Media, Conspiracies, and Propaganda in the Post-Cold War World
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EDITORIAL

Disinformation, fake news, hybrid war, post-truth... – words that don’t always have a distinct meaning, but in recent years have ever more frequently signified the anxiety gripping our late modern societies. The media use these words time and again, they can be heard in different contexts, but in any case they indicate insecurity, public distrust of public institutions and above all of the media themselves, confusion and loss of common reference points.

Lest we fuel the general anxiousness which tabloid media often escalate to paranoid levels, we avoid fad words that contribute to anxiety by being ambiguous. Instead, we try to address this anxiety and its social roots through more meticulous and clearly focused studies. In fact, this volume of Critique & Humanism has two main analytical focuses: it includes studies on propaganda in the media since the end of the Cold War, mostly in Bulgaria, as well as studies on the ways various actors today use conspiracy theories as a quick and easy explanation for complex global processes.

This issue is published within the framework of the Human and Social Studies Foundation’s large-scale research project on Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception. Most of the articles in it have already been published in Bulgarian in vol. 47, titled Media and Propaganda in the Post-Cold War World, while the section on ‘Conspiratorial Mind and Social Imagination’ features articles from the eponymous Bulgarian-language vol. 48 of Critique & Humanism.

The Russian Factor

Nowadays when one reads about media and propaganda in the international press it is hard not to notice how much of the discourse revolves around or even centres on Russia. Russia is clearly back as a geopolitical player, exerting influence and projecting power beyond its hitherto regarded traditional sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. More so, ever since the Ukraine crisis, the occupation and annexation of Crimea, and the war in Donbas, Russia is increasingly seen once again as the primary foe of the West. In the past four to five years, pundits have been speaking about a new Cold War, albeit one that is hybrid in the sense that it is more unconventional and non-linear than during the decades of the post-Second-World-War confrontation between the Soviet and the Western blocs in the twentieth century. This perception has only increased since the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States after which accusations of Russian interference, meddling, and collusion in the electoral processes on both sides of the Atlantic have permeated reporting and thinking about the state (and fate) of liberal democracy. In short, the Russian factor has become a cornerstone of Western political analyses to such an extent that it even eclipses the degree to which this was present in the Cold War era.
Yet, much of these analyses tend to rely on hyperbole and less on empirical evidence and concrete research results. The notion of a hybrid war has become so common that practically nobody questions the concept or its origins. In his contribution to this volume, Mark Galeotti skillfully disentangles myth from reality and discusses how the concept has become a mainstay in Western political discourse based on a misrepresentation of its origins and use in the Russian military and intelligence establishments. On the one hand, Galeotti demonstrates that the term originated as a perception of the West’s actions against Russia’s self-perceived security interests primarily as part of the West’s own military doctrine. On the other hand, Galeotti argues that given the disparity in conventional military power, Russia’s intelligence and security communities have adopted the concept as a pro-active response and de facto alternative for military confrontation with the West. Russia’s hybrid war in fact constitutes no more than a form of political warfare against the West which in turn calls for the need for new and adequate measures and policies.

While Russia’s military actions in Ukraine have not resulted in any further military escalation with the West, Western commentators have started and continued to invoke a Russian threat to the West. As noted above, this has gained new traction in the wake of Trump’s election to the US presidency. While Russian interference certainly cannot be excluded, it is at present still doubtful whether this played any fundamental role in supposedly altering the outcome of the elections in 2016. Andrei Tsygankov challenges the dominant narrative in liberal Western media by examining the persistence and subsequent re-invigoration of Russophobia among leading political and media circles in the United States. Acknowledging the revived East-West confrontation, Tsygankov reflects upon the manner in which this conflict – perceived among others as a clash of fundamental values – could be de-escalated in future.

What is often missing in the mainstream media coverage is an informed assessment of Putin’s Russia in light of Moscow’s foreign policy. Stephen Kotkin provides a historically argued assessment of Russia’s domestic and foreign policy conundrums. Highlighting both patterns and contradictions, Kotkin stresses that the geopolitical interests of the United States and Russia are inexorably bound to produce tension. Nevertheless, the deterioration of relations in recent years should not be seen as inevitable, but instead understood through the lack of an adequate response in US foreign policy. Kotkin subsequently outlines what such an adequate response could be. In light of the ongoing discussion about the ‘hybrid war’, Kotkin also reflects upon the controversial issue of ‘Russian collusion’ in the Trump campaign during the 2016 presidential election.

In a similar vein, tackling the question of what is perceived to be a pillar of the hybrid war, namely Russian propaganda directed against the West, Tom Junes qualifies the phenomenon based on a case study of Bulgaria and how it features in what are perceived to be Russian propaganda outlets. Junes elabo-
rates on how what can be coined as propaganda primarily serves a domestic purpose through Russian and Russian-language media outlets. In the case of Bulgaria, Junes also disentangles Russian propaganda from actual Russian influence in the country as the former often serves to distract from the reality of the latter instead of promoting it. Junes concludes that rather than any directed propaganda campaign against Bulgaria and its Western orientation, there is in fact a domestic home-grown phenomenon of pro-Russian propaganda which at times is taken over by and amplified through Russian or Russian-language outlets. Finally, Junes examines the presidential elections of 2016 in Bulgaria, the second round of which took place in the same week as the election of Donald Trump. Junes demonstrates that more than any Russian influence campaign, it was a Western-created narrative of Russian influence that played a role in framing the Bulgarian elections as part of a wider contest between Russia and the West.

**Populism and Propaganda: Logics, Ideology, Styles**

To avoid hyperbolizing the role of Russia – of Kremlin propaganda and disinformation – the latter should be distinguished from the populisms that have proliferated in Europe and America in the last decade.

The ‘populist moment’ that we are currently witnessing, Chantal Mouffe argues in her article on ‘The Affects of Democracy’, should be seen as an open possibility – it ‘may open the way for authoritarian solutions – through regimes that weaken liberal-democratic institutions – but which can also lead to a reaffirmation and deepening of democratic values.’ In her view, the rise of populisms today is a form of ‘return of the political’: after decades of neoliberal hegemony, in which agonistic politics was replaced by post-politics and popular sovereignty was appropriated by the governance of ‘experts’ under the cover of ‘rational consensus’, we are currently witnessing a revival of political antagonisms. The populist ‘passion’, which constructs a political frontier between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’, is a direct result of the decades of neo-liberal pressure – it is a collective affection (affectio) in Spinoza’s sense. But passion as an affection can reactively develop into different types of political behaviour, into different types of affects (affectus), that is, into different populisms. For ‘the people’ of populist movements can be and is discursively articulated in different ways. Right-wing populisms articulate the people in nationalist, anti-immigrant and isolationist terms, while left-wing populism, of which Chantal Mouffe is one of the strongest and best-known advocates, ought to articulate the people in the emancipatory terms of equality. According to Mouffe, in the next few years the central axis of the political conflict will be precisely between right-wing and left-wing populisms.

In Part One of his study on ‘Logics of Propaganda’, Dimitar Vatsov distinguishes populism from populist propaganda but also shows the family
resemblances and dangerous liaisons between them. Making such a distinction is particularly important, for we are currently witnessing the formation of a common populist-propaganda discursive front with a common repertoire of clichés. According to Vatsov, populism is a primitive language game, described through a list of characteristic features; this language game can and often is played ‘from below’, in everyday speech and upon spontaneous protest mobilizations: precisely when ‘played from below’, it often has an emancipatory and egalitarianizing effect. But populist grammar and vocabulary can be, and today are again, used for propaganda purposes ‘from above’, by elite speakers – politicians, journalists, experts – who use them strategically to consolidate a new type of authoritarian-oligarchic governmentality: this is the new populist propaganda. To characterize this propaganda discourse more precisely, however, the ‘logic’ of propaganda is examined in contrast to the discourses of everyday life and of science: propaganda works through strategic repetition, in a regime of metonymies, whereby the modal scope of the different utterances is blurred and a maximally generalized discursive horizon is created, a horizon in which the difference between truth and lie is diffused and certain phrases turn into propaganda labels: into instruments for discursive terror. Finally, the dangerous liaisons and easy transitions between emancipatory populism ‘from below’ and populist propaganda ‘from above’ are analyzed through a critique of two of the most prominent left-wing theorists of populism: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

Boyan Znepolski analyzes populist propaganda in Bulgarian media from another angle: to what extent it is ideologically elastic, how and to what extent it is able to cover different social stereotypes and discontents, and to package them under the general talking points identified in the report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria*. The talking points are: 1. Europe is dying; 2. Russia is rising; 3. Bulgaria’s pro-European elites are venal; 4. The US/NATO is a global hegemon/puppet-master. Znepolski identifies five different ideological perspectives, promoted by five well-known Bulgarian journalists and experts, which repeat all talking points but unfold them in a specific ideological direction with specific emphases: anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism, Russophilia, nationalism, and sovereignism. Despite the difference in their emphases, these ideological perspectives are mutually convertible because anti-democratic propaganda in all cases plays on the oppositions liberalism/nationalism, elites/the people, and the West/Russia. Through these oppositions, it is consistent in its strategies of negation, but weak in affirming an alternative vision of a good life. If it nevertheless promotes positive messages, and insofar as it assimilates both the leftist and rightist ideological conceptions of ‘the people’ and ‘the state’, anti-democratic propaganda offers a specific ‘national-socialist’ ideological mix.

The same line of enquiry into the elasticity of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria, yet not so much of its ideological as of its rhetorical range, is
pursued by Albena Hranova. Again through case studies – of four well-known public speakers – Hranova shows that the propaganda discourse seems to inevitably place the speaker in an ecstatic position, although this ecstatic and superordinate position is manifested in two distinctly different ideal types: of ‘the people’s tribune’ and of ‘the thinker’. The rhetoric of ‘the people’s tribune’ as if comes from down below, the ecstatic position as if draws on vulgarity, where cursing is a sign of sincerity, and sincerity produces either catachreses or simple, short ‘truths’ – slogans and aphorisms; conversely, the rhetoric of ‘the thinker’ as if comes from up high, it is more sophisticated, academically more ornate, drawing its ecstatic position from ‘truths’ about destiny and history to which only the chosen few have access. Hranova also shows other rhetorical and ideological profiles of the ‘ecstatic’ propaganda discourse, while a separate section of her article looks at how the high exemplars of propaganda-conspiratorial thinking are reflected in the low segment of yellow websites teeming with conspiracy theories about the reptilians and the Illuminati.

Martin Kanoushev makes a typological description of contemporary populist propaganda from a different angle. Taking totalitarian Nazi and communist propaganda as his starting point and reconstructing it through Hannah Arendt, Kanoushev makes a comparative analysis of totalitarian and contemporary propaganda. Apart from the identified significant similarities, the differences seem to be more important: populist propaganda today is not disseminated by a strictly centralized state machine, it is disseminated by networks; nor is it driven by any more or less consistent ideology that maps out a direction for the future (history) – it works with apocalyptic scenarios and instills only fear and anxiety about the future; through a conspiratorial logic, it constantly denounces ‘its enemies’ (‘the West’ and ‘the internal enemies’), without offering a clear alternative; it does not mobilize the masses around some goal, but demobilizes and deactivates them, instilling social cynicism and political apathy; ultimately, populist propaganda is only negative and subversive, without being ideologically creative.

Part Two of Dimitar Vatsov’s study on ‘Logics of Propaganda’ uses the results of the collective research conducted by the Human and Social Studies Foundation, and more precisely, the analyses by Iakimova, Znepolski, Hranova, and Kanoushev published in this issue, to outline not the logic of propaganda in general, but the specific practical logics of populist propaganda in Bulgaria. It is especially important that Bulgarian populist propaganda is based entirely on a conspiratorial grammar. The narrative figure of conspiracy can be logically represented as a multiple relation with three logical positions: 1. Conspirator (Puppet-master, Villain) – 2. Helpers (Puppets) – 3. Victim (potential Hero). The scene of the conspiracy is the globe. The usual suspect – the global Villain – is ‘the West’ (or the USA, NATO, Brussels, Soros, capitalism, liberalism, multiculturalism, etc., all of them metonymically substituted on demand). By totalizing conspiracy, populist propaganda totalizes cynicism: its first mes-
sage is that everyone is pursuing their own self-interest. The only legitimate interest is the people’s interest. But here a set of propaganda operations with the meaning of ‘the people’ takes place: 1. Using the Left repertoire of discrediting Western liberal capitalism, propaganda omits the inclusive Left meanings of ‘the people’ (the economically oppressed, the culturally excluded) and substitutes them with exclusive ‘Right meanings’ (usually it is strategically targeted at the local majority represented in an ethnically-nationalist holistic mode); 2. The people’s interest and the people’s sovereignty are also strategically substituted by the state’s sovereignty (in geopolitical étatist terms); 3. But the state’s sovereignty understood as the existence of strong and mutually independent institutions is also strategically replaced by the ‘personal sovereignty’ of one strong and charismatic political leader. On the Bulgarian media scene, Putin and Orbán are usually cast in the role of real sovereign leaders countering the conspiracy of the West.

In conclusion, contemporary populist propaganda is racist (excludes on a racial basis), isolationist (excludes international normative regulations and control), and authoritarian (on the internal level, it excludes the institutional separation of powers and blocks civic resistances). It is not only a Russian weapon but also an effective local device for state capture for every oligarch fighting against all forms of public control (internal and external) and utilizing the state as a tool for securing economic advantages.

**Populist Propaganda in Bulgaria: Media and Social Reception**

Milena Iakimova and Dimitar Vatsov, in their co-authored article, distinguish pro-Russian from local oligarchic uses of populist propaganda in the field of the Bulgarian media. The article presents once again a summary of the findings of the Human and Social Studies Foundation’s report on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria*, but proceeds to analyze them from a different angle. The main focus is on the way Russian propaganda has become a free resource which, on domestic territory, can be and is used both directly for Russian and for domestic purposes by different Bulgarian speakers and actors. Iakimova and Vatsov argue that a clearly identifiable populist-propaganda package of common talking points, which can be filled ad hoc with different concrete contents, is already in circulation in the Bulgarian media, but also in media in Europe and the US. State-controlled Russian media have made a specific contribution to the formation of this package after 2000. They have succeeded in appropriating the vocabularies of Western populist critique – both of leftist critiques of global capitalism and of rightist critiques of liberalism and cosmopolitanism – streamlining and refashioning them into a relatively simple and consistent (nationalist, sovereignist and geopolitical) repertoire that is now returning at the local level as a free resource: as a set of clichés like ready-made meals that can be popped in the oven and used by different actors for different tactical purposes. Based on an analysis of the frequency of use of the Russian
clichés in Bulgarian online media and on an analysis of the content of eight media outlets from a typological sample, a distinction is made between Bulgarian media conducting systemic Russian propaganda and Bulgarian media using the Russian propaganda package mostly for domestic purposes: for discrediting domestic economic and political opponents. The conclusion is drawn that the Russian propaganda package – maligning the hegemony of the West, multiculturalism and liberalism, appealing for sovereignty of the nation, and vilifying domestic opponents as foreign lackeys and paid agents – not only works for the geopolitical subversion of liberal democracy on the global scale and of the EU in particular, but also turns out to be an excellent instrument for state capture from within. Insofar as it generally aims to eliminate international pressure and control, internal separation of powers and internal civic resistances, that is, attacking simultaneously all forms of public control, the Russian propaganda package is anti-democratic. However, it also excellently serves those domestic elites – be they connected or not to Russian interests – which want to use the nation-state for private ends.

Against the background of the data on their media dissemination, Boryana Dimitrova analyzes the degree to which the clichés of anti-democratic pro-Russian propaganda in Bulgaria have made their way into the public consciousness. She presents data from a nationally representative survey conducted by Alpha Research (in May and June 2017), measuring the respondents’ attitude towards some of the main messages of pro-Russian propaganda in Bulgaria, as well as towards basic democratic values, institutions, and key actors (state and political leaders). Dimitrova draws two important conclusions: first, the more overtly geopolitically oriented the messages are, the more they divide society; the explicitly geopolitical propaganda theses are winning supporters but, at the same time, the respective counter-theses are also gaining traction – Bulgarian society is becoming polarized. Conversely, the more covertly politically and psychologically oriented the messages are, the more they feed on and intensify people’s fears and disappointments, and win supporters without resistance. But, second: however widespread the propaganda messages are in Bulgarian media in recent years, for the time being they have not managed to change the general pro-European and pro-liberal-democratic orientation of the Bulgarians when people are faced with a direct geopolitical choice.

Deyan Kiuranov takes as his starting point the results of the same Alpha Research survey, but focuses on another aspect – on the pro-Russian attitudes of the majority of the respondents on a number of questions asked in the survey (above all, those that do not presuppose making a direct geopolitical choice). The respondents’ answers as well as transcripts of the focus groups conducted along with the survey are compared with official statements of Russian politicians and scholars declaring their attitude towards Bulgaria. According to Kiuranov’s hypothesis, Russians and Bulgarians are widely driven by two different complexes (in the psychiatric sense of the term as defined by Charcot) in
their attitudes towards each other; these complexes give rise to mismatching, unrealistic mutual expectations and inevitably remain unsatisfied. The Russian ‘imperial’ complex expects but does not get total obedience from ‘the colony Bulgaria’, while the Bulgarian ‘vassal’ complex expects but does not get protection from ‘the suzerain Russia’.

In her second contribution to this volume, Milena Iakimova shifts her focus from propaganda messages to the social context of Bulgarian journalism, which is a condition for the penetration of populist propaganda into Bulgarian media. Her analysis of thirteen semi-structured interviews with journalists in print media shows that the process of disintegration of the field of journalism (especially in newspapers and websites, which are the most economically vulnerable) has advanced so much that for the interviewees, loyalty to the media corporation (including censorship and self-censorship, taboos on writing on certain topics and on mentioning certain names, even reluctance to ask questions about the ownership of media) has become something completely different from journalism perceived as a vocation: you either ‘work as a journalist’ or ‘do true journalism’ – the two, however, are incompatible. In such an environment, of course, propaganda messages are not just easily imposed by the editors and media owners as a framework that journalists must follow, they are not just ‘inserted’ into the content of media through memory sticks with anonymous texts and surreptitious paid advertisements – they are also easy-to-use, ready-made clichés for fast production of articles in a situation of uncertainty and insecurity, and above all, of scarcity of financial resources and time for serious journalistic investigations.

Through an exhaustive (not sample) case study, Konstantin Pavlov maps the field of the Bulgarian media and political public sphere. Pavlov analyzes the online media reception of the Government’s Annual Report on the State of National Security of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2016: through the SENSIIKA system, he has found 685 online media reactions to the Report from the beginning of September to the end of November 2017. Through an institutional analysis and content analysis, Pavlov classifies the reactions into official and unofficial; by types of speakers – reactions of politicians, journalists, and experts; by party affiliation of the speakers; and by type of attitude towards the Report. What is specific about this case is that, among the many findings in the Report regarding different threats to Bulgaria’s national security, a single one aroused public attention and even a ‘scandal’ – the mention of the Russian Federation as a threat to the security of Europe, and hence of Bulgaria. This finding was contested not just by the opposition represented by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, but also by parts of the ruling coalition – the Ataka and VMRO parties – which succeeded in producing more public speakers than the supporters of the Report. It is remarkable that even the supporters of the Report – the Prime Minister, who submitted it to the National Assembly for approval, and the representatives of the GERB party – did not engage in direct justification of
the Report, but sought compromise formulations by which they bowed to pro-Russian propaganda (they hinted at the ‘need’ to reckon with ‘external’ factors – with NATO and the EU). Pavlov’s analysis demonstrates that a direct public and political debate on the role of the Russian Federation in Bulgaria has not been held yet, and even that it is to a large extent tabooed.

Conspiratorial Mind and Social Imagination

This section presents some of the articles published in the eponymous Bulgarian-language vol. 48 of Critique & Humanism, edited by Lea Vajsova, Todor Hristov and Milla Mineva. Reptilians, Illuminati, secret plots, etc., are ever more often invading the public sphere, while conspiracy theories are apparently becoming ready-to-hand explanations for global (chaotic) processes. That is precisely why conspiracy theories have begun to attract the attention of researchers from different social sciences, who are trying to understand what these theories serve us for, what they tell about the world, who uses them and for what purposes. That is precisely why we have attempted to bring together a diverse set of researchers, united solely by the fact that they take conspiracy theories seriously.

Alejandro Romero Reche returns back in time to the Enlightened proto-sociology of error and prejudice, thus proposing a possible genealogy of conspiracy theories. In his article, ‘The Conspiracy Theory of Ignorance in the Classical Sociology of Knowledge’, he offers an account of the history of the sociology of knowledge, focusing his interpretation on the way authors like Marx, Mannheim, and Lukács analyze the machinery of ideological reproduction. Have the critical concepts elaborated in this tradition become a repertoire to which conspiracy theories add yet another component, namely that of ‘intentionality’ in the creation and management of the ideological machine? It is precisely through this question that Alejandro Romero Reche challenges social sciences and opens up the field for new critical interpretations that allow us to think of conspiracy theories as a specific knowledge about power and its legitimacy.

In his article, ‘The Deep State between the (Un)Warranted Conspiracy Theory and Structural Element of Political Regimes?’, Nebojša Blanuša deepens the perspective described above, namely the effort to conceive of conspiracy theories as knowledge and, more specifically, as a ‘wild’ hermeneutics of suspicion (following Ricoeur). Instead of as empty words, Blanuša analyzes conspiracy theories as a ‘symptomal reading of reality’, showing that they are compact, affectively saturated interpretations of the socio-political world. At the same time, he attempts to draw a line between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories, as well as to question the dividing line between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ knowledge.

In a similar vein, Lea Vajsova questions the clear differentiation of certain explanations as conspiracy theories. The thesis of her article, ‘Judicial Power
or Conspiracy? The Emergence of the Citizen-Investigator in the Context of a Politics Centred around the Rule of Law and the Fight against Corruption’, is unfolded through a careful reading of the works of Ivan Krastev and Nadège Ragaru in which they analyze the construction of the anticorruption discourse. Vajsova shows how, through the fight against corruption, the concept of civil society is constructed in a very specific logic, namely that of the citizen-investigator (following Rosanvallon). It is precisely through the fight against corruption that the political has become centred around the rule of law and that the discourse of judicial power has turned into a main political discourse. In this context, however, the difference between judicial power and conspiracy turns out to be a consequence of the positioning of ‘the respective logic in locations that are discursively granted the right to evaluate something as true’.

Is it possible, however, for conspiracy theories, understood precisely as ‘rebellious knowledge’, to be granted the right to determine the truth, to be legitimated as official? This is one of the questions examined by Todor Hristov in his article, ‘Conspiracy and Vulnerability: #Occupy, Zeitgeist, and the Legitimation of Rebellious Knowledge’. The article carefully traces the discussions of one of the working groups of #Occupy Wall Street, in which there was an active debate, an argumentative battle over the dividing lines between conspiracy theories and rebellious knowledge. The analysis shows how a ready conspiracy theory is rejected and transformed, rendered useless and criticized as producing asymmetry in the distribution of knowledge.

In fact, conspiracy theories may be said to construct a relatively autonomous field with its own capital, resources and stakes. Julien Giry offers precisely such an interpretation in his article, ‘Become a Full-Time Conspiracy Theorist: Radicalization and Professionalization Trajectories of Two Citizen Sleuths Groups’ (in French), tracing grassroots production of conspiracy theories. Giry carefully analyzes the dynamics of a collective action that begins as an individual effort to understand the social world, goes through micromobilization, and gradually leads to professionalization and development of specific and rival competences and skills. The actors involved eventually engage in battles for recognition and compete for dominant positions in the field of conspiracy theories as well as in the field of their market, which generates highly lucrative incomes.

Thus, this section attempts to outline a research field formed around the attempts to understand conspiracy theories, beyond their ridicule or demonization. Our purpose is to open up space for debate and scholarly imagination, to suggest a new critical perspective in social sciences…

* * *

We thank all contributors and reviewers, our English-language translator and editor Katerina Popova, as well as the technical team of Critique & Humanism. We also thank the America for Bulgaria Foundation, which has funded not only the publication of this volume but also the research project on Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception, within whose framework a significant part of the articles presented here was produced.

Tom Junes, Milla Mineva, Dimitar Vatsov

NOTES

Where force is necessary, there it must be applied boldly, decisively and completely. But one must know the limitations of force; one must know when to blend force with a manoeuvre, a blow with an agreement.

Leon Trotsky (1932)

A spectre is haunting Europe, the spectre of ‘hybrid war’. Whether we call it that or one of the other terms sometimes used, from ‘non-linear war’ (Pomerantsev, 2014) simply to ‘a new Cold War’ (Lucas, 2014), there can be little doubt that at present Russia and the West are locked into a political and normative struggle being fought in familiar and unfamiliar battlefields, from the virtual realms of cyberspace to the minds of people, whether in Topeka, Tallinn, or Tomsk. To the Kremlin, it is responding to a Western – and American-led – campaign to isolate it diplomatically, undermine it politically, and destabilize it culturally, such that Russia is denied its rightful status as a ‘great power’. To the West, it is rather that Moscow has embarked on a neo-imperialist project that challenges both the architecture of the post-1945 global order and the values this is meant to embody.

Putin and his government have concluded that the West began this campaign of gibridnaya voina – hybrid war – not least through, in its eyes, organizing a whole string of regime-changing insurrections, from the ‘colour revolutions’ of the post-Soviet space, through the ‘Arab Spring’ risings and eventually the 2013-14 Euromaidan revolt which brought down Ukrainian president Yanukovych (Tsygankov, 2015). The current Russian regime appears not only to have staked its political credibility on its revisionist program, it seems genuinely to believe that this is the only way to preserve Russian sovereignty and cultural integrity. Putin himself speaks increasingly the language of the clash of civilizations between Russia and the West. When justifying the annexation of Crimea, for example, he framed it as a response to a strategic campaign by the West to isolate and control Russia:

We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly...
trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. (Putin, 2014)

In the face of this perceived challenge, and mindful that the West is vastly more powerful according to pretty much any index, Moscow has adopted a strategy that targets the West’s unity and will to act, using a variety of non-military means.

In the West, this is generally described as ‘hybrid war’, a style of warfare that combines the political, economic, social and kinetic in a kind of conflict that recognizes no boundaries between civilian and combatant, covert and overt, war and peace. Rather, achieving victory – however that may be defined – permits and demands whatever means will be successful: the ethics of total war applied even to the smallest skirmish. However, just as Moscow tends to misunderstand or miscast Western ideas and intentions, so too there is a substantial misreading of Russian aims and approaches. One crucial such misunderstanding is to fail to grasp that Moscow envisages two separate kinds of non-linear war, which have become unhelpfully intertwined in Western thinking. The first is the way – as the Russians have been quick to spot – that modern technologies and modern societies mean that a shooting war will likely be preceded by a phase of political destabilization, as in Crimea. The second, though, is the political war that Moscow is waging against the West, in the hope not of preparing the ground for an invasion, but rather of dividing, demoralizing and distracting it enough that it cannot resist as the Kremlin asserts its claims to what it considers its rightful role as a great power, not least including a sphere of influence over most of the post-Soviet states of Eurasia.

The Soldiers’ Version

The Russians themselves certainly believe the nature of war is changing, and in ways which mean the use of direct force may not always or initially be a central element of the conflict – or even not employed at all. As Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov put it in an article in the Military Industrial Courier in 2013, one that has led people (wrongly) to speak of a ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’:

The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness… The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures – applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces. The open use of forces – often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation – is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict. (Gerasimov, 2013)
However, Gerasimov was not presenting a blueprint for a future without conventional military operations, nor yet hybrid war as originally understood in the West (McDermott, 2016). Instead, he was noting Russia’s conviction that the modern world was seeing more complex and politically-led forms of contestation alongside regular warfare. To this end, Russia’s ‘new way of war’ can be considered simply a recognition of the primacy of the political over the kinetic – and that if one side can disrupt the others’ will and ability to resist, then the actual strength of their military forces becomes much less relevant, even if not necessarily redundant.

When taken in the round, Gerasimov’s article – which was an encapsulation of previous debates more than a novel exegesis (Thomas, 2016) – presented ‘hybrid war’ not as an end in itself, but as a stage in a foreign aggression against Russia which could or would lead to chaos and the emergence of fierce armed civil conflict in which foreign countries could intervene. The aim for Russia, he asserted, was to be able to have the kind of forces able to shut out such external intervention and fight and quickly win any conflicts, using massive and precise military force.

Thus, Gerasimov’s vision was in many ways an essentially defensive one for a chaotic modern era, not of an army of covert saboteurs but rather a high-readiness force able rapidly to mobilize and focus firepower on direct, conventional threats. In this, he was reprising themes which had emerged in much recent military theoretical literature and presenting a sense of the comprehensive threats facing Russia, threats which required an equally comprehensive answer. After all, as Andrew Monaghan (2016, p.3) has perceptively observed, facing what appears to be a near-term future of unpredictability and instability, the Russian state has adopted a strategy of mobilization involving ‘what are in effect efforts to move the country on to a permanent war footing.’

Of course, it would be naïve to consider today’s Russia as a purely peaceable, defensive power. As events in Georgia and Ukraine have demonstrated, it is aggressive, assertive, willing to use force in support of its geopolitical agenda. Nonetheless, not only the literature but also conversations with Russian military officers and observers underscore the extent to which they truly consider гибридная война to be an essentially Western – American – gambit. As one recent retiree who had served in the General Staff’s Main Operations Directorate put it in a conversation in Moscow in April 2014, ‘we only belatedly came to see the weapon you [Westerners] were developing. Even then, first we thought it just applied in unstable, peripheral countries. Then we saw you could point it at us, too.’

All military doctrines are an evolution of previous ones, and influenced by the technical, political, social and economic forces shaping the battlefield at every level. Today’s Russian approach is broadly rooted in some distinctive characteristics of today’s Russia and past practice, but more specifically is the product of a series of military-political debates and organizational develop-
ments that came to fruition following the 2008 Georgian War (Der Haas, 2011). The 1979-88 incursion into Afghanistan had forced Soviet military planners to come to grips with asymmetric war, but many of the lessons were deliberately shelved at the time, the result of a foolishly optimistic assumption that Moscow would be embroiled in no more such campaigns. Nonetheless, the experience of that war did creep into subsequent debates in the 1990s, where they combined with a growing awareness of the sheer speed and destructiveness of modern conflict, which would mean that in full-scale war the front line would be deep, and perhaps even ubiquitous, and the potential devastation terrifying.

Nonetheless, the 1990s were taken up by the first war in Chechnya and the challenge of coping in severely constrained budgetary circumstances. Many within the Russian security establishment genuinely understood that the nature of war was changing. However, all such institutions tend towards conservatism, and a combination of self-interested resistance within the high command and a lack of a clear steer from the Kremlin ensured that practice did not move as quickly as the theoretical discussions.

Real progress would only follow as a result of the 2008 Georgian War. Russian forces operated alongside local militias and auxiliaries, in a politically-choreographed operation designed to provide a degree of deniability and legitimacy by provoking the Georgians into the first overt act of aggression. The Russians won, but that was hardly in doubt given the massive disproportion between the two sides and the relatively limited objectives, ‘liberating’ the already-rebellious regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The point was that they did not win as easily as they had expected (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011). The litany of errors was enough to allow Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov and above all his Chief of the General Staff Nikolai Makarov finally to push through sweeping reforms.

Serdyukov’s necessary but brutal modernization program won him the loathing of most of the officer corps. He would not survive long politically; a scandal saw him sacked in 2012, with Makarov following in his wake. However, their successors continued the process, hence the irony of Gerasimov getting the credit for what, if it should be considered any Chief of the General Staff’s brainchild, was closer to Makarov’s. Even so, this was still very much a discussion about war, not the kind of deniable political operations too often regarded as Russia’s new ‘art of war’, more war than hybrid.

Perhaps the best sense of how the Russian military expects a future full-scale war to unfold comes from an article by Colonel Sergei Chekinov and Lt. General Sergei Bogdanov (2011). They depict a war that starts with information and psychological operations and cyberattacks, but quickly moves into a ‘shock and awe’ offensive, starting with massive aerial strikes and moving eventually into a ground combat phase fought with missiles, artillery, tanks, and the final instrument, a man with a gun. This is a far cry from the imagined semi-covert, spooks-and-trolls ‘hybrid wars’ often imagined in the West, which are best considered ‘political wars’.
The Politicals’ Version

The answer is that although soldiers have been thinking how best to integrate new forms of contestation into their battle plans, so too the ‘politicals’ – national security theorists and practitioners, the security and intelligence community, and the Kremlin – have been exploring their new options. Having learnt his trade as a spy, having built his career on corruption and behind-the-scenes politicking, having forged a presidency through propaganda and hype, Putin also saw the scope for a ‘political war’ rooted in Soviet practices. Thus, the second variation of gibrindnaya voina was born.

These political wars, where the end goal is to be achieved by entirely non-military means, are very much how the Kremlin sees its current campaign against the West. Russia has reached back and re-learned a particular Soviet lesson, that political effects are what matters, not the means used to achieve them. Instead of trying to contest NATO where it is strongest, on the battlefield – it is worth remembering that NATO has a combined defence budget of $946 billion to Russia’s $47.4 billion (2.84 trillion rubles) – it is instead an example of asymmetric warfare, using gamesmanship, corruption and disinformation instead of direct force (NATO, 2017; Kofman 2017).

After all, here Russia has real strengths. Russia’s intelligence community has enjoyed Putin’s favour, and steadily growing budgets, sharpening their ability to conduct covert political but also terrorist attacks outside Russia’s borders, as well as not just cyberespionage but active cyberattacks (Galeotti, 2016a). Their networks in the West are now considered generally to be as active, aggressive, and extensive as at the height of the Cold War. The huge government foreign media operation, spearheaded by the RT multi-lingual TV network, has been mobilized in an effort to undermine the will and capacity of the West to resist Russian operations (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014). Meanwhile, the role of Russian money in supporting disruptive and divisive political movements in the West and infiltrating strategic economic sectors remains not just a concern, but one in which European intelligence agencies are seeing growing signs of strategic coordination. In and of themselves, none of these instruments are decisive, but together – and especially if Moscow manages to coordinate them more effectively – they form the basis for a formidable machine for fighting on the political front.

While Moscow has practical reasons and a historical bias encouraging it to adopt this kind of strategy, it also reflects the political nature of Putin’s Russia. When William Nemeth (2002) originally posited the notion of hybrid warfare, it was in the context of the Chechen war. His argument was that Chechen society was itself a hybrid, still somewhere between the modern and the pre-modern, where traditional forms of social organization, notable the family and the clan, could be used to mobilize for war in ways that need not distinguish between ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ forms of war. Hence, a hybrid society fought a hybrid war.
The ‘hybridity’ of Russian operations likewise reflects a conceptually analogous, even if operationally very different ‘hybridity’ of the Russian state. Through the 1990s and into Putinism it has, however you choose to define it, either failed to institutionalize or actively deinstitutionalized. The result is a patrimonial, hyper-presidential regime characterized by the permeability of boundaries between public and private, domestic and external. Lacking meaningful rule of law or checks and balances, without drawing too heavy-handed a comparison with fascism, Putin’s Russia seems to embody, in its own chaotic and informal way, Mussolini’s dictum ‘tutto nello Stato, niente al di fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato’: everything inside the State, nothing outside the State, nothing against the State.

As a result, it is not simply that Moscow chooses to ignore those boundaries we are used to in the West between state and private, military and civilian, legal and illegal. It is that those boundaries are much less meaningful in Russian terms, and additionally straddled by a range of duplicative and even competitive agencies. This can get in the way of coherent policy and create problems of redundancy and even contradictory goals, such as the 2016 hack of US Democratic National Committee servers, where FSB and GRU operations appear to have been working at cross purposes (Alperovich, 2016).

However, it also means that it is much easier for the Kremlin to instrumentalize all kinds of other actors, from the Russian Orthodox Church and organized crime to businesspeople. Millionaire Konstantin Malofeev, for example, played a crucial role in the seizure of Crimea and destabilization of the Donbas (Slon, 2014; Vedomosti, 2014). Since then, he has been an active agent of Russian influence in the Balkans (Bechev, 2017, pp.231-232). Likewise, former Russian Railways head and still close Putin ally Vladimir Yakunin is a vigorous supporter of Moscow’s interests and allies abroad, including supporting Edgar Savisaar’s divisive Centre Party in Estonia (Bershidsky, 2015).

Of course, it is hard to assess the actual impact and success of all these political ‘active measures’. The desire to undermine Hillary Clinton – whose election the Kremlin appeared to believe inevitable – led to the much less predictable Donald Trump presidency. Attempts to interfere in the 2017 French and Dutch elections backfired. What appears to have been a Russian-sponsored coup to avert Montenegro’s entry into NATO in 2016 failed, and even caused frictions with traditional ally Serbia (Wiśniewski, 2017). Nonetheless, it is safe to say that they have helped exacerbate existing tensions and divisions, galvanize divisive political movements and make the creation of common fronts on questions such as the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 over the Donbas that much harder.

Conclusions: Different Hybrid Defences for Different Hybrid Wars

After the unexpected Russian seizure of the Crimea, especially its use of unacknowledged ‘little green men’ – not, it has to be said, such an innovation
in the annals of warfare and statecraft – the notion that something dramatically new and dangerous has taken the West by storm, and led to both insightful analysis and panicked caricatures (Renz, 2016). For better or (probably) worse, ‘hybrid war’ is for the moment the accepted term of art in Western military and strategic circles. Perhaps, as Latvian scholar Jānis Bērziņš (2015, p.43) has acidly noted, it has caught on precisely because ‘the word hybrid is catchy, since it may represent a mix of anything.’

The particular concern is often that Russia’s supposed ‘new way of war’ bypasses or neutralizes much of the West’s undoubted capacities and superiorities. Has Russia truly redefined the nature of war through its use of proxies, undeclared armies, and covert political operations in Crimea and the Donbas, though? Is it really the case that NATO need to worry that, just as having an advantage in horse cavalry mattered little in the age of machine guns and barbed wire, so too as one US officer suggested to me in 2016, ‘we spent billions preparing to fight the wrong war’?

No. Even though each individual aspect of recent operations is familiar, and despite Moscow’s continuing focus on conventional, high-intensity warfighting, nonetheless Russia’s recent actions have highlighted changes in the nature of war that say as much about the evolving global battlespace as about specifically Russian military thinking. Thus, the whole debate about hybrid war is really two debates intertwined: about the strategic challenge from an embittered and embattled Russia, and the changing nature of war in the modern age.

From the tsars through the Bolsheviks, the Russians have long been accustomed to a style of warfare that refuses to acknowledge any hard and fast distinctions between overt and covert, kinetic and political, and embraces much more eagerly the irregular and the criminal, the spook and the provocateur, the activist and the fellow-traveller (Madeira, 2014; Galeotti, 2016c). Sometimes, this has been out of choice or convenience, but often it has been a response to the time-honoured challenge of seeking to play as powerful an imperial role as possible with only limited resources.

When they did, they were also able to draw on an especially rich experience of information operations, in which many have seen the roots of today’s activities (Snegovaya, 2015). The Soviets were especially concerned with propaganda, misinformation and political manipulation, often with the same goal of masking underlying weaknesses. This tradition also lives on, enriched by the opportunities in the new, diffuse and lightning-speed media age.

Putin was probably speaking for his entire security elite when he said ‘I think that only someone who has lost their mind or is in a dream could imagine that Russia would one day attack NATO’ (2015). The threat facing the West is likely ‘political war’, not a hybrid offensive turning into a shooting war. As a result, this is not just a military issue and the challenges of responding to the non-kinetic instruments of this new style of conflict are even more intractable. Should information warfare based on propaganda and spin be counteracted
with more propaganda, or with fact-checkers and media awareness classes in schools? For countries with potentially fractious minorities which Moscow could exploit, is the most effective way of buying security to spend more on counter-intelligence officers, police, and social inclusion programs rather than buy tanks or missiles?

Drawing on Russian strategic thinking, though, what implications does this have for present security calculi? If anything, the West should again turn to Gerasimov’s words, this time from a 2014 speech to the Russian Academy of Military Sciences. He called for a ‘comprehensive set of strategic defence measures embracing the entire state apparatus … to convince potential aggressors of the futility of any forms of pressure on the Russian Federation and its allies’ (Gerasimov, 2014, p.1). How can the West mobilize to deter or defeat any _gibridnye_ threats, without sacrificing its democratic values and liberties (Tallis and Šimečka, 2016)?

Deterrence certainly has its place, and NATO and the European Union alike, as well as national governments, are looking to ways to scale their existing responses also to reflect the smaller-scale initial challenges of hybrid war (Lanoszka, 2016). However, such measures are best suited to the military form of _gibridnaya voina_, in which the kinetic is an inevitable, even if later aspect of the struggle. In many ways, the best deterrence against the ‘political war’ form is not so much direct responses – though they undoubtedly have their place – but in creating sufficient societal resistance such that subversion is likely to fail (Cederberg and Eronen, 2015). Whatever else, the Kremlin is pragmatic, and it will not squander political and economic resources on quixotic operations doomed to embarrassing failure. If governance is therefore the new battlespace (Manea, 2015), then its warfighting forces and measures are thus very different: effective counter-intelligence services, proper oversight over the flow of funds and serious policing of corruption at home, media awareness for a new generation of citizens to render them less susceptible to manipulation from whatever the source, and above all efforts to increase the effectiveness and thus legitimacy of existing political structures. At a time when, for example, NATO members are being urged to meet a common target of spending 2% of GDP on defence, there is huge variation on European countries’ spending on policing and intelligence (Galeotti, 2017). Likewise, the substantial variations in levels of corruption across Europe identified in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2017) not only afflicts the citizens of the worst-affected countries, it creates vulnerabilities which can then have much wider implications, whether allowing the entry of Russian covert funding (so-called _chernaya kassa_, ‘black account’ money) which can then be spent on subversion, or simply allowing them to begin to capture local elites and influence the role they play in NATO and the EU.

After all, Russia (and potential future hybrid war antagonists) exploit and rely on weaknesses and vulnerabilities. At present, Moscow is capitalizing on
a generalized legitimacy crisis in the West, one which has empowered populists, alienated voters, and catalysed the rise of sensationalist and partisan media voices. Without this crisis, the roots of which are outside the scope of this paper, Putin’s options for political war would be vastly more limited.

Perhaps then this is the final lesson, that hybrid aggression of whatever form ultimately stems from weaknesses: a challenger without the strength to turn to direct confrontation, and a defender with sufficient divisions and shortcomings, whether military or socio-political, to be vulnerable. Given the two forms of гибридная война in Russian thinking, the challenge for the West is not to concentrate on one at the expense of the other.

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The Russian Factor

Andrei P. Tsygankov

AMERICAN RUSSOPHOBIA IN THE AGE OF LIBERAL DECLINE

From the era of great hopes and expectations generated by the Cold War’s end, the United States and Russia moved toward an emotionally bitter conflict of values. Since at least 2012, it has become common to hear American and Russian media accusing leaders of their respective countries of not only violating international law, but also of developing political systems that are based on cynicism, injustice, and disregard for human dignity. On many occasions, the United States’ officials and members of the political class used the inflammatory rhetoric by comparing President Vladimir Putin’s actions with those of the Nazi leader Adolf Hitler and portraying the Kremlin’s style of government as deeply corrupt and based on repression of opposition, reward of political cronies, and military invasions abroad. The US media and political circles now hold overwhelmingly negative images of Russia, while presenting American values as those of freedom and democracy. In the meantime, Russia sees itself defending its political system and legitimate interests from the West’s economic, political, and military interference. Comments by Russian officials indicate that they do not hold in high regard American institutions of competitive elections, free media, and market economy. Rather, they believe that such institutions serve as a cover for narrowly-based yet excessively powerful special interest groups.

This paper addresses the US media perception of the Russia-threat following the election of Donald Trump as the United States’ President. Under President Donald Trump, US-Russia relations entered a new period. Trump’s election revealed a major value divide within the American society. Whereas his opponents remained committed to world order based on liberal institutionalist ideas, Trump favoured a return to military strength, unilateralism, and economic nationalism. During the election campaign, he took issues with liberal characterizations of Russia as an ‘enemy’ to be contained and argued for lifting sanctions and building partnership with Moscow on the basis of counter-terrorism. In response, liberal media attacked Trump as autocracy-leaning Putin’s proxy (English, 2017). Ideologically Trump’s views, while distinct, share similarity with those of Putin and stress strong executive power and primacy in international affairs. The Russia issue became central in the new internal divide between the Trump administration and the liberal establishment. To a significant extent, the divide reflected...
the latter’s frustration with loss of elections and the respective share of political influence. The same liberal politicians have had no similar criticisms with respect to non-democratic countries such as China and Saudi Arabia. If the two countries are to move beyond viewing each other as potential enemies, they must find a way to reframe their values in non-confrontational terms.

‘Smell of Treason in the Air’ and the Liberal Paranoia

The election of Trump as US President prompted the liberal media to actively discuss new Russia-related fears and conspiracy theories. Two such fears were that Russia’s alleged cyber interference in the US elections amounted to an act of war and that Putin had now won and was ruling America behind the scene through his proxies. Members of the US political class endorsed these views and helped to spread the fears. The question of Russia’s motives, even if one assumes its meddling in the US elections, was never seriously explored.

The first fear likely came to the media from Hillary Clinton’s inner circle. As acknowledged by the liberal New Yorker, members of the circle believed that the Obama administration deliberately downplayed the DNC hacking by the Kremlin. ‘We understand the bind they were in,’ one of Clinton’s senior advisers said. ‘But what if Barack Obama had gone to the Oval Office, or the East Room of the White House, and said, ‘I’m speaking to you tonight to inform you that the United States is under attack …’ A large majority of Americans would have sat up and taken notice. … [It] is bewildering – it is baffling – it is hard to make sense of why this was not a five-alarm fire in the White House’ (Osnos, Remnick, and Yaffa, 2017). Commentators and pundits, including those with academic and political credentials, developed the theory of the US under enemy attack further. Former Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul (2017) wrote in The Washington Post that Russia attacked ‘our sovereignty’ and continues to ‘watch us do nothing’ because of partisan divides. He compared the Kremlin’s actions with those of Pearl Harbor or 9/11 and warned that Russia was likely to repeat assaults in 2018 or 2020. The historian Timothy Snyder (2017) went even further by linking the ‘war’ with the election of Trump which Snyder said was the basic aim of the enemy.

Rather than viewing the hacking attacks as interference in domestic affairs, both Democrats and Republicans helped to promote the war theory. Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee John McCain (R-Ariz.) stated, ‘When you attack a country, it’s an act of war’ (Chalfant, 2017). Former Vice President Dick Cheney called Russia’s alleged interference in the US election ‘a very serious effort made by Mr. Putin and his government, his organization’, pointing out that ‘in some quarters that would be considered an act of war’ (Cahill, 2017). Without calling for a military response, a number of Democrats too engaged in the war rhetoric, likening the Russia ‘attack’, as Senator Ben Cardin (D-Md.) did, to the United States’ ‘political Pearl Harbor’ (Chalfant, 2017).

The war rhetoric fit into a larger narrative developed by Democrats and lib-
eral media that presented President Trump as compromised by Russia and soft on the Kremlin. On 14 February 2017, Thomas L. Friedman (2017) of *The New York Times* called for actions against Russia and praised ‘patriotic’ Republican senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham for being tough on Trump. During her broadcast on 9 March, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow questioned whether Trump was actually under the control of Putin. Citing Trump’s views and examples of his associates travelling to Moscow, she told viewers that ‘we are also starting to see what may be signs of continuing [Russian] influence in our country. Not just during the campaign but during the administration. Basically, signs of what could be a continuing operation’ (Maddow, 2017). On 23 March, another *New York Times* columnist, Nicholas Kristof, published a column titled ‘There’s a Smell of Treason in the Air.’ Kristof (2017) argued that the FBI investigation into ‘whether another presidential campaign colluded with a foreign power so as to win an election … would amount to treason.’ Responding to Trump’s statement that his phone was tapped during the election campaign, *The Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum twittered that ‘Trump’s insane “GCHQ tapped my phone” theory came from…Moscow.’ 7 McFaul and many others then endorsed and retweeted the message. Previously members of the US establishment frequently accused Russia and the Kremlin-connected oligarchs of collusion with Trump’s officials on behalf of Putin. Subsequently this became a part of Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation although the political connection to the Kremlin was never proven.

The liberal media was feeding off discussions, activisms, investigations, and conspiracy theories about Russia within the political class and expert community in Washington. A considerable part of it was based on rumours and mysterious leaks, possibly by members of the US intelligence community, claiming improper ties between Trump and Putin (Porter, 2017), as well as activities of liberal groups that sought to discredit Trump. For example, on 22 February, *Politico. com* reported that the Clinton-influenced Center for American Progress brought on a former State Department official to run a new ‘Moscow Project’, while advocating the creation of an investigation into Trump’s ties to Russia (Debenedetti, 2017). In addition to the DNC hacking accusations, many of the Russia fears were based, as reported by Stephen F. Cohen (2017), on several related allegations against Trump, each implying potentially ‘compromising’ behaviour – praises of Putin as a leader, possible business dealings with Russian ‘oligarchs’, Trump’s former campaign manager Paul Manafort’s advisory ties to ‘pro-Russian’ Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich, a ‘black dossier’ on Trump held by the Kremlin, compiled by an unidentified British intelligence officer and leaked to CNN, and resignation of National Security adviser General Michael Flynn for not disclosing his contacts with Russian representatives.

Taken together, these points implied the Kremlin’s infiltration of the United States’ internal politics yet, viewed separately, each of them was questionable and unproven. Some of these points could have also been made about Hillary
Clinton with her ties to Russian – not to mention Saudi Arabian – business circles and Ukrainian politicians. Others were about political views and could also not be counted as evidence. Still others, such as the ‘black dossier’, could have been a fabrication (Weir, 2017). As to possible contacts with Russian representatives during elections, they too did not amount to anything significant. Flynn and, later, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions did not admit their contacts with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, but that alone was not the reason to suspect them of improper relations with Moscow. It is no less plausible to speculate that Sessions was selected as the next target after Flynn with the wider objective to undermine Trump. In such case, Sessions’ only ‘fault’ was that he holds a prominent position in Trump’s cabinet and that he couldn’t recall about his meeting with Kislyak. The latter was doing his job of an Ambassador meeting the US politicians, clarifying Russia’s position, and asking relevant questions.

Even the CIA and the FBI-endorsed conclusion about Russia attacking the DNC servers was questioned by some observers on the grounds of the intelligence agencies’ overreliance on findings by one cybersecurity company. The company, CrowdStrike, used the data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies which later stated that the data was used erroneously and could not lead to proof of the DNC intrusion (Raimondo, 2017).

The Crisis of Liberal West
The loose and politically-minded nature of discussions, circulation of questionable leaks and dossiers compiled by unidentified individuals, and lack of serious evidence led many independent observers to conclude that the Russia story was more about Trump than Russia. Mueller’s investigation too became increasingly focused on Trump associates’ business ties with Russia, as well as other violations of the law such as lying about their conversations with Russia’s ambassador (Lake, 2017). The Russia scandal was symptomatic of the poisonous state of bilateral relations which Democrats exploited for derailing Trump who advocated normalization with the Kremlin during the elections. US-Russia relations have become a hostage of partisan domestic politics. As one liberal and tough critic of Putin wrote, Democratic lawmakers’ rhetoric of war in connection with the 2016 elections ‘places Republicans – who often characterize themselves as more hawkish on Russia and defense – in a bind as they try to defend to the new administration’s strategy towards Moscow’ (Chalfant, 2017). As Jesse Walker (2017), an editor at Reason magazine and the author of The United States of Paranoia, pointed out,

There’s a difference between thinking that Moscow may have hacked the Democratic National Committee and thinking that Moscow actually hacked the election, between thinking the president may have Russian conflicts of interest and thinking he’s a Russian puppet … [W]hen someone like the New York Times columnist Paul Krugman declares that Putin “installed” Donald Trump
as president, he’s moving out of the realm of plausible plots and into the world of fantasy. Similarly, Clinton’s warning that Trump could be Putin’s “puppet” leaped from an imaginable idea, that Putin wanted to help her rival, to the much more dubious notion that Putin thought he could control the impulsive Trump. (Trump barely seems capable of controlling himself.)

There were two sides to the Russia story in the US liberal media – rational and emotional. The rational side had to do with calculations of Clinton-affiliated circles and other anti-Russian groups pulling their resources to undermine Trump and his plans to improve relations with Russia. Among others, these resources included dominance within the liberal media and leaks by unidentified members of the intelligence community. The emotional side was revealed by the liberal elites’ ability to engage with fears of Russia within the US political class and the general public. Popular emotions of fear and frustration with Russia already existed in the public space due to the old Cold War memories. In part due to these memories, minority groups such as one associated with Clinton were successful in evoking in the public liberal mind what historian Richard Hofstadter (1964) called the ‘paranoid style’ or ‘the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.’ Mobilized by liberal media to pressure Trump, these emotions of Russophobia then became an independent factor in the political struggle inside Washington. The public display of fear and frustration with Russia and Trump could only be sustained by constant supply of new ‘suspicious’ developments and their intense discussion by the media.

The Russia paranoia in the liberal media was symptomatic of America’s declining confidence in its own values. Following the terrorist attack on the United States on 11 September 2001, the disastrous war in Iraq, and the global financial crisis of 2008, the US and European nations have been searching for ways to adapt in a new, increasingly unstable and regionalized world. The United States was divided internally. In November 2016, following the presidential elections, 77% of Americans perceived their country as ‘greatly divided on the most important values’ (Jones, 2016). Externally, following the war in Iraq, US leadership could no longer inspire the same respect, and a growing number of countries viewed it as a threat to world peace. In response, the United States has moved away from trying to win hearts and minds, toward developing ‘digital’ and financial tools for engaging foreign activists and monitoring foreign governments. Activities of the US government exposed by Julian Assange and Edward Snowden indicated that the power of example was increasingly replaced with assertiveness, surveillance, and bribery in defeating the US opponents.

The lack of confidence was reflected in the exaggerated fear that Russia was capable of destroying the West’s values. However, Russia and Putin were neither omnipresent nor threatening to destroy the United States’ political system. Mark Lawrence Schrad (2017) identified fears of Russia as ‘increasingly hysterical fantasies’ and argued against viewing Russia as the global menace. Rather it is
a political system that combines democratic and non-democratic characteristics, while its varied strategic interests deserve recognition and respectful engagement (ibid.). If the Kremlin was indeed behind the cyberattacks, it was not for the reasons it is blamed for. Rather than trying to subvert the US system, it sought to defend its own against the perceived US global policy of changing regimes and meddling in Russia’s internal affairs. The United States has a long history of meddling and covert activities in foreign countries since the Cold War (Kapur and Saradzhyan, 2017). Unlike the Cold War, the struggle in today’s world is not for victory of communism or capitalism but for assertion of global rules and regulations that favour different states. Washington’s establishment assumes that America defines the rules and boundaries of proper behaviour in international politics, while others simply follow the established rules.

Is Russia Doomed to Be the Negative Other?
The analysis of US media confirms scholarly conclusions about media’s importance in terms of shaping the nation’s political and cultural identity. Through rejection of difference, the binary ‘self vs other’ presentation assists self in maintaining its moral and psychological confidence. The US narrative of Russia as the threatening neo-Soviet autocracy has been instrumental in confirming the identity of ‘free’ America at home and the leader of the ‘free world’ abroad. The narrative assists the media in engaging with the US public in part because the old Cold War views have not entirely disappeared from the public mind and have not been replaced by a different understanding of the new realities. Following the election of Trump as US President, the liberal media presented him as the Kremlin’s proxy and a main contributor to defeating the liberal candidate Hillary Clinton. Russia’s otherness, again, served to distract public attention from failed liberal policies and to preserve confidence of the liberal self. In addition, the United States continues to be guided by the geopolitical objective of remaining the sole superpower, which also requires an image of the external other(s). As Anatol Lieven (2017) wrote, ‘whipping up fear of Russia allows elites in both the USA and Europe to continue to structure their institutions and strategies around an adversary that is familiar, comfortable and fundamentally safe.’

On the other hand, the Russian media narrative of the globally intrusive, dictatorial, and internally corrupt America serves to strengthen Russia’s identity of an independent great power guided by superior values and principles. Presenting promotion of democracy and human rights as inseparable from the United States’ hegemonic ambitions helps the Kremlin to rally supporters for its policies inside and outside Russia. Propaganda of anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories has been a powerful method in the Kremlin’s toolkit.10 In the age of global information competition, media, more than ever, serves to articulate and consolidate national symbols and emotions.

The described clash of values in US-Russia relations was hardly inevitable, in the sense that alternative strategies and ideas existed in both countries. Influ-
ential intellectuals, organizations, and members of the political class voiced their support for cooperation based on mutual interests in fighting terrorism, regional instability, and weapons proliferation. Yet, each time those advocating exclusive values, rather than inclusive solutions, prevailed (Levgold, 2016). As I have argued, this happened due to a combination of two factors: perception of the other side’s recognition of self’s values and interests; and level of the self’s internal confidence in its ability to promote or sustain its values. The United States shifted toward negative presentation of Russia in response to the perceived challenge to its interests and values globally, including from Russia. The Kremlin’s value strategy was more regional and local, resulting from perceived Western pressures and internal confidence. The annexation of Crimea, in particular, was a popular decision that provided leadership with a powerful boost of confidence. Driven by such perceptions, the ruling elites postponed searches for cooperation and adopted policies of unilateral protection of each side’s interests.

The identified value conflicts had roots in both the cultural and political divide. Against some initial expectations, the age of globalization has not replaced the world of nation-states, but rather introduced new conditions, in which national identities, values, and institutions express themselves by reviving some old, historically established ideas and practices. As one American commentator wrote, it is abundantly clear that many in the West ‘underestimated the role of nationalism and other forms of local identity, including sectarianism, ethnicity, tribal bonds, and the like. … [I]t turns out that many people in many places care more about national identities, historic enmities, territorial symbols, and traditional cultural values than they care about “freedom” as liberals define it’ (Walt, 2016).

US-Russia conflicts too had roots in history and politics. Due to the history of Cold War and some earlier developments, the United States and Russia built principally different political institutions. After the Cold War, the two nations did not view each other as adversaries and their leaders rarely used the emotional and mutually alienating language of exclusive values until the early 2010s, or some twenty years later. However, during this time, the two nations failed to bridge the old cultural gap – largely because of existing and increasingly diverging political expectations. While Washington expected Russia to accept the US’ new status of the only superpower, the Kremlin never relinquished hopes to recover as a global power in the post-Cold War era and expected the White House to respect Russia’s claims of equality. It was only a matter of time before these radically different, indeed irreconcilable, expectations would clash, pushing the two countries toward rivalry including in the realm of values.

The US media led the way in creating the narrative of a threatening neo-Soviet Russia before the American officials chose to exploit it. Although the United States public did not hold an overwhelmingly negative image of Russia, the public perception became more critical since the late 1990s, creating a space for the revival of the neo-Soviet, neo-Cold War narrative by the mainstream
media. In developing this narrative, the media was arguably less influenced by the public and more so by various groups with anti-Russian feelings and preferences within the US political class. These groups were suspicious of Putin’s arrival as President of Russia and by the mid-2000s they widely publicized their view of the country’s deviation from the ‘right path’. In the eyes of mainstream liberal media, Russia’s diversion from building a Western-style political system and cooperating with the West in foreign policy ‘confirmed’ these groups’ assessments. The mainstream media then faithfully reflected the new perception of Russia by the public and especially by the elites.

Russia’s political system and values are, of course, quite different, yet not antagonistic to those of the United States. In the 1990s, Russian historically distinct values of Eastern Christianity, communal mentality, and strong state were thought to be increasingly combined with those of liberal democracy. Some synthesis of those might have emerged were it not for interference of interstate politics and perception on the Kremlin’s side that the US ignored Russia’s security interests and priorities. The country’s tradition of a powerful executive had centuries-long roots predating the Soviet and even the tsarist system (Tsygankov, 2015) and is likely to continue to shape Russia’s political system. Attacking this tradition as prone to dictatorship and threatening the West’s values is similar to attacks by Russian nationalists on Western political systems as unjust and inherently corrupt.

The US state played an especially prominent role in developing and consolidating these negative perceptions of Russia. By the mid-2000s, the US leadership began to rely on such perceptions, as George W. Bush’s statement during the Bratislava ‘democracy’ summit made clear. However, Bush and subsequently Obama refrained from using the inflammatory language common in the media and each hoped to find an understanding with Putin on the basis of the US priorities. In the meantime, the Kremlin was frightened by Washington’s strategy of global regime change and coloured revolutions in Eurasia, and was increasingly sceptical that such understanding was possible. These two divergent perceptions doomed the period of Obama-Medvedev cooperation to failure and then clashed following Putin’s return as President in 2012. At this point, the divergent political perceptions reinforced the growing cultural divide. First, the United States and then Russia each deployed the emotional language of value confrontation in attempting to pressure the other side politically. The US leadership sought to keep Russia’s political system open to American economic and political interests, whereas the Kremlin wanted guarantees against foreign ‘intervention’. Both sides developed media strategies – assertive from Washington’s side and defensive from Moscow’s side – in order to promote or sustain their internal political values. If the United States and Russia fail to develop a pragmatic cooperation, one can expect the US media to continue the ideological and largely negative coverage of Russia, and vice versa.

As E. H. Carr (1964, p.236) wrote, the state power is prepared to go far
to exploit and create ‘the morality convenient to itself’. Before the end of the Cold War, the United States already had such a morality system established as a ‘market democracy’. During the Cold War, the idea of such a system obtained the status of an ideology fighting on behalf of freedom against totalitarian communism (Oren, 2002). As far as Russia is concerned, it abandoned its Soviet system of values only to discover the older historical pattern of the strong state. The latter was gradually revived following decline of Russia’s liberal aspirations of the late 1980s-early 1990s in response to pressures from the West. Observers documented how the Kremlin improvised and experimented with different strategies of opposing Western influences (Wilson, 2005; Pomerantsev, 2014), yet it is equally important to identify similarities between the newly introduced ‘morality’ and the Tsarist practices of state dominance in the areas of information, politics, and economics. As previously in its history, Russia’s system of values developed in tensions with and in response to that of Western nations. Ideas of Christianity, communism, and liberal democracy all had their roots in the West, yet each was adapted to fit Russia’s own geopolitical and domestic conditions. Ironically, instead of transforming Russia’s traditional institutions, Western pressures contributed to these institutions’ revival.

NOTES

1 Some of the themes in this paper were discussed previously and are more fully developed in The Dark Double: How American Media Makes Sense of Russia (forthcoming in 2018).

2 For instance, speaking at the 2016 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Putin was critical of the institution of superdelegates in the United States’ system and implied that on two occasions election results were stolen: ‘Twice in the history of the USA presidents were elected by the majority of delegates, yet these delegates represented a minority of voters. Is this a democracy?’ (Plenary Meeting of St. Petersburg Economic Forum, 17 June 2016, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178).

3 For an analysis of Trump’s views, see Mead (2017). For a perspective on Putin’s strong system as grounded in Russia’s history, see Tsygankov (2015).

4 Some groups of neoconservative leaning within the Republican Party have been critical of Trump’s Russia views for their own political reasons. For convergence of views between liberal hawks and neoconservatives as formed during the George W. Bush era, see Tsygankov (2009).

5 For some perspectives, see Tsygankov (2017); Beebe (2017).

6 ‘Putin violated our sovereignty, influenced our elections … and now gets to watch us do nothing because of partisan divides’ (McFaul, 2017).

7 See https://twitter.com/anneapplebaum/status/843523070233133056.

8 Including those with Republican ties. See n. 4 above.


10 See, for example, Yablokov (2015).
REFERENCES


The Russia thing is good business. The world gets worse and worse and I get more and more invitations to speak at brunches. If I were to tell you about how this is a criminal regime and the leader is a gangster, you would know all of this already – this is a very well-informed audience, you wouldn’t really learn anything if I told you that kind of stuff. It is a criminal regime, there is no question about it: use of very obviously state-only controlled chemicals to kill people abroad who are considered traitors to the state is an indication that the regime would do just about anything it wants, regardless of international law. And the beauty of this is they’ll say, ‘We had nothing to do with it, but if anybody thinks about betraying our nation again, think twice!’ This is what we call implausible deniability. I can go on and on about that for you, but as I said, I don’t think you’d learn that much. So I’m going to take a little bit of a deeper dive through some history and come back the other side, and do three separate parts to the presentation. The first part will be what I am going to call ‘the geopolitical conundrum of Russian power in the world’, the second part will be about ‘the paradoxes of Russian power’, and the third part will be about a US response or what I would call a ‘possible US response in US foreign policy’.

The Geopolitical Conundrum of Russian Power in the World

The first thing to say about Russia is that if you look over the long haul, there is a pattern. Everything looks personal and the personalities matter, but the paradox is that we keep getting a similar type of person in charge of Russia. So maybe it is more than just personality. In other words, I am not discounting personality, I am just saying that if you look through Russian history, there is a lot of, I would say, repetition or similarity – not the same exactly, but a pattern. And I would describe the pattern this way: The first and most important piece is that Russia has always wanted to be a special country in the world – what they
call a ‘providential power’ or ‘power under God’. This means that they have a special mission – they are not just a regular country. You can argue where this comes from – does it come from the Byzantine legacy, does it come from just being a big country; there are many different theories about where it comes from, but what is not in dispute is that it has been there a long time and is still there today. But point number two is that although this aspiration of being a providential power has been clear for a long time, Russia has never been the greatest power in the world. There have been moments in time when Russia has had a significant position: the defeat, for example, by Peter the Great of Charles XII of Sweden, which is how Russia got onto the Baltic Sea in the early eighteenth century; the defeat of Napoleon by Alexander and Alexander got to Paris, for example; and, of course, the defeat of Hitler by Stalin in WWII. Other than these three peaks, Russia has not quite been as powerful as it aspires to be. So the result has been a gap – actually, a gulf – between the aspirations and the wherewithal, the capacities of the Russian state. So this has led Russia time and time again, while holding these aspirations and while not fully having the capacities to live up to the aspirations, to have recourse to the state, the state as an instrument to push the society – to push it in terms of some type of economic modernization that is coercive, a kind of state-led drive to make up the difference or at least to manage the gap with the most powerful countries. It has taken different forms – there was the tsarist version, there was a bloody, very coercive Soviet version, and there is a version today under President Putin that we would recognize. Once again, not identical throughout time but enough similarity to recognize a pattern. This recourse to the state – the state as an instrument, the state as a lever to push and kind of bully the society forward towards some type of modernizing project – has produced time and again a spur, a kind of economic spurt, and then a period of stagnation. The spurt is always followed by stagnation. So you get this recourse to the state which looks like it is going to work and for a time does produce some results at high cost, nevertheless then gets into a kind of bogged-down quagmire situation. The fourth and final piece of this historical excursion is that the recourse to the state, the attempt to build a strong state produces again and again personal rule. It does not produce a strong state, it produces a personalistic state. One of the things you probably don’t know is that Vladimir Putin goes on Russian television and complains endlessly that only about 20% of his orders are implemented. The rest are circumvented, ignored, buried in bureaucratic red tape because personalistic rule is not as strong as we think it is. State actors are not as easily controlled in authoritarian regimes and the more you build up the state in an authoritarian setting, the less control you have over the state officials, ironically enough. So you have aspirations to be a providential power, serious capacities but not always the first rank in states, a recourse to the state as an instrument to force the country to try to close this gap with the most powerful countries, and then personalistic rule. And the personalistic rule – the problem with that
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is a conflation between the national interests and the survival of the personal regime. So to criticize the personal regime is to criticize Russia – there is this conflation between national interests and personalistic rule survival. That is the period we are in – yet again. So in some ways, Putin is as much a symptom as he is a driver of the current state of Russia. The implications of this should be clear: our bad relations with Russia are not accidental. They do not derive, for example, from a ‘misunderstanding’ – you know, ‘if we respected them more, if we understood more what they are about, relations would be good.’ The answer to that is no. When was the last time there was a sustained period of good relations between the United States and Russia over more than a generation into a second generation? When was the last time that happened? Before the United States became a great power, there was a sustained period of good relations. Since the US has been the leading economy in the world, which dates to about 1890s, maybe even before, relations have not been good, they have been poor. There is a fundamental clash of interests between the United States and Russia. US grand strategy looks very complicated, but it is not that complicated, it can be boiled down as follows: do not allow another country to dominate its region. What that means is that no country, not Germany, not anybody else, should be able to dominate Europe; no country, not Japan and now not China, should be able to dominate East Asia; and no country, not Russia, should be able to dominate Eurasia. Well, what is Russian grand strategy? Russian grand strategy is ‘dominate Eurasia’. So there is a fundamental clash of interests between US grand strategy and Russian grand strategy. There is also, even below that, a fundamental clash of values. The highest value in Russia is respect for the state. The highest value in the United States is freedom, often understood as freedom from the state. So not only is there a clash of interests, but there is a clash of values even deeper than the interests. So we would expect relations to be difficult. That doesn’t mean they have to be warlike, it doesn’t mean that tension has to be as high as it is now, because differences, even differences of values, can be managed. That is called, for example, marriage. Everybody in this room is familiar with the problem of managing a clash of interests and a clash of values, even before your kids are teenager age. So we can manage better, but the idea that we can get to a friendly place with Russia has been a constant illusion. Not because Russians are bad people – they are an incredible civilization, their civilizational achievements are stunning. But there is a fundamental clash of interests and a clash of values which leads to difficult relations time and time again. We saw President Trump discover this, before President Trump President Obama went through this cycle and problem, President Bush before him went through this, and on it goes. So that is my first general point: it is not only Putin and it is not even primarily Putin, there is something deeper going on there. But once again that doesn’t mean that they are an enemy forever, or that we are always right. It just means that we need to manage the tensions and we could be doing a better job.
The Paradoxes of Russian Power

You hear a lot that Russia is weak, Russia is very weak. But of course this is the natural state of Russia – it is one of the great powers, it is just never the greatest power. You can recall the Soviet Union, and we thought, ‘Oh, the Soviet Union collapsed, we are done with the Russia problem.’ Well, it turns out we are not done with the Russia problem, even though the Soviet Union collapsed. Because they are weak or weaker, but they are still a major power. If you look at, for example, GDP – Russia’s GDP, which is maybe 1.3-1.4 trillion at current exchange rates – if you look at Russia’s GDP, it’s only a little bit more than one-fifteenth the size of that of the US GDP. The Soviet Union’s GDP at peak was one-third the size of the American economy – still not gigantic, but can you imagine going from one-third to about one-fifteenth. That tells you that Russia is not really on the same level as the United States. At the same time, you can look at other indicators – they obviously have a military-industrial complex. Yes, it has been inherited from the Soviet Union so a lot of it is not credited to the current regime, but nonetheless it has been revived under the current regime. And they are able to produce world-class weaponry of all different types and they are able to do that even when they have budgetary austerity. So there is something effective and successful about the Russian state. We think of the Russian state as a pure kleptocracy – ‘it’s a bunch of crooks, and gangsters, and thieves, and they steal everything inside.’ That describes a large part of Russian reality. But not all. Many people predicted, for example, that the sanctions would crash the Russian economy, that the oil price when it dropped would crash the Russian economy. And there they are – still there today, still investing in their military-industrial modernization, the military-industrial complex. And the reason is because they have also not just kleptocrats but many competent people in the state. Their central bank is competently run. Their Finance Ministry has a tremendous number of competent people. Their macroeconomic policy over the last twenty years has been excellent – since the 1998 default, it has been just excellent. And so we have to take account of these paradoxes: on the one hand, a tiny economy compared to the US economy; on the other hand, the ability to produce weapons, in fact to sell them globally and to use them, that are high class. On the one hand, thieves and crooks, a kleptocratic state; on the other hand, a highly competent central bank and a highly competent Finance Ministry. They also have something we don’t have – they have a state department. Their Foreign Ministry is excellent. It is full of people who know foreign languages, have experience of other countries, and go into meetings fully briefed and fully on their brief. So there is quite a lot of competence inside the kleptocratic chaos of the Russian state. So these are some of the paradoxes we don’t fully understand. Russia is smaller than ever, farther from Europe than ever since Peter the Great’s times. And yet it’s still in this geography of Eurasia, which means it touches on Europe, it touches on the Middle East, it touches on East Asia. And so Russia’s geography is a great platform for
influence projection. They have a unique geography. Russia doesn’t have any allies per se and so it looks weak in that regard, a lonely power. But it’s got one of the vetoes in the Security Council at the UN. Which is why time and again Russia tries to push things into or through the UN where they have significant voice. Of course, they earned this veto in the victory over the Nazi land army in WWII. So we cannot seem to be able to manage this – the paradoxical nature of Russia. We paint it one way or the other way rather than both ways at the same time. And I can give you many statistics – all the averages about this and that, and this and that; you know averages are very valuable, if your head is in the oven and your feet are in the fridge, on average you’re comfortable, you guys know that from your statistics class. I could do that with all the averages about Russia, but just the deeper point is that it is weak and yet it is a major power. Or another way to put it, it is a major power and yet it is weak. This is the story of Russia. It has some unique attributes – one of the unique attributes is daring, not recklessness but daring. Russia does stuff, constantly surprising us, daring. It’s no use being a superpower if you behave like a wussy or an idiot. And it is quite useful if you are a weak major power but you have a certain amount of daring and calculated risks.

**US Foreign Policy vis-à-vis Russia**

The third area of discussion. I haven’t really talked about the current administration – I think we’ll leave that for the conclusion, there may be some people interested in that question, including for example relationships between the current president and people in Russia. I want to talk a little bit about the foreign policy implications of some of what I’m saying. To me, there is a deep paradox on the American side, which is to say we are very proud of our tradition of limited government at home. If they still taught civics – they don’t teach civics anymore, but if they were still teaching civics, they would teach a story about the tradition of limited government, where it came from, the Founding Fathers, Constitutional convention and the formation of the United States and separation of powers, and checks and balances and everything else – things that I was taught just before they abolished civics for the next generations. Anyway, but paradoxically while we cherish the tradition of limited government at home, we sometimes forget about this when we talk about foreign policy. So if our idea is that too much power of any one institution or group leads to tyranny, how could it be that we want the United States to do everything alone and to dominate the whole globe? Isn’t that a violation of our own principles, of our own traditions of limited government? Wouldn’t it be smarter if we had a limited-government theory in foreign policy terms so that, like at home, we would be afraid of our own excess power in the international system? In other words, maybe it would be to our advantage abroad, just like it is at home, if our power were more limited. I know that sounds ridiculous, but if you think about American values, there is a certain logic there. What would that look like in
practice? What it would look like in practice is what should be familiar to this audience – a traditional balance-of-power notion about the world. You’d want a lot of friends and you’d want to consult those friends. So you wouldn’t want to engage in a trade war with somebody who is cheating at trade not because that person is innocent or that country is innocent – no, the Chinese are cheating at trade, but a trade war between the US and China has very adverse effects on all of those countries that also trade and are US allies. And I don’t have to mention them, but you know – South Korea, Japan, Germany – they are all US allies and so they are potential victims of a trade war that we would inflict on the Chinese, even though the Chinese deserve that. So you would instead want to preserve your alliance and your deep relationships, and you’d want to address the problem of Chinese cheating in economic terms without victimizing one of your strengths, which is your alliance system. You have more than sixty allies and the Chinese have North Korea as their principal ally or formal ally. Anyway, so just to continue this further then with the Russian story. It’s very convenient – by the way, as I said, it’s true that it is a gangster regime. On the other hand, it’s still there. It’s not going away. The Soviet Union went away and we are still confronting, as I said, similar problems. So what we need with Russia is some type of negotiation, we need some type of relationship, we need some type of managing of the tensions. And we have forgotten how one does this. That’s not to say we ignore violations of human rights, murders of journalists – all of that remains part of our understanding and part of our policy. But nonetheless you cannot go through, have a stable US foreign policy that is sustainable over generations, whereby you don’t have any relationship whatsoever with Russia. So paradoxically again, President Trump’s instincts are actually pretty good on this – he believes, and he is actually correct, that we need to get to a better place with Russia. The problem is how? How we would do that. Here is where the rubber meets the road. One of the things you’ll hear is, ‘Well, we have to get tough on Russia, we’ve got to be strong, we’ve got to show strength.’ And that’s correct. Those people who argue for deterrence, for strength, for standing up to Russia, they are correct. Of course, you have to recognize the limitations in a policy like that: for example, Russia has an army, Ukraine doesn’t really have an army, so are you going to defend the sovereignty of Ukraine? Are you going to make a statement publicly that you are going to defend the sovereignty of Ukraine? Because if you make that statement, you are going to have to send a quarter million American boys and girls to Ukraine for a long period of time to defend that sovereignty. So if you are going to make aggressive statements of deterrence or strength against Russia, your means better line up with your policy announcements. It’s one thing to not recognize Russian incorporation of Crimea, Russian annexation of Crimea – not recognize that. We didn’t recognize Soviet annexation of the Baltic republics either, as you know. So our ambassador in Moscow could not go to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania because the Americans didn’t recognize their incorporation into the Soviet Union. It’s one
thing not to recognize, it’s another thing to talk about rollback or to talk about military confrontation – that’s fine if you are ready to send a quarter million American boys and girls there to defend that sovereignty because Russia, as I said, has a real army. And you say, ‘Well, we can arm the Ukrainians to fight themselves’ – you can do that, let’s try that somehow, of course we cannot arm them to the degree that the Russians are armed. And moreover, we can arm the Ukrainians to defend themselves, and then the train station in Kiev blows up and a whole bunch of people die one day. And the Russians say, ‘Oh, we have nothing to do with that, we don’t know how that happened.’ And the Ukrainians in their capital are afraid to take mass transit because somebody set bombs in their mass transit in response to arming of Eastern Ukraine to defend itself against Russia. That’s the kind of escalation one can get into. I’m not saying we should not do it or we should do it – I’m just talking about we have to be aware of the implications of our public statements and about our proposed policies. So getting tough with Russia, standing up to Russia has implications – are we ready for those implications? Once again – I’m in favor of the deterrence, of being strong and of getting tough with them, but I understand that maybe differently from the cable TV-discussion version of it where everything is cost-free and Russia never responds and has no ability to escalate.

Let’s turn to the other piece. Then, you have some people saying, ‘Russia should be our friend, we should be more friendly with them, we should negotiate with them.’ And just like those who say, ‘we should get tough with Russia’, I agree with that statement too. I agree completely that we should have a relationship with Russia of mutual respect and derive as much mutual benefits as we can – for our own benefit, not because we want to be altruistic. But once again, the issue is how and in what form? Obviously, we need to combine the strength and the negotiation. Just to get strong and tough with somebody and then what? You are tough with them, you impose some punishment on them and then what happens next? What happens next is you need a diplomatic negotiation so that if you are strong and they make concessions, you are ready to pocket the concessions. Our problem is we are neither getting tough with them in a smart way, nor are we in negotiations. Getting tough without negotiations is a dead end. And just negotiating without having any leverage is also a dead end. Think about the Obama administration: first they wanted to get nice with Russia because they thought there was this misunderstanding that made the relations bad. This turned out to blow up in their face, the reset didn’t work. Then they wanted to ignore Russia and then Russia can’t really be ignored because they have significant capabilities and so they reminded the United States that they were out there – they interfered in our election process, ‘Hello, we are still out here, you are trying to ignore us, you’re trying to isolate us, we are just reminding you that we are still out here.’ One of the other pieces of the Obama administration policy that is not well understood is the negotiation we had with Russia. So, for example, we wanted Russia to help in Syria so we announced
that we wanted Russia to help in Syria. Now, this put all the leverage on Russia’s side of the table. We announced that we wanted to do a deal on the Iranian nuclear program and we needed Russia for that deal. Once again, we pushed all our chips, all our leverage onto the Russia side. So while there were some negotiations in the Obama case, they were negotiations not from strength but from weakness. And we gave what leverage we had over to the Russian side before the negotiation opened up and of course, we got nothing out of those negotiations. So the idea is – and this goes back to Reagan [...] and Shultz and it’s not rocket science, but it is ‘show some strength and negotiate at the same time’ and then linkage of the strength and the negotiation but not linkage of all the issues so that if Russia, for example, murders a journalist, you break off negotiations. No, you make a statement about how this violates core principles of the international community and you increase the pressure, but you keep the negotiations going because increasing the pressure gives you more leverage in the negotiation process. This ability to kind of walk and chew gum, to apply our strengths but also to have dialogue, to have diplomacy or to have diplomacy that is backed up with the kind of advantages that a superpower would have – this is banal, once again, not rocket science, but I just don’t see that happening.

Conclusion

Washington right now is just not really capable of a Russia policy, we are sort of paralyzed for all the reasons that you understand. But if we were to get a Russia policy, if there were to be a Russia policy, it would involve understanding that the differences are not superficial but fundamental, yet they can be managed. It would involve understanding that Russia is weak but also a major power. And it would involve an understanding that we need to show our strengths in intelligent fashion, not overcommitting, while also using diplomacy, negotiation to get those concessions and to pocket those concessions. But here is one thing, I want to conclude on this note. We haven’t really mentioned it yet so I just want to make sure we are clear on this. At the very beginning of this problem – Russian interference, Russia-Trump, all this kind of stuff – people were asking me, ‘What is going on, what is that stuff about, how could this be happening?’ And it’s very clear what happened. Think about this for a second. You have a very sophisticated military intelligence and civilian intelligence operation, you want to discredit American candidates, you want to discredit American democracy, so what are you going to do? You are going to need the services of the Buster-Keaton Trump campaign in order to pull this penetration off, right? You are going to need to ‘collude’ with the Trump campaign because you are Russia, you are not good enough to pull this off on your own – you cannot find WikiLeaks as a cutout to release all this information so that you have deniability, you need the Trump people to do all this. So obviously, the idea of collusion is absurd on the surface. The Russians have never had any need for any collusion from the beginning. Moreover, the idea that the Russians
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knew or thought Trump was going to win is also absurd. On the Friday before the Tuesday election, the Trump campaign polling operation sent out an email bragging – that is a few days before the election – that they would get as many as 250 electoral votes. They were bragging at how close their loss is going to be. That was the Trump internal polling – that was the Trump campaign, that is what they thought was going to happen. So the idea that the Russians knew what they were doing, on the one hand, and therefore bet on Trump, but didn’t know what they were doing, on the other hand, and therefore they needed to collude with Trump – there has been an absurd discussion in the US public sphere about this. What the Russians did was they compromised the Trump campaign and the Trump people. They entangled them in criminal activities and they penetrated them with surveillance to find out what was going on on the inside. It was a Russian intelligence operation. The intelligence operation was also there on the Clinton side – the Clinton people were less willing, they were more unwilling victims of this. And the Trump campaign was a willing victim of Russia’s compromising activity. Trump and his campaign, unfortunately, proved eager to allow themselves to become entangled in criminal activity. But the point was to penetrate and compromise. So what we have is a sophisticated Russian operation that the people on the Trump campaign willingly cooperated with and entangled themselves in compromising situations, subjecting the campaign, themselves and maybe even the president to blackmail. So that is why this all started as a counterintelligence investigation which then morphed into a criminal investigation, but the origins are a counterintelligence problem. That’s what the Russians did – it was an intelligence operation of penetration and compromise. One final point, if I could make on this: The other piece I noted at the very beginning of this – the absurdity of collusion is one piece – the other piece was that overpriced real estate is ipso facto money laundering, that’s the business you are in if you are selling overpriced real estate. If you are selling a ‘luxury condominium’ with 1/1000-millimeter thick walls for a 100 million dollars – or how much per square foot, you can do the calculation – there is only certain kind of people who can buy this property or who would be interested in that property – people who have stolen big amounts of money and buy overpriced real estate to launder their ill-gotten gains. So if any investigation of the Trump operation moved towards the business, they would discover the business was essentially a criminal enterprise. Because, once again, many people in the real estate business will not cross lines, they would do the due diligence, they would look where the money comes from, they would decline some buyers because of the suspect nature of the money – that is after all what the law requires. But in this case that organization did not do its due diligence and in many cases did the opposite. So it is very vulnerable in an investigation if the latter went into the business area which President Trump himself announced at the beginning – that it was a red line to look into his business operations, you all recall that, right? So here we are now, confused as hell about collusion which
was a Russian entanglement in criminality on purpose that foolish people got involved in, on our side, and moreover now we are investigating the business operation where you have the money laundering and the pincer movement is moving in so you get the campaign manager and then you move to the lawyer, and then you go in for the son-in-law, and then the son and perhaps the daughter, hoping people break.
PROPAGANDA IN BULGARIA: MADE IN RUSSIA OR HOME-GROWN?

‘A chicken is not a bird, Bulgaria is not abroad’ (Kuritsa ne ptitsa, Bolgariya ne zagranitsa) was a popular Soviet saying during socialist times. Bulgaria was indeed seen as the most friendly of ‘fraternal states’ among the Soviet bloc satellites. Both the historical narrative of a ‘Slavic brother nation’ – fuelled by Tsarist Russia’s role in the process of Bulgaria becoming an independent nation-state in the late nineteenth century – and the fact that many Soviet tourists would visit the country’s Black Sea Riviera contributed to this popular perception. The events of 1989, the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, and Bulgaria’s pro-Western orientation and process of entrenchment since the turn of the millennium have not seemed to change much in this regard. Russians, for instance, still see Bulgaria as one of their most favoured tourist destinations (Andreev, 2017). Thus, with the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, which took a decisive negative turn following Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea, and the onset of the so-called ‘information war’, it is worth looking into how Bulgaria came to feature in Russian media outlets that can be regarded as conveyors of propaganda for the Putin regime.

The purpose of this paper is to give the main tenets of how Bulgaria was represented in what can be coined as ‘Russian propaganda’ and how the dynamics of this process functioned in the period from 2013 to 2016. As such, it consists of two parts. First, it will provide a discussion outlining the general framework and illustrate some discourses that appeared in Russian media outlets concerning Bulgaria. Secondly, it will focus on how Russian propaganda operated in relation to Bulgaria’s presidential elections in the autumn of 2016. The latter case study is important as an empirical study since the ultimate winner of the election, Rumen Radev, was largely portrayed in both international and domestic media as being a ‘pro-Russian’ candidate. Such media portrayals of the Bulgarian presidential elections can be seen as consistent with similar depictions of other electoral contests in Europe and the United States over the past years in which Russian propaganda, social media trolls and bots, fake news have supposedly come to play a role in promoting politicians or political parties that are perceived to be ‘pro-Russian’. This paper will qualify such simplistic dichotomies and attempt to bring some nuance to the question of what consti-
tutes ‘Russian propaganda’. In contrast to widespread assumptions following the logic of the so-called ‘information’ or ‘hybrid’ war, it will argue that what is generally regarded as ‘Russian propaganda’ in Bulgaria tends to be a ‘home-grown’ phenomenon rather than a foreign-directed or steered influence.

The Image of Bulgaria in Russian Media Outlets for Domestic and International Use

In the past three years and in particular since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis with Russia’s occupation and annexation of Crimea and its interference in eastern Ukraine, several studies and reports have been published, emanating from both governmental-institutional (NATO, EU) and think-tank circles, regarding the phenomenon of Russia’s ‘hybrid war’ and its use of propaganda and disinformation against the West. However, most of these studies do not clearly distinguish between Russian foreign ‘policy’, ‘influence’, or ‘propaganda’, and tend to mesh the three concepts together. More recently, the phenomenon has been reconceptualized in the wake of the alleged hacking scandal during the 2016 US presidential election campaign as Russian ‘interference’ with a direct subversive goal of influencing the outcome of the election.

Some studies and reports that have appeared do include country-specific case studies, which usually go in the direction of ‘Russian influence in said countries’. Nevertheless, in these studies Bulgaria has been more often than not omitted. Two notable exceptions must be mentioned here: one authored by Bulgarian political analyst Dimitar Bechev (2015), which is concerned solely with Bulgaria, and another The Kremlin Playbook (Conley et al., 2016), by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and the Center for the Study of Democracy in Sofia, which deals with several countries in East Central Europe and includes Bulgaria. Both these studies have examined the degree of penetration of Russian interests (which are mainly economic) in Bulgaria. The goal of this paper is rather to highlight the specific nature of what can be considered as Russian propaganda concerning Bulgaria and to analyse its main dynamics. In order to contextualize this phenomenon in Bulgaria it is necessary to understand how Russian propaganda presents Bulgaria and its political, economic, social, and cultural development through its media outlets both in Russia and abroad. Thus, the purpose of this analysis (which is based on qualitative research of a sample of Russian media outlets) is to outline the main narrative(s) and topics relating to Bulgaria and how they are represented and instrumentalized in these outlets.

For the international context or audience, this analysis is based on the two major outlets that are recognized as Russian propaganda outlets: RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik News/Sputnik International. Both outlets are multi-lingual, though strikingly no Bulgarian editions exist (RT is more limited language-wise as it is also a TV-outlet, while Sputnik is a web-only news media site though it offers radio programming in some countries). This can be ascribed
Tom Junes: *Propaganda in Bulgaria: Made in Russia or Home-grown?*

to the fact that Russian tends to be read or understood well enough in Bulgaria and therefore Russian-language media outlets can fulfil this function. It should be noted that the main Kremlin-run Russian TV channels such as Perviy Kanal are available on Bulgarian cable providers. Additionally, Bulgarian-based outlets that publish Russian-language content or reproduce Russian media content serve a sufficiently satisfactory function, so there is no need to allocate resources to a specific Bulgarian edition. An alternative hypothesis could be that Bulgaria is not seen as important enough to be deemed a target for RT or Sputnik (again, this mainly applies to Sputnik which has a Turkish and Serbian edition, but no Bulgarian or Greek edition; conversely, Sputnik has no Romanian edition, but it has a Moldovan one which can fulfil the former’s role).

For the domestic (Russia and former Soviet republics with Russian speakers) context or audience, this analysis is based primarily on state-controlled and tabloid media. Given the former’s propensity to act as conveyors of propaganda, those Russian outlets which are deemed reliable or independent have been disregarded at this point (though they should preferably be used for more balanced or critical reporting on Russian affairs). These outlets include the following: Dozhd TV; Ekho Moskvy; Gazeta.ru; Grani.ru; Interfax; Izvestia; Kommersant; Lenta.ru; Meduza (Latvia-based); Moskovskiy Novosti; Newsru.com; Novaya Gazeta; Radio Svoboda; RBC/RBK/RBK daily; RIA ‘New Region’; Rosbalt; Russian Forbes; Russky Zhurnal; Slon.ru; Snob; Takie Dela; The New Times; Vedomosti; Yezhednevny Zhurnal; and Znack.com.

While some of the above outlets have been targeted by the Russian authorities or have changed ownership or editorial boards due to political pressure, the outlets that are more likely to spread propaganda are the state-run media and the tabloid outlets. The international Kremlin-funded and state-run outlets like RT have been portrayed as a pillar of the ‘hybrid war’ and have also recently been depicted as such by the US intelligence community. Nevertheless, this assessment has been criticized, as it highly doubtful to what extent these outlets have any real tangible influence since their market share is in fact quite minimal if not negligible. The Russian-language outlets function mainly for the domestic Russian audience (and internet readership) though, as noted above, they are available in Bulgaria. Similarly, though quite some online articles in Russian of dubious origin are reproduced in Bulgaria, the recent discussion of the significance of such ‘fake news’ has also been qualified by researchers (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

Thus, it is the tabloid outlets that represent a particularly interesting case, especially since they very much function in similar fashion as in other countries (e.g. in the United Kingdom where the tabloid press played a significant role in shaping public opinion in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, or in Bulgaria where the media landscape has been subjected to an increasing ‘tabloidization’ over the years [Tabakova, 2010] and therefore suffers from a tendency towards sensationalism instead of in-depth analysis). More so, Russia’s tabloid news
media site L!fe/Life News consistently outranked other Russian-language out-
lets in quoted/shared online content. According to a survey of ratings (for Octo-
ber 2016), the ranking of the 30 most-cited internet resources was as follows:

**Top 30 most-cited internet resources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Change in rank</th>
<th>Media outlet</th>
<th>Citation index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Life.ru</td>
<td>2,022.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Gazeta.ru</td>
<td>1,816.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Rbc.ru</td>
<td>1,511.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Lenta.ru</td>
<td>1,384.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Dni.ru</td>
<td>624.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Fontanka.ru</td>
<td>489.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>Kp.ru</td>
<td>293.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Vestl.ru</td>
<td>213.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Mosregtoday.ru</td>
<td>184.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Meduza.io</td>
<td>159.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>Newsru.com</td>
<td>145.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Znak.com</td>
<td>142.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>M24.ru</td>
<td>127.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Business-gazeta.ru</td>
<td>126.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>SvpRESSA.ru</td>
<td>114.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Izvestia.ru</td>
<td>95.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Rusplt.ru</td>
<td>90.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Utro.ru</td>
<td>85.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>+8</td>
<td>63.ru</td>
<td>83.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>Republic.ru</td>
<td>67.88</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Ntv.ru</td>
<td>67.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>+7</td>
<td>Ridus.ru</td>
<td>64.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Kommersant.ru</td>
<td>55.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>Kavkaz-uzel.eu</td>
<td>52.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Zona.media</td>
<td>51.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Tjournal.ru</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>47news.ru</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>Rg.ru</td>
<td>46.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>New</td>
<td>E1.ru</td>
<td>45.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this light, for the purposes of this analysis, tabloid media were of pri-
mary focus as the regular state-run media often overlap with the international
Kremlin-funded outlets like RT and Sputnik in content. It is also important to
note that in Russia itself TV still carries significantly more weight than purely
online media.
Bulgaria’s image and the instrumental use or reporting on developments in Bulgaria in the above media outlets should be seen within the general framework of the Russian propaganda narrative and discourses concerning the West, the EU, and NATO. While historically and culturally regarded as rather close to Russia, Bulgaria’s membership in both the EU and NATO makes it part of a geopolitical rival bloc nonetheless. Though by far not as important as countries like Germany, France, the United Kingdom or Poland, Bulgaria does represent a peculiar case since it borders both non-EU and non-NATO member states that tend to figure high within the Kremlin’s geopolitical and economic sphere of interest. One can perceive a reproduction of now ‘standard tropes’ of Russian propaganda discourses applied to Bulgaria with its propaganda image fitting within the broader anti-EU and anti-NATO narrative, albeit with some specific focuses and topical emphases. Overall, Bulgaria tends to be presented as a country potentially friendly to Russia, but hampered and restricted by the EU while acting as an ‘American lackey’. Bulgaria’s political elite is portrayed as loyal to its ‘overlords’, i.e. Brussels, Berlin and Washington, though with the occasional erratic reflex due to some resistance to the overarching logic of Great Power politics in international relations.

The most common topics in Russian propaganda in which Bulgaria figures tend to relate to: NATO (Balkan air space and Black Sea naval activity); the Ukraine crisis and sanctions against Russia; the refugee crisis; Turkey and the (civil) war in Syria; as well as energy policy (the South Stream/Turkish Stream pipeline projects, shale oil extraction and fracking, and the nuclear power plant project at Belene). Additionally, a dichotomy between the Bulgarian political establishment, which embraces a Euro-Atlantic orientation, and the domestic opposition, which is more Russia-friendly, is repeatedly presented. In the latter case, the opposition is usually depicted by the party Ataka and its leader Volen Siderov – Siderov figures rather in RT and Sputnik though not exclusively in the ‘domestic’ media outlets like L!fe/Life News. As such, Ataka is never referred to as a far-right, xenophobic party but alternatively as a ‘European’, ‘oppositional’ or ‘patriotic’ party depending on the context of the desired message. The references to Ataka mainly serve to show resentment against Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. Here one can also categorize various references emphasizing the ‘negative outcomes’ of the country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. Finally, the tabloid media offer an additional perspective since they regularly feature articles concerning the Bulgarian tourist industry, in particular summer tourism at the Black Sea coast, which often point to ‘negative experiences’ varying from inconveniences to even death experienced by Russian tourists in Bulgaria. By way of illustration, here are some examples featuring Bulgaria taken from L!fe/Life News and Komsomolskaya Pravda: on ‘foreign (here American) influence in steering civil society’ (Asanov, 2016a); ‘Bulgarian resistance to Ukrainian “fascism” – featuring Ataka as a party advocating minority rights’ (Gladikh, 2016); ‘foreign influence in aligning Bulgarian political elites’
(Asanov, 2016b); ‘resistance to NATO’ (Grin, 2016); ‘energy policy – the nuclear power plant at Belene’ (Asanov, 2016c); ‘the Night Wolves in Bulgaria’ (Ivanova, 2016); ‘low benefits of Bulgaria’s membership in the EU’; ‘bad experiences relating to tourism’ (Ivanov, 2016).

It is worth underlining again that Russian media outlets target the domestic audience and readership in Russia. It is in this sense that one must interpret the Kremlin’s decision to define ‘propaganda outlets’ as a matter of national security. A secondary audience and readership can nonetheless be found among Russian-speakers abroad, mainly in post-Soviet countries with a Russian-speaking minority or Russian diaspora. But as such, it would be an exaggeration to state that the image of Bulgaria as it is presented and instrumentalized for propaganda in Russian media outlets is used against Bulgaria, i.e. directed at the Bulgarian audience and readership in order to influence it. Rather, Bulgarian-based media fulfil this function more effectively and as such should be considered the main source of ‘Russian propaganda’ in the country. This provides a certain nuance as to what should be regarded as Russian propaganda and what should be more correctly classified as pro-Russian propaganda.

There is a need to cross-evaluate the image of Bulgaria in Russian propaganda with the tropes and discourses that are employed by pro-Russian and tabloid media outlets in the country. Of particular importance would be to determine to what degree there exists a ‘cross-pollination’ or reciprocal influence between Russian and Bulgarian media outlets. While Russian news outlets make use of Bulgarian international news agencies like Novinite or The Sofia Globe, it would be useful to gain more insight into the direction of the flow of information. In short, are Bulgarian pro-Russian outlets rather influenced by Russian outlets, or the other way around? To illustrate this problem, the second part of this paper will focus on the Bulgarian presidential elections that took place in November 2016, as they presented an interesting case in light of the broader international attention they received.

The 2016 Bulgarian Presidential Elections as a Case Study of Russian Propaganda

The 2016 presidential elections in Bulgaria were characterized by a rather low-key campaign in which the ultimate winner, Rumen Radev, was presented as a ‘pro-Russian’ candidate, mainly because he was backed by the Bulgarian Socialist Party. The elections also coincided with the US presidential elections – where there was much noise about Russian interference – and the Moldovan presidential elections where the outcome was supposedly in favour of the pro-Russian camp in the former Soviet republic. In this context, the Bulgarian elections were framed as another scene of possible competition between the West and Russia. Thus much of the Western press coverage picked up on the ‘pro-Russian’ labelling of Radev. Many of the Western articles were consequently translated and reprinted in serious Bulgarian media outlets.
What was striking about this was that Russian outlets were rather silent about the issue and, more importantly, so was the Kremlin. In late October and early November, right before the elections, two Russian state-owned television channels, TV Tsentr and Rossiya24, broadcast documentaries on Bulgaria featuring all the standard propaganda tropes while simultaneously casting doubt on Radev’s supposed pro-Russian inclination. Nevertheless, following Radev’s victory, several Bulgarian outlets began publishing ‘voices from Russia’ – concretely, fringe figures such as Aleksandr Dugin, or Leonid Reshetnikov who appeared initially on a marginal Russian TV channel – to suggest Russian meddling and thus a foreseeable ‘turn to Russia’ under Radev’s presidency (Junes, 2016). Unsurprisingly, once the ‘pro-Russian’ stance of Radev was being discussed in Bulgarian and Western media, the official Kremlin responses as well as Russian media began cautiously mirroring it, thus fuelling the narrative in Bulgaria. However, in the reporting it became clear that Russian media was relying either on Bulgarian or Western sources to make these claims (Sysoev, 2016). Closer examination revealed a peculiar dynamic of Western and Bulgarian media egging on the narrative in Russian media. In this case, the Russian ‘propaganda sting’ was thus rather self-inflicted and allowed Russian outlets to exploit or prey ‘on the cheap’ on what was being published in Bulgaria.

While the comments by Dugin and the numerous interviews by Reshetnikov certainly represented propaganda and disinformation, they were made more potent by the coverage and significance assigned to them by serious Bulgarian outlets. In this sense, more readers would read ‘about’ Russian propaganda then read the propaganda itself (Gathmann et al., 2017). The same pattern then repeated itself at the time of Radev’s inauguration when Bulgarian outlets – citing RIA Novosti – began circulating a story of a plan to ‘organize a Maidan against Radev’ and pointed to the fact that this was Russian propaganda and disinformation directed at Bulgaria with the goal of interfering in its domestic politics. The problem with this ‘propaganda sting’ was that the article in RIA Novosti was in fact an op-ed in which the information about a supposed ‘conspiratorial plan to organize a Maidan’ against Radev was based on ‘Bulgarian online media’ (Pshenichnikov, 2017). Closer examination revealed a series of links to an obscure Bulgarian blog post as the source of the story. In this sense, it became clear that the domestic ‘home-grown’ media play a more significant role whereas the Russian media merely could serve to amplify in Bulgaria what is ultimately created in Bulgaria. This story of a supposed plan to organize a Maidan was ranked as one of the top ‘fakes’ of the week. However, it was erroneously ascribed as having originated in Russia (and by implication ‘steered by’ the Kremlin).

Thus, while Russian media certainly has the potential to play a disruptive role in Bulgaria, it does so in a rather passive role: the op-ed in RIA Novosti was published for a Russian not a Bulgarian audience and had it not been picked up by Bulgarian media it would most likely have gone unnoticed. Consequently,
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it would therefore be more productive to conceptualize ‘pro-Russian propaganda’ of Bulgarian origin as opposed to ‘Russian propaganda concerning Bulgaria’. In addition, recent journalistic accounts have confirmed the existence of a ‘home-made’ phenomenon of ‘Russian propaganda’ in Bulgaria which in effect has no ties to any Kremlin-sponsored operation (Colborne, 2017). Today’s concept of ‘Russian propaganda’ in Bulgaria differs thus significantly from the concept of ‘hostile propaganda’ as it was utilized during the Cold War years. It is therefore advisable not to instrumentalize Cold War-era stereotypes in a simplistic depiction of a ‘new Cold War’.

Conclusion

Regarding the representation of Bulgaria and its politics in Russian media, one can identify common propaganda tropes relating to the West, the EU, and NATO as a whole. Apart from that, several specific topics relating to Bulgaria feature regularly in the state-run and tabloid media. These tend to function for the consumption of the domestic Russian audience and readership. However, there exists a propaganda framework that is ‘home-grown’, i.e. of Bulgarian origin, that can be characterized as ‘pro-Russian’ and which serves at times to feed certain stories in Russian outlets. These, if picked up, can be relayed back in an amplified way to the Bulgarian audience and readership. While there is no doubt that there is a high degree of Russian ‘influence’ in Bulgaria, as demonstrated in the two studies mentioned above (Bechev, 2015; Conley et al., 2016), the function of the actual propaganda in fact serves rather to distract from this influence than to enable it (Junes, 2016). The reason for this is that Russian influence in Bulgaria – which is mainly of an economic nature – spans the entire political spectrum and has deeply permeated the Bulgarian business community. In this sense, it is more productive to focus on the domestic outlets in Bulgaria that propagate ‘pro-Russian’ views as the source for disinformation intended to exert influence on the political process than Russian propaganda as such. More so, while the tabloidization of the Bulgarian media landscape is a problem in itself when it comes to the dissemination of propaganda tropes and disinformation, it would be recommendable that serious or independent outlets restrain from amplifying these tropes in a sensationalist manner, as happened after the presidential elections. It would be more effective to promote a fact-checking investigative journalism to counter said disinformation and propaganda.
Tom Junes: Propaganda in Bulgaria: Made in Russia or Home-grown?

NOTES


3 Available at: http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/4538/ [Accessed 5 January 2018].

4 Available at: http://www.mlg.ru/ratings/media/federal/4538/ [Accessed 5 January 2018].


10 The America for Bulgaria Foundation, George Soros and other NGOs are organizing a Maidan against the president elect Radev in Bulgaria. Bulgarians under 40 years are recruited and paid 30 euros each to participate in the uprising. EU vs Disinfo, 19 January 2017. Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-america-for-bulgaria-foundation-george-soros-and-other-ngos-2/ [Accessed 5 January 2018].


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Emotions and affects have recently become a very fashionable topic among philosophers and people working in social sciences and the humanities and there is a growing literature on what has been called the ‘affective turn’. It designates a very heterogeneous body of works among which it is not easy to find ‘family resemblances’ because the theorists who are sometimes put under this umbrella come from a variety of approaches which are difficult to reconcile. They disagree on the very meaning of the terms ‘affects’ and ‘emotions’, not to speak of their relation. Some of them are influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, others by the neurosciences, others by a variety of constructivist schools. I have for a long time in my work put a special emphasis on the role of ‘passions’ in politics, and I would like in this presentation to clarify what I understand by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics. In fact I have often been asked why I speak of passions instead of emotions and this is why I want to stress that, from the perspective that I advocate, it is essential to distinguish between ‘passions’ and ‘emotions’. It is with regard to the political domain that my approach has been elaborated and one of its central tenets is that in that field we are always dealing with collective identities, something that the term ‘emotions’ does not adequately convey because emotions are usually attached to individuals. To be sure, ‘passions’ can also be of an individual nature, but I have chosen to use that term, with its more violent connotations, because it allows me to underline the dimension of conflict and to suggest a confrontation between collective political identities, two aspects that I take to be constitutive of politics. I contend that without understanding the crucial role played by common affects in the constitution of political forms of identification, it is not possible to envisage what is at stake in democratic politics.

After presenting in a first part the main tenets of my theoretical approach, I will in a second part show how this approach is particularly suited to grasp the nature of the populist moment that characterizes our present conjuncture and of how to answer the challenge that it represents.

To understand what I mean by ‘passions’ and how I see their role in politics requires to be acquainted with the theoretical framework that informs my approach. This approach has been first elaborated in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, written with Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffé, 2014), where we have argued that two fundamental concepts are needed to elaborate a theory of
the political: antagonism and hegemony. The concept of antagonism is central because it postulates the existence of a radical negativity that impedes the totalization of society and forecloses the possibility of society beyond division and power. It is linked to the concept of hegemony in the following way. To assert the ineradicability of antagonism requires acknowledging the impossibility of reaching a final ground and recognizing the dimension of undecidability and of contingency that pervades every order. It is precisely to this dimension that the category of hegemony refers, as it indicates that every society is the product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency. The social in this view is constituted by sedimented hegemonic practices, that is, practices that appear to proceed from a natural order, concealing the originary acts of their contingent political institution. This perspective reveals that every order results from the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Every order is the expression of a particular structure of power relations and it is always established through the exclusion of other possibilities, hence its political character.

I have later suggested distinguishing between the political, to refer to the dimension of radical negativity, of antagonism, an antagonism that can emerge within a large variety of social relations, and politics, which deals with the ontic manifestations of this ontological dimension. Politics aims at establishing an order and organizing human coexistence under conditions that are traversed by the political and are thus always conflictual. We find this distinction between the political and politics in other theories, though not always with the same signification. We can in fact distinguish two opposing ways of characterizing the political. There are those for whom the political refers to a space of liberty and common action, while others see the political as a site of conflict and antagonism. This second approach is the one that I advocate and the thesis I defend is that it is only when the ineradicable character of division and antagonism is recognized that it is possible to think in a properly political manner and to grasp the challenge confronting democratic politics.

Taking account of the dimension of the political signifies acknowledging the existence of conflicts that cannot have a rational solution – this is precisely what is meant by ‘antagonism’. To be sure, not all conflicts are of an antagonistic nature, but properly political ones are, because they always involve decisions which require a choice between alternatives that are undecidable from a strictly rational point of view. Political life will never be able to dispense with antagonism, for it concerns public action and the formation of collective identities. It aims at constituting a ‘we’ in a context of diversity and conflict. Yet, in order to constitute a ‘we’, one must distinguish it from a ‘they’ and there is always the possibility that, under certain conditions, this we/they would take the form of an antagonistic friend/enemy confrontation. This is why I have argued that the crucial question for democratic politics is not to reach a consensus without exclusion – which would amount to creating a ‘we’ without a
corresponding ‘they’ – but to construct the we/they discrimination in a mode which is compatible with pluralist democratic institutions. This is something that most liberal-democratic theorists have to elude, due to the inadequate way they envisage pluralism. While recognizing that we live in a world where a multiplicity of perspectives and values coexist and that it is impossible, for empirical reasons, that each of us would adopt them all, those theorists imagine that, brought together, these perspectives and values constitute a harmonious and non-conflictual ensemble. This type of thought is therefore incapable of accounting for the necessarily conflictual nature of pluralism, which stems from the impossibility of reconciling all points of view, and this is why it is bound to negate the political in its antagonistic dimension. To be sure, liberal pluralists acknowledge that in democracy ‘the people’ can no longer be considered as ‘one’, but they see it as being ‘multiple’, while according to the hegemonic perspective it should be understood as ‘divided’.

After writing *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, while scrutinizing the discussion among liberal-democratic theorists, I realized that neither the aggregative nor the deliberative models allowed us to visualize the possibility of a democratic hegemonic politics. To give account of the ineradicability of antagonism and of the hegemonic nature of politics, a different approach was needed, an approach able to address the following question: How could a democratic order acknowledge and manage the existence of conflicts that did not have a rational solution? How to conceive democracy in a way that allows in its midst a confrontation between conflicting hegemonic projects? My answer to this question is the agonistic model of democracy that I see as providing the analytic framework necessary to visualize the possibility of a democratic confrontation between hegemonic projects.

According to the ‘agonistic’ model that I have developed in several of my writings, to conceive pluralist democracy in a way that does not deny the antagonistic dimension supposes envisaging two possible modes of manifestation of the antagonistic dimension: as a friend/enemy confrontation or as a confrontation among adversaries. It is the latter that I have proposed to call ‘agonistic’. The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for a possible consensus, but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate. Her ideas will be fought with vigour, but her right to defend them will never be questioned.

Asserting the constitutive character of social division and the impossibility of a final reconciliation, the agonistic perspective recognizes the necessary partisan character of democratic politics. By envisaging this confrontation in terms of adversaries and not on a friend/enemy mode that might lead to civil war, it allows such a confrontation to take place within democratic institutions. What is at stake in the agonistic struggle is the very configuration of power relations that structure a social order and the type of hegemony they construct. It is a confron-
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The distinction between antagonism (friend/enemy relation) and agonism (relation between adversaries) permits to understand why, contrary to what many democratic theorists believe, it is not necessary to negate the ineradicability of antagonism in order to visualize the establishment of a democratic order. The agonistic confrontation, far from representing a danger for democracy, is in reality the very condition of its existence. To be sure, democracy cannot survive without a certain form of consensus, a ‘conflictual consensus’ referring to allegiance to the ethico-political values that constitute its principles of legitimacy, and to the institutions in which these are inscribed. But it must also enable the availability of different and sometimes conflicting interpretations of those shared ethico-political values in order for citizens to genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real alternatives.

In On the Political (2005) and in Agonistics (2013), examining the current state of European democracies, I have argued that we are witnessing a crisis of representation which is due to the lack of an agonistic framework. It is the consequence of what I call the ‘post-political’ consensus at the centre that has been established between parties of the centre-right and the centre-left. This consensus, which is based on the idea that there is no alternative to neo-liberal globalization, serves to entrench the existing hegemony. By not providing the possibility of an agonistic confrontation between different political projects, it deprives the citizens of a voice in the elections. As the Indignados in Spain claimed, ‘we have a vote but we do not have a voice’.

By postulating that we now live in societies where collective identities have disappeared and where the opposition between left and right has become obsolete, the post-political perspective refuses to acknowledge that politics always consists in establishing a political frontier between we and they. Proclaiming the adversarial model has been overcome, it curtails the agonistic dynamics and impedes the crystallization of collective forms of identifications around democratic political objectives. This is what explains the multiplication of other forms of collective identities of a moral, religious or ethnic nature. It is also at the origin, and I will come back to this point later, of the increasing success of right-wing populist parties which are often the only ones to claim that there is an alternative and that they will give back to the people the power that the elites have taken away from them.

But in order to address the question of populism, I need to tackle the
issue of ‘passions’ in the field of politics. As I have already indicated, by using the term ‘passions’ I want to distinguish my reflection from the issue of individual ‘emotions’. By ‘passions’ I designate a certain type of common affects, those that are mobilized in the political domain in the formation of the we/they forms of identification. My aim is to challenge the rationalist view dominant in democratic political theory, underlining both the collective and the partisan character of political action, bringing to light the crucial role played by affects in the construction of political identities. One of my key criticisms of liberal-democratic theories is their incapacity to acknowledge this affective dimension, an incapacity which I take to be the consequence of their picture of the individual, presented as acting in the field of politics, as moved either by the pursuit of her interests or by moral concerns. This precludes them from recognizing the collective nature of political actors and asking one of the key questions for politics: How are collective forms of identification created and what is the part played by affects in this process? This is what my reflection on ‘passions’ aims at addressing.

Remember that I am posing this question within the post-foundationalist ontological framework that I have outlined earlier. Crucial to this framework is the assertion of the discursive nature of the social and the thesis that there are no essential identities but only forms of identification. What is at stake in politics is the construction of political identities and that this always entails an affective dimension, what Freud calls a libidinal investment.

Freud is central for my reflection because, besides asserting the general thesis that the social link is a libidinal link, he brought to the fore the crucial role played by affective libidinal bounds in processes of collective identification. As he stated in Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego: ‘a group is clearly held together by a power of some kind: and to what power could this feat be better ascribed than to Eros, which holds together everything in the world’ (Freud, 2001, p.92). For Freud affects are the qualitative expression of the quantity of libidinal energy of the instincts. This libidinal energy is malleable and can be oriented in multiple directions, producing different affects. This point is important to realize that different forms of politics can foster different affective libidinal attachments. It helps us to refute the essentialist view that adjudicates given affects to specific social agents.

To explicit this point, I want to bring in insights from Spinoza’s conception of affects, namely his distinction between affection (affectio) and affect (affectus) (Spinoza, 1994, part 3). Like Freud, Spinoza believes that it is desire that moves human beings to act and he notes that what makes them act in one direction rather than in another are the affects. An affection, for him, is a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body. When affected by something exterior, the ‘conatus’ (the general striving to persevere in our being) will experience affects that will move it to desire something and to act accordingly. I find this dynamics of affectio/affectus helpful to envisage the process of
production of common affects and I propose to employ this dynamics to examine the modes of construction of political identities, seeing ‘affections’ as the space where the discursive and the affective are articulated in specific practices.

On the importance of practices, I take my inspiration from Wittgenstein who taught us that it is by their inscription in ‘language games’, what we call discursive practices, that social agents form specific beliefs and desires and acquire their subjectivity (let me stress here that by ‘discursive’ I am not referring to practices concerned exclusively with speech or writing but to signifying practices in which signification and action cannot be separated). In this view, allegiance to democracy is not something based on rationality but on participation in specific forms of life. As Richard Rorty has often pointed out, a Wittgensteinian perspective makes us realize that allegiance to democracy and the belief in the value of its institutions does not depend on giving them an intellectual foundation. Allegiance to democratic values is a question of identification, it is created not through rational argumentation but through an ensemble of language games which construct democratic forms of individuality. Wittgenstein clearly acknowledges the affective dimension of this allegiance that he likens to ‘a passionate commitment to a system of reference’ (Wittgenstein, 1984, p.64).

Bringing together Spinoza, Freud and Wittgenstein, I propose to see inscription in discursive practices as providing the affections which for Spinoza bring about the affects which would spur desire and lead to specific action, recognizing in that way that affects and desire play a crucial role in the constitution of collective forms of identification and that they are the moving forces of political action. I submit that this recognition of the crucial role of the affects and of the way they can be mobilized is decisive for envisaging democratic politics. And I am going to argue in the second part of my presentation that such a theoretical perspective is necessary to comprehend the nature of the populist moment that we are currently witnessing and to envisage how to face the challenge that it represents.

To adequately address the question of populism, it is first necessary to discard the simplistic vision propagated by the media, presenting populism as mere demagogy, and to adopt an analytical perspective. I propose to follow Ernesto Laclau, who in *On Populist Reason* (2005) defines populism as a way to construct the we/they political frontier by appealing to the mobilization of the ‘underdog’ against ‘those in power’. It emerges when one aims at building a new subject of collective action – the people – capable of reconfiguring a social order lived as unfair.

Populism, he insists, is not an ideology or a political regime, and it does not have a specific programmatic content. It is a way of doing politics, a strategy, which can take various forms, depending on the periods and the places, and it is compatible with different forms of government.

Some populisms have led to fascist regimes, but there are many other forms and it is a mistake to affirm that all of them are incompatible with the existence
of liberal-democratic institutions. Indeed, this type of mobilization can have democratizing results. This was, for instance, the case with the populist movement in the United States in the nineteenth century that was able to redistribute the political power in favour of the majority without putting in question the whole democratic system. In fact, populism constitutes one important dimension of democracy since it refers to the dimension of popular sovereignty and the construction of a demos that is constitutive of democracy.

Scrutinizing the growth of a populist type of politics in Europe, we ascertain that it is due to the convergence of several phenomena that, in recent years, have affected the conditions in which democracy is exercised in our societies. The first phenomenon that I have already mentioned and that I call ‘post-politics’ refers to the blurring of political frontiers between right and left. As we have seen, it is the result of the consensus established between the parties of the centre-right and centre-left on the idea that there is no alternative to neo-liberal globalization. Under the pretext of ‘modernization’ imposed by globalization, social-democratic parties have accepted the diktats of financial capitalism and the limits they imposed to state intervention and their redistributive policies. The role of parliaments and institutions that allow citizens to influence political decisions has been drastically reduced. Elections no longer offer any opportunity to decide on real alternatives through the traditional parties of ‘government’ and citizens have been deprived of the possibility of exercising their democratic rights. Popular sovereignty, the notion that constitutes the very heart of the democratic ideal – the power of people – has been declared obsolete, and democracy has been reduced to its liberal component. Politics has become a mere technical issue of managing the established order, a domain reserved for experts. The only thing that post-politics allows is a bipartisan alternation of power between the centre-right and centre-left parties. All those who oppose this ‘consensus in the centre’ are disqualified as ‘populists’ and accused of being ‘extremists’.

These changes at the political level have taken place within the context of a ‘neo-liberal’ hegemonic formulation, characterized by a form of regulation of capitalism in which the role of financial capital is central. We have seen an exponential increase in inequality affecting not only the working class but also a great part of the middle classes who have entered a process of pauperization and precarization. We are clearly witnessing a process of ‘oligarchization’ of Western societies. Centre-left parties have abandoned the struggle for equality and their main slogans are now about ‘choice’ and ‘fairness’. The two democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty have been relinquished and it can be said that now we live in ‘post-democratic’ societies. To be sure, ‘democracy’ is still spoken of, but only to indicate universal suffrage and respect of the majority rule.

This evolution, far from being a progress towards a more mature society, as it is sometimes claimed, undermines the very foundations of our Western model
of democracy, usually designated as ‘liberal democracy’. As C.B. MacPherson (1977) has shown, that model was the result of the articulation between two traditions. The first one is the liberal tradition of the rule of law, separation of powers, and the affirmation of individual freedom. And the second one is the democratic tradition of equality and popular sovereignty. No doubt, these two political logics are ultimately irreconcilable and there will always be a tension between the principles of freedom and equality. But as I have argued in The Democratic Paradox (2000), that tension is constitutive of our democratic model because it provides the space for an agonistic confrontation and it guarantees pluralism. Throughout European history, this tension has been negotiated through an ‘agonistic’ struggle between the ‘right’, which favours liberty, and the ‘left’, which emphasizes equality. In recent years, with the hegemony of neo-liberalism, the left/right frontier has been blurred and the space has disappeared where that agonistic confrontation between adversaries could take place. A characteristic of our post-democratic conditions is that democratic aspirations can no longer find channels of expression within the traditional political framework. The passion for equality, which, according to Tocqueville, is the democratic passion par excellence, does not find a political terrain where it can be channelled towards emancipatory goals.

It is in such a context that various populist movements have emerged, rejecting post-politics and post-democracy. They claim to give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated by the elites. Regardless of the problematic forms that some of these movements do take, it is important to recognize that they are the expression of legitimate democratic aspirations which unfortunately are expressed in a xenophobic vocabulary. This possibility for democratic demands to be constructed in a xenophobic way is something that most parties are unable to comprehend due to their essentialist approach. This is why I submit that, without adopting an anti-essentialist discursive approach, it is not possible to grasp the nature of the populist challenge. This challenge requires acknowledging that the ‘people’ as a political category can be constructed in very different ways and that not all of them are of a progressive orientation. Indeed, in several European countries the aspiration for recovering the democratic ideals of equality and popular sovereignty, discarded under post-democracy, has been captured by right-wing populist parties. They have successfully mobilized common affects in view of constructing a people whose voice calls for a democracy aimed at exclusively defending the interests of those considered ‘true nationals’. They construct the people through an ethno-nationalist discourse that excludes immigrants, considered as a threat to national identity and prosperity.

It is urgent to realize that it is the absence of a narrative offering a different vocabulary to formulate these democratic demands which explains the success of right-wing populism in a growing number of social sectors. What is needed is another narrative embodied in an ensemble of practices providing the
discursive inscriptions able to foster other forms of identifications. Disqualifying those parties as ‘extreme-right’ or ‘neo-fascist’ is an easy way to dismiss their demands, refusing to acknowledge the democratic dimension of many of them. Attributing their appeal to lack of education or to the influence of atavistic factors is of course especially convenient for the forces of the centre. It permits them to avoid recognizing their own responsibility in the emergence of those parties. Their answer is to protect the ‘good democrats’ against the danger of ‘irrational’ passions by establishing a ‘moral’ frontier so as to exclude the ‘extremists’ from the democratic debate. This strategy of demonization of the ‘enemies’ of the bipartisan consensus might be morally comforting, but it is politically disempowering.

Instead of denigrating those demands, the task is to formulate them in a progressive way, defining the adversary as the configuration of forces that strengthen and promote the neo-liberal project. The strategy to combat right-wing populism should consist in promoting a progressive populist movement, a left-wing populism that is receptive to those democratic aspirations, and that through the construction of another people will mobilize common affects towards a defence of equality and social justice. Because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed.

Facing the challenge that the populist moment represents for the future of democracy requires the articulation of a collective will that establishes a synergy between the multiplicity of social movements and political forces and whose objective is to recover and deepen democracy. Given that numerous social sectors suffer the effects of financialized capitalism, there is a potential for this collective will to have a transversal character that exceeds the left/right distinction as traditionally configured. Conceived in a progressive way, populism, far from being a perversion of democracy, constitutes in today’s Europe the most adequate political force to defend it.

The main obstacle to the implementation of such a politics is that most left-wing parties do not understand the crucial role played by common affects in the constitution of political identities and the importance of mobilizing passions in a democratic direction. They are influenced by the view dominant in democratic political theory, according to which passions should be excluded from democratic politics that should limit itself to rational arguments and deliberative procedures. This is no doubt one of the reasons for their hostility to populism and this is why they are unable to answer the challenges posed by the rise of right-wing populist movements. Such movements do understand that politics is always partisan and that it requires the creation of a we/they relation. They are well aware of the need to mobilize affects to construct collective political identities.

I am convinced that in the next few years the central axis of the political conflict will be between right-wing populism and left-wing populism, and it
is imperative that progressive sectors understand the importance of involving themselves in that struggle. The best way to fight against those parties is not by accusing them of ‘populism’, condemning their appeal to affects. It is only through the construction of another people, a collective will that results from the mobilization of the passions in defence of equality and social justice, that it will be possible to combat the xenophobic policies promoted by right-wing populism.

In recreating political frontiers, the ‘populist moment’ we are witnessing in Europe points to a ‘return of the political’. A return that may open the way for authoritarian solutions – through regimes that weaken liberal-democratic institutions – but which can also lead to a reaffirmation and deepening of democratic values. Everything will depend on the kind of populism that emerges victorious from the struggle against post-politics and post-democracy.

NOTES

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REFERENCES

Part One. Populism and Propaganda: Dangerous Liaisons and Family Resemblances

1. Introduction

I originally intended this text to be a direct response to the criticisms of the report on Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria,¹ which triggered a tidal wave of media reactions, including a distinct ‘mud wave’. Apart from the offensive qualifications, two main words, contained already in the title of the report, aroused the media’s fury against it: (1) That we called ‘propaganda’ the anti-liberal, anti-American (and anti-NATO), Eurosceptic, and pro-Russian discourses in the Bulgarian media sphere; (2) That, furthermore, we defined them as ‘anti-democratic’ and, in doing so, ruled out the possibility of any democratic alternative to liberal democracy. Hence, another two interrelated accusations: that, on the one hand, we were conducting censorship, muzzling freedom of speech, stifling the possibility of critique, vilifying as anti-democratic and propagandistic media outlets and authors that consistently conducted the above-mentioned discourses (and were in fact free critics of the status quo), which, on the other hand, meant that we ourselves were conducting liberal propaganda.

It is true that in the introduction to the report, we described both the theoretical premises and the methodology of our empirical study. Still, when I set out to respond to the criticisms, I realized that quite a few additional theoretical and terminological explanations were necessary – their absence may have given rise to at least part of the objections. That is why I wrote this theoretical text, which attempts to specify, with maximum precision, the terms and concepts ‘populism’ and ‘propaganda’ in general, and contemporary ‘populist propaganda’ in particular, as well as the latter’s relation to ‘democracy’. This is also my response to the above-mentioned objections.

I will remind the reader that the report begins as follows: ‘Over the last ten years or so, the world has witnessed the emergence of a common “populist front” that is opposed to the values and institutions of liberal democracy which seemed to have no alternative for almost two decades. A repertoire of clichés has also emerged – a primitive propaganda language used by different
actors to criticize and undermine: [next follows a list of the basic principles and institutions of liberal democracy at the global and national levels]’ (Vatsov et al., 2017, p.4). In fact, one of the main theoretical contributions of our study is precisely in that it provides an analytical prism through which one can see the emergence of a common populist-propaganda discursive front on the global scale – that is, the emergence of a specific language whose resources are utilized by different political actors (from Vladimir Putin, Jarosław Kaczyński, Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Brexiteers to Donald Trump), but also by different locally institutionalized or entirely non-institutional everyday speakers.

More specifically, the study introduces a new term: ‘populist-propaganda discursive front’. The conceptual meaning of this term is not scientifically established yet. What’s more, for the time being it has hypothetical status for a number of reasons. First, at the present stage its claim and scope are marked as global, although they have not been deduced as such through precise comparative studies of different contexts – here the presumption is that, despite its specificities, the Bulgarian scene can be used as a laboratory for identifying global trends (since it is obvious that the populist-propaganda clichés, identified by carefully analyzing the Bulgarian scene, very clearly resonate not just with the clichés of Russian media from which they are most often directly copied; they resonate also with the clichés of Donald Trump and the other speakers enumerated above (see also Iakimova and Vatsov in this issue). Besides this, the study we conducted was entirely empirical – in the radical sense that the terms through which we wanted to describe our empirical findings had to be drawn immanently from the empirical situation and were not predefined: that is also how this peculiar hybrid was born, the new term ‘populist-propaganda discursive front’, which we shall elucidate here. However, while conducting our large-scale collective research project, we collected a significant amount of empirical data allowing a high level of formalization: to my mind, it is precisely those empirical data which make it possible – after examining the available serious literature on populism and propaganda – to identify some new typological features of propaganda, to outline its practical logic in general as well as the logic of contemporary populist propaganda in particular.

2. The Populist Language Game: A List of Features

From the vast literature on ‘populism’, where the latter is defined in various ways, we shall borrow some basic definitions. Here (and this is what is methodologically specific) we conceive of them as a list of features – as short descriptions of the ways the world is articulated by different speakers: individuals, media outlets, civic movements, political parties. In general, we understand populism in Wittgenstein’s sense: as a primitive political language game. The basic features listed below represent ‘the grammar’ of this game. Of course, such a list of features cannot be exhaustive. Moreover, all of the features in it
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do not necessarily have to be used by one speaker nor do they necessarily have
to be used by one speaker in a consistent fashion. Here they are:

- ‘Populism proclaims that the will of the people as such is supreme over
every other standard’ (Canovan, 1981, p.4);
- populism rejects pluralism (Müller, 2017), or at the least, reduces it dis-
cursively, constructing ‘chains of equivalence’ (Laclau, 2005), insofar as ‘the
people’ is represented as a single entity, as a single ‘general will’ (volonté géné-
rale) that transcends all group, class, and cultural differences;
- that is why ‘populism itself tends to deny any identification with or clas-
sification into the Right/Left dichotomy’ (Germani, 1978, p.88);
- populism attacks meritocracy as a principle of legitimating elites (Krastev,
2017) and appeals rhetorically to the traditions and virtues of the common
people, but does not have any coherent ideology (Minogue, 1969);
- in fact, populism creates an ‘antagonistic frontier’ between the people
and the elites (Laclau, 2005), whereupon ‘we, the people’ is opposed to ‘they,
the elites’: populism ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two ho-
mogeneous and antagonistic camps’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6);
- the populist opposition of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ usually follows a ‘conspira-
torial logic’, according to which ‘the elites’ are accused of being ‘corrupt’, they
are ‘blood-suckers’ who govern in ‘their own interest’ and conspire against ‘the
people’ – thus, ‘conspiracy theory’ is ‘a mode of populist logic’ (Fenster, 2008,
p.90);
- the conspiratorial logic of populism allows the ‘us/them’, ‘people/elites’
relationship to be strained, in some cases, to the point of extreme political po-
larization – of ‘friend/enemy’ antagonism;
- populism is anti-institutional: it most often tries to bypass the complex
institutional forms of party representation (in liberal democracies) and instead
of representation of ‘part’ of the people, it proposes ‘direct’ representation of
the general popular will through ‘charismatic leadership’;
- and so on.

Although we speak of ‘populism’ in the singular, we must not forget that
the features enumerated above are common features of the linguistic – discurs-
ive – behaviour of different social actors: they are certainly features of the
language of spontaneous social discontents ‘from below’, such as the Bulgar-
ian mass protests of 2013 (both the winter and the summer ones), but also of
Occupy, Indignados, and so on (the examples, including historical ones, are
 legion); the same common features, though, are characteristic of the discourses
of a number of more or less institutionalized and elite speakers ‘from above’
who demagogically try to head local social discontents, or entirely instrument-
ally, using state institutions and the media, to govern them in a more or less
authoritarian fashion. In fact, the instrumentalization of populism today – the
transformation of populist language into a propaganda vocabulary that serves
not the global corporate and financial elites but the local oligarchic elites – is
the important phenomenon which our study has identified and attempted to describe.

However, the great ambivalence of ‘populism’, its different interpretations as a social and political phenomenon, comes precisely from the tension between uses of the populist discourse ‘from below’ and its uses ‘from above’. This is the dividing line between proponents and opponents of populism. Left-wing advocates of populism, the pioneers in this respect being Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2013), view populism as a counter-hegemonic movement ‘from below’: they place the emphasis on its mobilizing potential, on the ability of populist language to consolidate broad popular movements beyond the governmental ‘logic of difference’, on the one hand, as well as on its emancipatory potential, on its ability to empower the disempowered on the other. Undoubtedly, populism – at the level of social discontents – has such mobilizing and emancipatory potential. The big question, however, is what happens when ‘populism comes to power’: when the language of populism shifts from counter-hegemonic to hegemonic uses, when it becomes an instrument of a regime of government? Laclau tries to block this question – he tries to keep ‘populism’ and ‘regime’, movement ‘from below’ and government ‘from above’ invariably in opposition, insofar as he assumes that there is an inherent difference between the ‘logic of equivalence’, which is characteristic of emancipatory populism, and the ‘logic of difference’, which is characteristic of government (Laclau, 2005). Such a strong opposition between populism and regime, however, is very problematic not only at the level of historical examples: in the twentieth century, fascism, Nazism and communism used the existing social and political discontents, they packaged them in a language that has the common features of populism, in order to come to power and to consolidate, through various reifications of this selfsame language, their regimes of totalitarian government (see Snyder, 2017). But if historical examples are always subject to controversial interpretation (the French Revolution is usually used as a counter-example to demonstrate the emancipatory potential of populism), then we should pose the more general questions: Does, as the liberal critics of populism insist, the language of populism as a set of general features invariably presuppose that if populism achieves hegemony, there will be a reign of terror that will be institutionalized inevitably as an authoritarian or totalitarian regime? Or, as its left-wing advocates insist, there is a way to distinguish the populist discourse as an entirely emancipatory and critical resource and to oppose it to the discourses of liberal governmentality?

Giving an unambiguous answer to those questions is not only difficult but, in our view, impossible. If populism is a set of linguistic features – a cluster of discursive figures – then the figures of populism can be used in different ways by different actors. Our general assumption is that there is no a priori language – neither of populism nor of liberal democracy or any other. Also: neither is there an a priori ‘logic of equivalence’ nor another a priori ‘logic of differ-
ence’ that can frame the emancipatory aspirations to equality (in the case of the former) and, respectively, the striving for subjection through individualization (in the case of the latter). Our general methodological approach presupposes a post-Wittgensteinian understanding of language, according to which there is no archetypal political language *stricto sensu* – there are different, sedimented as habits and institutionalized to a varying extent, political ‘language games’.

What’s more, even the existing political language games are not entirely stable, because the meaning of words and phrases depends primarily on their actual contextual use which can, and often does, change both the habitual and the formally codified rules of usage of those same words and phrases: that is, it shifts their meanings in different directions. Within the framework of the present study, this general approach presupposes that it is necessary not just to identify the common talking points – the clichés repeated and circulated by the present populist-propaganda discourse – but also to analyze the typical ways in which they are used and through which their meaning is changed.2

Actually, the fact that the meaning of one and the same phrases is changed – and even intentionally, instrumentally substituted – is also the main empirical finding of our study, which has allowed us to speak of the emergence of a common populist-propaganda discursive front. By this we mean that there is an empirically observable process in which the critical vocabulary of the spontaneous and inevitably anti-elitist social discontents, understood as ‘a pool of meanings shared daily’,3 is appropriated ‘from above’ by a definite type of ‘elite’, more or less institutionalized actors who twist the meanings of the words of this vocabulary, turning them into a propaganda instrument of governmentality, and inject them through (their) media – now with substituted meaning – back into the pool of meanings shared daily. We are talking about a twisting of meanings through which local economico-political actors oppose the global economico-political elites by appropriating the vocabulary of social discontents, appropriating the critique of liberalism and capitalism, killing the critical potential of this vocabulary and turning it, through its purposive media dissemination, into an instrument of governmentality. That is to say, we found that a coherent, sustained language (omnivorous, but simple) has already been created; it is based precisely on coherentization of scattered and ambiguous as well as heterogeneous languages of discontent. This is what our study has established.

And it is precisely in this regard that we found the old, and as if outdated today, term ‘propaganda’ to be appropriate. For, unlike ‘populism’, the term ‘propaganda’ remains clear at least in one sense. Unlike populism, propaganda – as one of our critics correctly noted⁴ – whatever its concrete content may be, inevitably and always is an elitist project. To signify the uses of the languages of popular discontents ‘from above’ – be it in a network of different loosely connected or even unconnected ‘elite’ speakers (journalists, experts, politicians) or in a relatively consolidated regime of government – as well as to
describe the specificities of those ‘elite’ uses, we chose the term ‘propaganda’. Thus, by introducing the hybrid term ‘populist-propaganda front’, we tried to do several things:

(1) To indicate that at present in Bulgaria, but also at the global level, a new anti-liberal ‘discursive front’ in the sense of Laclau has been formed, although here – contrary to Laclau – we conceive of this front in a quite looser, post-Wittgensteinian sense: as only a relatively stable common repertoire of interpretive clichés which are used in different ways not merely ‘from above’ and ‘from below’, but from much more than two ‘sides’ – by many different actors, some of whom do not even know about one another, others are inscribed in different networks, while still others are inscribed in well-consolidated propaganda machines; all those actors often have different motives and stakes in using parts of the vocabulary and grammar of this discursive front and hence sometimes invert its meanings in different directions. At the same time,

(2) Upon the general distinction between populism and propaganda, we assume that populism has an emancipatory potential and therefore use this term to refer above all to criticisms ‘from below’, to the spontaneous protest use of populist language, while designating as ‘populist propaganda’ the different uses of this same language ‘from above’, for the purposes of governmentality. Yet even so,

(3) We observe empirically ongoing processes not merely of mixing but also of appropriation of the populist criticisms by different elite actors ‘from above’ – the latter do not merely channel the critical vocabulary of everyday populisms, they substitute their meanings. The successful propagandistic substitution of the meanings of the critical populist vocabulary, such as we are witnessing today, ought to be blocked by exposing it precisely as propaganda in the pejorative sense. By doing so, we are trying to provide a space where spontaneous social critique, generated by real social, economic and political problems, will retune its critical resources, escaping from the grip of governmentality and propaganda, and address, perhaps through another vocabulary or through specific targeting of segments of the same vocabulary, the real social problems today.

Still, what do we understand by ‘propaganda’?

3. Propaganda Uses of Language: Specificities

According to Jacques Ellul’s (1973, p.61) definition, propaganda is ‘a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals’. Ellul also points out that propaganda works less through lies about facts than through general interpretations that frame facts. Unlike Ellul, however, who works with the mentalistic vocabulary of ‘intentions’ and ‘interpretations’, here we view propaganda as a linguistic phenomenon: we analyze the common linguistic clichés that are strategically disseminated for propaganda purposes and which – if the
propaganda is successful – turn into a **basic grammar** that frames the concrete articulations of the world, and hence, the actions of individuals. If we paraphrase Ellul in linguistic terms, the working definition would be: **propaganda is a set of linguistic clichés that are strategically disseminated by some at least relatively organized and institutionalized group with the aim of framing the linguistic articulations, and hence, the actions and inactions of a mass of individuals.**

### 3.1. Strategic Framing of Articulations

Clichés in themselves are by no means a bad thing – they are a supporting structure of ordinary language, an anchor of ‘normality’, of the routine everyday interactions, and hence they are practical conditions of possibility for understanding. Even the general vocabularies and grammars of the languages we speak are clichés, that is, ready-made phrases for articulating the world produced by repeated use. That is why it is particularly important to answer the following question first: What is the specific role of clichés apart from their everyday and scientific uses – a specific role that allows us to identify it as ‘propagandistic’? In other words, what is the strategic or instrumental use of clichés?

It is a commonplace that advertising as a specific type of commercial propaganda, as well as political propaganda, work by the principle of systematic, purposive repetition of one and the same thing. Things of the type ‘Ariel washes best!’ are repeated ad nauseam. Such systematic repetition aims to maximally decontextualize the message: to make us take it for granted that ‘Ariel washes best in all cases, in every respect!’ If the message is indeed decontextualized to such an extent by repetition, then it must begin to play the role of a ‘depth grammar’ for the consumer’s behaviour: the consumer must be inclined always to buy Ariel and to try to wash with it (almost) every stain. Thus, the **performative aim of propagandistic repetition** is to transform the respective propaganda message into a **meta-cliché**: into a benchmark of behaviour, into a **context-free framework of the actions and inactions of individuals** – a framework through which individuals must articulate every context, that is, they must apply it regardless of any concrete context and respectively, act (or not act) every time according to that framework.

Of course, propaganda exploits already established everyday clichés – existing sentiments, resentments, that is, pre-linguistic affective biases and explicitly linguistic stereotypes, habits, beliefs (whatever we call them depending on our preference for a particular scientific jargon) – but its aim is precisely to abstract the clichés from the always plastic and contextual everyday use, to generalize them through mechanic repetition in order to return them back into everyday use, but now in their capacity as a solid grammatical framework of articulations. Often upon this operation, as we shall show, propaganda also changes the everyday clichés – it implants an inverted meaning in them. In a
fist step, however, we can now answer the leading question: We can speak of propaganda when definite everyday clichés are intentionally transformed, through strategic repetition and dissemination, into meta-clichés: into grammatical benchmarks of behaviour.

3.2. Propaganda as Strategically Reinforced Bullshitting
(On the Types of Generalization of Clichés: Science, Everyday Life, Propaganda)

The question, however, immediately arises: What, then, distinguishes propaganda from science, which seeks to offer context-free truths, and from education, which is expected to turn those truths, through their strategic repetition, into benchmarks of behaviour? This question is too broad to be given a satisfactory answer here, because the practical intertwinements – the dangerous liaisons – between propaganda, on the one hand, and science and education on the other, are legion – in the present as well as in the past. We shall only recall that mechanical strategic repetition of clichés is an invariable part of mass education beyond all attempts to develop critical thinking, while the most sinister forms of total propaganda known to humanity – of Nazism and communism – relied not merely on terror and repression for legitimation of their meta-clichés, but also on the claim, which went hand-in-hand with terror, to ‘scientific justification’ of those clichés.8

Here we will venture ad hoc to propose just one working criterion that can serve, for the time being, as a practical imperative for distinguishing propaganda from science. Contemporary science relies – or at least ought to rely – on the reflexive self-awareness that the context-free models to be followed, the truths it produces, are never entirely context-free. At best, they have limited universal validity: for a scientific truth to be valid independent of context, its scope of validity (that is, its universality) must be carefully limited and modalized – no scientific truth is valid in absolutely all cases, in absolutely all contexts, but only in a limited number of typical cases, in a particular type of possible contexts. And this holds for all truths: the axioms of Euclidean geometry are relevant for a particular type of flat spaces, but not for curved spaces; the truths about natural kinds are true about a particular type of things, not about all things (for example, the truths about the nature of inert gases are true only about inert gases; factual truths are true only about some particular fact; and so on – for details, see Vatsov, 2016, Part III). By this we support but also extend Karl Popper’s thesis about falsifiability as a criterion for distinguishing science from pseudoscience: a theory cannot be falsified if it has not been clearly modalized – if the scope of its validity, the type of phenomena for which it claims to be valid, have not been specified in advance. That is to say, in order to be scientific, a theory must be modalized in advance: its possible or actual scope of validity must be clearly specified, thereby automatically limiting its claim to ‘pure’, context-free universality. If there is no modalization (or if it has been deliberately shifted,
as in some cases discussed below), then the respective statement or series of statements (theory) stop being scientific and turn out to be propagandistic or ideological (in the pejorative sense).

It is precisely by this criterion—presence or absence of careful modalization—that a distinction can be made between ‘truth’ and what is now fashionably and too generally called ‘post-truth’. Today Trump, the Brexiteers, Putin, Erdoğan, Orbán, Kaczyński, Le Pen and many others, including in Bulgaria, are inundating us with identitarian and national-sovereignist discourses that are distinctly anti-liberal. Those discourses do not offer a detailed picture of the world, they appeal to mass sentiments by means of simple, easy-to-digest clichés, most often constructed by a conspiratorial logic. The first problem with these clichés is that they don’t need and don’t stand up to slow, long research which presupposes checking the various aspects of things and the points of view on them, and by extent, they don’t stand up to modalization—they don’t presuppose careful specification of the scope of their validity (what exactly they are valid for, and in which respects). What’s more, they even rule out debate and rely on maximal simplification of the world, on the creation of a black-and-white picture of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’, of ‘victims’ and ‘villains’, where the roles are arbitrarily switched for tactical purposes. In the Russian case, where the use of this performative apparatus is centralized and state-institutionalized to the greatest extent, the performative apparatus has begun to operate as a state-controlled propaganda machine. In the case of Trump and the Brexiteers, where the populist discourse has not yet completely turned into the language of the state and its institutions, the populist clichés tend to work in the way Harry Frankfurt (1986; see also Marsh, 2017) described the phenomenon of bullshitting. In Frankfurt’s account, bullshitting is saying things that are irrelevant to the question of truth, things that are said for entirely tactical ad hoc purposes and do not presuppose extensive legitimation or verification of any type. In this respect Trump’s tweets and the Russian trolls’ online comments are of one and the same type, as are the writings of their ideologues—Steve Bannon and Aleksandr Dugin, among many others. The principle of bullshitting is: if anyone falls for it, all the better; if no one falls for it, we keep on bullshitting without having to prove that what we are saying is true. Social networks today are certainly encouraging bullshitting for many reasons, but among those reasons is the following: social networks do not presuppose complex, subtle, multifaceted everyday conversation, nor careful and complex, but coherent and consistent argumentation; they encourage fast, univocal evaluations of the True/False type (‘like’/’ban’) without any need for argumentation. That is also why they encourage the production of fast theses.

In fact, bullshitting produces something like ‘fast truths’—messages suitable for fast and easy consumption (like ‘fast food’), which, of course, are quasi-truths. They are quasi-truths because bullshitting decontextualizes and generalizes what is said in a similar fashion to the declaration of truth, but
without taking the next step – without modalizing the scope of validity of the generalized model of thinking. Of course, such fast, careless generalizations are especially characteristic of everyday thinking and conversation, but there they most often take the form of ‘glosses’ in the ethnomethodological sense, that is, there are loose generalizations that try to generalize divergent topics and presuppose different interpretations, and hence, open-ended conversation (see Garfinkel and Sacks, 1986; Koev, 2012). Conversely, the bullshitter radically generalizes short theses, precluding the possibility for different interpretations or argumentation. Unlike glossing practices, bullshitting seems to preclude the possibility for further communication: ‘D’ya reshpect me?’ mumbles the drunk, leaving room for nothing other than a univocal answer (yes/no; you will either hug each other or quarrel), let alone for any more subtle explanations.

Incidentally, propaganda is strategically reinforced bullshitting (the difference between Trump’s bullshitting on Twitter and the state-institutionalized media propaganda that reinforces and even directs Putin’s messages is not a principled one, it is only in the extent of institutionalization and centralization).

Let us also note something else: unlike glossing in everyday conversation, when fast generalization is made for strategic purposes the meaning of the message is usually performatively constrained. In the advertising slogan ‘Ariel washes best!’ one and the same product (washing powder) is fixed in the meaning of the phrase. Context-free constraint of the meaning – ‘exactly Ariel and always Ariel’ – distinguishes propagandistic generalization from glossing, where the generalization is context-sensitive and therefore keeps the meaning polyvalent. But the performatives of advertising and propaganda are similar to the performatives declaring scientific truth precisely in that they constrain meaning – they have a definite purpose: they aim to fix the meaning of the phrase (or image). Conversely, unlike the performatives declaring scientific truth which ought to seek additional information for their generalizations by way of the more careful modalization, propaganda messages systematically do the exact opposite: they either refuse to modalize or intentionally shift the modal scope of validity of what is said. For while it may be true that Ariel washes certain stains better than other washing powders, it is certainly not true that Ariel washes best in every respect. It is also true that ultranationalists with fascist persuasions took part in the Euromaidan in Kyiv, but it is certainly not true that the Euromaidan as a mass civic movement was a ‘fascist putsch’ that brought to power a ‘fascist junta’. It is also probably true that the British and American intelligence services had reasons to suspect that Saddam Hussein’s regime was developing weapons of mass destruction (as claimed by the propaganda campaign to legitimize the war in Iraq – see Chomsky, 2004), it is certainly not true that he was actually developing such weapons. And so on. As our examples show, propaganda – commercial or political, practised by different actors – works strategically precisely by stretching the scope of validity of its messages (it changes and extends their modal relevance). More generally, the
work of propaganda can be compared to the difference between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories. It is true that there are real conspiracies, but it is by no means true that everything is the fruit of a conspiracy – of the reptilians, the Freemasons, the Jews, Soros, the US, NATO, Putin, or somebody else. It is by no means accidental that conspiracy theories are a main weapon of contemporary (as well as older) political propaganda: they are the main means for expanding the modal scope of propaganda messages, for their fast and total generalization.

3.3. Propaganda Metonymies within a Maximally Generalized Discursive Horizon

Actually, the horizon created by propaganda is maximally generalized precisely because within it the messages are not subject to clear modalization, that is, the scope of their more precise validity cannot and strategically ‘should not’ be limited. This maximally generalized, insofar as it is modally blurred, discursive horizon is a precondition for another basic feature of propaganda language: for its tendency to work by the principle of free association by similarity, in an unaddressed generalized space where it is always possible to say one thing instead of another, without any requirement for strict coherence. More precisely, within its totally generalized horizon, propaganda works in the mode of metonymy.10 By metonymy we understand, entirely traditionally, the replacement – and in the case of propaganda, the intentional substitution – of a word or phrase with an established meaning by another word or phrase with another established meaning. Metonymy, to put it most simply, is saying one thing instead of another as if the two are one and the same thing in a particular respect, that is, as if the one ‘stands for’ (represents) the other – for example, ‘gold’ instead of ‘money’. In this sense, metonymy is a rhetorical (performative) instrument for creating quasi-logical statements by substituting alogical (at the least, because they are not strictly equivalentialized) epithets and notions on the basis of association by similarity. In other words, metonymy is a conventional rhetorical (discursive) device for representing similarity as equivalence by reducing differences and hyperbolizing the similarity in question. This is certainly not to say that metonymy is in principle a false – merely rhetorical or fictional! – discursive device, because:

When we say ‘In 1990 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait’, by ‘Saddam’ we mean both the Iraqi regime more generally and the concrete army units that invaded Kuwait in August 1990; respectively, by ‘Kuwait’ we mean both the territory and the population of the country; and so on. As in this case, there is often an element of realism in metonymy.11 The utterance ‘Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait’ is self-evident and if anyone asks us, we will probably confirm it is true. And it is indeed true even though the individual Saddam Hussein personally never invaded Kuwait. If this were the meaning of the above utterance
– if by it we were referring simply to the individual Saddam – then the utterance would not have been metonymic, it would have been false. Still, we understand the utterance ‘Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait’ precisely as a metonymy, and this metonymy is realistic (we are almost automatically ready to recognize it as true). That is because we know in advance that Saddam was the leader of the regime and commander-in-chief of its army at the time, therefore it is logical to hold him responsible for the actions of the regime and hence to directly connect him to the entirely concrete actions of its troops in 1990. That is to say, metonymy works in a pre-constructed interpretive space where (some) previous performatives have already created stable connections between the meanings of particular words and realia, creating a ‘pre-knowledge’ according to which it is entirely logical that Saddam stands for (represents) the regime and army in Iraq. Thus, when someone makes the metonymic utterance ‘Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait’, these explanations – in which respects ‘Saddam Hussein’ may be a substitute, that is, may be thought of as a ‘representative’ of the Iraqi regime in general and of its army’s actual actions in particular – these connections do not need to be explained.

According to Kim (1996, p.44),

The power of metonymy is evidenced in its realistic effects resulting from the fact that metonymy is existentially connected to something to which it refers and in its inducing the sign user to fill in what is not represented or substituted by the metonymy itself. This is what especially demonstrates the sheer power of metonymy.

Although metonymy can, and often does, contain some ‘realistic part’, the substitution of a word or phrase with a conventional meaning by another word or phrase with another conventional meaning inflates the balloon of meaning, creates a loose space for association between the meanings, and leaves people ‘to “fill in” for themselves’ (to decide what the exact meaning of the metonymy is) ‘through imagination, inference, or guessing’ (ibid.). This is precisely what makes metonymy a powerful weapon of propaganda: ‘The only thing propagandists and commercial advertisers have to do is to launch the balloon of metonymy’ (ibid.).

How ‘the balloon of metonymy’ is launched and steered is what we want to understand better. How is the ‘realistic’ work of metonymies in everyday discourse inverted so that the metonymies will deceive, or at the least, manipulate the public? That is to say, what we want to understand is, what is the specific role of metonymy in propaganda?

To this end, however, the metonymic function should not be limited to the cases where a word or phrase is somehow rhetorically or poetically ‘deliberate-ly’ substituted for another word or phrase within a single utterance or sentence (as in ‘They don’t even have a tile [instead of roof] over their heads!’), ‘our
Heroes meet bayonet steel [instead of bayonets] with steel breasts’, and others of this kind. For words and their meanings are constantly layered metonymically upon one another in every longer speech, from one utterance to the next, often completely unintentionally and imperceptibly: ‘John stopped. He was very tired...’ – here the personal pronoun ‘he’ is a metonymic substitute for ‘John’, it is as if completely synonymous with ‘John’. But this substitution has been fully prepared by the previous sentence and often also by the course of longer speech, and that is why it is self-evident: it fits totally – without any hesitation about its meaning – into our speech habits. This effect is also what propaganda seeks to achieve, the only difference being that it does so completely intentionally: by repeating a series of performatives, it tries to prepare an interpretive space where the public will read and produce a definite type of performatives as if they are metonyms for the previous propaganda performatives: as if what is said in them is completely synonymous with what has been said in the propaganda series, without any divergence or contradiction between their meanings.

Through a semantic analysis of publications in twenty Bulgarian-language media outlets, we empirically established that metonymy is used at all levels of the discourse of anti-democratic populist propaganda in Bulgaria. In our study it is most evident in the case of the arch-villain produced by this propaganda – the hegemon/puppet-master of the global conspiracy – represented arbitrarily and alternately (one instead of the other, as if they are identical) as the US, NATO, Soros, Wall Street, Brussels, liberalism, the Eurocrats, Ivan Kostov (former prime minister of Bulgaria), the America for Bulgaria Foundation, and so on. Actually, this was also one of our reasons for calling the empirically identified discursive front a ‘propaganda front’: namely, the fact that words and phrases with quite different meanings and fields of reference are regularly used in it metonymically, as if they are synonymous. How is this propaganda effect achieved, though?

Apart from the above example from Bulgarian media, metonymy allows us to identify a more general salient feature of propaganda discourse: propaganda uses performatives that are mostly simplistic, soundbite-like, quasi-univocal, although from one performative to the next – in the longer series – a univocal or quasi-univocal phrase is arbitrarily substituted metonymically for another. In other words, if constraining the meaning of the message (similarly to truth-telling) is a specific propaganda gesture, then every subsequent propaganda performative can, and often does, directly substitute the univocal meaning of the previous propaganda performative. Actually, a propaganda performative series usually contains univocal performatives which – if tested and verified one by one for factual relevance and if their meaning has been modalized appropriately – will be found to be true. In other words, propaganda uses factual truths for the purpose of manipulation: following Ellul, we will remind the reader that propaganda is often ‘accurate to facts’ – it rather packages facts, assigning them ‘moral’, according to Ellul, or, more simply put, generalized meaning. That is
to say, propaganda is a specific regime of playing with the truth and our task is to understand exactly how it plays with the truth, how a propaganda effect is achieved through true statements.

The problem is that in a propaganda series truths are metonymically layered upon one another as synonymous with performatives which, if they are not outright lies (this is the rarer case), at the very least pretend to be telling the truth by virtue of their univocal generalization, but are not subject to indexical relevantization and modalization of their meaning. They somehow – through metonymy – inflate truths and, in doing so, turn them into a peculiar type of ‘lie’. Here is an example from the second war of 2003 – ‘the war in Iraq’ – of a (stylized here typologically) propaganda performative series similar to the practical series through which propaganda actually prepared the legitimization of the war itself:

- Multiple performatives insisting that despite UN Security Council Resolution 1441 (8 November 2002), Saddam Hussein’s regime was continuing to obstruct inspections by the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons on the territory of Iraq (a factual ‘truth’ for the period before the Resolution, in 1998-2002, but not after it: UNMOVIC Executive Chairman Hans Blix’s assessment of Iraq’s cooperation after inspections resumed on 27 November 2002, was that ‘after a period of somewhat reluctant cooperation, there had been an acceleration of initiatives by Iraq since the end of January’; in fact, inspectors had been given prompt access to all sites and were conducting no-notice inspections all over Iraq).
- A crucial moment in this story was the UN Security Council meeting on 7 March 2003. There IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei reported that Iraq’s ‘industrial capacity has deteriorated substantially’ after 1991, as well as that ‘After three months of intrusive inspections, we have to date found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons programme in Iraq.’ According to the UNMOVIC report, presented at the same meeting, ‘No proscribed activities, or the result of such activities from the period of 1998-2002 have, so far, been detected through inspections’ for chemical and biological weapons, although the inspectors did not rule out the possibility that such weapons had remained hidden from them or had been moved outside Iraq. Both the IAEA and the UNMOVIC reports recommended continuing inspections, as well as concrete measures that Iraq should take to facilitate them. That is to say, both reports established as a factual truth that there was actually no evidence of the existence or development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, although they did not rule out the possibility that such evidence might be found later on.
- After these reports, it became impossible for the US to obtain a UN Security Council resolution authorizing military intervention in Iraq, since such a resolution was opposed by France, Germany and Russia, which had veto power.
From then on, the political and media – propaganda – campaign, conducted primarily by the US and UK, focused entirely on the suspicions, remaining above all in the UNMOVIC report, that it was nevertheless possible that there might be ‘hidden’ biological and chemical weapons stockpiles and development projects in Iraq, as well as on Hans Blix’s rather politically motivated assessment that the cooperation accorded by Iraq ‘could not be said to constitute “immediate” cooperation’. In any case, the propaganda campaign involved a series of transformations of the experts’ statements: the statement that there was no “immediate” cooperation’ was metonymically substituted by statements that there was no cooperation at all; the statement that there were still no full guarantees that Iraq did not have WMD was substituted, again metonymically, by statements that Iraq actually had WMD.

In fact, we witnessed a series of statements of political representatives of the US and UK and of a number of media outlets, promoting the generalized rhetoric of ‘the war on terror’ and identifying Iraq as part of ‘the axis of Evil’, in which the regime’s WMD were represented as an actual threat. In his address to the nation on the start of the war on 20 March, George W. Bush said: ‘The people of the United States and our friends and allies will not live at the mercy of an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder.’

All those propaganda statements were generalized in a way that made all previous modalizations – ‘possible’, ‘unlikely’, ‘very likely’, ‘actually’ (in a particular respect or in a particular period of time), as well as the contradictions between them – disappear. In fact, there was a systematic metonymic substitution of statements that were more or less carefully modalized by ‘the experts’, by similar statements which, however, were maximally generalized and presented as actual ‘reality’ by the propagandists of the war.

That is how a discursive flow is created, in which different meanings, momentarily (performatively) presented as univocal, are strategically substituted metonymically, without taking into account their specific sphere and degree of validity, as well as without taking into account any possible and actual contradictions between them – they are arbitrarily layered upon one another, thereby creating an illusion of coherence, but above all an illusion of totality of the final message. The purpose of propagandistic metonymy is not to metaphorically open up space for free associations and dissociations, but to layer different meanings upon one another, creating the appearance that all cases refer to ‘one and the same thing’: ‘an outlaw regime that threatens the peace with weapons of mass murder’. What’s more, the propaganda discourse pretends not only that it maintains the coherence of ‘its subject’, but also that what it tells about it is ‘The Truth’, the total Truth – where the modalizations of the truth are strategically reduced.

Actually, the type of ‘coherence’ is what practically distinguishes the propaganda performative series from the scientific (expert’s) series of performa-
tives. In scientific argumentation (as in serious public argumentation – in professional journalism, for instance) – which is fundamental to modern science and the modern public sphere – the normative requirement for maintaining a high degree of univocality in long performative series is imperative: consistency, or at least coherence, have become a normative criterion of truthfulness. This normative requirement is by no means accidental, although the criterion of logical coherence invariably remains a regulative ideal, that is, it can never be fully achieved in practice (not even in mathematics and physics). That is because the only way scientific practice can come close to this ideal is by carefully defining and modalizing the meaning of the phrases which it performatively raises (as a minimum at the level of the axiomatics in mathematico-deductive systems and, more complexly, of each statement, by coordinating the modalizations of the separate statements regarding more specific or factual truths). **Maximally strict modalization – careful differentiation of the sphere of validity of each phrase – is the method/technique by which science strives to resolve/avoid contradictions between its performatives and to maintain univocality and coherence of their messages.** The raison d’être of modalization as a specific goal of science isn’t to eliminate metonymy (although, let us recall, this utopia was also part of the modern development of science: the dream of achieving ‘pure tautology’ and ‘absolute univocality’ beyond everyday metonymies was indeed once a mobilizing horizon, but it has long since proved futile). **The raison d’être of modalizations from a contemporary point of view – from the point of view of reflexive science – is to publicly elucidate metonymies:** to show which statement may metonymically substitute another statement, in exactly which respect, in what aspect, and so on. Of course, we must emphasize that here we understand modalization not in a strict logical sense (not only as modal categories, operators, etc.), but in the widest sense: as practical work on elucidating the infinite variety of ways (modes) in which our utterances and things in the world are interrelated (where the modes of relation are not limited only to actual, possible, necessary, probable, and so on, but also include the different degrees of rigidity, intensity, certainty, temporal and spatial distance, and so on, in infinite epistemic and deontic aspects of correlation). It is in this general sense – and apart from the different special thematizations of modality in philosophy, logic, linguistics, psychology, and so on – that careful modalization as investigation and specification of the ways in which utterances and things in the world are interrelated, as a strategy for avoiding contradictions and creating maximally coherent pictures of the world, is the systemic task of science in general. That is to say, a strategic task of science today – the ‘expertise’ entrusted to science, through which it must cater for everyday life – is to illuminate, through careful modalizations, the fields of associations and metonymies, and hence, also the field of everyday preknowledge, and to offer more univocal, modally tempered, metonymic models through which it can channel everyday metonymies. In contrast to science, of course, the everyday under-
standing – when it does not resort to ideological, propagandistic or drunken bullshitting – continues not to strive for univocality or for strong modalizations; it is far more flexible and is not afraid of contradictions, resolving them by another technique: by keeping an open horizon for ever newer and constantly ramifying small modalizations that are sufficient for the purposes of practical coordination of actions, without heavy generalizations. Still, ensuring that everyday metonymies are ‘informed’ by science (that the field of association is illuminated and channelled in advance by science) was a normative programme of the Enlightenment: it seems that precisely this normative programme is undermined by propaganda today.18

For, conversely, propaganda simulates univocality and maximal generalization while rejecting modalization. The rejection of modalization, or more precisely, the instrumental but in fact arbitrary logical and empirical expansion of the modal horizon of messages is a basic practico-logical operator of propaganda.19 Through metonymic accumulation of performatives, the propaganda series simulates deductive reasoning, where the last statement, the generalized ‘conclusion’, retroactively expands the quantifier of the previous statements, of the ‘premises’. It is as if the propaganda ‘syllogism’ proceeds back-to-front: since the conclusion is a general proposition, this retroactively requires also that the premises be thought as general propositions although they aren’t such: that is how the appearance is created that since ‘on the Euromaidan there were ultranationalists with fascist leanings’, then ‘all protesters on the Euromaidan were fascists’; that since ‘the UNMOVIC and IAEA experts presumed that it was possible that Saddam Hussein’s regime may have weapons of mass destruction’, then ‘the regime definitely had weapons of mass destruction’, and so on.

The specific technique of defending propaganda messages in direct debate is noteworthy. We could imagine it as follows: propagandist A says that the Ukrainian government is a ‘fascist junta’ that has come to power after a ‘fascist putsch’, but interlocutor B decides to contest this statement by citing acquaintances of his own, idealistic students who took part in the civic movement. Propagandist A interrupts interlocutor B, saying something like, ‘So you’re denying that Right Sector are ultra-nationalists and fascists!’ (or ‘So you’re denying that Stepan Bandera collaborated with the Nazis!’). Of course, those responses contain an element of factual truth. But their purpose is different: it is to block the possibility for modalizing the facts and to totalize one fact. What we have here is a peculiar type of ‘propaganda induction’ which drastically differs from traditional scientific induction.

In a sense, propaganda takes advantage of the uncertainty of inductive knowledge (but also of every knowledge more generally). Ever since David Hume formulated the ‘problem of induction’, few are those who do not admit that inductive inference can never be absolutely certain: for experience is open to a future in which it is always possible that a counterexample might appear.
Dealing reflexively with the problem of the uncertainty of induction presupposes at least two things. First, inductive inferences should be recognized to be ‘hypothetical’: their quantifier is only hypothetically universal (that is why Karl Popper even denies that such inferences are properly inductive). Second, however, if the ‘problem of induction’ is taken into account, then it is necessary to display another type of scientific integrity when a given ‘inductive hypothesis’ is disproved by a counterexample. Then the old hypothesis must be modified by being complemented, while the old logical quantifier of the generalization must be transformed and re-modalized more narrowly. Let me recall the banal: if after an n-number of instances we have generalized that ‘all swans are white’, then if a black swan appears (instance n+1), we must change the quantifier of the conclusion by specifying it anew: ‘Most swans are white, but some are not.’ The ‘propaganda induction’, conversely, will directly totalize the counterexample and arbitrarily expand the quantifier on its basis: ‘Do you see this black swan? All swans are black!’

By the traditional standards of science, but also of common sense, the strategic expansion of the modal horizon of messages is a lie (a lie most often based on a fact, but a lie about the degree of generalization of the fact – to put it in everyday terms, it is a lie because it ‘inflates the fact’, it ‘inflates’ the meaning of the fact). Incidentally, the recently much talked-about ‘fake news’, if taken in a stricter sense – as fabrication of non-existent facts – is only a small segment of propaganda. The main function of fake news – apart from the possibility that some people might believe it to be true – is that it additionally blurs the general discursive horizon, stimulating a loss of orientation on the part of recipients as to which message refers to what exactly. Fake news kills ‘the fact’: it kills trust in the ability of public discourse to strictly define the state of affairs in the world about which its messages are relevant and reliably verifiable; fake news also kills the public’s desire to look for relevance and verifiability on its own.

What’s more, the strategic expansion of the modal horizon of propaganda messages is not a one-off act – propaganda is not a one-off lie. On the contrary, we can speak of propaganda discourse when the expansion of the modal scope of utterances is a systematic and strategic gesture repeated many times, when different meanings which, in another regime – of stricter coherence – would often prove to be contradictory, are layered upon one another through such a series of gestures. The accumulation of such utterances, which tendentiously expand the modal horizon of what is said in them, is exactly what leads to the blurring of the modal horizon of the discourse in general, to the emergence of a horizon of unaddressed generalization, of totalization without any possibility for modalization. I said that this horizon of unaddressed generalization (‘unaddressed’ in the sense that it is not clear exactly what the utterances in such a horizon refer to) is a precondition for propaganda metonymies. We now see, however, that the process is circular: metonymies do not merely rely on a
blurred modal horizon; in practice, the metonymic accumulation of utterances that tendentiously expand their modal horizon creates the blurred discursive horizon of generalization, in which propaganda metonymy turns out to be the only relevant discursive device. By the way, it is precisely the practical accumulation of metonymic performatives that creates the horizon of unaddressed generalization in which it turns out to be possible – in the state-controlled Russian media and in some Bulgarian media – to systematically repeat radically different things which, however, are perceived as ‘one and the same’:

- The Euromaidan was a ‘fascist putsch’ and the government elected after it was a ‘fascist junta’ while, at the same time, the Euromaidan was also a ‘colour revolution’ orchestrated by the liberal West.

In the blurred horizon created through those actually conflicting propaganda messages, the messages themselves do not merely begin to coexist as if there is no contradiction between them; in this horizon it turns out to be entirely possible for meta-oxymorons such as ‘liberal-fascist’ not only to emerge but also to be trivialized (such oxymorons are trivialized as propaganda labels, as we will explain shortly).21

This, by the way, is yet another discursive feature by which propaganda can and ought to be classified as ‘lying’, yet not because it necessarily lies about facts, but because it metonymically layers in a common generalized horizon mutually irreducible and often conflicting statements (some of which, in another context, could be modalized as truths: truths which, however, if they are taken separately and modalized more strictly, beyond the metonymic layering, will not agree with and will even contradict each other). In this sense, propaganda is lying because it violates the traditional normative requirement of logical coherence and consistent argumentation of the truth. It is as if the law of consistency of meaning does not apply to propaganda.

Violation of the normative requirement of coherence of public discourse is a strategic goal of propaganda: in this sense, its strategic goal is to lie – lying as rhetorical creation of apparent coherence of messages and of their totalization, where ‘everything is anything’ and there is no principled difference between truth and lies.

4. Populism and Propaganda: Convergences and Differences

4.1. The Empty Signifiers of Populism and the Half-Empty Signifiers of Propaganda. Metaphors and Metonymies

Blurred by propaganda, the discursive horizon as if inevitably creates ‘empty signifiers’: signs whose meaning is indeterminate and fluid, which therefore can be used to signify all sorts of arbitrary referents. This isn’t exactly the case, though. As we said, propaganda plays a double game: of blurring meaning through constant metonymies, but also of constraining meaning by creating the appearance that what is being referred to is ‘one and the same
thing’. The commercial for a new car model is meant to persuade you that this model at once offers all subjective pleasures and has all objective characteristics you may wish for, even if they are mutually exclusive: maximum personal control over the car and, at the same time, maximum automation and personal relaxation, but also maximum stability and incredible turning speed, and so on. Still, this is a commercial for precisely this – ‘selfsame’ – model: the meaning of such a commercial is entirely definite and, what’s more, it is purposively defined, although random ‘good’ characteristics are metonymically combined in it. Here the signifier is certainly not entirely ‘empty’, though – it is, rather, ‘half-full and half-empty’. The metonymy in positive commercials is distinct and to some extent ‘honest’ in its simplicity: even if it pretends to offer at once all delights, advantages and pleasures, what is being advertised is clearly indicated and defined. **Metonymy creates half-empty signifiers**: signifiers whose meaning is directly fixed (as in positive commercials) or only quasi-fixed (as in negative propaganda), while it is in fact blurred (for example, ‘the people’ used in a propaganda discourse usually works as if it has a clear referential scope without having such).

For things seem to be somewhat more complicated in the case of negative PR and above all of political propaganda aimed at collective mobilization through opposition and exclusion. Here we have in mind the propaganda use of populist discourse which works through polarization and opposes ‘us’ to ‘them’. Actually, we will now parenthesize – through practical *epoché* – commercial advertising and the forms of political propaganda that package ‘a positive image of desire’ without explicit exclusion (up to this point we tried, albeit in an unfocused manner, to keep them within the scope of our generalizations). From now on we will describe only the more radical type of political propaganda that seemed to have waned in the decades of liberal hegemony after the Cold War, but which has been gathering momentum in recent years. We are talking about the forms of propaganda which use as a resource the maximal political polarization ‘friend/enemy’ and which, if not explicitly then at least latently or purely instrumentally (for entirely different purposes) activate collective mobilizations of the ‘life or death’ type. Precisely this more drastic type of propaganda feeds on populist discontents, appropriates the critical potential of the vocabulary of populism today and transforms it into a vocabulary of governmentality.

But first let us look at populism before it is packaged by propaganda:

Ernesto Laclau is to a large extent right that in the case of populist movements from below, the emergence of a discursive front and the collective mobilization it produces become possible insofar as and when the protesting ‘us’ or ‘the people’ begin to work as an ‘empty signifier’. That is because: all differences must be dissolved (the individual, economic, cultural, and all other differences among the participants in the protesting multitude must turn out to be insignificant or, to put it in Laclau’s [2005, p.74] vocabulary, the differ-
ent ‘popular demands’ must be articulated as equivalential) in order to make possible the emergence of ‘the people’ as an ‘us’. This discursive operation can be thought of basically as metaphor (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, p.125) or as catachresis, as naming the unnameable (Laclau, 2005, pp.71-72), where all differences are metaphorically dissolved in an empty signifier – ‘us’, ‘the people’.23 With regard to more radical collective mobilizations, Laclau is also right that the consolidation of ‘us’ is practically done through a construction of an antagonistic frontier which, in essence, excludes from ‘the body of the people’ a ‘them’ – ‘the elites’, ‘the government’ more generally, but more specifically ‘the ancien régime’ (in the French Revolution), ‘the capitalists’ (in the left-wing movements and revolutions), ‘the communists’ (in the velvet revolutions), ‘the global corporations’ (often today), and so on. The excluded, regardless of the contextually varying historical circumstances, become ‘them’ who, in the respective situation, are identified as actually governing, but who, in the same situation, are identified as governing in an interest that is ‘foreign to the people’ (be it a ‘private interest’ or the interest of a ‘foreign power’). The ‘them’ that is signed as radically foreign to ‘the people’ plays, in a certain sense, the role of its constitutive other: it is what activates the catachresis, the metaphorical constitution of ‘us’ as something one, as ‘our’ equivalence beyond all differences. Such a discursive operation, which is also undoubtedly a power, (counter)hegemonic operation, can indeed be observed in situations where a protest or revolutionary movement is formed from below. The question is: How can we distinguish the metaphorical association and dissociation of differences which produces ‘the people’ as an ‘us of equality and fraternity’, from the propaganda metonymies through which – by means of the same vocabulary that polarizes the picture of the world into a ‘friend/enemy’ antagonism – ‘the people’ is constituted as a body of governmentality: a body that can be used also for implementing practical asymmetries vis-à-vis the others (including to the point of genocide)?

We must realize in advance that this question cannot be answered easily, nor can strict criteria be given for distinguishing the one from the other. That is because – the examples are legion! – but, let’s say, in situations of military mobilization against a foreign enemy, usually not only state propaganda is at work, which, by systematically vilifying the enemy and metonymically dissolving social differences, instrumentally consolidates the warrior body of the people in order to ‘throw it into the war’; in such situations of mobilization, also at work at different levels from below are metaphors and catachreses through which – sometimes also ‘in opposition to’ the governments, the generals, and so on (but very often also in agreement with state propaganda) – solidarity is created among the soldiers as well as among the public at large.

Hence, the answer to our question can have the form only of a practical regulative imperative: we can propose only general practical markers for distinguishing the uses – spontaneous and propagandistic – of populist language.

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fact, the distinction has already been made between: (1) Uses where the excluding opposition to ‘them’ activates a metaphorical constitution of ‘the people’ as an empty signifier, with no fixed meaning – an indignant ‘us’ of solidarity beyond all differences. Such metaphorical consolidation of the community, however, is inevitably loose, negative (with no fixed meaning, it is motivated by protest), but in practice it easily passes into (2) Uses where the excluding opposition to ‘them’ is employed to metonymically form the image and the body of ‘the people’ as a half-empty signifier – through metonymy, a layered, usually inconsistent but still more or less fixed meaning is covertly inscribed behind the metaphor, behind the ‘solidarity beyond all differences’. Metonymies – whether made spontaneously in everyday life or for propaganda purposes – produce a half-empty signifier through covert and invariably incomplete (fluid) reification and essentialization of the meaning of messages.

The big problem here is that it is impossible to distinguish a priori metaphoric from metonymic uses of ‘us’ (just as it is impossible to strictly distinguish constituent from constituted power in the sense of Antonio Negri, politics from police in the sense of Jacques Rancière, populism from regime in the sense of Ernesto Laclau, and so on). That is to say, it is impossible to make a strong ontological distinction between the two types of uses of ‘the people’ and of the other epithets from populist discourse that are related to ‘the people’. Conversely, it seems that in everyday discursive operations, some metonymy is involved in metaphor even when strategically unmotivated and daily inconsistent speakers utter a series of performatives about ‘the people’ or about its ‘enemies’. Illogical and inconsistent as the meaning may be, it seems that a series of practical performatives often inscribes an associative yet covertly reified meaning under the words in the series.

This unavoidable metonymic work of everyday discourses, through which the metaphoric empty signifier of ‘the people’ is partly filled and reified, can be and is used instrumentally for propaganda purposes, though. For when the covert metonymic inscription of meaning becomes a strategic goal, then ‘the people’ becomes a propaganda instrument of governmentality. Propaganda metonymies create the false impression that it is already known ‘what the people should be’, what its true ‘essence’ is, and hence, ‘who’ should be excluded from it, that is, who ‘the enemies of the people’, internal and external, are. Thus, ‘the people’ is consolidated, including to the extent where it can be ‘thrown into war’. But thus-made, the propaganda metonymies do not turn ‘the people’ into an associating empty signifier that metaphorically dissolves the differences of the protesting multitude into a solidary ‘us’; on the contrary, they turn it into a differentiating term, into an instrument of exclusion, of division and rule.

Let us for a moment leave the level of theoretical abstraction and recall the emblematic year that was not chosen by accident as the starting point of our empirical study of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria: namely, 2013, and
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more specifically, the anti-government protests of 2013, both those in the winter (against monopolies) and in the summer (against the oligarchy). In both instances the protest energy was clothed in a classic populist discursive form: ‘us’ versus ‘the government’ that works in a ‘foreign oligarchic interest’. In both instances the protests were concretely motivated by cases that clearly showed the failure of the state to fairly regulate socioeconomic and political relations in Bulgaria. Despite those important common features, the two protests were publicly differentiated and opposed to each other, and their populist vocabulary was appropriated for the purposes of governmentality. How was this done?

Of course, everyone in Bulgaria remembers: it was done by opposing ‘the people’ of the first (winter) protest to the second (summer) one – ‘the poor and ugly’ versus ‘the smart and beautiful’. Serious analyses of the public representations of the two protests have already been made (see Znepolski, 2016; Iakimova, 2016). The question, however, is why their public representations split and, in doing so, prepared the propaganda uses of ‘the people’ identified in our study.

It would not be fair to say that the journalist Velislava Dareva who, to our knowledge, was the first to publicly contrast the two protests, did so with a strategic propaganda aim in mind, although her concrete pro-BSP (Bulgarian Socialist Party) bias is obvious (it is certain, however, that by coining the phrases ‘the poor and ugly’ versus ‘the smart and beautiful’ she played a part, probably unwittingly, in the formation of the propaganda-populist vocabulary under study here). But Dareva isn’t ‘the evil genius’ because, before she generalized them, the metonymies that more covertly or more overtly essentialized the meaning of ‘we, the people’ in the two protests had already occurred at the level of the everyday discourses in the two mass movements. The February 2013 protests, motivated by the exorbitant electricity bills, discursively linked the protesting ‘us’ to poverty and the lack of social protection, they activated the vocabulary of patriotism against foreign corporations (which indeed have a monopoly on electricity distribution in Bulgaria), they directly attacked the then government of GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), and they also often metonymically inscribed the then opposition – explicitly Ataka and the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), but also the BSP – into the discursive ‘us’. Conversely, the June 2013 protests, motivated by the appointment of media mogul Delyan Peevski as chief of the State Agency for National Security (DANS) – although they likewise created their protesting ‘us’ versus ‘the oligarchy’ in an entirely populist way – activated metonymically the liberal discursive repertoire of civil society, transparency and integrity, competence and meritocracy; they also activated resources of the ‘anticommunist’ protest vocabulary of the 1990s and directly attacked the then coalition government of the BSP and DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms), even though most speakers reflexively avoided metonymically inscribing the then opposition parties (above all, GERB) into the protesting ‘us’. That is to say, in both mass movements the
protesting ‘us’ had already absorbed, through metonymic accumulations ‘from below’, from the everyday articulations of the protesters, one or other loose meaning – this ‘us’ had already begun to function not as an empty signifier but, in each of the two protests, as a half-empty signifier which, moreover, was filled in different ways. We may say that the common populist vocabulary in both cases was metonymically complemented in different ways: in the first case, rather by ‘leftist-patriotic’ articulations, and in the second, rather by ‘liberal’ articulations of ‘the people’ versus ‘the elites’. Hence the metonymic chains in both cases produced two different types of populism and turned ‘the people’ into different half-empty signifiers. Why, however, didn’t an additional metaphoric short-circuit occur between those two half-empty signifiers, a short-circuit that would have made the existing social and discursive differences equivalential, hence creating ‘the people’ as a signified of solidarity beyond all differences?

This question cannot be answered theoretically, although one can easily offer rational arguments that the two protests had the same stakes, that they were provoked by analogous structural problems in the functioning of the state and in the ways the political elites exercise their power in Bulgaria. What’s more, such rational arguments were put forward in public, and more than once at that. Still, the different metonymies – especially after they were publicly articulated as an incompatible dilemma and, what’s more, as a strongly generalized dilemma – ultimately prevailed over the metaphors of solidarity.

And there is something else too: after the ‘two Bulgarias’ or ‘the two peoples’ – of ‘the poor and ugly’ and of ‘the smart and beautiful’ – were publicly articulated through generalized exclusive disjunctions, this automatically unleashed massive propaganda use of populist language. Since the summer of 2013, it has become common practice to strategically organize ‘counter-protests’ against (at present, any) protests in Bulgaria, as well as to direct the machine of ever-more propagandistic and ever-more consolidated voices and media against them. In this sense, 2013 was a turning point for the Bulgarian public sphere: it marked the beginning of the massive transformation of the populist vocabulary into a propaganda vocabulary of governmentality. That is when ‘the people’ (again, after a certain lull) was transformed into a propaganda label used for producing social divisions. Our main thesis, which we will try to defend in the second part of this text, is that contemporary populist propaganda systematically substitutes, through series of strategic metonymies, the empty signifier of ‘the people’, replacing it with personalized étatist reifications of sovereignty. In doing so, propaganda turns populism against itself: it turns the emancipatory potential of populism into an instrument of governmentality.

4.2. Transcendental Signifiers, Propaganda Labels, and Discursive Terror

‘The people’, just like every other word put to strategic metonymic use, has become a propaganda label. The propaganda label pretends to be
univocal, although different, and often mutually irreducible, meanings are metonymically combined in it; in addition, the quasi-fixed meaning of the propaganda label is maximally generalized in the blurred general discursive horizon of propaganda. Propaganda labels are generalized half-empty signifiers. This is what turns them into political ‘baseball bats’ – into instruments for discursive terror.

Who is ‘a man or woman of the people’ and who is ‘an enemy of the people’ is decided to a large extent arbitrarily, ad hoc – insofar as there is no stabilized modalization of the referential application of such propaganda labels, neither an everyday nor a scientific one. The propaganda label is a peculiar kind of ‘Frankenstein’s monster’. In propaganda usage, ‘the people’ as well as ‘the enemies of the people’ are taken as absolutely generalized in themselves quasi-sacred phrases – as if it is absolutely clear what their sole and canonical meaning is and as if this very meaning is absolute. Thus, although the propaganda label is a half-full signifier, it actually presents itself as an ‘absolutely full signifier’.

At the same time, however, insofar as the meaning of these phrases is actually fuzzy, amorphous, metonymically layered through arbitrary performances, the propaganda signifier in fact works rather as an empty signifier: for its associatively blurred meaning (or rather, amalgam of meanings) does not consistently specify a possible horizon of its indexical referential application. Through this Frankensteinian split – between pretence of absolute univocality and maximal blurring of meaning – the referential application of propaganda epithets turns out to be entirely arbitrary and decisionist. Anyone can be performatively promoted as ‘a man or woman of the people’ and anyone can be condemned as ‘an enemy of the people’ through a short-circuit between the maximally general meaning of the phrase (at once generalized as absolute and completely blurred practically), on the one hand, and on the other, any act, event, behavioural trait (and so on) of the respective person or group of people who are referentially labelled by it. For in propaganda labels, there is no bridge – there is no routinely trodden path – for possible application of the meaning of the phrase to any referent whatsoever. Any referential focus can be both included in and excluded from the meaning of the propaganda label – there is no habitually sedimented, even if porous, demarcation between possible and impossible uses. In the ideal-typical model of propaganda, such as I am actually describing here, the propaganda label turns out to be an instrument for total decisionist arbitrariness. The other name of total decisionist arbitrariness is ‘terror’. For it is precisely the totalization of discourse and the arbitrary decisionist targeting of violence which, taken together, characterize terror (the contemporary forms of terror, in which completely innocent people are killed in the name of a fanatic idea, only confirm this definition). Hence, propaganda labels are instruments for discursive terror.

In her analysis of totalitarian propaganda, Hannah Arendt (1979, p.348) insists that ‘Totalitarian movements use socialism and racism by emptying them
of their utilitarian content, the interests of a class or nation’ – to put it in our vocabulary, they empty ideologies of metonymically inscribed meanings, turning them into a specific kind of transcendental signifiers: according to Arendt, into ‘predictions’ that are ‘infallible’ and pretend to be scientific, whose infallibility is guaranteed not by facts but by the totalization of terror: everything that contradicts them – facts, people – must be wiped out. Incidentally, Arendt also systematically examines totalitarian terror as a combination of maximal totalization of the respective ideology with maximal arbitrariness and, at the same time, systematicity of violence. In fact, here we will expand her understanding into a general definition of every terror: terror is any instance where a maximally abstract discourse claiming monopoly on the truth clears the way for completely unilateral and arbitrary violence, non-reciprocal and irreversible, which dehumanizes by labelling and dooms its object to silence.

Here, however, we too seem to have excessively strained – totalized – our discourse, therefore some qualifications are in order. For the way we defined the propaganda label in relation to terror brings it significantly close to Jacques Derrida’s terms ‘centre’ and ‘transcendental signifier’. Those Derridean terms, however, were coined as an instrument in the critique of metaphysics – of classical essentialist metaphysics and of religion, but also of modern science and philosophy, insofar as in a number of cases the latter also follow the tradition of ontotheology and make claims to absolute truth. These terms, however, do not self-evidently apply to propaganda.

Those Derridean terms are extremely useful. For when a discursive programme (doctrine, theory, ideology) claims to be absolutely true, then it inevitably turns its general terms into transcendental signifiers: into terms that dissolve sign, meaning and referent into one, totalize this dissolution and begin to function as mantras that can signify anything without signifying anything in particular – a sort of black holes of meaning. It is important to note, however, that no matter how totalized and dissolved the meaning of such a phrase is, still – insofar as this phrase has some concrete genealogy and is used in practice in some concrete actual contexts – some implicit and at least minimal conventional meaning is always inscribed in it through former (genealogical) but also actual metonymies. Incidentally, Derrida also systematically demonstrates this through his deconstructions of such personages – by deconstructing various pretenders to be a transcendental signifier, which always turn out to contain some more or less reified (‘present’) but in all cases specific meanings that are inscribed in them. To put it another way, no matter how hard a word or phrase tries to become a black hole of meaning, the word – insofar as it retains some actual sense, insofar as it doesn’t deteriorate into sheer nonsense – can never become such. In ‘the best-case scenario’, it will remain a generalized half-empty signifier.

Parenthetically, propaganda is an actual, albeit specific, successor of metaphysics, and hence propaganda labels are a specific successor of transcendental
signifiers. We may even hypothetically presume that a phrase cannot become a propaganda label if it has not previously been a transcendental signifier (or at least a phrase consistently occurring in practical correlation with the transcendental signifier of a given discourse). It would be appropriate, however, to point out some concrete differences so that the above proposition wouldn’t sound too bombastic – so that it wouldn’t turn out that everything is propaganda (then someone will say: ‘Propaganda is yet another transcendental signifier!’).

It seems that in modern propaganda there is progressive polarization between the claim to totality of the meaning of phrases and the ever-growing amorphousness and arbitrariness of the metonymic meaning inscribed in them. That is to say, there is a progressive split between the absolutist claim to univocality and the ever-growing substantive dissipation and metaphoric dissolution of the practico-metonymically accumulated meanings in the signifier. But let us return to the question of the ‘metaphysics – science – propaganda’ relations!

Let us describe their history roughly, typologically, as follows: the classical metaphysical religious and philosophical doctrines, insofar as they seek to attain absolute truth, unavoidably presuppose a transcendental signifier: ‘the beginning’, ‘the ideas’, ‘the form’, ‘God’, and so on. Although this transcendental signifier turns into a total ‘centre’ of the respective discourse (a centre which, viewed from a logical perspective, means everything and nothing, but from which everything else is inferred), a more or less specific and practically consistent meaning always remains inscribed in this ‘centre’, a meaning which at least partly limits the possibility of using the ‘transcendental signifier’ as a purely propaganda label: as a pure instrument of terror. The specific meaning concretely inscribed in the ‘centre’ of metaphysical systems is also created through metonymies, but these are metonymies derived from everyday practices, from the immanent discursive and ethico-practical routines and traditions of communities – routines in which their speakers are inscribed and which of course undergo ruptures, changes and different interpretations but nevertheless retain a conservative horizon of shared meaning. It is precisely the specific meaning, routinely and implicitly inscribed in ‘the centre’, which restrains the ‘centre’ in question from resorting to absolutist arbitrariness. This, of course, does not exclude the historically verifiable, in all ages and cultural regions, moments of terror: moments of excessively totalized and excessively decisionist use of various transcendental signifiers.

What’s more, if we accept for a moment Habermas’s general thesis about modernity as a transition from traditional to post-traditional societies, we cannot but see that this transition was concretely motivated precisely by such terror: the religious wars of the seventeenth century are a common and sufficient reference. It seems that modernity began when the transcendental signifiers began to lose their canonically inscribed shared meaning – when the metonymic everyday practices became too diverse to allow for their easy everyday
coordination; and when even the moments of states of exception, of terror, began to last too long, without being able to coordinate routines; it seems that then terror itself also stopped playing the role of an ‘exceptional’ means for overcoming tensions and itself became a total everyday threat. In this entirely concrete historical European context, it seems that new, beyond-everyday forms of practical coordination of meanings began to be sought and found through different ways: of course, first of all by way of science as institutionalized critical work; but also through the mediation of the public sphere as another type of institutionalization of critique – such barriers to terror were also the new, more impersonal forms of political negotiation of life together, which today have been routinely inscribed in the institutions of liberal democracy.

Yet even in the modern period, insofar as science inertly preserved the metaphysical claim to attaining absolute truths, it continued to produce transcendental signifiers. However, although the claim of those transcendental signifiers was totalized, more or less specific meanings were again inscribed in them – yet those meanings were no longer produced merely through everyday metonymies, but through ever-more specialized and professionalized scientific metonymies seeking ever-more logical coherence and specific modalization of their terms and statements. Those new forms of inscription of shared meaning in the ‘transcendental signifiers’ of modern science also played the role of barriers to their use for absolute terror.26 In the last one hundred and fifty years – in the so-called reflexive modernity – science seems to have been increasingly successful in limiting its own potentialities for terror through critical reflection, by systematically deconstructing its own transcendental signifiers: by critically limiting the absolutist claim of its terms and, at the same time, specifying their meaning and trying to practically modalize their indexical relevance. That is to say, contemporary science either withdraws the status of transcendental signifier from its terms, or, where the use of general (quasi-transcendental) terms cannot be avoided, it keeps them solely and only as regulative – as terms that have relevance and meaning only for the discursive operations where they serve as a concrete axiomatic framework, not ‘in themselves’. Thus, the regulative terms of contemporary science are – and must be maintained as – completely negative in themselves, empty of absolute, context-free meaning, and hence, contestable in principle, subject to ever new contextual interpretations in which alone they acquire specific meaning.

The biggest exception to this rule – or actually its strongest confirmation – are the two major totalitarian political ideologies of the twentieth century, Nazism and communism, which have their own quasi-scientific origins and legitimation. They are quasi-scientific (and quasi-critical) because instead of limiting the totalizing claim, they expanded to totality and ascribed quasi-univocality to the metonymically produced and in fact semi-dissolved meaning of their transcendental signifiers – ‘class’, ‘race’ – so as to totalize terror to extremes and to try to permanently institutionalize it in their political practices. Terror, of
course, in these cases was also discursive: it was part of indiscriminate political propaganda based only generally on an ideological framework but in fact leaving vast space for arbitrary violence. It seems that after metaphysics and after the early modern utopia of pure science, the two totalitarian ideologies in question represent a third historical wave of production of transcendental signifiers which, however, unleashed terror on a larger scale than their predecessors, both in terms of scope and arbitrariness of violence (Stalin’s purges are a sufficient example). It might be that this was because something had changed in the transcendental signifiers themselves; and what might have changed is this:

In the metaphysical doctrines, the tendency towards totalizing transcendental signifiers – and hence, the tendency towards using them for terror – is systematically limited by the hidden meanings inscribed in them based on the metonymies of everyday practices. These inscribed meanings, figuratively speaking, play the role of ‘Mirrors of Princes’ and obligate ‘the prince’ to keep an honourable image: an image of honour which, in routine situations, does not allow him to exercise absolute terror. Modernity, however, found other recipes for deterring terror in its own transcendental signifiers: among them are the new scientific imperative for coherence through careful modalization of the series of performatives that lead to shared meaning, the new political imperative for separation of powers and, by extent, of property, and the special critical authority of the public sphere – the scientific and the political public sphere. These critical barriers reversed the trend, therefore reflexive modernity has been trying ever more systematically to abandon ‘transcendental signifiers’ and to avoid terror. None of those older and newer barriers to terror, however, has ever succeeded in stopping terror altogether – there have always been exceptional moments of terror; and no society has ever succeeded in deploying its critical barriers so as to leave no states of exception whatsoever – of physical and discursive terror. But does this mean that modernity as a critical interpretive horizon is ineffective in principle? Does this mean that all critical efforts are a cover for the immanent tendency of modernity to be totalitarian and totalizing: an ever-more encompassing form of terror?

It would be an exaggeration to view totalitarian ideologies as an immanent tendency of modernity. Rather, here we view them as an inversion of one of the immanent possibilities inherent in modernity – namely, of the constant possibility that the transcendental signifiers may turn out to be ever-more totalized phrases that are ever-more emptied of metonymically inscribed shared meaning. Although they build on it, totalitarian ideologies invert this possibility in a direction opposite to the leading critical tendency of modernity. In them the shared meanings elaborated practically in everyday and scientific metonymies are not utilized to deconstruct the totalizing claim of transcendental signifiers to the point where they will lose their status as such. Conversely, totalitarian ideologies seek to do the opposite: to directly totalize the very few remaining shared meanings of their transcendental
signifiers – ‘class’, ‘race’ – so as to unleash and institutionalize terror. This opposite effort, which succeeded on a monstrous scale in the twentieth century and which is still being made today in different contexts, may sometimes be driven by ideal motives, too – by the impulse for absolute truth and justice. But ideal motives don’t make terror more acceptable ethically: on the contrary, if the motives are too ‘ideal’, they arouse terror.

In fact, all ideal-typical distinctions I am trying to make about terror with regard to transcendental signifiers ought to hold true for propaganda as well: as I said, propaganda is discursive terror. Accordingly, the propaganda label is an almost-empty signifier generalized in a specific way. The new axiom, which we have ‘deduced’ here (from practical metonymies, not ex nihilo) and which describes the specificity of this type of generalization, is: the more the practical ‘fullness’ of the half-empty signifier dissipates and the emptier it becomes of routine meaning, the more possible it is that the fury of its totalization will grow, that the false claim to ‘its absolute fullness’ will grow. In other words, the more generalized and empty a half-empty signifier becomes, the more it can serve as a totally arbitrary propaganda label; the greater the possibility for unleashing terror.

Does this mean that modernity – our sociocultural horizon – dooms us to terror and propaganda?

The possibility created in modernity for unleashing terror is precisely a possibility: that is, it may, but it may also not be realized. The fact that the maximally generalized words and phrases we use have largely lost shared meaning gives us the possibility to fanatically force to totality the ‘little’ remaining shared meaning, but it also gives us the possibility to refuse to force it. That is to say, we may become, but we may also not become terrorists and propagandists. The question is in which direction we will interpret the tension between the claim to absolute fullness and univocality of the general phrases, and the increasing amorphousness and ever more minimal shareability of their practical meanings. Still, how can we avoid becoming propagandists?

The refusal to work in public with transcendental signifiers, which in our times means refusing to work with propaganda labels, seems to me to be the only way to limit terror. But how can we give up transcendental signifiers – after all, every discourse ultimately relies on maximally general terms, doesn’t it? The answer is simple: by realizing that our maximally general terms are produced from below, through practical metonymies – everyday and scientific – and that some specific (albeit never entirely strict) meaning is nevertheless inscribed in them only from below, as a result of the long metonymic work of practical discourse. That is to say, general terms acquire meaning only from the concrete practice from whose metonymies they are derived and generalized – as specific but practically generalized meaning and not as ‘total meaning’. But this also means that maximally general terms have no meaning ‘in themselves’ at all – they have no meaning that can be totalized immediately. Taken in
themselves, they **are not transcendental signifiers, they are completely empty signifiers** – so empty that we must admit they are completely negative. This of course holds true for ‘the people’, but also for ‘liberalism’ and ‘democracy’; as a matter of fact, it holds true for any term, including for the terms in the exact sciences. That is because pure totality is purely empty.

Here, however, we cannot but return to ‘the people’ as understood by Ernesto Laclau – to his specific ‘empty signifier’ of populism. Laclau’s understanding of the ‘empty signifier’ is quite different from the ‘empty signifier’ I sketched out here. His empty signifier seems to be quite fuller. Roughly speaking, we may liken the ‘empty signifier’ of the people in Laclau to a ‘positive concept of freedom’, and mine to a ‘negative concept of freedom’ (in the sense of Isaiah Berlin, 1969). The analogy here is precisely an analogy, that is, not a strict comparison, but not because Berlin’s conception of freedom is designed, rather, to describe and defend liberal individual freedom, while here the question is focused on the general ‘us’, ‘the people’. The plane of analogy I propose is different: the main risk Berlin perceived in the treatment of freedom is that whatever positive meaning we ascribe to freedom (in the so-called positive concepts), by doing so we automatically turn freedom into a heavy normative and anthropological predicate: a predicate by which one can suppress, a predicate that can serve for authoritarian purposes, including for terror, against anyone who does not share the ‘positive’ anthropological image of freedom. The question now is whether at the other level too, at the level of ‘us’, we are faced with the same dilemma: whether, if we assign any positive meaning whatsoever to ‘the people’, we will turn it into an instrument of terror.

Of course, the question is formally unfair with regard to Laclau, because he has made enough critical moves to prevent inscription of any directly reified meaning whatsoever in the ‘empty signifier’. Already in Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) earlier, world-famous book, ‘the popular us’ – the so-called ‘popular subject position’, the hegemonic subject – is defined first of all through systematic deconstruction of all reifications of ‘class’ and ‘the people’ in the Marxist tradition. In addition, in Laclau and Mouffe ‘the people’ is produced through strong negation, through total *exclusion* vis-à-vis an external oppressive power that is the constitutive other of ‘the people’ – through this exclusion, the social and political field is divided into two antagonistic camps. It is precisely the direct powerful pressure of the external which activates the metaphor (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) or catachresis (Laclau, 2005) that totalizes the subject of the people and brings the differences in the multitude into a relation of equivalence without, however, fixing an essentialist meaning of ‘us’. It is no accident that catachresis in Laclau and Mouffe is the privileged discursive figure – catachresis is designed to protect their theory from reifications.

Despite all those deconstructive qualifications, however, Laclau’s ‘empty signifier’ is far from empty. There are grounds to suspect that it is covertly filled (through unarticulated metonymies). First of all, although it is constituted
through the total negation of power solely as a metaphor, the people – ‘the people itself’ – becomes a hegemonic subject; as a hegemonic discursive formation, it is literally born of negativity: ‘What we affirm is ... that certain discursive forms, through equivalence, annul all positivity of the object and give a real existence to negativity as such’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, pp.128-129). However we may specify the terms, one thing is clear: ‘negativity as such’ becomes really existing, that is, positive. Of course, also at work here in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory are some other, as a matter of fact, unelucidated, additional assumptions – something like a not entirely articulated ‘a priori logic’ of the political. First, in order to become a hegemonic subject, the people must go through hegemonic articulation which reduces the different ‘moments’ of the multitude to equivalent ‘elements’ in a discursive ‘chain of equivalence’ (ibid., p.127).  

Second, the ‘logic of equivalence’ stemming as if of necessity from negativity, turns out to be, again as if of necessity, univocally emancipatory – it as if inevitably expands equality, dissolving all political, socioeconomic and cultural asymmetries. Here I will not undertake a detailed critical analysis of these assumptions, which bring Laclau’s ‘empty signifier’ too close to the ‘transcendental signifiers’ of classical logocentric metaphysics in the sense of Derrida.

It is more important to point out that these assumptions of Laclau and Mouffe, as I noted, have their entirely empirical – and not speculative-philosophical – sources in protest movements and in the effects of direct solidarity in the protesting ‘us’. It is problematic, however, to what extent they can be universalized into a general ontology of the political, an issue I will not discuss here. Still, their effort to deconstructively purge classical Marxism of its essentialist rudiments while preserving only its emancipatory impulse for equality and the utopian horizon of universality, conceived of here as totalization, is entirely understandable. It is also entirely understandable to seek, beyond the growing differentiation and individualization of life in late capitalism, a possibility for rehabilitating rebellious solidarity. The latter, however, entails a significant risk:

Namely, the risk of rehabilitating solidarity in the form of pure terror. For, as I said, if ‘the people’ or any other empty signifier is (1) completely purged of shared meanings metonymically inscribed in it, if it is completely divested of concrete content and turned into a pure catachresis; and if, at the same time, (2) it is represented as a live and actual totality, as an ‘absolutely full signifier’; then there will be all preconditions for unleashing pure terror. For, as we pointed out, terror presupposes precisely totalization of discourse, and hence, total arbitrariness of violence in its actual application.

Of course, neither Laclau nor Mouffe or any other of the contemporary radical-left authors (Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, and many others who have undertaken such totalization of negativity) make a direct apology of terror (although the sympathy for Jacobean and Bolshevik terror is
palpable in some of them). What is more important, however, is how such a theoretical framework opens up a possibility for terror and its legitimation! For the metaphoric dissolution of the constitutive terms of radical discourse and their maintenance precisely as constitutive – as speculatively active, demanding transformation of the world in toto – opens up the possibility for practical radicalism. Even though it has been deconstructed in terms of its essentialism, today Marxism seems to be relapsing into its metaphysical radicalism. If additional critical barriers are not created, the space of this radicalism easily can, and often does, accommodate terror and its discursive form, propaganda. What propaganda?

NOTES

1 This text generalizes the results of the two-year research project on Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception, conducted by the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia. Here I am referring to the first report on the project, published in April 2017 (see Vatsov et al., 2017). For an analysis of the Bulgarian media’s reception of the report, see Valkanov (2017).

2 For an analysis of the changed and substituted meanings of the populist vocabulary upon their actual propagandistic use in Bulgaria, see Iakimova and Vatsov (in this issue); Znepolski (in this issue); Hranova (in this issue).

3 As Nikola Venkov has aptly put it (personal communication).


5 In this sense, the ‘discursive front’ is not a set of articulations forming an actual ‘chain of equivalence’ in some strict sense; it is a set of articulations which, through metonymic accumulation and replacement, have created clusters of practical synonyms – ‘chains of quasi-equivalence’, if we paraphrase Laclau – whereupon it begins to seem that different, much-repeated things mean one and the same thing. Incidentally, one of the strategic goals of propaganda, as we shall show, is precisely this: by creating metonymic synonymies, to begin to regulate everyday articulations as if they move along chains of equivalence. Contemporary populist propaganda in Bulgaria (and apparently not only in Bulgaria) has indeed managed to achieve a stable inversion of the meanings of the vocabulary of populist discontents (that is precisely what Part Two of this study shows).

6 The analysis of media discourses, such as our collective study is – especially when it is an analysis of relatively mainstream media, such as the official news websites and print media are – is by presumption an analysis of ‘elite’ discourses. The use of populist language in such ‘elite’ media, especially when the specific features of the propaganda mode of its uses (which we shall describe in more detail here) are found in them, can undoubtedly be called ‘propaganda’. This is also one of the important arguments as to why we called our study ‘Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria’.

7 That is precisely why our study is not an analysis of disinformation, which is a most general and fluid term, nor of the so-called ‘fake news’ which is only a small segment of contemporary propaganda.

8 Already Hannah Arendt (1979, p.345) noted that ‘Science in the instances of both business publicity and totalitarian propaganda is obviously only a surrogate for power’ – invoking science is a way of claiming monopoly on the truth, and hence, on power.

9 Unlike Harry Frankfurt, I don’t think that bullshitting is completely irrelevant to the question of truth. In one respect – as an attempt to generalize what is said by decontextualizing it, but without offering any subsequent coherent arguments – bullshitting is similar to truth-telling. This resemblance, but also the differences between the two, are discussed in the next paragraphs.

10 In her analysis of the styles of propaganda discourse, Albena Hranova (in this issue) shows that catachresis – excessive and random accumulation of metaphors – is a main stylistic device of one of the
authors she has chosen to analyze. In this particular case, this is an entirely appropriate and accurate analytical move. Here we are trying to show, however, that metonymy is a more general and basic mode of propaganda. Whereas metaphor and, hence, catachresis presuppose an indeterminate and free shift between the conventional meanings of words and phrases, metonymy is the substitution of a word or phrase with an established meaning by another word or phrase with another established meaning. We shall return to the subject of catachresis and metaphor in the generalized sense in which they are used by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

11 For the similarity between metonymies and indexes, as well as for the difference between them by the ‘truth factor’, see Fiske (1990, pp.95-97). Most linguistic and semiotic studies on metonymy conceive of its ‘realistic’ or ‘truthful’ component in rather naturalistic terms – as some type of correspondence to a presumed reality. This conception of ‘realism’ ought to be revised more carefully in a pragmatist mode: for the connection between the substituting and the substituted word to be ‘realistic’, this connection must already have been habitually sedimented through multiple repetitions in previous performatives so that the present substitution will sound ‘logical’ – it must be self-evident that the one word ‘stands for’ the other. Furthermore, for a metonymy to be ‘realistic’, the substitution must be indexically relevant – the substituting word must refer to some immediate indexical focuses, to something tangible: ‘Saddam invaded Kuwait’ indexically refers to the Iraqi troops who invaded Kuwait. For a revised and more precise conception of the term ‘indexical relevance’, see Vatsov (2016).


17 To my knowledge, the best study on modalizations understood in such a wide sense, but which is detailed to the point of sketching a general logic of modalization, is that offered by Darin Tenev (2017). His work can serve for analytical specification of the quite general definitions of ‘modalization’ I use here.

18 Especially distinct is the subversion of the authority of ‘the scientist’ and ‘the expert’ in contemporary populist propaganda – the systematic denunciation of ‘bought experts’, ‘sell-out analysts’, and so on. Populist propaganda substitutes the authority of expertise by the authority of the seemingly random and spontaneous (‘seemingly’ because they are actually directed by propaganda) metonymies of ‘the people’, of ‘the common folk’.

19 In Part Two of this study we will see that not only the expansion of the modal horizon of messages (see here the so-called propaganda induction in the next paragraphs) but also the purposive limitation of the modal horizon (the propaganda reduction, discussed in Part Two, section 3, in this issue) are standard practico-logical operators of propaganda. The latter, however, is also possible only in an already undressed, generalized discursive horizon produced through totalizations – through systematic expansions of the modality of utterances.


21 The propaganda label ‘liberal-fascist’ is directly calqued from Russian and imported on the Bulgarian scene by ‘elite’ politicians, journalists, and political analysts, such as Angel Dzhambazki (http://a-specto.bg/liberalniyat-fashizam/), Petar Volgin (http://a-specto.bg/fashizmat-dnes/), and Boyan Chukov (http://pogled.info/avtorski/Boyan-CChukov/zashto-ne-se-uchi-istoriyata-na-liberal-fashizma.74353).

22 In radicalized Islamism, in the rhetoric of ‘the war on terror’ after 9/11, in the rising national-populisms and radicalisms after the global financial crisis as well as in the ever-more sovereignist Russian propaganda after 2010, which co-opts the vocabulary of nationalisms and radicalisms and returns it to them as a free propaganda resource.

23 The catachresis in this case is a totalizing or ‘ultimate’ metaphor – see Hranova and Vatsov (2013).

24 Of course, there were propaganda uses of ‘the people’ in the years immediately before 2013 as well, although they were relatively more marginal: the propaganda-populist discourse of the Ataka party (founded in 2005), borrowed in translation from Russian, was a ‘pioneer’ in this regard on the Bulgarian scene, following a fll when the use of ‘the people’ as part of the propaganda repertoire of communism but also of the early transition had begun to fade in the late 1990s. All this, however, requires special research.

25 In fact, here I will revise, in an unstrict and free way, the indirect debate between Derrida and Habermas on the relations between the European Enlightenment and terror, organized through interviews and commentaries on them by Giovanna Borradori (2003). If, as Borradori (ibid., p.20) correctly notes, terrorism is
for Habermas a deviation from modernity, while for Derrida it is the symptom of an autoimmune disorder of modernity, by revising Derrida’s term ‘transcendental signifier’ I am trying to find a middle way. By showing that modernity entails the latent possibility of associating the claim to absolute fullness of transcendental signifiers with ever-growing amorphousness, to the point of disappearance of their metonymically inscribed meanings, I demonstrate that this possibility can be used in two different ways: in a critical way, leaving all general terms as completely empty signifiers (regulative terms that are only contextually filled with practical specific meanings), or in a totalitarian and terrorist way (absolutizing through terror the minimal shared meanings remaining in them).

26 Of course, forms of scientifically legitimized terror, more covert or overt, are by no means absent in European modernity: let us mention colonialism, imperialism, eugenics…

27 Nowhere in Laclau is the status of the ‘logic of equivalence’ as opposed to the ‘logic of difference’ practically clear: it is not clear which and what practical articulations produce ‘chains of equivalence’, and which ones articulate ‘difference’. Here we are trying to introduce practical metonymies as an everyday (but also scientific, propaganda, etc.) operator that can show, without assuming any archetypal or transcendental structure/logic, how clusters of synonyms (‘chains of quasi-equivalence’) may emerge in practice, or how synonymies can practically scatter.

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Anti-democratic propaganda is invariably present in the media landscape of liberal democracies, but its place varies depending on their overall state. In periods of prosperity and a general feeling of stable legitimacy, it occupies the media periphery and represents the most extreme forms of speech with which only a small part of the citizens identify themselves. In periods of crisis, however, such as the world has seen in the last ten years – the global financial and economic crisis, the Greek debt crisis, the refugee crisis, the emergence of the Islamic State and the wave of constant terrorist attacks in Europe and across the world – anti-democratic propaganda, supporting and supported by the rise of national-populist and sovereignist political parties, gradually finds its way into mainstream media discourse, appealing successfully to a significant number of disoriented and disillusioned citizens. The problem is that this type of rhetoric is not merely one of the countless rhetorics that are admissible within the framework of liberal democracy; it is a rhetoric that utilizes the principles of liberal democracy – the freedom of speech and the right of everyone to freely express their views and opinions – yet directly undermines liberal democracy not only through its privileged topics but also through the way in which it is constructed and presented. Anti-democratic propaganda takes part in the democratic public sphere, but without meeting the conditions that are constitutive of the latter.

First, anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria in particular, is a collective social phenomenon: although it has its prominent authors, it is conducted mostly through organized mass campaigns, as evidenced especially by the thousands of essentially similar anonymous publications that appear simultaneously on dozens of websites on various occasions. Second, anti-democratic propaganda displays a surprising coherence of its topics, thematic coordination among its authors and consistent focus of its messages which, contrary to the usually diverse and divergent forms of social critique, are consistently aimed at a clear target: discrediting liberal democracy. Third, unlike the critical approach, which presupposes some empathy and concern for the object of critique, that is, a desire
to reform, even to transform, but nevertheless to preserve liberal democracy, anti-democratic propaganda takes an entirely external point of view on liberal democracy, the point of view of an opponent who wants it to be abolished in the name of another type of democracy, namely illiberal democracy, or in the name of an authoritarian and traditionalistic political regime. Fourth, viewed in terms of its style, anti-democratic propaganda seeks to create narratives that suggest worldviews, not to formulate arguments. Its purpose is not to persuade readers, which presupposes some indeterminacy, a possibility to question the presented propositions and the arguments supporting them as well as to present counter-propositions and arguments. Conversely, its purpose is to draw readers into a narrative whose fast pace, high pathos and accumulation of essentially similar elements create the impression that the propositions are unquestionable and that the suggested historical tendencies (decline of American democracy, pending collapse of the EU, rise of Russia, advance of nationalists and sovereignists in Europe and the world, etc.) have no alternative.

In the first part of the study on Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria in the period between 2013 and 2016, we identified four main propaganda topics: ‘The decline of Europe/the West’, ‘The rise of Russia’, ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’, and ‘The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master’. In this paper, we will look at how these topics are presented in the texts of particular authors. The question is, in what form are they presented, what are their interpretations, do the interpretations modify the general topics, and if yes, to what extent? In order to answer this question, we chose five prominent representatives of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda who do not simply repeat the four talking points in a convincing and eloquent manner, but also develop them in a specific ideological perspective. This paper aims to identify and analyze the specific characteristics of each of these five ideological perspectives. Hence, its task is to check the ‘elasticity’ of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, to see how, and to what extent, the general talking points can be rearranged and extended in different ideological directions so as to encompass different social stereotypes and discontents and package them in a propagandistic manner.

How to Discredit Democracy Through Anti-Americanism

Anti-Americanism is among the most convenient means for discrediting democracy. On the one hand, the US is one of the historical symbols of liberal democracy. On the other hand, more than other democratic countries, the US symbolizes tendencies that are undermining democracy: imperial ambitions, uncontrolled development of the markets and almighty corporations, a cult of individual interest and frenetic consumption, etc. Placing the emphasis on the second aspect while downplaying the first, the authors using anti-democratic rhetoric in Bulgaria claim that although the US indeed used to be an epitome of democracy, nowadays it is an epitome of the failure of democracy. And if the symbol of democracy is failing, then Western democracy is obviously failing,
too. What’s more, according to these authors, nowadays democracy has become only an ideological weapon with which the US legitimizes both its imperial foreign policy and the exploitation of its own citizens at home.

Kalina Androlova’s journalistic stories place strong emphasis on anti-Americanism, although she shares the main points in the theses of other, more or less like-minded, authors such as Petar Volgin, Valentin Vatsev, Dr Iliya Iliev, and Darina Grigorova: the opposition between sovereignism and globalism, between nationalism and liberalism, the vilification and rejection of liberal democracy, the hope that sooner or later the EU will collapse, which will allow Bulgaria to change its foreign policy orientation.

Kalina Androlova’s anti-Americanism is based on two moments: one is related to the claim regarding the hegemonic position of the US in the world, its aspiration to dominate all continents, to impose its will on all countries, privileging American interests over everything else; the other is related to the claim regarding the decline of American hegemony and American power, which creates the possibility for a new world order in which Bulgaria would be elsewhere.

American domination, represented by Androlova as predatory, plundering, ruthless, is denounced in almost all her texts. It is a common stylistic feature of these texts that pathos and strong words are substituted for research and analysis of the topics discussed, hasty and dogmatic conclusions conceal the nuances and contradictions contained in these topics, the peremptory character of the conclusions is at the expense of their accuracy, the strong and unidirectional flows of words block the reader’s reasoning, seeking to convey definite messages instead of justifying definite theses. The style probably corresponds to the aims of the author. A good example in this regard are her descriptions of the destructive consequences of American domination:

The US, in fact, is by no means a guarantor of freedom and preservation of the cultural-civilizational order. On the contrary. The outcome of the planned operations of the US has left entire regions of the planet in ruins, plunging them into a deadly atmosphere, exhaustion and chaos, and dangerous long-term destabilization. America is no longer capable of being global policeman and it’s high time it admitted this somehow. …

Feeding on the creation and maintenance of chaos. Planning death. Remaining the only one by dismantling all others. …

The problem comes from the continuous unintelligent resolution of the global conflicts, from the devastations following American intervention in every part of the world, from the greedy supra-national corporate expansion that destroys the resources of every single country without exception (those that try to be an exception are subjected to arrogant pressure, coups, colour revolutions, sanctions, isolation, etc.). All this has strongly diminished American authority to the point of rejection and even hatred. Yet exercising force without trust is called slavery.²
According to Androlova, American domination is manifested also in Washington’s relations with the EU. The US and the EU are only seemingly allies, in reality the US has an interest in a weak Europe which will obey it in everything and follow the American interests. The refugee wave was not the result of a concurrence of circumstances but of the US strategy of consciously undermining the prospect of a strong Europe, of keeping the old continent in a subordinate position and of perpetuating its own hegemony:

The US stands to gain a lot from a Europe that is weak, conflicted, under strategic threats from the outside – radical Islamism, neo-Ottomanism, migrant waves, etc. Why? Because Europe is thus eliminated as a subject with an autonomous geopolitical projection and turns into a manipulated object for solving others’ tasks. If Europe doesn’t start governing this chaos, then this chaos will start governing it. (Ibid.)

The second significant moment in Androlova’s picture directly follows from the first: since American domination is excessive and destructive, which is presumably obvious to everybody, it inevitably begins to generate resistances. American hegemony is entering a period of decline, America is declining. In its attempt to prevent its decline, America is only increasing the destructive effects of its domination, thereby accelerating its decline even further:

The US is increasingly failing to control the Eurasian politico-economic architecture and gradually losing Europe’s trust, while it has turned the Arab world into a horrifying failure of its doctrine of exceptionality, according to which it has a right to impunity. …

The failures of the US on the international plane are repeated so frequently and tiringly often that it has fully exhausted both the accumulated and the credit limit of trust on the part of all other peoples. …

[The US] is doing absolutely everything in its power to push Russia out of the European orbit. This might be because Europe, including Russia and Turkey, is becoming a globally ambitious factor capable of immediately dethroning the hegemon. Alas, the fears of America’s decline in America itself are turning its foreign policy decisions into an apocalypse.³

With regard to the EU, Androlova shares an invariable view that can be found also in the other authors examined here: Petar Volgin, Darina Grigorova, Dr Iliya Iliev, and Valentin Vatsev. The EU is completely subordinate to the US, its policy is a projection of American interests. The EU is not an autonomous political subject, it is an organization that is completely subordinate to US:

‘Brussels’, a hyperbolized concept of European community and solidarity, which is increasingly turning into a frightening macabre maze. What is
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Brussels’? Germany under the instructions of the US. The hegemon’s interests institutionalized in complicated directives. An artificially assembled group of states with imposed allegedly common interests turned into a controlled geopolitical factor. An object directed always eastwards. A relic of the cold war – an instrument whose creators are trying once again to use in the old, time-tested plan: the deterrence of Russia. A weapon that is disguised in the minds of the Europeans as a self-governing autonomous subject. Alas. ‘Brussels’ is on a leash. And on an amazingly strong leash at that.4

Europe is constantly compelled to undertake political actions that are deeply detrimental to it in order to assist Washington’s geopolitical plans. Here and there, however, there are flashes of light. Or it’s simply that the US changes its moves and arrangements, thereby changing also the behaviour of Brussels.5

Androlova is adamant that in its present form the EU cannot and does not deserve to continue to exist and its end is inevitable. She cites the Bloomberg Pessimist’s Guide to 2017, according to which after Brexit, several other countries will also leave the EU: ‘Bloomberg has predicted several other Brexits from the EU, which may practically put an end to united Europe as we know it.’6 More specifically, this means that there will be a redistribution of power and of the spheres of influence in the world as well as in Europe. The weakening of the positions of the US and the EU will be offset by the strengthening of the positions of some strong nation-states. According to Androlova’s scenario, Bulgaria will obviously have to choose a new foreign policy orientation that will lead to new geopolitical dependencies:

Bloomberg’s analysts think that the world is moving towards a ‘Yalta 2’ agreement, according to which Putin will demand full power over Ukraine, Belarus and Syria. …

The Democrats in the US are continuing to deny the reality that the world is changing before their eyes. And that America has failed spectacularly before their eyes in its role as ruler of planet Earth, our common political and human home. What follows from now on is a dramatic acceleration of history. The autonomous policy of countries like Britain, Russia, Turkey, China, Germany, France, India, Iran, etc. will grow, and this will lead to the invention of a new model of international interaction. And the place of the US in this model will be that of a country among several powerful factors. Which really negotiate with each other to reach agreement on the solution of international problems. The problem for us is how Bulgaria is yet to bring up autonomous statesmen. And how to rid itself more quickly and resourcefully of the present servants (epitomized by [Foreign Minister] Daniel Mitov), kicking them into the servants’ cellar of the political past. (Ibid.)

According to Kalina Androlova, power in the world until very recently, until Donald Trump’s election as president of the US, can be represented as
a pyramid: at the top of the pyramid is big American capital; below it is ‘the American state which has long since been functioning only as an administrative form of the financial interest of big capital’; below the American state is the EU, which is a subcontractor serving American interests; below the EU are the governments of the member countries, including Bulgaria, whose role is entirely that of servants.

What is the place of ‘democracy’ and ‘liberalism’ in this scheme? In Androlova’s account, they lack any consistency whatsoever and have been reduced solely to an instrument for justifying, excusing, disguising the American domination and the American expansionist policy across the world. In this regard:

[T]he American doctrine of superiority has killed millions of people across the world on the pretext of imposing democracy. …

After the murder of Qaddafi in Libya, Washington began to instill democracy in Libya, engineering the Libyan spending of resources on the tribal wars until all possibilities for buying weapons were exhausted. (Ibid.)

According to Androlova, all colour revolutions, all Maidans, all significant civic protests in recent years, including the protests against Donald Trump’s election as president of the US, are inauthentic; they were an instrument for exerting influence on the part of powerful shady forces in their attempt to control events. In a historical reconstruction of key events of the twentieth century, Androlova claims that they were driven by the interests of the West. Through the Great October Revolution the West sought to destabilize Tsarist Russia, through the rise of Nazism – to destroy the Soviet Union, through the student protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing in 1989 – to stop the rise of China.8

Androlova implies that even in America itself democracy is only a façade. If in foreign policy ‘democracy’ is used as a slogan for legitimizing the subjugation of other countries and the draining of their resources, in domestic policy it is used as a means for manipulating and subjugating American citizens obviously to the benefit of big private interests:

The US might be the most democratic country in the world, such as it claims to be, but the facts show that it is also the most perfidiously controlled media democracy. (Ibid.)

As for Bulgaria, ‘democracy’ and ‘liberalism’ in its case are also defined by Androlova as slogans and ideological constructs promoted with the mediation of the Right against the imaginary Russian threat, which ultimately serve the disintegration and self-destruction of the country. Androlova, however, doesn’t explain why that is so, obviously following the principle of ‘asserting but not proving’:
The use of the brainless Right ‘in the dark’ under the slogans of ‘democracy’, ‘anticommunism’, ‘human rights’ and ‘liberalism’ are a harbinger of the dismemberment of Bulgaria and of the transformation of the country into a zone for battle with a phantasmagorical enemy from the East. Of course, there is no enemy from the East, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is that the operative ‘zombification’ be such that it makes those who are killing themselves sing hymns of joy while killing themselves.9

In principle, Androlova defends the thesis – formulated most generally, without any proof and examples – that the Western media are not one of the conditions of the political public sphere and of a viable democracy; on the contrary, they are totalitarian, their purpose is to serve particular interests (it is not clear whether those interests are supposed to be private or state interests), and for this purpose, they manipulate the citizens of the respective countries and compel them to obediently follow the media messages:

The European peoples are a victim of a powerful media propaganda that feeds on its own instinct of preserving the status quo. … In this sense, in Europe there is a sort of totalitarian media model – a model that’s being constructed and maintained – which expels the journalists who open cracks in ‘the system of generally accepted speech’. The citizens are compelled to obediently accept every lie spewed forth by the media and to recognize it as true even though they see from close up that it is untrue.10

Androlova, however, omits the fact that almost all her references that allow her to denounce the Western democracies are precisely from Western media (New Statesman, Der Freitag). She also omits the fact that the very existence of a magazine like A-specto is proof of the pluralistic, not totalitarian, character of the Western (and Bulgarian) media sphere.

Another element of modern democracies – non-governmental organizations – are also defined by Androlova as an instrument for undermining national sovereignty and for promoting foreign interests against those of their own country. According to Androlova, the obvious and most eloquent example in this regard are the Open Society Foundations financed by George Soros. In this case, too, strong words and images are meant to fill the void of absent concrete arguments and analyses:

Soros’s network structures have de facto dismantled the monopoly of the state on political decision-making in quite a few countries. … In fact, Soros’s Open Society is more of a closed society for lobbying and dominating the public spheres in the countries that are targets of his intervention. (Ibid.)

Androlova explains major historical events, such as the Solidarity
movement in Poland, the toppling of the Milošević regime in Serbia and the
colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, precisely with the interventions of
Soros and his teams from the Open Society Foundations. Obviously, according
to Androlova, there is nothing authentically civic in the civic movements
fighting with totalitarian or authoritarian regimes, they have no significance
of their own because they are merely an instrument created and used by
foreign, behind-the-scenes forces. But doesn’t the delegitimation of the civic
movements imply retroactive rehabilitation of the totalitarian and authoritarian
regimes against which they fought?

Androlova’s view on ‘human rights’ is similar. According to her, human
rights are devoid of all legal or moral content and are nothing more than the
successive instrument in the arsenal of the US through which Washington seeks
to destabilize Europe and keep its powerful positions in the world:

The doctrine is being promoted that nation-states are an anachronism and
that we have global human rights and freedoms. In this sense, all of Africa
and half of Asia have the human right to descend on Europe and to look
for a better way of life. … ‘You have the right!’ say the Americans, too, to
whom Europe’s descent into chaos gives a conclusive advantage upon the
subsequent division of the world – between the US and the dominant factor
in Asia. (Ibid.)

Androlova’s political analysis is founded on an irreversible conceptual
hierarchy. Values, ideals, norms have no motivating or regulating power.
According to Androlova, they serve mainly for manipulating the populations
of one country or another, or for justifying one policy or another. In principle,
values and ideals themselves do not and cannot motivate policies. The decisive
factor in politics, the reality of politics, is force. Everything depends on the
balance of forces, on the conflict of forces and the outcome of this conflict.
Russia is an example in this regard – under pressure from the Western powers,
Russia is compelled to be strong (to arm itself), too, in order to secure a place
for itself in the present-day world:

In all cases, however, the sole objective of international politics is the fight
for resources and control over them. If you want to be free and to have
security, then you must be strong. That is why Russia was compelled to
revert to the strategy of rearmament. The West’s pathological non-love for
Russia has compelled the Russians to arm themselves instead of integrating
themselves.11

In Kalina Androlova’s texts, systematic anti-Americanism leads to the
discrediting of democracy – not just of American democracy or of Western
democracy, but of democracy in general. This result is the product of consistent
and zealous discrediting of the different elements of democracy – media,
civic protests, non-governmental organizations – all of which are declared to be instruments of American imperial policy. In this way, by virtue of the cumulative effect, democracy itself is ultimately discredited, reduced to façade democracy, to pure ideology which only conceals (and justifies) the domination of some countries over others, of some forces over others.

Anti-Liberalism in the Name of Nationalism Plus Socialism

Democracy can also be attacked for liberalism, insofar as the two are inseparable in the concept of liberal democracy. For example, we can construct a seemingly plausible narrative describing how liberalism has failed once and for all in all its forms – political, economic, cultural – thus implying that liberal democracy, that is, Western democracy, has failed, too. The question is: What is proposed in its place? Petar Volgin’s answer, in which different alternatives – nationalism, socialism – are mentioned, remains unclear in principle, though. Probably because of an impossibility or reluctance to publicly point out a real alternative.

For Petar Volgin, from a historical point of view liberalism is, above all, legitimization of the domination of the bourgeoisie: ‘The bourgeois elites succeeded in replacing the representatives of the aristocracy and clergy that had been dominant for centuries. Liberal philosophy is the best legitimization of this victory.’ Volgin’s critiques of liberalism are from all directions. Volgin obviously accepts both the conservative and the radical democratic (left) critiques of liberalism. But these critiques, as presented by the author, turn out to be mutually exclusive:

The critique by conservatives: ‘They mounted a strong attack against the liberals, accusing them of practically destroying the foundations of society and pushing it towards chaos and anarchy by their “liberty-loving” ideas.’

The critique by radical democrats (leftists): ‘… the radical democrats, who at the time of the French Revolution occupied the left side of the political spectrum and began to attack the liberals for their insufficient resolve and their inclination towards unprincipled compromises with the forces of the status quo.’ (Ibid.)

If we put these two critiques together, it turns out that the liberals are destroying the foundations of society, while being at the same time guardians of the status quo. Volgin’s general assessment of liberalism, though, places the emphasis on liberalism as guardian of the status quo, a thesis that sounds completely wrong even from a Marxian point of view, not to mention the bourgeois revolutions, the social movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s, the fall of the communist regimes, and many other events and collective actions that were conducted in the name of liberal values and led to the rejection of a particular type of societies, the collapse of political regimes, and the
establishment of new social relations:

The liberals are rational people, no doubt about that. But they suffer from a basic defect: they don’t have an attractive vision about the future. The status quo suits them and they don’t intend to change it, except for some minor, insignificant corrections. (Ibid.)

In contradiction to his own paradoxical thesis about the conservative character of liberalism, Volgin claims that liberalism was at the basis of all major cataclysms of the twentieth century. For example, the First World War was not caused by the nationalisms in Europe but by the fight for markets and for bigger profits, that is, in the final analysis, by liberalism. The next quote is telling in that the whole blame for the war is placed on liberalism, while nationalism is exculpated:

It’s simply that the war was the perfect means by which the great powers hoped to resolve their economic contradictions as well as their domination over the colonies outside Europe. And if we disregard all nationalist clichés that accompanied the four-year-long mutual extermination of the peoples, we will see that the First World War was conducted for markets and for bigger profits. (Ibid.)

Petar Volgin very often identifies liberalism with the generalized image of the West and the policies of Western countries. This is the case with the First World War as well as with the major crisis between the two world wars, where liberalism is associated with parliamentary democracy, again with negative connotations:

Parliamentary democracy, with its traditional parties and with its liberalism, was the subject of fierce criticism. And rightfully so. It failed to save humanity both from the horrors of the First World War and from the devastating postwar economic crises. The main attacks against parliamentarianism came both from the left and from the ever-stronger far-right movements. (Ibid.)

Volgin associates liberalism with the parliamentary democracies in Europe that led to the First World War and the interwar crisis, but he also associates it with the interwar right-wing dictatorships, reminding us in this way of pre-1989 communist propaganda:

Where there once was parliamentarianism, its place was taken by right-wing authoritarianism – in a direct or veiled form. It’s interesting what the liberals thought about all this. In words, they condemned the different manifestations of right-wing authoritarianism. But what about in practice? In practice,
it turns out that they either began to collaborate with Fascists, Nazis, Phalangists, or their resistance was so ‘strong’ that only their wives were aware of it. The majority of the liberal politicians did not oppose Hitler, Mussolini, or Franco. And this is natural, because however extreme the doctrines of those leaders, they never encroached on what the liberals hold dearest – private property. Capitalists, especially the big ones, felt wonderful under parliamentary democracy. They felt just as wonderful under the rule of the right-wing dictators. (Ibid.)

If we accept literally Volgin’s thesis that the resistance against Nazism, fascism, the right-wing dictatorships, came not from the circles of the liberals but from those of the left, above all of the communists, then events like the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or the role of the US and Britain in the Second World War seem inexplicable. Continuing his historical reconstruction, Volgin claims that after the Second World War, that is, after the failure of liberalism in the period from 1914 to 1945, Europe rejected the liberal tradition and chose the welfare state which, according to the author, is a negation of liberalism. However, it is difficult to take seriously the thesis that by creating the institutions of the welfare state, the West ceased to be liberal in the political sense. Here the author covertly shifts his meaning – he no longer has in mind the political liberalism of Western parliamentary democracies, but the economic liberalism that privileges the institution of the market. Equating liberalism with market fundamentalism, Volgin says the following:

People voted for the left-wing parties because they promised general social transformations. The liberals, with their ‘invisible arm of the market’, were driven into the corner. Most Europeans did not wish their fates to be determined by various invisible or visible arms. They wanted the state to start exercising its powers and to govern fully. Not to be simply a ‘night watchman’, as liberal theory postulates, but to be an active participant in economic and political life. (Ibid.)

At the end of the 1970s, when the welfare state model went into crisis and ‘the glorious thirty years’ came to an end, a new period began – the neoliberal turn. Volgin describes the conditions under which this turn took place comparatively correctly but, ignoring its sociological and cultural dimension, places emphasis on the demonic image of the revenge-minded business elites. His description can find a worthy place among the propaganda materials against the West from the time of the Cold War. Moreover, the thesis that from the end of the 1970s onwards liberalism had finally turned into neoliberalism is false. There is no way, other than by magic, that the liberal principles embodied in the political institutions of liberal democracies could be wholly transformed into neoliberalism:
Powerful businessmen, market fundamentalists, fanatic anticommunists provided sufficient financial comfort to a number of liberal thinkers. They did so because they were sure that sooner or later the time for revenge would come. Then the ideas of Hayek and company would be especially necessary in the fight against the proponents of social justice. This time came at the end of the 1970s when, at the theoretical level, liberalism was finally transformed into neoliberalism. (Ibid.)

The question of how liberalism appeared in Bulgaria and the other countries of Eastern Europe is interesting. According to Volgin, after 1989 liberalism was introduced, or rather, imposed in the eastern part of the continent through propaganda and money, that is, entirely for selfish ends, via the non-governmental organizations financed by the West. In other words, Volgin rejects the possibility that there could have been truly convinced liberals in these countries, he denies the fact that the powerful protest waves of East European citizens in 1989 and 1990 against the repressive communist regimes were not motivated ‘financially’ but inspired by the idea of establishing (liberal) democracy, or at the least, by the expectation that the existing political order would be liberalized. Volgin also omits the fact that precisely the institutional democratization and liberalization of the East European societies – if we take Bulgaria as an example, the repeal of Article 1 of the communist Constitution (which enshrined the leading role of the Bulgarian Communist Party), the introduction of a multiparty political system, of a free press, the conduct of elections for a Grand National Assembly, the adoption of a new Constitution – was the vitally important measure that gave these societies the chance to survive and to overcome the heavy crisis caused by the implosion of the communist regimes. Mistakenly equating liberalism with neoliberalism, Volgin makes another mistake, too: discussing liberalism, he actually claims that a political regime and a social order can be maintained, in the absence of repressions against the population, by relying solely on venal elites and media campaigns – which is in fact impossible. The thesis that liberalism in Bulgaria and the other countries of Eastern Europe is a purely ideological phenomenon, imported and generously paid for at that, may sound spectacular but is sociologically absurd:

[T]he success of the neoliberal recipes in the former socialist states is also due to the fact that their propagators shared not only ideas but also funds. Lots of funds. It quickly became clear that if you became a local disseminator of the ideas of the Chicago School, you would gain not only prestige as a carrier of the new and the true, but also significant funds. That is why there began in the erstwhile socialist states a frenzied process of creating non-governmental organizations, think tanks and all sorts of institutes financed generously by overseas donors. (Ibid.)

How is the topic of liberalism related to the topic of Russia? Here things
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are crystal-clear. According to Volgin: the Russians don’t like liberalism, but then, the liberals don’t like Russia. If you are a liberal, you most definitely must be a Russophobe:

Bulgarian liberals have never had ideas of their own. Everything you hear from them is something they’ve read in the Western handbooks designed for ‘defenders of free enterprise’. And in the handbooks in question it is written, along with lots of other nonsense, that for the former socialist states friendship with the countries of NATO and of the EU is [as necessary] as ‘the sun and air for every living creature’.13 That if anyone doubts the divine nature of the North Atlantic Pact, he is an enemy of freedom and democracy. That the biggest opponent of liberalism is Russia, therefore this country must be constantly insulted. That whoever doesn’t curse Russia from the bottom of his heart is a ‘rubladzhiya’ [ruble-paid fifth-columnist] and ‘servant of the Kremlin’. That is why liberalism in the Bulgarian conditions has acquired stable Russophobic characteristics. It is assumed that you can’t be ‘an authentic liberal’ if you don’t hate Russia. Because the Russians don’t like liberalism at all. It’s true. The Russians, at least most of them, don’t like liberalism at all. And there’s no reason why they should. (Ibid.)

In Volgin’s account, liberalism is understood in several main senses. First: liberalism is associated with the West and parliamentary democracy, and equated with the interests of big capital. Second: liberalism is associated with capitalism and neoliberalism, which means exploitation of human labour, alienation, subjection of human life and fate to the laws of the market. Third: liberalism is thought of as political liberalism, but its main values – rule of law and freedom of speech – are rejected by Volgin as an ideological construct that has nothing to do with reality. As regards the rule of law, Volgin thinks that it is an instrument solely for defending class interests:

But the thing is that the whole rule of law they are calling for nonstop is in fact the ‘lawfulness’ of the status quo. The last 27 years have seen the formation in Bulgaria of two distinct classes: the class of the winners of the transition and the class of the losers of the transition. The old liberal slogan of ‘the sanctity of private property’ is a perfect excuse for not taking any action against all those who became millionaires literally overnight. They are protected by the law, while workers aren’t protected by anyone either from decrease of income or from dismissal. (Ibid.)

As regards the freedom of speech, Volgin thinks that it is a complete deception and manipulation because there is no such freedom, at least in Bulgaria. According to him, in Bulgaria there is less freedom of speech even than in totalitarian regimes:

In addition to everything else, the Bulgarian liberals have turned out to be
the biggest foes of every speech that is different from theirs. Yes, they are for the freedom of thought, provided that it’s solely about their thought. If you don’t believe this, just try to make a critical remark about Brussels or Washington. Or to say something nice about Russia. You’ll receive such a barrage of insults from the liberal camp, in comparison to which the diatribes of Joseph Goebbels or of Andrei Zhdanov of the 40s will seem like friendly banter to you. (Ibid.)

In its fourth sense, liberalism is associated with cultural liberalism, but it is again thought of as destructive because it privileges minorities at the expense of the majority:

But a liberal, Bulgarian, and not only, is too elevated to deal with the protection of the rights of the exploited. When it comes to the rights of some ethnic, sexual, religious or any other minority, though, you can’t make the liberal shut up. What’s more, in Bulgaria in particular, there are enough NGOs that are on the lookout for any violation of the rights of some Krishnaite, Rom, gay or transvestite, which will require all the liberal troops to likewise join in this monitoring effort. The organizations that are concerned about how people live on a minimum wage or on an ordinary pension are quite fewer in number, if there are any at all. (Ibid.)

The above goes to show that liberalism, in all the senses in which it is used by Volgin, is rejected. The problem is that Volgin’s analysis itself is a combination of comparatively plausible narratives (the crisis of liberalism in the interwar period, the rise of the left after the Second World War, the achievements of the welfare state, the neoliberal turn); very approximate and questionable equations and shifts of meaning (equation of liberalism alternately with the West, with parliamentary democracy, with capitalism, with neoliberalism); explicit overstatements and ideological clichés (there’s no freedom of speech, the rule of law serves only the privileged); false dilemmas (if you are a liberal, you are a Russophobe, if you are a Russian, you hate liberalism; the state either cares for minorities or cares for the majority, etc.).

An important moment in Volgin’s argumentation is the failure of liberalism in Russia. In his article titled ‘The great leap backward, or, on the poverty of liberalism’, Volgin mocks the fruitless dreams of the Russian liberal pomeshchiki of the mid-nineteenth century, contrasting them with the Russian Emperor Alexander II – a resolute statesman who introduced a protectionist policy and carried out large-scale infrastructure projects. Volgin explains the success of the ruler as follows: ‘The new ruler had nothing to do with liberalism – either in politics or in the economy.’ In more recent times, the failure of liberalism is associated with the term in office of President Boris Yeltsin, when the democratization of the country and the liberal reforms conducted by his team led to Russia’s economic collapse and geopolitical marginalization:
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Russia’s perennial critics very much love describing the last decade of the past century in the country as ‘a flowering of democracy and pluralism’. This assessment, however, is diametrically at odds with the experience of the majority of Russians from the time of Yeltsin’s rule. For them, this was by no means ‘a flowering of democracy’ but a time of outrageous plunder of state property, a time in which the ruling circle around Boris Yeltsin cared about anything but the horrifying pace of impoverishment of the Russian population.¹⁴

Without looking for the reasons for the failures of the Yeltsin era in the concrete context of Russia’s foreign and domestic policy, Volgin ascribes all evils to the country’s democratization and liberalization which, in his account, are associated with social disintegration, economic disorganization, strong social stratification between a prospering minority and a poverty-stricken majority, loss of national sovereignty. Volgin obviously suggests that liberalism leads to such consequences always and everywhere, which is a rather oversimplified thesis. Choosing as an example Russia – a country with comparatively weak liberal traditions – and without taking into account the concrete historical context, Volgin a priori undermines his possibility to arrive at significant and valid conclusions about liberalism. At the same time, he fails to mention an essential point which, were he a bona fide critic of liberalism, he ought to have mentioned: liberalism is an inseparable part of Western modernity, it is precisely to the values embodied by liberalism that we owe the overthrow of the traditional, hierarchical societies of the past and the establishment of the modern societies of ‘the rights and freedoms of citizens’, the unprecedented development of science and technology in the last few centuries as well as the exceptional material prosperity of the Western world.

The EU is also included as a subject in Volgin’s anti-liberal rhetoric. He defines the EU, on the one hand, as undemocratic (exercising diktat) and on the other as inefficient, even destructive, in its policies. Volgin chooses examples that most easily fit his theses, such as, for instance, the recent Greek debt crisis.

Citing the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis, Volgin claims the following:

As regards the European Union, it wasn’t planned as a ‘centre of democracy’ at all, Yanis Varoufakis firmly believes. He reminds that the prototype of the present-day EU was created at the beginning of the 1950s in the form of a cartel similar to OPEC. The role of Brussels was to administrate this cartel. The main purpose of this union was to stabilize the prices of basic raw materials and to restrict competition among its members. It had nothing to do with democracy, with ‘rule by ordinary Europeans’.¹⁵

According to Volgin, the harsh measures taken by the European institutions
(the EC, the ECB, the Eurogroup), whose purpose is not to find a solution to the Greek debt problem but to oppress and control Greece, are proof of the EU’s undemocratic character. In this connection, Volgin presents Slavoj Žižek’s view on the Greek debt crisis:

According to Žižek, the Brussels bosses are playing the role of Super-Ego vis-à-vis Greece. The main role in disciplining the Greeks is played by this so much discussed debt. The point is that the creditors’ main idea isn’t even to get Greece to repay its debt. Even those in Brussels realize that this is impossible. The main goal is to constantly pressure, bully and humiliate the Greeks. To constantly wag a finger at them and make them feel guilty. This is the best way to control somebody – be it a state or an individual. (Ibid.)

But this policy of diktat towards Greece, as, according to Volgin, many Greeks define it, is not just undemocratic; it has proven to be catastrophic for the Greek economy:

The policies of cutting wages, pensions and social programmes, known as ‘austerity’ policies, failed to revive the Greek economy. On the contrary: they helped to ruin it completely. But real life doesn’t matter at all to the Eurocrats and IMF experts. The only thing that matters to them is to get the calculations in their tables right. The fate of the entirely real people is of no interest to them at all. (Ibid.)

What, according to Volgin, is the political formula for finding a way out of this situation? Volgin pins his hopes on the left-wing parties, on anti-establishment structures and players. In this connection, he cites Yanis Varoufakis again:

One of the things that fill Varoufakis with optimism is the fact that leftist ideas are becoming increasingly popular in ever more places around the world. The successes of Podemos in Spain, of the leftist formations in Portugal, of Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, of Bernie Sanders in the US – all this goes to show that many people are sick and tired of the traditional centre-right and centre-left parties. They want political structures and individuals who will make a radical break with the status quo. (Ibid.)

Elsewhere in the same text, Volgin defines even more clearly the political profile of the party, in this particular case Syriza, which can successfully cope with the Greek debt crisis: it must pursue leftist policies that will overcome the power of the oligarchs and corruption, cope with social inequalities, emancipate itself from the diktat of the European institutions. But this could happen only if the leftists (socialists) align with the nationalists:
In the days before it took office, SYRIZA won the sympathies of many Greeks both with its strong social messages and promises to put an end to the growing inequality and the power of the oligarchs, and with its clear nationalist rhetoric. SYRIZA promised that when it came to power it would end the vicious practices of blind obedience to the diktat of the Troika and to the Brussels directives. Winning the elections a year ago, SYRIZA entered into a coalition not with some ideological similar leftist formation but with the nationalist party Independent Greeks. In this way, it secured for itself the support also of voters who don’t hide their nationalist feelings and who, under different circumstances, would probably have supported Golden Dawn. (Ibid.)

The question we can reasonably ask Volgin is: How are these two components of the political solution – ‘socialists’ and ‘nationalists’ – to be kept at a safe distance from one another so as to prevent them from merging into the explosive mix of national-socialism? The problem is that whereas nowadays there is a strong leftist rhetoric, there is no strong leftist ideology, so there is a danger that the energy of social discontent will translate into nationalist sentiments.

In conclusion, we may say that Petar Volgin has set himself an impossible task – to reject liberalism once and for all. But rejecting centuries-long traditions which, in addition to being intellectual movements, are also social practices embodied in institutions – the same holds true for socialism or for conservatism – cannot be done so easily, by a wave of the hand, simply by saying that ‘the emperor is naked’. Still, Volgin’s publications, as part of a massive wave of publications which are essentially similar in content, seek deliberately, if not to denounce, then at least to discredit, as much as possible, liberalism in Bulgaria. Volgin’s position isn’t the position of a critic but of an opponent of liberalism (and of liberal democracy). The critical position presupposes a dose of concern and empathy: liberal democracy is criticized for its weaknesses, in the name of more democracy, more justice, more equality or more freedom, but while accepting in principle its basic institutions. Volgin, conversely, doesn’t criticize liberalism, he rejects liberalism from some external position which he himself doesn’t point out but which we may suppose to be the idea of illiberal democracy or a political and cultural model that can be summed up in three words: authoritarianism, nationalism, traditionalism.

The Russian Cultural-Political Model Versus the Western One

Anti-democratic rhetoric is at its most explicit when the pole of categorical negation – Western liberal democracy – is balanced by the pole of categorical affirmation – the Russian cultural-political model. Without a clear definition of the pole of affirmation, the attacks against the West sound abstract and leave an impression of bad faith because they do not indicate their starting point. From now on, however, the reader is faced with a choice between two polar
alternatives, albeit in the context of a very biased comparison.

Darina Grigorova’s public position is based precisely upon the opposition between two civilization models, the Western and the Russian one, where the Western model is defined mainly as liberal, and the Russian as founded on tradition. Liberalism, viewed not as economic but as cultural liberalism, is associated above all with weakness – civilizational, cultural weakness – because it represents a betrayal simultaneously of religion, of morality, of the aspiration to community. Liberalism is a triumph of the individual over the community, of immorality over morality, of chaos over order, of meaningless consumerism over a meaningful life in the bosom of religion and tradition:

In the EU it is not the Christian culture that is the norm but the anti-Christian, or neoliberal one, which does not unite but fragments people into genders that outnumber the colours of the rainbow, blurs the notions of good and evil (not to mention of sin – this sounds obscurantist to the delicate metrosexual ear).

The EU ideologizes the individual comfort of the person without roots in every sense of the word, of the consumer fixated on his navel or on the successive implanted silicone.¹⁶

One of the main accusations against liberalism is that because of its weakness, it cannot cope with the dangers posed by the advance of Islam in Europe. The integration of Muslim communities in Europe has failed not because of the Western governments’ inadequate integration policies but, first, because the very idea of integration of cultures is completely illusory and nonsensical (‘The term “integration” has been imposed by the bureaucratic vocabulary and popularized by inertia in the intellectual reflections on culture in a sterile environment’, ibid.); second, because the Muslim communities themselves don’t want to integrate into a civilizational model they regard as inferior and not worthy of respect:

The Muslims in Europe, such as are the majority of Arabs and Turks, Kurds and other migrants from the East, cannot respect the liberal European because he isn’t ‘a man of the Book’, and hence, cannot emulate him, let alone integrate themselves, i.e. assimilate. Conversely, they segregate themselves in expectation of the demographic retribution, which is a matter of time and will come along with lightning-fast cultural shock therapy. (Ibid.)

Darina Grigorova’s ideological premises are clear: a society founded on tradition – on (Christian) religion, morality, authority, order, priority of the community over the individual – is stronger and more viable than the Western liberal societies. If nowadays Europe is threatened by the invasion of Islam, then the only adequate response to this threat coming from a traditional, but alien to European civilization, society is another type of traditional society.
which, however, is closer to Europe – the model of Russian traditional society. Compared to the rhetoric of the Cold War era, the relationship between Russia and the West seems different. In fact, only the plane of comparison has changed, while the balance of forces remains the same. Whereas until thirty years ago Soviet society, founded on the communist ideology, was declared by the party ideologues to be superior to ‘the decaying capitalism’ of the West, today Russian society, founded on its traditional values, is declared by the ‘Russophiles’ to be superior to the Western liberal societies. The communism/capitalism axis has been substituted by the traditional society/liberal society axis. According to Grigorova, in the present-day historical context Russia’s civilizational superiority over the West consists more specifically in that the Russian model of a state and society, unlike the Western one, can stop the Islamic threat as well as guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different cultures and religions:

Russia is the example of a state that combines the peaceful life together of Christians, Muslims and others, because the norm is the tradition, and the tradition protects everybody, including the Russian liberal minority. Tradition doesn’t integrate, tradition protects. To be traditional means to be faithful. To be liberal means to be fickle. Integration is anti-tradition, anti-history, unification of the global person who loses touch with reality, and the ghetto of the barbarians/the different catches up with him at some point. (Ibid.)

The liberalism of the West is associated, albeit secondarily, with the idea of democracy. Whereas liberalism means weakness of culture – de-Christianization, erasure of the line between good and evil, erasure of the line between genders, consumerism, inability to defend one’s own cultural identity against other cultural identities – democracy, at least in the Bulgarian case, means above all weakness of the state. Analyzing the years of transition in Bulgaria, Grigorova associates the Bulgarian state after 10 November 1989 with plunder and ruin. According to Grigorova, the change was initially met with enthusiasm and great expectations, inspired to a large extent by Russian perestroika literature, but they gradually gave way to disillusionment and disappointment:

[W]e weren’t yet immunized against the technology of the transition: a coup stage-managed from the outside – in this case, by the Kremlin – represented as the successive revolution because of the revolutionary consequences – redistribution of property – for an elect few, and separation of powers, political and civil liberties – for all.

We didn’t imagine privatization as legitimate looting of the state, and the disappointment came gradually – the political elite remained corporate, not party/ideological (it is such only for the purposes of election campaigning and orientation in the parliamentary chamber), and the state gradually abdicated from key functions; but then, nobody stopped this autoimmune
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disease of [Bulgarian] statehood, even on the contrary – the public mindset was hypnotized by the mantras of ‘the market’ as the sole and exclusive ‘way to Europe’…\(^\text{17}\)

Grigorova obviously ascribes all pathologies of Bulgarian social development to democracy, while implying also that democracy in its Bulgarian form is indicative of democracy in general (‘it has become banal to write or speak of the wrecked state not because it isn’t politically correct – it is simply part of the political landscape…\(^\text{18}\)’). This weakening of the state, blamed by Grigorova on democracy, cannot be resolved by the fundamental principles of democracy (‘separation of powers, political and civil liberties for all’), which, in her view, obviously have no particular value and significance. The solution she proposes – unity (a people), force (army), patriotism (education) discipline (work), faith (religion) – is obviously inspired by the model of Russian statehood:

For the purpose [of ensuring the recovery of the state], there is a need for something old-fashioned: a people \([\text{narod}]\) – not a population, an army – not mercenaries, teachers – not creative managers, cheerful Roma labor servicemen – not sour Roma queuing at the Local Council’s office for welfare benefits. Nor can this be done, of course, without a Church with services in mediaeval Bulgarian, such as is the Church Slavonic language… (Ibid.)

Europe (the EU countries) and its social model are called into question not just along the lines of culture (liberalism) and statehood (democracy), but also of geopolitics. Darina Grigorova defines Russia by words like ‘super-state’, ‘great power’, and ‘empire’. In one of her interviews, she says the following about Russia: ‘Russia has no choice – in order to exist, it must be a superpower, otherwise it will break up’.\(^\text{19}\) Elsewhere, she writes: ‘The Russian attitude towards the Turks, despite the military conflicts, … is [in the range from] laid-back to friendly, like that of one empire towards another empire.’\(^\text{20}\) Russia and the EU are compared and ranked on the basis of strength: whereas Russia is defined as an ‘empire’ and ‘superpower’, with regard to the EU Grigorova points out ‘the geopolitical deficiency and failure of the EU’, ‘the subordinate role of Brussels vis-à-vis Washington, which is forcing the Europeans to amputate themselves by giving up the Russian market and raw materials’ (Ibid.). The EU’s weakness consists in its vassal attitude towards the US, which is manifested both in the support for the sanctions against Russia because of the annexation of Crimea and in the support for the second Ukrainian Maidan, by which the EU has demonstrated its colonial attitude towards Eastern Europe. Still, the US and the EU are not rated equally on Darina Grigorova’s scale. The US is the true opponent of Russia, it is (or, rather, it was until 2014, until the annexation of Crimea) the global hegemon striving for a unipolar world. Although the EU falls into the category of ‘the bad guys’ insofar as it obediently follows the will
of the US, unlike the ‘US’ constant, it is a historical variable that always has a chance of passing over to the ‘good side’:

[T]he EU, startled by the refugee waves and by the anti-European effect of the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation for ideological, not for pragmatic, reasons under American pressure, may abandon the negotiations on the Transatlantic [TTIP] agreement and establish, together with Russia and China, its own free trade zone, which will be stronger than that of the US and the APR [Asia-Pacific Region]…21

In the present-day geopolitical context, what should Bulgaria’s attitude towards Russia be? Of course, Bulgaria should have a close relationship with Russia, but the reason for that is neither the nostalgia for the common communist past nor Slavic fraternity or any other ‘sentimental’ reason. As in other cases, such as the EU sanctions against Russia, the reasons are pragmatic: Bulgaria’s economic interests and security. Asked whether it is better for Bulgaria to belong to the EU or to the Russia-initiated Eurasian Union, Darina Grigorova gives a cautious and evasive answer, pointing out that Bulgaria should be guided mainly by its economic interests and security considerations; still, in the long term, the future of Bulgaria and Eastern Europe seems to lean towards the Eurasian Union:

Bulgaria is Eastern Europe, Russia is Eurasia, Turkey is Asia. As you see, these are three liminal civilizational lines, not two. We shouldn’t gravitate, we should use our strategic location as a link between these three worlds, yet not as a ‘little hub’ but as a ‘medicentre’ of this geopolitical triangle. Eastern Europe will survive only in a union with Russia because Western Europe will swallow it up if there’s no balance. In economic terms, we stand to benefit from the Russian – the Eurasian market, which we ourselves gave up. There’s no irreversible choice because human history is an example of inconstant unions. Of course, this doesn’t apply to one or two generations, and that’s why it seems to us to be eternal or predestined.22

Darina Grigorova’s line of reasoning follows a well-known pattern: Bulgaria is located at the crossroads of different continents and cultures. Its wellbeing depends on the extent to which its foreign policy manages to juggle between the interests of different unions and countries, it has to be flexible, taking into account the changes in the context and the balance of forces. In this sense, no constant and unconditional alignment of Bulgaria – meaning, in the present-day context, alignment with the EU – would be beneficial for the country. Perhaps the only exception to this rule is the close relationship with Russia which will always – regardless of the circumstances, in any conjunctures – be beneficial for Bulgaria. For example, Bulgaria isn’t directly threatened by the state of Russian-Turkish relations because, whatever they might be, it can
always rely on support and protection from Russia:

When Russian-Turkish relations are good, Moscow can exercise a positive influence on Ankara, which is favourable for us. When they are strained, Moscow can again be pro-Bulgaria, with intensified Russian activity in the Balkans against the Turkish one – this is a matter of situating [Bulgaria properly], but it’s not something that can be taken for granted. It takes efforts, flexibility (not of the spine but of the imagination through diplomatic multi-move combinations) and, above all, a consistent national position on the part of Bulgaria regardless of which party is dominant in the concrete government.23

In the final analysis, Darina Grigorova’s propositions do not make two things clear. First, why Bulgaria’s economic interests and national security will be protected better by Russia than by the EU. This is asserted but not proved – it seems to be taken for granted. Second, the praise for Russia is inspired above all by Russia’s strength (strength of traditions, military strength). Russia is on the rise, it is making a comeback on the international scene as a ‘great power’. But nothing is said about the living standards and way of life of the Russian citizens, about their rights and freedoms. That is probably because from the point of view of an empire, the question of exactly how its citizens live isn’t a question of primary importance.

**The Dilemma Is Nationalism or Liberal Democracy**

The attack against liberalism isn’t directed simply against a particular ideology, a particular type of institutions or policies. According to a number of Bulgarian anti-liberal authors, the stake is much higher: it is about a sort of ‘war of the worlds’ on whose outcome depends the fate of humanity. Only a conspiracy theory on a cosmological scale could encompass and understand the clash between the two antagonistic cosmic forces: liberalism and nationalism. The liberal camp is represented by the US, the EU, the local political elites and non-governmental organizations; the camp of its opponents is represented by the local nationalist parties and movements. The outcome of this clash is a foregone conclusion because liberalism is, so to speak, unnatural, inauthentic, forcibly imposed from the outside in the context of nation-states. The structure of the world itself, founded on the ‘us’/‘them’ division, presupposes an insurmountable ontological priority of the majority over all minorities within the framework of a country, and of the own nation over all other nations at the international level.

For Dr Iliya Iliev, the main opposition isn’t between the West and Russia, between liberal societies and traditional societies, as it is for Darina Grigorova; it is between the interests of nations, on the one hand, and different ideologies like Marxism and liberalism on the other. Dr Iliev’s thesis is that just as the
Marxist-Leninists before the change in 1989, so too the liberals after the change have been trying in every possible way to demoralize and denationalize the nations, to suppress national interests, to place the national majorities under the rule of minorities. The opposition isn’t between left and right but between the present-day left-right liberal political oligarchies and the interests of nations:

The apologists of liberalism and the carriers of Those values keep harping on about the irreversible transition towards the postnational as a consequence of the natural course of history. Just as the Marx-Leninists trumpeted for decades on end that their doctrine was invincible because it was true. The behaviour of the left-right political oligarchies in the face of the objective tendencies in Europe is hysterically aggressive in Bolshevik style.

The centuries-old Christian religion stands in the way of their multicultural values and extreme tolerance of everything alien and perverted, so they are suppressing and pushing it to the periphery of public life. That is also what the communists did both in Russia with regard to Orthodox Christianity and in China with regard to Buddhism, Daoism and other faiths traditional to this country. The internationalists loathed the nationalists, who are now loathed by the globalists too.24

The symmetry between liberalism and Marxism in Dr Iliev’s criticisms, however, is superficial and fake. His main criticisms and attacks are against liberalism; those against Marxism seem to have been added to feign objectivity. Sometimes this asymmetry becomes all too visible. For example, in an article25 in which he attacks liberal democracy (something which he does constantly) Dr Iliev reminds the reader of the coming centenary of the October Revolution and quotes Lenin as saying, ‘Liberal democracy in Russia has exhausted itself’ – obviously implying that nowadays, too, the time of liberal democracy has been exhausted. In another article, in which he compares Bulgaria’s sovereignty at the time of the communist regime and today, Dr Iliev shows his bias very clearly:

For the [politically] correct [NGOs, financed by the US], the past is only dark and the future brilliant. Before [1989], there were no Soviet troops and bases in our country, now there are two American ones. The opposite is true, they scream, Bulgaria was occupied before, now it is free.

We are obliged to believe, although instead of the limited sovereignty we had before, today we have almost none!26

Dr Iliev’s interpretative scheme is very simple and seemingly convincing. The whole world is governed by conspiracies (the author himself rehabilitates the word ‘conspiracy’, claiming that ‘the terms “world conspiracy” and “conspirology” have been invented to discredit in advance any attempt to show how the world functions’). Conspiracies are the means by which the stronger
nations impose their rule over the weaker nations and keep them in subjection for the sake of their own interests. One example of a conspiracy is globalization: ‘A world conspiracy [called] “Globalization” is underway, aimed at imposing the interests of the transnational companies practically on all of humanity.’27 Another example of a conspiracy are the emigrant waves – they are ‘obviously a consequence of a world conspiracy to force the countries into subjection to the American hegemony’. Yet another world conspiracy is ‘Russophobia based on the legends about the ineradicable Russian aggressiveness and Asian despotism’ and dating already from the time of Louis XV, which manipulates the historical facts to serve the interests of certain European nations (ibid.). Applied to liberal democracy, Dr Iliev’s conspiracy theory claims that this political form has been imposed on Bulgaria (as well as on the other European countries) by Washington and Brussels. At the local level, liberal democracy is being imposed by the venal political elites and non-governmental organizations, which are proxies of Washington and Brussels. The purpose of this forcible imposition of liberal democracy is to destroy the nation by privileging the minorities and oppressing the majority.

As regards the Washington-Brussels tandem, the balance of forces is clearly indicated: the US is the hegemon that sets the rules of the game, while the EU is the obedient executor that obsequiously carries out the commands of the hegemon. The US is mighty and therefore deserves respect, even awe, but its servants from Brussels deserve only contempt. In Dr Iliev’s vocabulary, there are no other words for the EU except insults and invectives. Whereas the future American president, the Republican Donald Trump, deserves only praise (‘A top-class fighter – this is Donald Trump. A fighter by nature, upbringing and training’), the French President, the Socialist François Hollande, is mocked and ridiculed.28 Both the former president of the EC, José Manuel Barroso, and the incumbent Jean-Claude Juncker are declared by Dr Iliev to be corrupt, serving the interests of international corporations and therefore harming the EU.29 With regard to the EU itself, the author claims: ‘… the Eurounion was created according to a scheme by Washington and is under the control of the overseas hegemon’ (ibid.). Dr Iliev seeks to discredit the EU by representing it as a puppet organization that is completely subservient to Washington. In his words, ‘their essence [of European politicians] is puppet-like and extortionist’.30 In another article, in which he compares European politicians unfavourably with Donald Trump, he calls them ‘the Brussels multiculturniks, emigrant-lovers, gay-paraders and political-correctniks’.31 The EU is destructive by its very essence because its true objective is to destroy the European nations: ‘It has long been clear that the destruction of the nation-states, in parallel with the breakup of the state-creating nations, is a leading value in today’s European Union’;32 ‘We have long claimed that a main task assigned to the Barrosos, Junckers and Kristalinas is the destruction of the nation-states with their subsequent inclusion into some kind of United States of Europe or European Soviet Union.’33
The true opposition today – at the international level as well as in the context of every European country – is between liberalism and nationalism. The only ones who can and must oppose the ‘national nihilists’ from Brussels and the ‘globalists’ from Washington are the nationalists:

The nationalists, who are defending the traditional European moral, Christian, cultural-historical and patriotic values, are destroying, step by step, the monopoly of the so-called mainstream parties in the PES and EPP, which are defending those values pertaining to same-sex marriages and migration. …

The wind from the US and Europe is blowing in the sails of the nationalists, the angry Bulgarian voter is looking at them with favour. But also with reasonable doubts about whether they are fighters for the Bulgarian interests, and about whether some of them are relying on Moscow and others on Berlin.34

In the domestic political context, the proxies of Washington and Brussels and the fighters for liberal democracy are the local political establishment and non-governmental organizations. Dr Iliev’s attacks against Bulgarian politicians are temperate by comparison with those against NGOs. In his view, the main characteristic of the Bulgarian political class is its venality and obedience to the US and the EU: ‘Will politicians in our country stop kowtowing to Merkel, Juncker and the bosses from Washington? It seems they won’t’; ‘Here the politicians and their parties are disconnected from the Bulgarians, they have succeeded only in creating the impression that they are working for others and to the detriment of Bulgaria.’35 Dr Iliev’s view on NGOs, though, is one of utter loathing and disgust, he has almost nothing but insults for them: ‘servants’, ‘ packs of “human rights defenders”, “reformists” and NGOers’, ‘wrongs-defending “Helsinki” and other suchlike neurotic Sorosoids’, ‘grant-gobblers and other suchlike freeloaders fed by the benefactor Soros’, etc. In his view, NGO workers have no professional and moral qualities whatsoever: ‘They aren’t offering anything new, they are conceptually impotent and utterly morally bankrupt.’36 The main function of NGOs in Bulgaria is to promote the interests of the US and of certain EU countries. Citing analyst George Friedman, Iliev claims that ‘in Eastern Europe foreign governments are using NGOs to achieve their geopolitical goals’ (ibid.). According to Iliev, the main task of NGOs is to manipulate public opinion and national history so as to serve the goals and interests of their financial benefactors:

In the mouths of the professional NGOist manipulators, black is white and vice versa. Big Brother is infallible, the ones who are predestined to govern in the colonies are the white politicians currently designated by him, the others are ‘black’ and even toxic. If people in the country doubt this, they are bad, stupid, retrograde, disoriented, etc. For the [politically] correct [NGOs, financed by the US], the past is only dark and the future brilliant. (Ibid.)
According to Dr Iliev, however, both the policies of the local venal political class and the activities of the venal NGOs have failed because liberal democracy itself has failed: ‘The tendency is obvious – liberal democracy has failed. The nationalist parties and alliances now have to prove themselves as such.’37 Liberal democracy is associated by Dr Iliev with three main ideological constructs that have been translated into policies: multiculturalism, tolerance, integration. All three determine the relations between the majority and the minorities in a nation. All three have been forcibly imposed by the US, the EU, the local political oligarchies, the local NGOs. All three are destructive for the nation. All three have ultimately failed. Multiculturalism is defined by Dr Iliev as both undemocratic and lethal to society:

The Brussels institutions and the NGOs of Soros are in fact sinister machines for denationalizing the European countries, while their respective governments are showing themselves to be their obedient and apathetic transmitters.

Multiculturalism is an undemocratic ideology that is increasingly failing among the societies infected by it while being ever more hysterically and forcibly imposed. In this way, it is akin to the most brutal forms of implementation of the communist ideology, such as Bolshevism and Maoism. … Through this unnatural creation, democracy is gradually being emptied of its essence, political problems are ever more frequently being resolved through the courts, and sovereignty is being transferred to the judges. In this way, it becomes possible to institutionally disarm the true sovereign – the people. This is what lies behind the fierce determination of NGOers and grant-gobblers in our country to take control of the judicial system.

Applied in the form of ‘positive discrimination’ towards the minorities in the US, Canada, Western and Eastern Europe, multicultural practices everywhere are failing, leading to destructive and chaotic phenomena in society, provoking strong nationalist resistance.38

Tolerance is defined by Dr Iliev as institutional repression which, of course, is imposed from the outside and through which the majority is forced to put up with the arbitrary acts of alien, disgusting and intolerant minorities:

In the lexicons of the West it [tolerance] is now interpreted as ‘readiness to welcome benevolently views, convictions and behaviour’ of other people who are different from our own. People are forced to put up – without any resistance whatsoever, in every sphere of everyday life, as if they were doomed – with all sorts of disgusting alien cultural traditions and practices contrary to their worldview! There’s no trace of the Christian love for the fellow man, instead of it we are being forced to accept the vices of the alien and even the hostile man.39
The integration of minorities (refugees, Gypsies) has failed because the minorities themselves are, by their cultural essence, unable and unwilling to integrate themselves:

What integration of people who are unwilling to learn the language, to keep the laws and to respect those who are holding out a hand to them! The Brussels multi-culti has failed to convince anybody to date, and will never manage to do so.40

Whereas liberal democracy has failed because of its inadequate, and repressive vis-à-vis the majorities, ideological constructs translated into policies – multiculturalism, tolerance, integration – these policies have, furthermore, caused great harm to the national majorities. The results of liberal democracy are repressed and miserable majorities oppressed by ever more aggressive and militant minorities:

Visible to every unbiased observer is the fact, repeatedly confirmed by history, that the refusal to codify in law the priority of the dominant nation turns it into an object for draining its vital juices. By minorities that are receiving ever more privileges solely on the grounds of their being a minority.

Such a forcibly imposed policy leads, after several decades, to the decay of the nation infected with perverse tolerance and forced to adjust to the intolerant, and often hostile, differentness. Then the minorities appropriate ‘aristocratic superiority’ and it comes crashing down not just on the majority that has lost the energy to resist, but also on the state created by it. Breaking it up into parts in which it forms personal fiefs for feeding its bureaucratic gangs through robbery.41

Perhaps the most interesting part of Dr Iliev’s reflections is his philosophy about the basic, ‘biological’ antagonism of human groups. In the spirit of Carl Schmitt, Dr Iliev claims that the division between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’, between the majority and minorities in a nation and between a nation and its neighbours is of fateful importance, it is a guarantee of the nation’s viability. Hence, liberal democracy is unnatural because it tries to eliminate this age-old division and, in this way, erodes nations:

The people as an ‘us-group’ is independent only when it is capable of distinguishing ‘own’ from ‘alien’, ‘friend’ from ‘enemy’. Otherwise, if it lacks the will to counteract ‘the enemy’, the politically divided people turns into a culturally interested audience, into production personnel and consumer masses. The presence of ‘the enemy image’ is a fundamental characteristic of social processes and no humanistic activities can change this. Aggression has a biological nature. If it is suppressed, ‘the enemy image’ is transferred into one’s own psyche and turns into fear and a personality-corroding guilt.

This is what they want from us! They want it from the Europeans and
have achieved it to a not insignificant extent. It is not durable, however; against biology, politics can do little, especially when it is hysterically rash. The mixing of ethnic groups is always unnatural because it involves a clash of different cultural-historical processes. Resistance is growing, fascism is knocking at the door. (Ibid.)

According to Dr Iliev’s conspiracy theory, however, we shouldn’t forget that liberal democracy is not a universal value, a neutral political form. It is an instrument through which some nations impose their domination over other nations:

The conscious blurring of ‘the enemy image’ unequivocally works towards destroying the defence mechanisms of one community and securing advantages for other communities. Which leads to loss of political subjecthood. This is a new form of total war that aims not to annihilate individual soldiers but to create entire ‘zones for annihilation’. (Ibid.)

Dr Iliev is obviously an opponent of liberal democracy and a proponent of ‘illiberal’ democracy, that is, of the constitutionally and institutionally guaranteed supremacy of the majority over minorities. At the international level, his hatred of the EU is overt and candid, while his partiality for Russia is covert but undeniable. In a similar way, he leaves the impression that he rejects, simultaneously and symmetrically, both liberalism and Marxism as opponents of nationalism, yet his attacks against liberalism are not just more numerous but also much more furious. In Dr Iliev, the opposition between nationalism and liberalism is not thought within the framework of liberal democracy: nationalism is thought as an alternative to liberal democracy.

Against Pro-Western Elites, Hoping for a Eurasian Future for Bulgaria

According to the authors engaged in anti-democratic rhetoric in Bulgaria, liberalism and liberal democracy are doomed because their failure has begun, so to speak, from their home: the US (after Donald Trump’s election as president) and the EU (after Brexit). From now on, things look predetermined. Returning to the principle of sovereignism, the US and the West European powers will stop the flow of directives and funding to the East European political elites and NGOs, and in this way liberalism – which, according to the anti-liberal authors, has been imposed in Eastern Europe from the outside – will also lose all ground in the countries of the region. An important moment in the overall picture is the dehistoricizing of the change of 1989 – abstracting it from any historical context, disconnecting it from any objective economic or geopolitical logic, and declaring it to have been nothing but a palace coup. In this way, liberal democracy is additionally delegitimized and the people desubjectivized: it turns out that people in Eastern Europe didn’t want the change, they wanted
neither democracy nor rights and freedoms. The whole change was faked, masterminded and orchestrated by a handful of people driven by private interests.

In Valentin Vatsev’s articles, we find all the topics that can be found in those of Darina Grigorova and Dr Iliev: negative assessment of the US and the EU as colonial powers, positive assessment of Russia as an empire restoring its might, predictions of an impending collapse or radical transformation of the EU, America’s retreat from its role as global hegemon, opposition between sovereignty and liberalism, contempt for multiculturalism, loathing for the venal and conceptually impotent Bulgarian political elite, more overt or more covert nostalgia for socialism, totally negative assessment of the transition as a time of disintegration and loss of sovereignty. But whereas in Darina Grigorova the emphasis is on Russia, its culture and historical destiny, and in Dr Iliev on the opposition between liberalism and nationalism, Valentin Vatsev’s ambition is to outline the fate of the world against the background of the clash between liberalism and sovereignty, with an emphasis on the pernicious role of the Bulgarian political elite.

In Valentin Vatsev’s account, liberalism (globalism, multiculturalism) is on the retreat worldwide. Vatsev views liberalism not in economic but in political terms – liberalism is the ideology that turned the US into global hegemon; and in cultural terms – liberalism as degenerate consumerism, a dissolute lifestyle, blurring of the gender lines, odious mixing of cultures, etc. Initially, at the beginning of 2016 – that is, before Brexit and Donald Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections – Vatsev considered liberalism to be dominant and total worldwide and, in this sense, speaks of fascist-like liberalism, of Eurofascism, that is, of a liberalism that has turned into a matrix formatting social relations and forms of life:

In fact, nowadays fascism is arising sporadically, spontaneously and irrepressibly, on a mass and vast scale, precisely from the now dominant liberalism – just as the infamous and nightmarishly terrifying Islamic State is not a negation but a continuation of the US State Department, its functional organ, an organ of the status quo that isn’t hiding its wish to turn into eternity.42

According to Vatsev, liberalism has no alternative. Not only the political right but also the political left are part of the liberal scenario. The seemingly far-right formations like the National Front in France are a product of liberalism that does not threaten but, rather, legitimizes liberalism. Vatsev calls ‘fascism as mimesis’ all far-right political parties, which are histrionically trying to imitate the rhetoric and gestures of the fascism of the past. The true present-day fascism – ‘fascism as poesis’ – is precisely liberalism,43 which is being realized not through pogroms and genocide but by means of consumption:
This new fascism doesn’t need vulgar violence but coloured pills. What works much more successfully for it aren’t the anti-Jewish pogroms and Nazi purges but the technique of shopping insanity, consumerist hypnotization and universal objectification of Meaning reduced to its material forms.

This is a world in which God is long dead but nobody has noticed it because everybody is immersed in the delicious and feverish expectation of iPhone 7. (Ibid.)

Brexit and, especially, the rise of Donald Trump in the US, however, totally changed Vatsev’s perspective. He suddenly inverts his theses and starts saying the exact opposite of what he said until recently. Whereas before that Vatsev claimed that the liberal matrix produces the reality of the world, a fortnight before Trump’s victory he suddenly begins to claim that ‘the world is finally and irreversibly illiberal’:

But what’s important is something else – today it’s not the economy that lives through geopolitics, but the other way round. Geopolitical dependencies are manifested through economic projects, successful and not so successful ones. This means simply that the world is finally and irreversibly illiberal. This is a catastrophe of the liberal doctrine.

Trump’s victory in the presidential elections totally changed Vatsev’s view on the geopolitical and ideological scene. According to Vatsev, Trump’s victory means that the US has given up its role of an empire and hegemon and is returning to the nation-state. This victory, according to Vatsev, is a victory of Americanism over globalism:

The United States isn’t just a territory on which the transnational corporations hold their legal registration, it is one of the first nation-states in the world. Those who founded the American state had in mind precisely a nation-state. In this sense, I don’t fully agree that the US is an empire – it is a nation-state, albeit with serious problems. What happened, and I make no secret that I’m pleased with it, is a brilliant victory of Americanism over globalism. All ordinary Americans who wanted their state to remain also their national home found the strength to rebuff the globalist ambitions of the liberals in the Democratic Party and in the state leadership.

The victory of Americanism over globalism means that, since the US has given up the role of hegemon voluntarily, out of economic necessity in a ‘post-American world’, the dominant liberal ideology has also become irrelevant. It follows, then, that by Trump’s victory the hegemon itself, the US, has officially invalidated liberalism worldwide in the name of a world governed by the principle of sovereignty. The consequences of this are significant and many. First of all, this means the rehabilitation of Russia as a global power equal to
the US (Vatsev expressly points out that Trump treats Putin with respect, as one strong man does another). This indirectly means also that Bulgaria’s attitude towards Russia can now be different.

In the second place, the very prospects of an organization such as NATO are changing under the influence of the worldwide sovereignist tendencies. Guided by their own interests (above all, by their interest in avoiding confrontation with Russia), countries such as Germany and France are becoming unreliable members of NATO. According to Vatsev, the US is planning to establish a second, more reliable NATO, where Turkey will be a key player. The problem is that Turkey itself has also begun to reconsider its interests, reassessing the possibility of closer ties with the Eurasian Union, and this makes NATO’s future even more uncertain. In the final analysis, according to Valentin Vatsev, NATO has become obsolete:

> Unless there is a big war – because such wars invalidate all calculations, wipe out all debts and begin life anew – NATO is on its way out already. There are three big problems, which NATO cannot solve – the problems of financing, goal-setting, and raison d’être. Each problem, on its own, is enough, yet they are three. Trump himself says that NATO is already working as a wart. And since I’m not on an election campaign, I can say that no one needs NATO any longer, except the generals and, perhaps, Solomon Passy [founder and president of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria]. (Ibid.)

In the third place, while liberalism has suffered defeat in the US, which means that the ideological foundations of the American hegemonic position in the world have been eliminated, liberalism has also been defeated in Europe, which means that the ideological foundations of the EU, conceived of as a European federation, have been eliminated. According to Vatsev, the formula of the EU is to be thoroughly revised:

> The screams that the Eurounion is dying are premature, hysterical and unnecessary. No, it isn’t dying, it’s rather the old federalist doctrine about the EU as a United States of Europe … that is dying. … This idea is dying, and it is related to the moral, conceptual and political catastrophe of the now common European doctrine – liberalism, as a principle, as a central ideological and worldview norm of united European life. It died when a responsible European politician said that ‘multiculturalism is over’. Merkel said it. Of, course, others had also said it before her, but it was important that she say it.

The dying away of liberalism as the leading ideology inevitably means also overcoming the dominant position of the US vis-à-vis Europe, insofar as American domination rested precisely on liberalism. In its turn, overcoming the EU’s dependence on the US inevitably means also changing the attitude
towards Russia. In the new conditions, the EU’s location along the US/Russia axis will be completely different:

In Europe, there are processes not of normalization but of weakening of America’s almost total control, which was established there after the Second World War. In this logical scheme, the Russia factor has an explanatory role and place. … There are strategic and geopolitical relations between Russia, Germany and France. The Moscow-Berlin-Paris triangle exists, and more and more paint is needed in order to cover it up so that it remains invisible. It keeps showing up under the rich layer of decoration. For this reason, Germany and France can no longer be relied on in NATO, either. It is necessary to create a new NATO.49

In the fourth place, the end of liberalism means that the attitude towards refugees is likely to change. According to Vatsev, until now rights were thought of at two levels – civil rights and human rights. Precisely liberalism was the ideological premise for defining human rights that are superior to the civil rights defined within the separate nation-states. To Vatsev, the reason for the introduction of human rights is entirely clear – through them, global capitalism seeks to gradually erode and annihilate the nation-states:

The difference between human and civil rights is absolutely fundamental. This is an important conceptual element in the war of global financial capital against the nation-state. The civil rights of man are connected to his nation and constitute a set of his bonds (including obligations) to his nation-state. To annihilate the nation-state as an anachronism that stands in the way of financial globalization, you have to erode the very concept of civil rights and substitute them with concepts such as human rights.50

In the fifth place, the collapse of liberalism (globalism) on the international scale and the consequences of this – the redefinition of American policy, the possible breakup of NATO and the transformation of the EU model – give Valentin Vatsev reason to formulate three main tasks for the Bulgarian political elite, which mark the steps towards Bulgaria’s gradual reorientation from NATO and the EU towards the Eurasian Union:

Three things follow for Bulgaria. First, since globalism has suffered a terrifying blow, if in Bulgaria there are politicians of the male gender, then it is necessary to find a political personality who will raise the following questions. Bulgaria must veto the European sanctions against Russia. It is necessary to find a Bulgarian responsible politician who will take the country out of NATO’s military organization, while keeping its membership in the alliance’s political committee. This is what a French general, who is remembered and loved in France to this day, did. In addition, it is necessary to very seriously think over the possibility that, while keeping its European
commitments, Bulgaria should begin to think at the expert and political level about alignment with the processes in the Eurasian Union. Those are the three global political tasks facing the Bulgarian political elite.51

The failure of liberalism worldwide is the first important topic for Valentin Vatsev. The other important topic is the failure of the Bulgarian transition. Vatsev seeks to discredit the transition at many levels. First of all, the transition is declared to have been the work of part of the communist nomenklatura which wanted to transfer its power to its children. On the other hand, the anticommunists are declared by Vatsev to be former communists who had turned, out of entirely careerist motives, into anticommunists when communism no longer existed and there was no risk in fighting against communism. Hence, the entire transition is declared to have been the work of people seeking power and personal gains. In other words, there was no other reason for the transition except the predatory treachery of a handful of people.52 In this picture of the transition, everything happened by force of subjective will. Vatsev openly and deliberately omits the fact that the main reason for the transition was the ever more obvious economic, political and moral bankruptcy of the communist regime, which had conclusively lost its legitimacy and the support of the Bulgarian citizens. Vatsev also omits the fact that the communist regimes of Eastern Europe were consigned to history against the background of huge demonstrations in which hundreds of thousands, even millions, of angry citizens took part. The peoples of Eastern Europe simply could not and did not wish to put up any more with the rule of the communist regimes.

What’s more, the transition is declared by Vatsev to have failed because it was not just legitimized and motivated by, but also completely immersed in the atmosphere of, a hallucination, an illusion:

Everything happened somehow as in a Fellini film. At some point, the hallucinations must end, the self-complacent joy runs out, as in my favourite Fellini film, *And the Ship Sails On* – at the end of the film, there appears a boat with a rhinoceros in it. Reality returns with a vengeance. We must all face the principle of reality. The Bulgarian political elite, as well as we along with it, lived to a large extent in the world of our dreams and our fictions. But now we have to be able to say: Je suis Boyko [Borisov, Bulgaria’s Prime Minister], and to assume our guilt and responsibility, because Borisov is simply a divine retribution for our sins. (Ibid.)

Vatsev is obviously implying that liberal democracy is an ideology that has suddenly collapsed, revealing its illusory character, and that it should now give way to reality, that is, to a world order and policy guided not by values and ideals but by interests, by the principle of sovereignty and supremacy of force.

To this one must add that in his attempt to discredit the transition, Vatsev uses the populist opposition between the political elite and the people and
declares the state to be an instrument that solely serves the elite and doesn’t care about the ordinary people. According to Vatsev, the socialist state was comparatively successful, but it was abolished by the transition, which then failed to create a new state. Without offering any analysis or argument, Vatsev asserts the biased view that ‘No, this isn’t a state.’ Vatsev’s main accusation against the present-day Bulgarian state is that it has given up its sovereignty and colonized itself, and that this is of benefit only to the elite:

Bulgaria was a real nation-state with real sovereignty, which we were unable to keep due to various historical, objective and subjective reasons. Today Bulgaria is a happily self-colonized territory in which the elite is living successfully and comfortably, while the population must support [bTV talk show host] Slavi Trifonov and watch bTV, football, this and that, yellow press, [TV series about] fatal love, servants’ thrills, lots of porn – and that’s it.

Last but not least, the transition (and liberal democracy, in whose name it was carried out) has divided Bulgarian society not only along the lines of elite/the people but also along the lines of ethnos, creating two Bulgarias that have incompatible cultural attitudes and geopolitical orientations. One Bulgaria is the people’s, traditional Bulgaria, continuer of the age-old Bulgarian history and statehood; the other Bulgaria is the pro-European Bulgaria, the rootless, renegade Bulgaria of predators and conformists whose social success and adaptability are declared by Vatsev to be a manifestation of something amoral, colonial, non-Bulgarian. How Vatsev has distinguished two ‘ethnoses’ within the Bulgarian nation – the authentic Bulgaria (probably the nostalgic-for-socialism, pro-Russian Bulgaria) from the inauthentic (pro-Western) Bulgaria – does not become clear. To Vatsev, however, it is completely clear that in Bulgaria there’s no place for two Bulgarias. It is also clear which is the redundant Bulgaria:

To me, these two Bulgarias have a different population. The ones are Bulgarians – uncouth, not very polite, sometimes needlessly cruel, sometimes hardly reacting, with a huge potential for culture and development but with a weak enterprising spirit, deeply confused in their identity and prospects today. And the others, who also pretend to be Bulgarians [bulgari], but whom I call Bulgaryans [bulgaryani]. They are ‘small and predatory’, super-enterprising, and they behave like an occupational force, conquering one position after another – this is the other Bulgaria. And this other Bulgaria will announce very soon that there isn’t another Bulgaria except for itself. To my mind, there is an ethnic difference between Bulgarians and Bulgaryans. …

And here I’m not talking about minorities – Gypsies, Turks, Jews. The division is deeper, it is within Bulgaria, within the Bulgarian ethnos. In fact, we aren’t one people, we are living in two parallel states on one and the same territory. And I’m afraid that we cannot live together any longer.
To summarize: on the plane of geopolitics, for Vatsev everything is a matter of ‘realpolitik’; there are no ideals and values in politics, it’s all about ethnic identities, balance of forces, sheer interests. On the plane of Bulgarian politics, Vatsev combines: the proclamation of socialism as a successful, if not prospering, society; the depreciation of the transition as a palace coup that wasn’t supported by the will and the wish of the people; the lack of ideology (our inability to return to communism) is offset by embracing a most basic nationalism; leftism, as in Volgin’s case, is combined with sympathies for anti-establishment players such as Putin, Trump, and Marine Le Pen. There is obviously nothing leftist in this position, it is wholly reactionary and restorationist: a position that is toned down in calm times and played up in times of crisis, but which never offers any positive, new outlook on Bulgarian society and geopolitics.

* * *

The five ideological dimensions of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda in the period between 2013 and 2016, examined in this paper, are by no means characteristic only of the authors discussed here. They can be found in dozens and hundreds of other publications flooding Bulgarian media today with one or another of their versions. In the cases reviewed here, these ideological dimensions are interlinked and presuppose each other: starting from anti-Americanism, we will inevitably arrive at anti-liberalism, praise for sovereignty and admiration for the Russian empire that is restoring its might; beginning with anti-liberalism, we cannot but oppose nationalism to liberalism, vilify the US as a global hegemon in decline and denounce local NGOs as liberal servants of the US and the EU. In other words, these five ideological dimensions are individualized but interlinked actualizations promoting a common propaganda platform. If we have to define this platform, the classic left/right division will be of no use to us. The ideological oppositions that define it are: liberalism/nationalism, elites/the people, the West/Russia. The anti-democratic platform is consistent in its strategies of negation but weak in its affirmation. Behind the rhetorical devices of its attacks we cannot find any proposal about society and a world order except for: a return to nationalist passions, to the principle of force in international relations, to the unity and might of the collective, achieved at the expense of the rights and freedoms of individuals.
NOTES


13 A paraphrase of Georgi Dimitrov’s dictum that: ‘Just as the sun and air are necessary for every living creature, friendship with the Soviet Union is indispensable for Bulgaria.’


Boyan Znepolski: Ideological Dimensions of Anti-Democratic Propaganda


53 Vatsev, V. (2016) NATO e otvad perioda na svojata istoricheska validnost.
55 Vatsev, V. (2016) NATO e otvad perioda na svojata istoricheska validnost.
This paper is part of the research project on *Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception* in the period between 2013 and 2016. The project deals with the state of the discursive front on the three main talking points of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda – 1. ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’; 2. ‘The decline of the West/Europe’; and 3. ‘The rise of Russia’ – and found a sharp increase in the number of publications devoted to them in the studied period. Those talking points were identified by the project team after extensive empirical research. In this paper our attention is focused on the styles and audiences of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria. The analysis offered here does not pretend to be complete or exhaustive.

To begin with, I must answer an entirely reasonable preliminary question – why, amidst the sea of publications examined in the research project, I have chosen to analyze precisely the examples and authors that follow below, and what governs my choice of interpretation. My first argument is the fact that they are sufficiently representative and significant in the general picture of the propaganda discursive front in Bulgaria. My second argument is unscientifically personal – because among the thousands of publications included in our study, precisely these texts and authors dismayed me the most.

‘Bulgaria’s Venal Elites’ and ‘The Decline of the West/Europe’

We will begin our illustration of these two firm talking points with examples from the journalistic works of two well-known public speakers, Kevork Kevoorkyan and Alexander Simov, who are similar in that both have assumed the role of ‘people’s tribunes’, seek a mass and not particularly pretentious audience, and equally hate the phrase ‘talking points’ because they present their own positions as an expression of free spirit and brave truth-telling. Here, however, we introduce them together above all because of their differences, which reveal some of the marks of the social, linguistic and political range within which the talking points are expounded. The first has the reputation of a
‘journalistic legend’, while the second is still regarded as a ‘young journalist’. The first behaves as though he is above the whole political and journalistic community, considering himself to be its doyen and condescending angry critic, while the second is an openly party-affiliated journalist. And another very important difference – in the works of the first, the talking points are consistently motivated by manifestly racist and xenophobic messages, the majority of which are definitely anti-constitutional in character, while in those of the second there are no messages of this type.

Let us begin with observations about what the talking points on ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’ and ‘The decline of the West/Europe’ look like in the nationalist-xenophobic journalistic language of Kevork Kevorkyan.1

Since the author’s main idea is that Bulgaria is incompatible with the EU, he is the most outspoken in his rage against ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’. In addition to the informal pejorative reference by first name (‘Boyko’ for Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, ‘Tsetska’ for National Assembly President Tsetska Tsacheva, yet, for example, not ‘Rosen’ but consistently only ‘Plevneliev’ for President Rosen Plevneliev), their invariable negative image can be seen from the central figure of venality in this style: the janissaries. The figure of the janissaries inhabits all topics, from the state of Bulgarian literature to current politics and geopolitics: ‘they were on the verge of calling the Batak massacre [during the April 1876 Uprising against Ottoman rule] itself a civilizing process’; ‘the janissaries of the Jew Soros’; ‘a gang of mother-sellers’; ‘the massacre in literature’. Let us look in more detail at Kevorkyan’s highly telling and much-reprinted article titled ‘The new janissaries’.2 The article begins with the topic of ‘Kristalina Georgieva’s disgraceful flight from the Eurocommission’ and ends with the portrait of Vasil Levski, formulating in-between the following characteristic features of the image of the janissaries: ‘What has remained hidden once again is our Curse: Bulgaria to be governed behind the scenes by janissaries. In this particular case, we simply saw the successive reshuffle of one of them. The prime minister, whoever he may be, has the sweet role of a puppet – directed, sometimes also blackmailed, by the janissaries.’ The janissaries are of two kinds: overt (Daniel Mitov, Nikolay Mladenov, Simeon Djankov – ‘The janissaries wear the label of “civilizers”, but aren’t embarrassed by these things’) and covert (Ivo Prokopiev, Ivan Krastev – ‘the hidden political DJs are the most toxic, the likes of Ivan Krastev and the rest’). Rosen Plevneliev is unequivocally a janissary too, while Boyko Borisov is cast in a more complex, strange role: ‘The janissaries have always despised and will always despise Boyko. For example, they backbite him for not speaking [foreign] languages, to say the least. … Boyko isn’t anybody’s janissary – except his own. But when he mixed up with insidious types, he, too, began behaving like them – but at whose cost?’ The not particularly clear figure of ‘janissary of oneself’ is also applied to the other janissaries, but in a radically different style and accompanied by sexual figures: ‘Those must be transsexual types – what’s more, they must be
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ready to have sex even with themselves.’ Here we don’t want to explain what the author meant.

Kevorkyan also introduces some special innovations into the image of the janissaries – unlike the strong Russia, the janissaries are weak, pathetic and cowardly (predicates that are completely absent from the stereotypes of Bulgarian collective memory; in it precisely the janissary is strong and vindictive). Kevorkyan’s janissary government of the state is represented along the lines of ‘sheep’ (‘The State, which behaved like a Miserable Sheep in order to pander to the games of the Wolves’), while the janissaries themselves are represented along the lines of ‘pathetic-puppets-mice’. We must admit that the puppet-janissary, the mouse-janissary, the pathetic janissary, is a novel figure in the traditional Bulgarian stylistic-semantic contours of this image.

Here is what Europe, the US and the janissaries look like when viewed through the lens of the refugee problem, one of Kevorkyan’s pet topics:

I’m sick and tired of listening to the wails of otherwise hard-hearted types about solidarity, empathy, compassion, etc. They speak like the erstwhile socialists, who kept on blathering about how we were supposed to be solidary with the international situation.

One Ivan Krastev, for example, who takes himself for a visionary at the least on a par with Brzezinski – he, too, is wailing about others’ misfortunes, but his gaze always remains cross-eyed when it comes to the Bulgarian fate.

The last thing such people are interested in is the Bulgarian fate. Krastev claims in The New York Times that Europe is suffering from a deficit of compassion for the refugees. He’s found the place to write this – because he doesn’t say a single word about the fact that it’s precisely America which created the evil that’s making Europe tremble now. The US produced the refugee problem with the same grocer calculations with which bad big-budget Hollywood films are produced – bad but profit-making …

Let’s make some simple calculations that are comprehensible even for dumb heads. Which border are we going to guard now, when the Serbs and the Hungarians have made their borders impregnable? We, for our part, are successfully wielding the sling against Russia. Foreign Minister Mitov will soon hide in our embassy in Washington – playing the innocent.

Who is actually dealing with the Horde? …

Everyone’s thinking about their own interests; we’re the only ones behaving like internationalists, like horses in blinkers. It’s high time we stopped listening to empty talkers like the French Ambassador [to Bulgaria] Xavier Lapeyre de Cabanes. …

While our bigwigs kept a cowardly silence about the Gypsy problem, they are now about to be struck by the other disaster, too. They must at least clearly say that it isn’t fair, nor is it right, for the poorest country in Europe to turn into a giant ghetto for refugees. That’s precisely what the plan is. Europe is inevitably falling apart and they will push us back into the hell of isolation.

Nu, zayats, pogodi! (Exclusively for Weekend, 2015³)
This text features all figures in relation to which ‘the janissaries’ were defined above: the strong, terrible and unscrupulous America which ‘created the evil’; the weak Europe whose decline is inevitable (‘Europe is inevitably falling apart’, the French Ambassador is ‘an empty talker’); Russia which smiles in contempt at the sling-yielding Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov. Regarding the sling, the direct association with David and Goliath has escaped the attention of the author, who has achieved an effect here that is the exact opposite of that in the Old Testament – Goliath/Russia has firmly turned into the hero/protagonist, unlike in the Bible (not to mention also the role in which the author has cast himself through the catch-phrase in the famous Soviet animated series Nu, pogodi!). Against this background, the refugee and the Gypsy problem (in the words of the author) have been left in the hands of janissaries like Ivan Krastev and Daniel Mitov, that is to say, the fatherland is in danger.

‘The Gypsy rise’ and ‘the refugee hordes’ are almost synonymous for Kevorkyan; hence, the enemies of the true Bulgarians are, above all, the human rights activists, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC) and President Rosen Plevneliev. At times, this author’s abhorrence for the others (refugees, ‘Gypsies’) is so authentically strong that it turns into self-sufficient hate speech legitimized solely by the background claim to patriotism, which is most often made by simply inserting the name of Vasil Levski (Bulgaria’s greatest national hero, also known as the Apostle of Freedom), as in the much-reprinted article titled ‘From the Apostle to Berlin’, 2016:

Now another animal [a Bulgarian Rom who kicked a woman down a flight of stairs in a subway station in Berlin], from Dobrich again, has disgraced us before the whole world. Some political mice are fretting – about what they would say in Berlin. What’s important, however, is what we will say at long last about those savages – and about their pathetic advocates from the ‘Bulgarian’ Helsinki Committee… This loathsome Gypsy kicked not just the innocent German girl. He kicked us, too. He delivered his vile blow right in the face of Bulgaria… But it’s we who are to blame, because we’re putting up with them. Where’s now the Gypsy woman who wanted me to be sued for calling those Gypsies from Dobrich ‘animals’? … Why is the packaged-as-foreign-minister Mitov silent – he should have said something a hundred times by now. Where, in which mice hole, is the Chief Gypsy-Lover [Krassimir] Kanev [Chairman of the BHC] hiding? And, by the way, is he a Bulgarian – or a Gypsy, which in itself is nothing bad. But if he’s a Gypsy, wouldn’t this cast doubt on his rusty activity as a Gypsy Apostle? … Plevneliev’s chosen few – to them, the Bulgarian honour doesn’t matter: let’s hide under the blanket, together with the successive disgrace – again with the seal of the Gypsies’ barbarity.5

The evil forces are so many that Kevorkyan proposes a BG/EXIT (figu-
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ratively – but, as we know, the effect of every figure is due also to the strong effect of its literal layer): ‘A BG/EXIT doesn’t mean escaping from the improvident and greedy Brussels commissars – those small-minded petty folks who’ve doomed Europe to collapse. A BG/EXIT is the Bulgarian Exit from the internal catastrophes that are looming over us.’ Despite this proviso, Kevorkyan explicitly expresses his admiration for Brexit and Boris Johnson. His BG/EXIT is given a completely literal meaning by the far from jocular suggestion that ‘Sofia had better secure for itself separate membership in the EU’ because ‘Sofia has nothing in common with True Bulgaria’. In the ‘True Bulgaria’, there are three questions (along with the author’s capital letters): ‘What is the Bulgarian Exit: from the Gypsy Rise; from the Refugee Hordes; from the Outrageous Degeneration of a significant part of the Bulgarian population [into animals].’

The following passage from another article by Kevorkyan is even more explicit about its message:

You’ll sympathize with the Eurounion – until you’re left under its ruins.
Instead of looking at the Muddy Puddle – the one here, our own.
And preparing for the Evil.
Stop playing the hero – on the contrary, complain, seek compassion, cry and wail, be sly, be sly, be sly…

The second group of examples illustrating the talking points on ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’ and ‘The decline of the West/Europe’ belong to a political framework that defines itself as politically leftist, party-affiliated, free of nationalist-xenophobic excesses. If we have to define it historically, we will see its typology, without any hesitation, in the late 1940s and the 1950s: the class struggle is its top political priority, and hence, the dominant basis for figurative usages; everything rightist is ‘fascist’ and beyond the realm of the normal, it is a form of social and clinical pathology that can and must be condemned only; every more complex picture of the historical and contemporary world is degenerately intellectual and has nothing to do with the people; the term ‘the people’ (narod) is confined solely to the poor and the revolutionary left-wing, its classic meaning of ‘people of any age, class...’ has no place within the coordinates of this political thinking.

The target of daily attacks in this journalistic language, exemplified by Alexander Simov, a journalist and member of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), are the rightists in Bulgaria, called ‘protesters’, ‘Sorosoids’, ‘grant-spongers’, ‘psycho rightists’, ‘loony rightists’, etc. According to the calendar of the period under review here (2013 – 2016), we will first look at the image of the ‘protesters’ in an article with the telling title ‘The civil society of the narcissists’. Their image is based on a simple, and fundamental for the author’s entire oeuvre, class opposition: the poor are left-wing, the rich are right-wing. Hence, the protests of February 2013 were leftist (‘the hungry, the angry, those unable to
pay their electricity bills’), while those of June 2013 were rightist (those ‘who read Ayn Rand, have state jobs but hate the state and imagine themselves to be proud independent souls although they leave the capital city twice a year. They aren’t defending any interest other than their own narcissism. … The battle for a different state doesn’t involve solely the battle for the rich citizens’ being sure that their phones won’t be tapped … to be a citizen means to care also about something other than the thickness of your wallet and calculating everything in money … urban snobbery.’) Derivative of this opposition is also the division between ‘the people’ (leftists, poor) and ‘rightists’ (‘protesters’, ‘grant-spongers’, that is to say, intelligentsia, or, according to the favourite pejorative cliché of this type of public languages, ‘the smart and beautiful’). This, too, is a classic party-class understanding of the term and concept of ‘the people’ that is familiar from the writing of the decades between 1944 and 1989. However, another socialist cliché – the image of ‘the people’s intelligentsia’ of the same decades – is not offered in Simov’s writing for the time being, and that is also why the opposition between the people and the (rightist) intelligentsia in them is so distinctly Stalinist. All this is crowned with the words of Jesus Christ, which Simov condescendingly says as if they were his own: ‘It’s not their fault. They simply don’t know what they are doing.’

Since this journalistic thinking is not afraid of contradictions, along with the almost all-forgiving New-Testament ‘they don’t know what they are doing’ the conviction that of course they know what they are doing is consistently affirmed in the figure of the professional protester-sellout-parasite:

Well, well, well, being a fighter against communism is indeed becoming a well-paid profession. Professional anticommunist. Something like director of a waterfall. A builder of castles of air because in these lands, alas, communism hasn’t been spotted for a long time. But that’s also why the job is so sweet and blissful, and why the applicants for it are legion.9

In addition to being rich and narcissistic, the rightists are also very few in number against the background of the concept of ‘the people’ (= the leftists): ‘In Bulgaria, there’s no civil society. There are some ten thousand Sofianites who take themselves for such and who are, furthermore, very venal. The ‘grant-spongers’ figure is a much-repeated and conspicuous refrain; it is also an obvious successor to the Stalinist cliché about ‘venal servants/spies of foreign agencies and foreign interests’. This is also a refrain in Simov’s journalism. Here we will illustrate it through his article titled ‘The professional scroungers of the America for Bulgaria [Foundation] as a threat to national security’ (201616), inspired by the following sentence from the 2016 annual report of the State Agency for National Security (DANS): ‘The use of subjects from the non-governmental sector as part of the applied complex instrumentarium for influence and impact is growing.’ The Agency does not say which non-
governmental organizations and which subjects it has in mind, but the author promptly translates this: ‘That is to say – interests that are foreign to Bulgaria are being imposed through foundations, non-governmental organizations and all sorts of other factories for social parasites. It’s fortunate that the state has at long last matured enough to notice this obvious phenomenon.’ In this article the whole non-governmental sector in Bulgaria is reduced to ‘the sinister America for Bulgaria Foundation’ and the ‘parasites’, according to Simov, are mentioned by name – Nikolay Mladenov, Edvin Sugarev, Hristo Ivanov, Iliyan Vassilev, Zornitsa Mitkova – while Dostena Lavergne and her book Ekspertite na prehoda (The experts of the transition) are praised (‘because trying to describe the network is like letting a sunray into a den of vampires – the air fills with smoke and curses’), along with Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov (praised for what Simov defines as his ‘iconic’ statement: ‘People whose profession is to demand resignations are attacking [Minister of Culture Vezhdi] Rashidov’). Of course, if the government claims that Russia is a threat to Bulgaria’s national security, the author disagrees, once again declaring ‘the externally-financed civil society’ as a big and true enemy.11

Simov’s take on the incumbent right-wing politicians, who resemble the protesters in their venal and parasitic character, is invariably negative. But while in his view Boyko Borisov is rather pathetic because he is cowardly (‘The prime minister who’s shaking like jelly’12), politicians like Defence Minister Nikolay Nenchev, Foreign Minister Daniel Mitov or EU Commissioner Kristalina Georgieva are rather frightening. Here are some examples where Simov’s journalistic style strives to represent the image of the venal Bulgarian elites as vacillating between the funny and the frightening, and in doing so pulls no punches:

Kristalina Georgieva has turned out to be a virtuoso at intrigue. A black genius of envy. A shady Balkan character with a mean grimace holding a high European office. The Bulgarian political Salieri. A dealer in Balkan complexes on the big scene.

It’s only through such definitions that we can describe Georgieva’s behaviour and her last, desperate attempt to jump on the bandwagon for the top job in the UN without caring at all about her country’s dignity, or about the exact number of corpses, intrigues and denunciations she’ll pass over. … Even the ancient cannibalistic rituals were more humanistic and humane than the hundreds of statues full of demonic joy, satanic giggling and brutal pleasure that Bulgaria is on the way to squandering its chances [after the government withdrew its support from its previous candidate for UN Secretary General, Irina Bokova, and nominated Georgieva]…13

Nenchev seems to have taken himself for Pinochet. That’s because the inclusion of the [Bulgarian] military in this type of unclear anti-terrorist operations has begun to look like the junta in Chile, which killed hundreds
of peaceful citizens in order to establish a grim neoliberal dictatorship from which this Latin American country cannot recover to this day. …

Pinochet – this is the unlawful and secret fantasy of the Bulgarian anticommmunist. He may be extremely tolerant in the projects he defends before the America for Bulgaria [Foundation], but late at night, when the drunken litre of vodka gets to his head, he begins to dream of a Pinochet’s Bulgaria where anyone who disagrees will be taken to the stadium and shot dead even for a leftist blinking of the eyes. This erotic political dream has long been bubbling in the collective unconscious of the psycho-right, but we are now witnessing an attempt at its legislative materialization.\(^{14}\)

After being twice forced into a ‘historic compromise’ pose and then compelled by force of circumstances to succumb to a majestic schizophrenia – unable to decide whether it’s in power or in opposition – of late the Reformist Bloc [RB] has somewhat faded from the public eye like a retired porn actress who has devoted herself to reading Zen literature in order to find out exactly where she was wrong in her life-choices. At any other time the electorate would have sighed with relief because the RB’s disappearance from the horizon radically improves the mental health of the nation, but right before the presidential elections this is a manifestation of some morbid symptom. … The reformers have hidden like an MP in a brothel, with a group of paparazzi waiting for him outside. … It [the Right] has never managed to find its [plastic surgeon] Doctor Enchev. Some normal politician to give it a facelift to remove the wrinkles, then suck the restitute fat from the stomach, remove a couple of Kostovist ribs on each side to make its waist slimmer and sexier, inject hyaluronic acid in the lips so that it can’t often stick out and display its snake tongue. And finally, to give it a breast lift, because several generations of mentally confused politicians marred the media image of the Right so much that in the last few years it existed like a vampire who’s ruminating anticommmunism ad nauseum, without being able to renovate itself at least a little bit and to propose some fresh idea about Bulgaria at least once.\(^{15}\)

Alexander Simov often accuses the enemies of using ‘fascist’ methods when he disagrees with them in various cases (this accusation is also completely in line with the Stalinist tradition); but he just as often and, we hope, unconsciously, uses the classical techniques of that propaganda in his style. Even when he rightly identifies fascism in public rhetoric such as that of Greece’s Golden Dawn and in the attacks against migrants, Simov does not recognize any allies even on this point:

One topic dominates over all others and, to the horror of the smart and beautiful, it isn’t that of their theatrical discontent, but that of the influx of refugees in our country. … The situation was immediately sniffed out by the political vampires … The ancient beast gave a roar, the sleeping demon, it turned out, has never gone away. … These days I read also quite a few articles by right-wing authors who likewise declare themselves to be against
xenophobia and hatred. Last week the DSB [Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria] organized a small rally against hatred, but it seems they didn’t notice that they were chanting ‘Red rubbish’ at it.16

Despite the word ‘likewise’, the author excludes the rightists from any possibility of a humanistic and value-based consensus – first, because their discontent is ‘theatrical’ and they chant ‘Red rubbish’, and second, because in his idiolect they, too, are very frequently described in the same infernal style (demon, vampires) which, in this article, is predicated to the image of fascism. The examples given so far clearly show that the style – just as any style in principle – is never politically innocent, and this requires a more detailed look at it.

Interlude I: Propaganda Policies of the Style

Their intellectual spasms [of ‘the Euro-Atlantic bg-intellectuals’], indistinguishable from the urges to vomit, are producing one gem after another. … [I]n Bulgaria, because of the classic lackey provincialism which is like a venereal disease of the mind, we can observe this process much more clearly and, if we have a black sense of humour, grab a bag of popcorn and watch our intellectuals trying to escape from the noose that’s tightening around their image so as to reduce it to ashes once and for all and then scatter it with the autumn wind…17

This example from Simov’s journalistic oeuvre (in this particular case, on the talking point on ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’) has even provoked an analytical review of this and similar styles – an ‘amusing’ (in his own words) article by Kalin Yanakiev,18 in which the author makes some important points about Alexander Simov’s metaphors and Darina Grigorova’s syntax. Yanakiev shares his amusement at the immoderateness of Simov’s metaphors, which are drawn simultaneously from several associative clusters, thereby achieving a purely comic effect, unintended by the author, in the inconsistencies between them. The comic effect, in its turn, is drowned in inordinate malice (‘It begins to look like a long curse, yet long curses are never “brilliant”’). Actually, what Kalin Yanakiev calls ‘an unswallowably thick metaphorical soup’ in Simov is an excellent example not exactly of metaphor but of catachresis – a peculiar trope that is a mistaken, mixed metaphor whose inordinate sensory-associative targets obstruct and block its ability to be meaningful.

Let us trace for a moment the lines of the catachresis in the publications quoted above. The ‘protesters’ are narcissists at the beginning of a short text, at the end of which they turn out to be zombies as well (that is to say, in the full catachresis the protester appears as a narcissist-zombie); Kristalina Georgieva is a virtuoso at intrigue-black genius-Salieri-shady Balkan character-dealer-passing over corpses; Nikolay Nenchev is Pinochet-fantasy-alcoholism-erotic
The catachresis in Simov is focused – through repetitive series of its segments – on psycho-physiological negative details, innerness, monstrosity, sexual deviance, and disease. The catachresis wraps the image of the enemy in thematic subsections of the general framework (sellouts, lackeys, puppets of foreign interests) – and introduces in this image the repetitive associations of deviation from the norm, preordained pathology and, generally, ‘subhumanity’. Such an approach also has its historical (Nazi) tradition which is not at all progressive, nice, or praiseworthy.

Simov’s catachreses do not have the form and character of a complex thought – the eclectic mix of different lines of association in them does not achieve a deepening of meaning, but a simple quantitative increase of the insult. And precisely because the main intent of his journalism is to insult the ‘venal Bulgarian elites’, this journalism functions as ‘popular’ reading material, as a series of verbose and unpretentious curses that serve only to vilify the image of the enemy. But the catachresis also has an important political quality – the ramifications and non-centredness of the lines of association are also a ready rhetorical instrument for shifting between contexts, switching between topics and intertwining talking points so that no matter what the actual occasion for the article is, the propaganda matrix sounds with all its thematic components and talking points simultaneously.

Thus, Nikolai Nenchev is a fascist like Pinochet because he ‘is hallucinating Putin and hybrid wars’. In addition to being a demonic Salieri, Kristalina Georgieva turns out to be a touchstone for the just and honest position of Russia and the vile policy of a politically collapsed Europe personified by Merkel, whose country is a dwarf in the UN:

And that’s why the plotters very much hoped to entangle Russia, too, in their web of lies and fifty shades of Kristalina. Russia, however, came up with an unexpected response. In violation of all diplomatic rules and unwritten etiquette, Moscow made public details of an informal conversation of Merkel with Vladimir Putin, something like testing the waters for possible support for Georgieva [as Bulgaria’s candidate for UN Secretary General]. Thus, two things became clear – that Russia categorically supports Bokova and won’t take part in Georgieva’s shady affairs, and that Russia has written off Merkel as a world leader. Which is logical. Germany is merely a dwarf in the UN, and Merkel’s policy has brought Europe to political collapse.

Thus, the talking point criticizing the Bulgarian elites is framed in a geopolitical evaluative context. For Simov, the US is an antagonist mainly in the
case of the war in Syria and especially emphatically – in the completely negative image of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. The EU (and the entirely metonymic term for it – ‘Europe’), though, is in a much worse state – in this style Europe is not just ‘politically collapsed’, it turns out to be downright non-existent in the title ‘The propagandists of the nonexistent Europe’, and its image is maintained and propagated only by a handful of inept, paid journalists: ‘It’s appalling to watch how the people, who unashamedly kept painting for us a made-up variant of the world and of Europe even when reality showed thousands of times that they were lying their heads off, are obstinately sticking to their lies and drowning in their hallucinations and illusions…”

The style in which Kevorkyan offers his version of the propaganda theses is completely different from Simov’s. In Kevorkyan, there is no frantic lapsing into catachresis – on the contrary, his style is sententious and slogan-like. In his articles, the talking points are interlinked through a fragmentary composition (the separate segments are often also graphically separated by asterisks) whose parts look like a chronicle, like a hopeless calendar of a dark present. The fragmentary stories themselves, however, look as though they were written by a seer – things are happening, but there is only one person who sees them in their, at first glance, unharmonious wholeness and reveals their meaning to the public. Kevorkyan indeed wants to sound portentous, like a speaker of the truth and the only sighted person among the blind. Even such a detail as the frequent capitalization of various words in mid-sentence speaks of a desire to add extra conceptual weight to the word, to load it with an additional universalizing meaning which the speaker offers to his less perspicacious audience. That is also why the capital letters in Kevorkyan look like something situated in the stylistic range between prophetic speech and troll-writing.

Such a mindset does not need rational and clear argumentation; Kevorkyan is not in the mode of ‘I’m saying this and proving it’, he is in the mode of ‘I’m saying this because it’s the truth but you can’t see it’. That is also why in his writing arguments are replaced by explicit invectives and insults (quite similar in style to swearing) aimed at the EU, the US, the Jews, the minorities and the venal Bulgarian politicians. Here is a telling sample of words and syntagmas which are clear examples of this style:

the little Napoleons … the bastards, as Radan Kanev and Hristo Ivanov, the Minister of Justice, call themselves. But they don’t just call themselves bastards, they take themselves to be such. This is the most sincere thing those political midgets have ever uttered. They truly are bastards – postcommunist runts… The Feeble One [Radan Kanev]; provincial Plevneliev … our Logorrhea Plevneliev; sparrows with a hard-on [referring to Plevneliev and his ilk], rats [referring to the authors of a petition against Culture Minister Vezhdi Rashidov]; Solomon Passy’s gold ablution-jug; Now we must look out to make sure that [Education Minister Meglena] Kuneva doesn’t mortgage
the whole Bulgarian education system, or the scraps left over from it, to the
America for Bulgaria Foundation;\textsuperscript{27} the kolkhoznik Nenchev … the Brussels
sprouts;\textsuperscript{28} the until recent French ambassador to Sofia, the Xavier, who kicked
up [a fuss, talking himself blue in the face] on every occasion like an overripe
dancer from Moulin Rouge … the false oracle Ivan Krastev is the son of an
ideological rat;\textsuperscript{29} rats who organized the conspiracy … the cross-eyed oracle
Krastev … the false Mitov, the minister-attendant … assholes;\textsuperscript{30} [Interior
Minister Rumyana] Bachvarova, the would-be sociologist;\textsuperscript{31} Tsetska …
ingnorance … arrogance;\textsuperscript{32} Nenchev’s antics … Defence Minister Nenchev’s
servile loops … the fleas of hypocrical anticommunism;\textsuperscript{33} sparrow … a small
bird … talks like a streetwalker-protester [referring to Rosen Plevneliev];\textsuperscript{34}
the improvident and greedy Brussels commissars – those small-minded petty
folks who’ve doomed Europe to collapse;\textsuperscript{35} and so on and so forth.

The non-human and sub-human nature of Bulgaria’s venal pro-European
elites are assigned different accents and dominants in the styles of Kevorkyan
and Simov. Whereas the former places emphasis on the zoological (and floral)
as a subhuman weakness and impotence of the pro-Europeans – mice, rats,
horses in blinkers, sparrows, small bird, Brussels sprouts – the catachreses of
the latter are dominated by psychosomatic pathological details: psycho right-
ists, loony rightists, hallucinations, alcoholism, etc., plus the somewhat over-
estimated, due to the catachrestic effect, might of the enemy in the infernal
imagery of vampires, demons and monsters. There is a distinct use of sexual
figures in the styles of both Kevorkyan and Simov – for example, the janissar-
ies are ‘transsexual guys ready to have sex even with themselves’, ‘the Xavier,
who kicked up [a fuss] on every occasion like an overripe dancer from Moulin
Rouge’ – while the combination of the zoological and the sexual is achieved
in the unsurpassed image of ‘sparrows with a hard-on’ (Kevorkyan); ‘erotic
political dream’, ‘like a retired porn actress’, ‘like an MP in a brothel’, etc. (Si-
mov). Hence, in both styles there is a strong fixation on the body and the bod-
ily: ‘political midgets’, ‘postcommunist runts’, ‘the cross-eyed oracle Krastev’,
‘assholes’ (Kevorkyan); ‘to give it [the Right] a facelift to remove the wrinkles,
then suck the restitute fat from the stomach, remove a couple of Kostovist ribs
on each side to make its waist slimmer and sexier…” (Simov).

In fact, the excessively florid styles of the two authors boil down to a sim-
ple intention to insult, to the plain wish to verbally abuse and discredit the
enemy to the point of distinguishing the enemy from the usual norms of the
human. Of course, history reminds us that this is by no means a socially and po-
litically innocuous act, but if for a moment we ignore its stylistic expressions,
all that will remain are the invariable claims of the talking points – they remain
firmly and are repeated from one text to the next despite all stylistic differences
and ideological details. That is also why the question of what social spectrum
of propaganda does this type of rhetoric serve, where is it situated in the public
sphere, is very interesting.
Here of course we cannot answer this question, but we can suggest some possible lines of enquiry that might lead to an answer. The field of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria is mobile, it has at its disposal different sources, voices and audiences which are mutually reflected in social interaction and therefore mutually reaffirm each other but also mutually relativize each ‘separate’ position, role and function of their own.

On one side, the above-quoted examples of a rather extreme style of the talking points may have a special role in the new discursive front – being its stylistic boundary, the limit of the admissible. Unless this limit is transgressed, the same claims articulated in another tone and style become implicitly normalized – what’s more, they might sound ‘learned’, competent, intellectual and even academic. (Such is the case with speakers whose public language is examined below. Although their claims are practically the same, the other way of their articulation widens their capacity to sound competent and convincing.)

On another side, however, the style of the above examples can (most regrettably) be seen as having already become normative because of the conclusion, shared by the participants in this study, that hate speech has become a civic virtue – that there must be ‘persistent encouragement of the denunciation of multiculturalism and political correctness – they are an American weapon against Europe and denouncing them is not wrong, it is a noble and brave act. Those who accuse you of hate speech only prove that they are American agents (in the softer version, euphemistically: “a conduit of foreign interests”, be it consciously or because they are naïve and idealistic). Hate speech is assigned the status of a civic virtue – it alone is “sincere and truthful”.36

There is, however, a third side – this rhetoric may seem ‘objectively’ normal vis-à-vis another type of writing found in the Bulgarian public sphere. In comparison with it, the imagery of the political nonhuman in the cases discussed above seems almost entirely normal because it rests solely on ‘figurative meanings’. Let us look briefly also at this third side and line of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria.

**Interlude II: Reptilians as Political Animals**

Sensational conspiracy theories occupy a separate and probably quite wide niche in the Bulgarian public sphere, a niche which has its own ‘language’, causality rules, logic and audience. At first sight, they seem to be not particularly compatible with the direct goals of anti-democratic propaganda and its current political tasks. The main haven of conspiracy theories are the hundreds of anonymous websites (the haven of fake news). Here we will examine only some of the publications from the 2015-2016 period on the website Bradva.bg (by the way, this is one of the few websites that are recognizable to the public, according to the sociological survey conducted by Alpha Research under this project). We will trace how the conspiracy theory that the world is ruled by reptilians, an alien race of reptilian humanoids, has developed on Bulgarian soil.
Here we have chosen to focus on the reptilians because in this conspiracy theory politicians are most seriously (or at least with no visible irony) thought of as beings from the twilight zone. The nonhuman here is not a metaphor, cat-achresis or any other figure of speech, as it is in the examples quoted above; it is entirely literal.

The conspiracy theory about the reptilians, of course, is not Bulgarian and the Bulgarian anonymous website Bradva.bg translates and applies it in the local context (or, in fact, invents or extends its successive episodes), its media role being that of a transmitter relaying globally covered-up truths to the Bulgarian public. That is also why these publications abound in quotations from and references to other (similar) sources. This behaviour of quoting is meant to strengthen the reader’s trust; but it actually follows the formula of one of the characters in Umberto Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*: How can the Marquis de Carabas not exist when Puss in Boots says he’s in the marquis’s service?

In 2015 the publications about reptilians were apparently still driven by pure sensation-seeking, without selecting from among the people in power particular candidates for nonhuman roles. If there is any propaganda in this, it is mainly in the message that the person in power – whoever he or she may be – is in fact not human. This is more a collective image of those in power than differentiation between good and bad power-holders, although the annexation of Crimea definitely looks like resistance against the Americans who are disliked by the masters of the world. In March 2015, an article titled, ‘British politician: Aliens advised Putin to stand up to the Americans’, offers the confession of British Labour Party councillor Simon Parkes (who lost his virginity at the tender age of five after he was seduced by an extraterrestrial lady) that the ruling race of the reptilians had advised Putin to annex Crimea and enter Ukraine in order to limit the American influence there. The same plot appears in October, in which Bradva.bg now refers also to ‘The Daily Mirror, quoted by TCH’ for Parkes’s confessions.

In December 2015 it becomes clear who is the true master of Earth – the true master of Earth is Richard Hugh Baker, President and CEO of Managed Funds Association. According to the channel Species, he is the chief reptilian on Earth, even a reptilian god, because, as the proof caught on video shows, the pupils of his eyes contract from time to time. The reptilian Baker is very evil and brings evils to humanity, and Obama and Putin are his servants. Up to this point in 2015, all great powers and their leaders, both Obama and Putin, are only executors of another’s will, servants of the reptilians, but they are still humans.

The year 2016 brought a serious rise in propaganda and sharpened the lines of various protagonists and antagonists of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda through sensational plots. In April Putin is no longer a servant of the reptilians, he is a fighter against the reptilians. According to yournewswire.com, Putin had called an extraordinary meeting and told his close aides that the world
Albena Hranova: Bulgarian Anti-Democratic Propaganda

is ruled by reptilians. He said that he was not one of them, but they are afraid of him and have attempted to lure him into their ancient Babylonian cult. (To the storyline of the meeting is added the claim that the reptilian class, which rules humanity, had ‘tyrannical control over our food, water, and air supply, and they are actively dumbing down the masses’, according to the website nepoznato.energetika-bg.com). A sort of culmination of the episode with the extraordinary meeting is Putin’s response to questions about the Panama Papers leak – pointing out that George Soros was behind the plot, Putin slammed his fist on the table and exclaimed, ‘George Soros, you sly dragon, this is war!’

In July, an article tells us that ‘there is a serious theory that Vladimir Putin is immortal!’ and that he is a ‘mythical creature’, as 6th-sense.net claimed – a wise, undying creature that has resided on our planet for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, therefore Russia, ‘according to a number of analysts, will very soon occupy its place as the world’s number one superpower!’ The proof of Putin’s immortality is provided by three photos, from 1920, 1941 and 2015, claiming to show Putin who has barely aged. The main argument for the mythical immortality and the superpower is the Russian leader’s youthful looks.

In July 2016 again, Bradva.bg reports that Putin and Obama had joined forces to fight against the Netherworld, because the Earth is hollow, there is a giant opening on Antarctica leading to the interior of the Earth, which is home to an advanced alien civilization with which the two leaders will start a war of the worlds. Proof of this is the fact that ‘Patriarch Kiril [of Russia] had visited the operation in Antarctica twice, disclose.tv writes.’

Also in July, Bradva.bg informs us that Angela Merkel and Theresa May are Illuminati for sure, because they have the habit of positioning their hands in a certain manner, which was an Illuminati symbol according to the website illuminatiRex, quoted by intrigi.bg. This hand gesture was reportedly also used by Denzel Washington, Tom Cruise, Pope John Paul II and Hitler.

In September it becomes clear what was the true reason why Putin annexed Crimea, and it ‘has nothing to do with geopolitics’. The truth is that thirty-eight underground pyramids, bigger than the Egyptian ones and dating from the era of the dinosaurs, were discovered near Sevastopol. A sarcophagus with the mummy of a small dinosaur with a gold crown on his head was discovered in the biggest pyramid. All this was accompanied by strange vibrations. So the reason for the annexation of Crimea turns out to be archaeological, also connected to the reptilians and, of course, energy-related: ‘An even bolder theory claims that the crowned lizard is a predecessor of the race of the reptilians, the creatures that a number of conspiracy theories claim are still ruling the world. Alternative analysts are certain that Putin’s goal is to discover the source of the vibrations – it may turn out that this is an eternal energy source that would make all nuclear power plants redundant.’

In October 2016 Bradva.bg again informs us about the mighty reptilian race that is ruling us. This time the list of reptilian leaders looks as follows:
‘There is intense talk that many of the world leaders are representatives of this race, among them the British queen, the Bush clan, even America’s Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin.’

If the reader were to suppose that this is a unified political plot (something like a ‘novel’) from the short period between April and October 2016, disseminated in separate episodes following a consistent logic and sending a consistent message, then it would look as follows: Putin is a fighter against the reptilians and against the old dragon Soros, and in his capacity as a thousands-year-old wise immortal creature Putin is making Russia a world power and preparing, together with Obama, a war on the advanced civilization from the Netherworld, while the European Union has been taken over by at least two Illuminati; meanwhile, the excavations in Crimea are continuing, where the mummy of a small dinosaur with a crown on his head and energy vibrations that render all nuclear power plants meaningless give the answer about the origin of the reptilian civilization to which, by the way, Putin himself also belongs, along with Obama and the British queen.

Of course, this plot makes no sense and contains huge contradictions which no avid reader of the genre would forgive. Obviously, these episodes are not interconnected in any way and are addressed at readers who do not care about story logic, use causal chains in their thinking while reading, remember the previous episode and ask questions of the type, ‘How could Putin be a fighter against the reptilians and the reptilian Soros, then turn out to be a reptilian himself?’ It may be that the website Bradva.bg is not upset by comments of the type, ‘stop this nonsense!’, such as are also to be found below the publications. Or the political message may be promoted today but dropped tomorrow, because this is indeed anonymous journalism at its worst and there is nothing articulate in it, not even a more or less logically consistent propaganda. Or it may be simply that none of the anonymous authors has read what the other anonymous authors wrote before him or her, so the effect of the episodes is something like ‘Chinese whispers’. Or it may be that the propaganda effect nevertheless works, and persistently at that, because fighting the reptilians and being a reptilian are equally important to the genre of sensational journalism; or it doesn’t matter whether you are a reptilian or not if you are Putin. And so on.

Actually, we did not say something very important about the October 2016 article. Besides the mentioned reptilians Obama, Bush, Putin and the British queen, Boyko Borisov appears in it as the main character, along with Todor Zhivkov and his daughter, therefore Bulgarian political history also becomes integrated into the reptilian plot. Citing an anonymous reader whose grandmother lives in Bankya near Borisov’s house, the article reports that the elderly woman was upset by some regular visitors to Borisov’s house whose first visit made her dog howl and bark; after their second visit, the dog fell ill and died. Borisov also had special chairs for reptilian guests who, feeling at home, relaxed, assumed their reptilian shape and put their tails in a special hole cut into
the base of the back of the chair (there is no irony whatsoever in the language of the article and there is even a picture of a chair for reptilians with a hole). Worried, the elderly woman watched all this and shared it with her grandson, who drew the following historical conclusions which are presented by Bradva.bg with great concern and heuristic insight:

Could precisely this be the secret of his [Boyko Borisov’s] political success and influence over the masses!?

According to a number of ufologists, already Todor Zhivkov was in direct contact with the alien race of the reptilians! The theory claims that precisely they enabled him to hold on to power in the country for decades on end. Alternative researchers claim that after the horrible car accident in 1973, in which his daughter, Lyudmila Zhivkova, almost died, representatives of this alien race made her recover in a record short time.

Precisely this is also the reason why she ‘opened her eyes’ and undertook a number of controversial and quite secret enterprises, such as the quest for the tomb of the goddess Bastet in [Mount] Strandzha – a government operation that remains shrouded in mystery to this day! It is assumed that precisely the reptilians ordered her to deliver to them ‘something’ that has been hidden deep in the mountain for thousands of years!

Boyko Borisov was a bodyguard and confidant of the former ‘number one’ [Zhivkov] in the last years of his life. Could it have been precisely Todor Zhivkov who introduced him to his years-long ‘alien partners’, who then recognized his potential and decided that this would be the next leader of Bulgaria!?

You may be asking yourselves why the alien puppet-masters have such serious interests in our lands?

It stands to reason why. Bulgaria’s land is the point with the strongest energies on the whole planet. This has been confirmed by phenomena like Vanga and Peter Deunov. The Teacher [Deunov] called our lands the ‘New Jerusalem’! The oldest civilization on the planet was born here, and this is by no means accidental! If there indeed are alien puppet-masters, they would certainly want to have full control over what’s happening across our holy lands. Yet this cannot be achieved without ‘communication’ with the rulers.

When we asked our anonymous informer if he thinks that Borisov himself is of the reptilian race, he simply said nothing.

Thus, this text demonstrates the point at which the reptilian plot becomes quite patriotic because of our strongest energies, our holy lands, and – of course – above all because of Vanga and Deunov. Even so, however, the greatest strength of the reptilians is in geopolitics and, evidently, Putin (whether he is a reptilian or not, according to Bradva.bg) is at the centre of the plot. Hence, we will return to the third propaganda talking point and to the non-anonymous styles of some of its speakers.
The Rise of Russia

This key talking point of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria – which is, of course, closely and causally intertwined with the other two – was found by our study to be subdivided into several sub-topics: Russia’s political and, above all, spiritual might, which has made Russia an alternative to Western liberalism; Russia’s enemies (and Russia as a victim of the aggressive West and of those who claim it is conducting a hybrid war); the power of Russian weapons; Crimea and Ukraine as fair Russian causes; the unfair sanctions against Russia. Here we will examine primarily the first sub-topic and, in particular, one of its important aspects: how anti-democratic propaganda views Russia as a matter of Bulgarian identity; how, in terms of the old anthropological opposition between ‘own’ and ‘foreign’, Russia is seen as ‘own’ and Europe as ‘foreign’; and how Russia (in its Putinist political variant) is inscribed within ‘everything Bulgarian and native’.

For example, Kevorkyan’s janissaries – besides having betrayed the native in order to sell themselves out to foreign forces which, for this author, are invariably the US and the EU – have another janissary characteristic, namely that they don’t love Russia:

These people, apart from everything else, are illiterate and ignorant, they don’t know anything about the Russian political mentality, they don’t know to what extremes it can go, how vindictive it can be, if provoked. A couple of senseless words against Putin from some stinking local mouth can kill an entire project. Boyko let [outgoing President Rosen] Plevneliev exercise his provincial Russophobia for five years, and didn’t intervene. It’s almost certain that [current presidential candidate] Tsetska [Tsacheva] won’t go that far – after all, she’s seen her fill of the Panorama in [her home town of] Pleven, devoted to the [1877-1878] Russo-Turkish War.46

This reference to Russia in relation to the image of the janissaries supports at least two messages that are important to the author – the image of Russia as strong, extreme and vindictive, and the question of identity, a question of extreme importance to Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda: the janissaries are betraying the native, they are also betraying Russia, therefore Russia is constitutive for the native.

The answer as to what direction should the author’s dreamed-of BG/EXIT take is to be found in another article by Kevorkyan, in which strength is opposed to weakness, kinship to foreigners, and collective memory to janissaries. The coordinate of this direction is, of course, Russia, represented here as a moral and civilizational alternative:

You can’t but say to yourself that no one can get the better of the Russian people.

And then, something like that can be born only in the Russian mind – [at
Albena Hranova: Bulgarian Anti-Democratic Propaganda

the 9 May Victory Parade in Moscow,] at least 400 thousand people from Moscow alone were carrying portraits of their relatives who took part or died in the War. This ocean of photos was majestic...

Today’s leaders haven’t learned anything from History, they use it simply to serve their concrete needs – first they whine about Crimea, which they no longer even mention, then they take up Ukraine. And they go into hiding when tribute must be paid to the Day on which Evil was defeated, because they have to keep up the theatre with Ukraine, where their calculations have gone wrong again. But what does the Ukrainian mess have to do with the victory over fascism? …

This was a Parade of duty to the Dead. And an amazing demonstration of this much-suffering people’s high culture of remembrance. Our sufferings are insignificant in comparison to its own ones, but even the smallest ordeals will disappoint us. We last rose in 1989, rushing to support the changes … [as if everyone would be given a free winning ticket for the jackpot]; and we quickly [gave up and] shrank back [into our shells], satisfying ourselves with putting up with people who are destroying precisely our collective Memory.47

This image of Russia is based on strength – the venal Bulgarian elites are weak (rats, sparrows), while Russia is mighty; Russia’s might is expressed even through somewhat intimidating formulas, such as: ‘no one can get the better of the Russian people’; ‘they don’t know anything about the Russian political mentality, they don’t know to what extremes it can go, how vindictive it can be, if provoked.’ The opposite image is just as effective for propaganda, though – namely, Russia as being unjustly accused, as a victim of the false claim that it is conducting a hybrid war; the aggressors in this case are, of course, Bulgaria’s venal liberal elites and their Western masters. For example:

Since Bliznashki’s caretaker government to this day, the Defence Ministry has been making desperate attempts to promote in an official document the idea that a hybrid war is being conducted in Bulgaria. The first time, in the notorious Strategy 2020, Russia was defined as a threat to Bulgaria. Despite the obvious unwillingness of people [in Bulgaria] to recognize Russia as an enemy and, most importantly – despite the mass public disapproval of the policy of sanctions against Moscow, which the last two governments have supported, with their tongues lolling. The MoD is now again trying to promote the thesis that a hybrid war is being conducted in our country, a thesis that serves solely a tiny handful of Sofia Russophobes who have turned their hatred into a means of subsistence. Can a policy be adequate if it is massively at variance with people’s feelings? Even the very attempt to impose the thesis about a hybrid war is a way of conducting a hybrid war. And against all Bulgarians at that. … There is no hybrid war in Bulgaria. There are only people who refuse to follow the clichés, dictated from above, regarding the imagined threats. People en masse don’t recognize Russia as an enemy. And the fact that the same cliché is repeated over and over again suggests that the agents of foreign influence already feel desperate. Because
the hybrid war they are conducting against the truth is a complete failure.48

The Bulgarian Euro-Atlantic television plankton, the psycho-right that has been left permanently without quality medications, has, since a few days ago, a new monster that upsets its sleep and its grant-based timelessness. The new nightmare is called the ‘Night Wolves’, a legendary group of bikers known for its motorcycle trips and actions. The motorcyclists became famous after part of them were sanctioned and banned from entry into the US and Canada because they actively supported the return of Crimea to the Russian Federation.

Since then, the Night Wolves have been demonized and made out to be almost like a motorcycle regiment of the Kremlin, Putin’s personal Biker Guard that is lying in wait for the Euro-Atlantic consciences in the dark in order to ensnare them in the cobweb of the hybrid war.49

Here Russia appears mostly as a victim of foreign (and Bulgarian right-wing) propaganda – there is no hybrid war, Russia is attacked by malevolent hybrid operatives and European hypocrisy who cannot forgive it for preserving its national dignity thanks to Putin’s regime. Simov introduces the opposition ‘propaganda versus truth’, defining himself as a speaker of the truth opposed to the propaganda conducted by the Bulgarian ‘hybrid butchers’ and against the feelings of the majority of Bulgarians.

Another thing is also important – in Simov's journalistic language there is no contradiction between his authentic leftist ideas and his just as authentic defence of the unjustly accused regime of Putin. There is no contradiction because of an obvious substitution – the leftist and class-based concept of ‘the people’, shared by Simov, is transformed into geopolitical terms by the following ‘syllogism’: the corporations (the neoliberal elites) that are enslaving the ordinary person (the people) are an enemy of the Left – the hegemony of neoliberalism is imposed by the US (first geopolitical ‘translation’) – anyone who takes a stand against the US is a protector of ordinary people and a fighter against neoliberalism – Russia stood up against the US by annexing Crimea, therefore... The leftist vocabulary is thus translated into realpolitik and geostrategic terms and ‘replaced’ by national-sovereignism, without taking into account the political reality and the ideological ‘conservative’ self-assessments of the Kremlin regime in which there is nothing leftist. Thus, the leftist idea is likewise emptied of anything leftist, once it is ‘translated’ into the terms of the talking point on ‘The rise of Russia’. Russia’s image as a victim of foreign propaganda aggression is represented in the mode of the workaday; it is a constant product of Simov’s work on the talking point that is prevalent in his articles – the venal Bulgarian elites. In them, however, there is also another, celebratory, image of Russia, when Russia in itself becomes a topic of praise in its capacity as a value-model and even as an identity model for Bulgarian historical memory. This topic is especially prominent in the days around 3 March (Bulgaria’s Liberation
Day, its national holiday) and 9 May; of course, the holiday is also an arena of a political battle for the hearts and minds of the Bulgarians, a battle which – according to Simov – Russia cannot but win simply because the other ‘civilizational choice’ has never taken place but is planned to be a ‘new enslavement’:

It’s high time we admitted the truth – this is a war against the ordinary Bulgarians, this is an attempt at a new enslavement of the minds of the people who refuse to reconcile themselves to the falsification of history and want to remember the truth, such as it is. And not such as dictated by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. … This holiday [3 March] continues to flicker like a tiny light in the geopolitical darkness and to show us over and over again that our civilization is completely different, that we belong to a different space of culture and community … I’m very sorry for those paid with foreign money – it wasn’t the American marines who spilled their blood so that we can exist today. It was the Russians. It was they who paid for our freedom with so much blood and so many victims that this gift is unpayable. For it we owe them gratitude. In defiance of the new enslavers and their incessant malice. The fact that they are so furious means only one thing – they are losing the battle. And they know it.50

The ‘Immortal Regiment’ has come to Bulgaria, too. People here, too, remembered that their ancestors were part of this victory, that they had contributed to the decisive battles and that this is an occasion for pride, not for shame. And watching the Bulgarians who came out in the streets, carrying the faces of their grandmothers and grandfathers, I felt pity for all those who virtually gnashed their teeth in horror on that day. I understand them to some extent. Seventy-one years ago their idols were brutally kicked out and sent for spa procedures in hell. And now those same people are afraid. They are afraid that the procedure might be repeated. They are afraid not of the military parade but precisely of the ‘Immortal Regiment’ which will always show that remembrance is the best way of resistance against the insanity of the present days.51

Here, however, the exemplariness of the celebrating Russia, the model of 9 May, represents Bulgarian historical memory (such as exists and is thought to be by Simov), too, as exemplary, as axiologically and politically unquestionable. Thus, the Russian model – in an entirely Stalinist way – legitimizes also the repressions in Bulgaria, which are likewise celebrated by the author through a sentence that stuns for its presumed appropriateness and admissibility: ‘Seventy-one years ago … were brutally kicked out and sent for spa procedures in hell.’ If anyone asks once again why we defined propaganda as ‘anti-democratic’ in the title of our research project, we would kindly ask them to read this sentence once again.

The polar opposite to the writing of Simov and Kevorkyan is an entirely different style which we will provisionally call ‘the style of the thinkers’. It is
exemplified by the charismatic orator Dr Nikolay Mihaylov, who enjoys a wide audience, disciples and followers. The job of the thinker is not to curse about current affairs, as we have seen in the examples up to this point, but to look at them with analytical condescension, invariably from a superordinate, generalizing perspective; the thinker’s role is to point out the way, to formulate the alternatives, to construct a stable value-system. That is also why in the public rhetoric of the thinkers we cannot find a vituperative style and daily display of bias against ‘the venal Bulgarian elites’ – these antagonists appear, rather, as types, as contours implied by the ruthless analysis. And usually as a comic and temporary counterpoint to a value-system and perspective whose conceptual framework refers to the intransient and unquestionable values. These last are ever more firmly and consistently associated with Russia in Dr Nikolay Mihaylov’s messages.

The first thing we will note about his writing and rhetoric is the pretension to erudition, to a multilingual library in his texts (a pretension that Simov entirely honestly doesn’t usually have, while Kevorkyan has it but doesn’t demonstrate it, so to speak). Quite often, Mihaylov’s most mystical formulations about Russia are presented in the public sphere in the form (or, to be more precise, in the guise) of ‘Western’ quotations. The title ‘Dr Nikolay Mihaylov: Russia is a mystery country, it cannot be understood with the mind’ refers to his statement at a roundtable discussion on the occasion of the first anniversary of Ruski Dnevnik. According to the article published under this title, Mihaylov’s statement includes the following sentence: ‘Russia has an aura of its own. This is a mystery country, it cannot be understood with the mind, said Churchill. This is a cliché. But this cliché is correct, just as almost all clichés in this world.’ We do not know to what extent this quote is from Churchill, but it is from Tyutchev for certain (from his famous poem of 1866, whose literal translation is: ‘Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone, / No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness: / In Russia, one can only believe.’).

A very similar syndrome of quotation is found in one of Dr Nikolay Mihaylov’s best-known articles, ‘Russophiles, Russophobes… Origin of the species on the periphery of the continent’, widely reprinted by various websites. In it we read the following: ‘Countries border on each other, but Russia borders on God, said Rilke. Hence also the gravitation to the East, the spiritual Russophelia…’ This is not exactly what Rilke said. In his short story ‘Vie der Ver rat nach Russland kam’ (How Treachery Came to Russia) from Geschichten vom lieben Gott (Stories of God) (1904), one of the two characters engaged in a dialogue says that Russia borders on God in the sense that countries are not flat and do not have only geographical borders but also border on something ‘both above and below’. There is certainly no opposition between ‘the other countries’, whose borders are simply and flatly geographical, and Russia which, alone, borders on God. Furthermore, the border on God in Rilke’s story
is explained through a parable about Ivan the Terrible who cheated God out of money (because he did not recognize him as God) and that is how treachery and the border on God came to Russia – as a punishment for avarice and greed, as an insurmountable border between Russia and God.

The erudite way in which Nikolay Mihaylov quotes others is in fact intuited by the websites, which have changed the titles so that the phrases appear – now without the help of Churchill or Rilke – as fully authored by Mihaylov, as in the above-quoted title of the article on Blitz, ‘Dr Nikolay Mihaylov: Russia is a mystery country, it cannot be understood with the mind’, or in the changed titles of the article ‘Russophiles, Russophobes…’ in its reprints. For example, ‘Why Russia borders on God, or, origin of the species on the periphery of the continent’;54 or the very detailed title, ‘Because Russia borders on God. Without Putin, the Bulgarian Right is unthinkable. Without Putin, they are nothing. Nil. With him, they are Pokemon hunters’.55 Faced with Dr Mihaylov’s understanding of the phrase ‘Russia borders on God’ and its further dissemination precisely as his, every ordinary nationalism of the type, ‘Along its land borders, Bulgaria borders only on itself’, loses all arguments and is redirected towards a more sublime (and, as everything sublime, also more frightening) identity.

Let us trace the chain of definitions of the enemy, ‘the rightists’ and ‘the Russophobes’. In the article ‘Russophiles, Russophobes…’ it looks as follows: pro-West-oriented, Anglo-Saxon patriot, democrat and liberal-rightist, anti-communist. The seeming neutrality of these words, however, turns out to be the first step of Dr Mihaylov’s Socratic irony – the seeming agreement with the opponent’s self-definitions. Further on, the definitions are expounded in ‘caricatural self-opinion of an “eternal child” (puer aeternus) of “mature liberal age”’; ‘suspects the Russians more than absolutely necessary’; ‘Russophobia is similar to anti-Semitism’; ‘hirelings on the Russophile field ... an anthropological twin of the later Komsomol nomenklatura ... lovers of careers, [high living] standards and the Western “style”’; ‘inborn opportunists’; ‘acrobats of career, snobs of success’; ‘anyone ready to be photographed between Hillary and Trump and to look flattered’; ‘a slightly manic category of professional “protesters” who walk around with a computer on their backs and can barely restrain themselves from performing something historic’; ‘the colonizers offer money to see who will stretch out their hands with a sound barbaric appetite and irrepressible inclination “to be civilized”’; ‘they won’t forgive the “Eternal Russia” (Mamleev)’; ‘Russophobia is an identification benchmark. Without Putin, the Bulgarian Right is unthinkable. Without Putin, the rightists are nothing. Nil. With him, they are everything. With him, they are Pokemon hunters.’

Although there is inertially-growing overexaggeration here, too, we must say straight away that in its style, this line is far from Simov’s catachreses. Between the separate metaphors there is enough syntactic distance to keep the text articulate. They are, rather, neatly ordered along the classic line of gradation, crowned by ‘Pokemon hunters’. The intonation is different, too – whereas
Simov pours out words in a frenzy, Mihaylov filters his words. The catachrestic in Mihaylov is definitely elsewhere – it is in his hero/protagonist.

Dr Mihaylov’s text has – to put it in a nutshell – the immodest objective of revoking Enlightenment modernity. And it revokes it, because Enlightenment modernity is too rational and too secular for the author’s taste; and, worst of all, it is liberal. In this text, every liberalism is mocked and thrown off the politico-axiological stage, including left-liberalism (left-liberals are softly mocked as follows: ‘A leftist reform in the system of late liberal capitalism is a pure utopia, a rhetorical exercise in Sanders style’). Russia, alone, remains on stage: a Russia that is anti-bourgeois, does not love money and thinks of it as a ‘Satanic mystery’ (although the Russian tsar in Rilke’s parable thinks and loves the exact opposite). This is a Russia that has ‘civilizational originality’; a Russia that is, in temperament and spirit, an ‘opposition’ and ‘protector’; a Russia that ‘attracts and awes, rivets and repels’. A Russia that is eternal, that borders on God, that cannot be understood with the mind and that – with or without the unclear help of Churchill and Rilke – remains forever a secret, a mystery of being as such. Of course, this messianic metaphysics is ideographically non-Enlightenment because of its fundamental irrationality. Similar arguments, but with a more unrestrained syntax, in the writing of Darina Grigorova, are defined by Kalin Yanakiev as ‘culturological-psychoanalytic shamanism’.

In Dr Nikolay Mihaylov, this Russia has a single personification and it is, of course, Putin. Putin is duly distinguished from the image of the claims of ‘official propaganda’ about him:

Putin is stylized by official propaganda as a wily Eurasian persona, a bandit let loose. I am tempted to speculate, however, that some of the Western leaders are ambivalent about him, with mixed feelings of respect, envy and destructive fantasies. They are jealous of the fullness of his power from the position of their own universally found-out impotence. ‘Feeble-bodied [individuals]’ wander around the stage, compare the potency and become despondent. But they are a group and whisper intrigues to each other. They have a ‘cause’. They are anxious about gender justice…

Thus, in the unofficial propaganda of the article ‘Russophiles, Russophobes…’, Putin is at once a subject personifying the mysterious and eternal metaphysical might of Russia, which borders on God, and a potent ruler who angers the less potent and envious Western leaders. There’s no way you can remove the political from Putin in order to make him a personification of Russia’s metaphysical nature, and then rejoice that it is precisely the topical political in him that makes him so potent in power, unless you are not afraid of producing a catachresis which, as in this particular case, ‘suffers’ also from a heavy contradiction between metaphysics and realpolitik and therefore begins as a catachresis and ends as an oxymoron – and thus destroys all conceptual alibis
of metaphysics and Orthodox Christianity.

This attempt to unproblematically combine Orthodox Christian metaphysics and realpolitik is not an exception. In a statement on Bulgarian National Television in September 2015 (published by Blitz), Dr Mihaylov speaks about ‘the panically helpless’ European leaders; about European identity as threatened by the refugees-consumers: ‘The refugee is a young male in American trousers with a smartphone in hand, he has no belonging and is an applicant for the consumer society’; about the US: ‘The present refugee crisis is the fruit of American interventionism in these ruined states. This chicken-brained giant had hardly foreseen the crisis it would cause’; about the failure of liberalism: ‘the weakness of a European leadership caught in the trap of its late-liberal biases’. Hence, he speaks even about the political necessity of renouncing humanism itself – in his view, reports like the one with the body of a drowned three-year-old child stranded on the beach prevent the European leaders from coming out of their ‘humanitarian trance and making the right decisions’.57 This last statement obviously does not conflict with Orthodox Christianity in the self-consciousness of this public language, but then it certainly – in the sense of Rilke – draws a border between it and God.

Also in accordance with the model offered by Dr Mihaylov is the public rhetoric of Professor Ivo Hristov, as predetermined also by his identity as a scholar and sociologist. He, too, offers a messianism or a new metaphysics, but with a scientific-objectivistic and historical-materialistic orientation, painting a radical eschatological picture according to which, with the help of a series of conspiracies that are invisible to the public eye, the Apocalypse in history is objectively inevitable. Boyan Znpolski calls this type of narratives ‘discursive viruses that can seriously diminish our cognitive capacities’. By ‘gradually saturating the Bulgarian media sphere without meeting with particular resistance, they are quietly turning into a dominant worldview background’. In the words of Znpolski:

First of all, the apocalyptic narratives have a dogmatic, in the Kantian sense of the word, that is to say, an uncritical cognitive pretension. They pretend to offer immediate and all-encompassing knowledge about the Bulgarian social reality, without realizing that they are a specific cultural and genre form which is in fact superimposed on reality and substitutes reality. These narratives do not analyze the world around them, they only glance at it, discovering straight away the deep tendency hidden within it. For them, social reality (in a very wide range of configurations) is only a pretext that enables them to activate and expound their own ‘cultural agenda’. On the other hand, although they are a fictional social reality, a bias about social reality, the apocalyptic narratives are capable of causing real practical effects: they significantly narrow down our motivation for political and civic action, confining it within the affective limits of resignation, apathy, the feeling of impotence and doom.58
Unlike Nikolay Mihaylov, who does not target a specific audience but the public at large, Ivo Hristov speaks in a different way and says different things when he is addressing different media outlets and audiences. His rhetoric, however, is invariably apocalyptic. In Hristov’s account, the Bulgarian people is disappearing, its elites are corrupt and dependent by default, the refugees are an ‘operetta’ produced and staged by the US with the aim of destabilizing the world, and so on. Still, there are noticeable differences depending on the media outlets and their audiences. We will give two examples from two polar opposite media outlets: Ivaylo ‘Noisy’ Tsvetkov’s interview with Ivo Hristov on Offnews.bg in 2015 and a series of interviews with Ivo Hristov conducted by Stoycho Kerev in 2015 and 2016 for TV+, News7 and the website novotopoznanie.com as well as on the show Vapros na gledna tochka (A matter of point of view), announced as ‘a patriotic show’.

In Ivaylo Tsvetkov’s interview, Ivo Hristov says he does not believe in the adequacy of the distinctions between ‘left’ and ‘right’ when it comes to the Bulgarian political elite, yet behaves like a leftist analyst who believes that socialism was a modernization project and that modernity is something good, while premodernity nowadays is not to be preferred: ‘Bulgaria was relatively modern and developed, but it has collapsed into a premodern state with complete barbarization of social relations. A country that had a decent modern economy has collapsed back into a rather raw-material economy, while two and a half million of the by and large most passionate and quality population was simply sucked towards the West.’ Referring to the Eastern and, in particular, to the Bulgarian elites, Hristov says the following: ‘first-, second- and third-generation successors to the Bulgarian elites from before 10 November [1989] are playing the role of colonial administration of the territory.’ The West as a whole looks as follows: ‘the by far smarter – and, I would say, cold-blooded – predatory attitude of the geopolitical opponent, who was aware of these processes and used the primitivism and intentions of the ruling elites in the USSR and in Bulgaria, in order to eliminate the idea of a geopolitical alternative.’ Russia has a wholly rational and criticizable image: ‘Russia’s elite, roughly speaking, consists of two groups. The first is connected to security services and the military-industrial complex, and the second to exports of raw materials, the so-called “Gazprom” line.’

Ivo Hristov’s language formulas and conceptual interpretations are quite different in the interviews by Stoycho Kerev, who relies on ‘alternative knowledge’, aliens, special powers of the mind, the Bulgarians as carriers of an ancient genetic code, and the like. Here Ivo Hristov calls modernity a ‘specific social mutation’ that is dying out and proving its non-universality. Thus, the revocation of Enlightenment modernity, performed by Dr Mihaylov in a ‘magazine for political culture’, as A-specto defines itself, is reconfirmed here in an entirely different social light, in the media twilight zone – of sensations, con-
sporadic theories and alternative knowledge (which is indicative of the unproblematic retransmission of propaganda statements to different audiences with the help of an insignificant but ostentatious change of style). In the horizon of social mutation, such as modernity turns out to be, there is no relevant choice between capitalism and socialism because ‘the most profound Bulgarian thinker, Nikolay Mihaylov, told me: you cannot find an alternative to one modernity in another type of modernity’, since both capitalism and socialism are products of Western civilization; modernity is at the end of its existence. In these interviews, the West looks like the ‘end of civilization’, ‘the masters of the world’, ‘the rulers who rule by birthright’ and who are preparing a ‘final solution’ for the world with various regimes of anaesthesia; deceptions and manipulations of the human mind by means of the new technology and media, while the masters are preparing for a new physical life through secret biotechnologies. The EU is destroying religious and cultural identity and it is populated by 500 million morons ruled by global capital. As for the Bulgarian national identity: ‘the Bulgarian civilization’ will disappear, the Bulgarians are disappearing as a people and turning into ‘moronized consumer cattle’. This kind of rhetoric brings the professor closer to the rather specific thematic context of his interviewer and, generally, to unleashing conspiracy theories of all sorts. He does not go as far as invoking the reptilians as political animals, but mentions in passing, for example, the Harry Potter books as a conspiratorial warning that the masters of the world are scheming to impose on all of us a dismal, Muggle-like life.

Accordingly, Russia is the only alternative and hope because it is far from the modernist cliché. Russia, however, can live only ‘in concentration around the vertical of power’ (these ideas are expounded by repeatedly quoting Andrei Fursov); that is to say, authoritarianism is a hope because Putin is waiting for the rift in the Western elite to become manifest in order to use it. According to Ivo Hristov, Russia, alone, can leave and lead humanity out of the matrix because of its peculiar culture. The professor supports his view with a quotation from Hristo Botev, as he claims in the interview: ‘The holy truth is my banner’. The erudite manner of quotation here is of exactly the same order as in the cases of Churchill and Rilke in Dr Mihaylov. For the sentence ‘The holy truth is my banner’ does not belong to Botev, it is from the foreword of Notes on the Bulgarian Uprisings by Zahari Stoyanov. The quotation is inaccurate and belongs to another author, but this apparently doesn’t matter to the self-confident speaker who constantly advises his audience to read more books. It is obvious, however, that rhetorically sustaining the figure of the quoting and much-learned scholar is more important than the actual contents of his knowledge, in which the masters of the world, modernity as a specific social mutation, Botev who is not exactly Botev, and the hope of the coming of Russia are combined entirely unproblematically.

To sum up: Russia can appear in all sorts of social, media, conceptual, existential, religious, political, cultural, and other incarnations in the field of
Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, but it is invariably in the role of the hero/protagonist. Russia has become metonymic both for the leftist class concept of ‘the people’ and for the rightist understanding of ‘the people’ as a community of land, blood and spirit (that is also why it doesn’t particularly matter whether its speakers define themselves as leftist or rightist, because both types of thinkers end with praise for Russia). Through the regime directed by Moscow in the 1944-1989 period, Russia brought socialist modernization to Bulgaria; but then, Russia is the main bulwark against modernity, this non-universal mutation of European history. It is mighty, strong, and it can also be vindictive towards the venal Bulgarian elites; but then, it is a victim of the aggression of the West and is falsely accused by the latter as by the venal Bulgarian elites of conducting a hybrid war. Its leader Putin is the only true bulwark of the world against the sly dragon Soros and, generally, against the reptilians; but then, he might be a reptilian himself, which only makes him mightier. Russia is a spiritual essence, mystic being of the spirit, but also ordinary political practice, potent realpolitik that is envied by the impotent Western leaders. And, what is probably most important with regard to Bulgarian affairs – Russia is the anthropological ‘own’, while the West is the anthropological ‘foreign’. Russia is a keeper of Bulgarian national memory and a sacred content of Bulgarian national history. To put it in a nutshell, as Svetlana Sharenkova, President of the Bulgaria-Russia Forum, did on 4 February 2017 at the successive congress of the BSP, to wild applause: ‘Russophilia is part of Bulgarian national identity.’

In Lieu of a Conclusion: Critique and Propaganda

The difference between critique and propaganda is not always noticeable and always raises questions as to whether a particular text, rhetoric or behaviour belongs to the former or the latter. That is why here we will attempt to formulate – of course, in a reductionist way and in the form of ‘ideal types’ – some of their typical behavioural differences in the Bulgarian public sphere.

The first important distinction is probably in that critique despises propaganda and does not want to be mistaken for it, while propaganda very much wants to be taken for critique. As pointed out in our collective study, propaganda ‘co-opts themes from Western grassroots critique of liberalism and globalization, recasts both left and right populist critique in national-sovereignist and geostrategic terms, and promotes them as a free resource for undermining liberal democracy from within.’ Furthermore, propaganda appropriates, shifts, dislocates and re-contextualizes the critical constructions which, in this way, fall into its social space, become a compositional part of its repetitions, and legitimize it as something more worthy in the mind of Bulgarian society.

Critique sets forth arguments through which it produces claims; propaganda merely claims and repeats talking points, while replacing argumentation with stylistic devices. Critique, true to its nature, admits and accepts critique; propaganda, likewise true to its nature, does not accept critique and simply...
declares it to be another propaganda. Critique is self-reflexive; propaganda uncritically assumes the a-priori nature of its talking points. In criticizing, critique speaks with its object-opponent; propaganda speaks only with its audience and therefore seeks only to increase its audience, undertaking stylistic mutations in order to widen its social scope. Critique quotes accurately; propaganda misquotes, but boldly uses misquotations as glittering rhetorical ornaments. Critique analyzes; propaganda loves the word ‘analysis’ and designates/disguises by it every successive syntax of its talking points. The changing events and tendencies drive critique to change, fine-tune and update its explanatory schemes; propaganda frames the new events and tendencies within its ready-made explanatory and evaluative schemes regardless of whether they fit into them or not. In its analytical constructions, critique has an acute sense of authorship of its theses and of authorial responsibility; propaganda relies on repetition of one and the same theses by different voices and is therefore more capable of making them sound like folklore.

Furthermore, critique seeks to construct a more comprehensive, complete explanatory scheme without any contradiction between the arguments and images of which it is composed; propaganda works in accelerated series of multiplying ‘pieces’, without being afraid of constantly appearing contradictions in the nexus of images, talking points, events, and causalities. That is also why critique likes being read and understood as a comprehensive set of arguments, without reductionist operations; propaganda does not like being read in the simultaneous and evolving multitude of its components and sees such a reading as subversive, hostile and denunciating (as some initial reactions to the partial publication of the results of this project have shown). In other words, critique resembles a ‘novel’ whose world, characters and ideas are constructed by the talent and responsibility of its author; propaganda resembles a ‘TV series’ that wants to be watched only in the form of multiple episodes – it cannot possibly have an overarching, consistent and non-contradictory plot because the development of the story in the TV series depends mainly on the availability of the actors, the twists and turns in the composition of the repetitions, the budget, and the budget-driven decisions of the screenwriters.

NOTES

1 Here are part of the author’s recurrent claims which, over the years, have framed the talking points in question. The failure of the Russian energy projects is due to the EU and their political servants in Bulgaria. ‘We cannot trust [Brussels] for anything at all, those are seasoned sly guys, shirking is in their blood’; the Bulgarians ‘consume Gypsy violence’ – this is an absurd situation to which nobody pays any attention – those who profit from it are the ‘national apostates’ from the human rights organizations and, above all, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Privatization in Bulgaria was a ‘monstrous crime’ – Ivan Kostov, Balkan Airlines, Kremikovtsi, Maritsa 1 and Maritsa 3 – Kevorkyan stubbornly repeats all mantras that have appeared on this subject over the years. The demolition of the mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov in Sofia was
an act of showing-off, indicating that the new rulers are subordinate to the Demon of Destruction, without constructing anything. The shutdown of the first two units of the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant is also a crime. What we have received from the EU in a decade is less than the cost of the two units; everything is a conspiracy, created and developed by the Jew Soros who has been ‘the hidden minister of culture in Bulgaria for twenty years now’; the refugees and the local minorities – the Gypsies’, whom Kevorkyan stubbornly refuses to call Roma – are the inevitable way of destroying Bulgaria: ‘We won’t be a buffer, we will be Europe’s dumping ground for refugees’ (the quoted phrases are from various articles and websites).


3 ‘Well, Hare, you just wait!’ – the catch-phrase in the iconic Soviet-era cartoon series about a wolf and a hare, Nu, pogodi! (Well, Just You Wait!), similar to Tom and Jerry.


11 ... the idea that Russia is a main threat to Bulgaria is absurd and ridiculous in its very nature. And this, I’m certain, is realized by everyone who has touched the new report on the national security which the Council of Ministers sent to Parliament these days. … This thesis is so insane that anyone who tries to verbalize it will look like a patient at Karlukovo [State Psychiatric Hospital], exactly like the Facebook know-it-alls who are obsessed with conspiracy theories. … In my view, however, the true threat to Bulgaria’s security has never been Russia, but those small political-interest groups that are trying to pose as civil society, generously financed from outside, because it is precisely they that are the main authors of insane theses.’ Simov, A. (2017) Geopoliticheshkiyat sluginazh izpalzya ot blatoto [The geopolitical servants have crawled out from the swamp]. Pogled-info (13 September). Available at: http://pogled.info/avtorski/Aleksandar-Simov/geopoliticheshkiyat-sluginazh-pak-izpalzya-ot-blatoto.89215 [Accessed 10 November 2017].

12 This article was published on two consecutive days, 12 and 13 August 2016, under two different titles, although the phrase ‘shaking like jelly’ is present in both cases: ‘Premierat, koyto se tresé kato zhele’ [The prime minister who’s shaking like jelly] on Pogled-info (http://pogled.info/avtorski/Aleksandar-Simov/premierat-koito-se-trese-kato-zhele.76185) and ‘Premierat, koyto se strahuva’ [The prime minister who’s afraid] in Duma (http://www.duma.bg/node/129884). If this paper were focused on the stylistic differences between the researched media outlets and their audiences, it would have definitely paid greater attention to this difference between the two titles.


Albena Hranova: Bulgarian Anti-Democratic Propaganda


Kevorkyan, K. (2015) Ukrotyavane na napoleoncheta. Kopeleta ot gyon [The taming of little Napoleons. Bastards made of sole-leather]. Afera.bg (28 July). Available at: http://afera.bg/web/%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BB %D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B2% D0%BE%BD%BB-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B0% D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%BB [Accessed 10 November 2017].


Kevorkyan, K. (2016) Boyko i flaskoto na pop/krastevshnitata! [Boyko and the fiasco of priest/Krastevism! (i.e. betrayal – a play on the names of the priest Krastyu, commonly assumed to have been the person


Kevorkyan, K. (2016) Stiga s toya Brexit! Da mislim za BG/Exit! Vatsov, D. and M. Iakimova (2017) Populizm, lokalni interesi i ruska propaganda: analiz na danni ot balgarskite medii (2013–2016) [Populism, local interests and Russian propaganda: an analysis of data from Bulgarian media (2013–2016)]. Portal Kultura (20 September). Available at: http://kultura.bg/web/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BD%0D%BE%D1%83%0D%B0%BD%0D%80%D1%8A%0D%BC-%0D%BB%0D%BE%0D%BA%0D%BB%0D%BD%0D%88%0D%BD%0D%81%0D%82%0D%B5%0D%80%0D%B5%0D%81%0D%BB-%0D%B8-%0D%B8-%0D%80%0D%83%0D%81%0D%BA%0D%BB-%0D%BE%0D%81%0D/ [Accessed 10 November 2017].


Putin i Obama sa samo negovi pionki! Tova e istinskiyat gospodar na zemyata! (Video dokazatelstvo) [Putin and Obama are merely his pawns! This is the true master of Earth! (Video proof)]. Bradva.bg, 26 December 2016. Available at: http://www.bradva.bg/bg/article/article-67859#.Wci8xrIjHIU [Accessed 10 November 2017].


Albena Hranova: Bulgarian Anti-Democratic Propaganda


D-r Nikolay Mihaylov: Rusiya e strana-zagadka, ne mozhe da bade razbrana s um [Dr Nikolay Mihaylov: Russia is a mystery country, it cannot be understood with the mind]. Blitz, 4 July 2016. Available at: http://www.blitz.bg/analyizi-i-komentari/d-r-nikolay-mihaylov-rusiya-e-strana-zagadka-ne-mozhe-da-bde-razbrana-s-um_news425523.html [Accessed 10 November 2017].


Mihaylov, N. (2016) Zashtoto Rusiya granichi s Boga. Bez Putin balgarskata desnitsa e nemislima. Bez Putin sa nishto. Nula. S nego sa lovtsi na pokemoni [Because Russia borders on God. Without Putin, the Bulgarian Right is unthinkable. Without Putin, they are nothing. Nil. With him, they are Pokemon hunters]. Afera.bg (28 December). Available at: http://afera.bg/%d0%b7%d0%be-%d1%88%d0%b8%d1%80%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%bc%d0%b8%d0%b2%d0%b0%d0%b9%d0%be-%d1%82%d0%be-%d1%80%d1%83%d1%81%d0%b8%d1%8f-%d0%b3%d1%80%d0%b0%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%87%d0%b8-%d1%81-%d0%be%d0%b3%d0%b0-%d0%b1%d0%b5%d0%b7-%d0%b1%d1%83%d1%82%d0%b8%d0%bd-%d0%b1.html [Accessed 10 November 2017].

Yanakiev, K. (2016) Stilisticni nevoli na dvama “rusofili”. Grigorova, quoted by Yanakiev, expresses herself thus: ‘Russia is the battle of absolute evil with absolute good. Russia is, in this sense, Christocentric, not anthropocentric, the orientation is inwards to man and does not have external precision, orderliness, order, legality, this pharmacy-like neatness of the central and north West (the south one is somewhat different). Russia is unpredictable and scares, to some extent with good reason, the West European law-obeying mind that is used to the static security of a boringly planned detailed life as opposed to the Russian dynamic chaos in which everything is “kol lyubit’, tak bez rassudku, kol’ grozit’, tak ne na shutku… kol’ prostit’, tak vsey dushoy” [if you love, then do it madly, if you threaten, then do it seriously… if you forgive, then do it generously] (Aleksey Tolstoy).


https://novotopoznanie.com/bulgarians-have-lost-their-social-and-civilizational-face/; http://bultimes.com/top-secret-stojcho-kerev-i-dots-ivo-hristov-za-kontrola-nad-saznanieto-video/, etc. For a video archive of Stoycho Kerev’s interviews with Ivo Hristov, see http://bultimes.com/page/1/?s=%D0%98%D0%92%D0%9E+%D0%A5%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%A1%D0%A2%D0%9E%D0%92 [Accessed 10 November 2017].

THE SOCIAL (IN)COMMENSURABILITY BETWEEN TOTALITARIAN AND ANTI-DEMOCRATIC PROPAGANDA

This paper is devoted to a particularly important scientific problem: it is a sociological attempt to conceptualize the social continuity as well as the social incommensurability between propaganda as a classic instrument of power used by totalitarian regimes and propaganda as an immanent functional moment of the postcommunist public sphere. Hence its central task is to trace those focal points of significant difference/repetition at which their discursive (non) coincidences converge and diverge, and which constitute the unified, complete and indivisible ideological agenda of anti-democratic propaganda.

Why is propaganda necessary, what place does it occupy and what functions does it performing in building totalitarian societies? In the first place, the general and ultimate purpose of propaganda is to construct a particular type of social bond in an ‘amorphous population mass’ made up of infinitely disconnected, atomized and isolated individuals; a social bond that must bind the individual micro-units into a unified, indivisible and obedient totality, and thus, overcome the practical disintegration and restore the lost unity of the social body; in the final analysis, a social bond built upon the unconditional loyalty of each individual member; a ‘total loyalty’ that must thoroughly permeate the future totalitarian society. (Here I will only remind the reader that the personal oath, unified motto and inseparable unity of the SS, or Schutzstaffel – literally, ‘Protection Squad’ – in Nazi Germany were ‘My honour is my loyalty’). As Hannah Arendt (1979, pp.312-313) points out:

Democratic freedoms may be based on the equality of all citizens before the law; yet they acquire their meaning and function organically only where the citizens belong to and are represented by groups or form a social and political hierarchy. The breakdown of the class system, the only social and political stratification of the European nation-states, certainly was one of the most dramatic events in recent German history and as favourable to the rise of Nazism as the absence of social stratification in Russia’s immense rural population...
Consequently, the ultimate result of the liquidation of social hierarchies, the eradication of social stratifications and the elimination of social differences is the transformation of the atomized individuals into ‘amorphous masses’; a key historical prerequisite for the rise of totalitarian domination, which is possible only if there are vast masses and, moreover, precisely in countries where they can be sacrificed without leading to a disastrous decimation of the population.\(^2\) However – and this is a fact that requires special attention – the atomization of society and extreme individualization precede the emergence of mass movements which most easily and quickly attract not the socialized, non-individualistic-minded members of the traditional parties but people who are completely unorganized, typically non-aligned because of their individualism, who permanently reject any commitment or obligation to society. In the final analysis, the truth is that the masses are born from the constituent elements of an extremely atomized society whose competitive foundation, with its invariably concomitant loneliness of the individual, was regulated only by the individual’s belonging to a particular class. The most important characteristic of the person from the masses is not his or her particular brutality and lack of creativity, but his or her isolation and lack of normal contacts. We must never forget that the comparatively easy victory of the so-called ‘October Revolution’ ‘occurred in a country where a despotic and centralized bureaucracy governed a structureless mass population which neither the remnants of the rural feudal orders nor the weak, nascent urban capitalist classes had organized’ (Arendt, 1979, p.318). In its turn, the total atomization of the already ‘built’ Soviet society was achieved through a series of purges that invariably preceded the actual liquidation of one social group or another. In order to destroy absolutely all social and family ties, the purges were conducted in such a way as to threaten with the same fate the defendants and all those around them, from mere acquaintances up to their closest friends and relatives. As a result of this simple and ingenious device, ‘guilt by association’, as soon as someone was accused, their former friends immediately became their bitterest enemies. In order to save their own lives, they offered, completely voluntarily, made-up information and false denunciations to corroborate non-existent evidence against the defendant; this was obviously the only way to prove their own loyalty, fidelity and trustworthiness. And, of course, they would claim that their friendship or acquaintance with the accused was only a pretext for spying on and revealing him or her as a traitor, a saboteur, a foreign agent or a fascist. Since merit was measured by the number of one’s denunciations of one’s closest friends, obviously the most elementary caution demanded that one avoid all close contacts, if possible: not in order to avoid revealing one’s secret thoughts, but to eliminate, in the almost certain case of future trouble, all persons who might have not only an ordinary interest in denouncing you but also in bringing about your ruin – simply because their own lives are in danger. In the final analysis, it was through this ‘method of governance’, developed to the point of extreme and incredible perfection, that
the Bolshevik rulers indeed succeeded in creating an atomized and individualistic society the like of which had never before been seen in human history and which no social cataclysms could have brought about.

So, totalitarian movements are true mass organizations of atomized, isolated and ‘straying’ individuals. Compared with all other political formations, their most conspicuous external characteristic is their demand for total, unrestricted, unconditional and invariable personal loyalty of each individual member. This normative demand is made by the leaders of totalitarian movements even before they seize power and precedes the actual totalitarian organization of the country under their rule; it follows from the claim of their ideology that their organization will encompass, in due course, all of humanity. Where, however, totalitarian rule has not been prepared by a totalitarian movement (as was the case in Soviet Russia, in contradistinction to Nazi Germany), the movement has to be organized afterwards and the conditions for its development have to be created artificially in order to ensure total loyalty – one of the fundamental social ties in a totalitarian society – at any cost. Such loyalty can be expected only from a completely isolated person who, being deprived of any natural contacts such as family, friends, acquaintances, groups and communities, derives his or her sense of worth solely from his or her belonging to a movement, his or her membership in the party. And the big question is, indeed, how to create and consolidate a total bond, such as total loyalty is, in an extremely atomized society where social hierarchies have been liquidated, class stratifications eradicated, and individual differences eliminated. It is precisely propaganda which is that instrument of power, a key element of the social engineering of the future totalitarian domination, through which social unity must be restored and history given a progressive direction of development.3 To quote Hannah Arendt (1979, p.326) again:

Neither National Socialism nor Bolshevism has ever proclaimed a new form of government or asserted that its goals were reached with the seizure of power and the control of the state machinery. Their idea of domination was something that no state and no mere apparatus of violence can ever achieve, but only a movement that is constantly kept in motion: namely, the permanent domination of each single individual in each and every sphere of life. The seizure of power through the means of violence is never an end in itself but only the means to an end, and the seizure of power in any given country is only a welcome transitory stage but never the end of the movement. The practical goal of the movement is to organize as many people as possible within its framework and to set and keep them in motion.

And that is why, of course, it is necessary to have an efficient, flawlessly functioning propaganda machine that must back up and duplicate all structures of an entire totalitarian society, constantly producing false information and modelling the social world according to its own ideological canon, and thus,
keeping its own population in a state of permanent mobilization.

The second function of totalitarian propaganda is to be the other face or the obverse of terror: the masses must be indoctrinated and attracted at any cost. Under conditions of constitutional government and freedom of expression, totalitarian movements struggling for power cannot resort to mass terror and, like the other parties, are compelled to win adherents and to appear plausible to those who are not yet completely isolated from all other sources of information. However – and this is a fact of exceptional importance – in totalitarian countries, although propaganda and terror are two sides of the same coin, in reality the relationship between them is ambivalent.\(^4\) As Hannah Arendt (1979, p.341) claims: ‘Wherever totalitarianism possesses absolute control, it replaces propaganda with indoctrination and uses violence not so much to frighten people (this is done only in the initial stages when political opposition still exists) as to realize constantly its ideological doctrines and its practical lies.’ The social difference between indoctrination and propaganda is obvious: they are not merely two interlinked phases in the development of total domination, but whereas propaganda is meant to attract ever more supporters of the mass movement, the strategic goal of indoctrination is to intensively, comprehensively and constantly reaffirm the loyalty of the party’s members to its ideology. For example, totalitarianism would not be satisfied merely to assert, despite the existence of contrary facts, that unemployment does not exist; it would abolish unemployment benefits as an important part of its propaganda. In the 1930s it was officially announced in Soviet Russia that unemployment had been ‘liquidated’ forever. As a result of this, all unemployment benefits were also ‘liquidated’. Not less significant is the fact that the refusal to acknowledge the existence of unemployment realized, albeit in a rather unexpected way, the old socialist adage that ‘he who does not work shall not eat’. Or, to take another example: when Stalin decided to rewrite the history of the Russian revolution of 1917, the propaganda of his new version consisted in destroying not just the older publications and documents, but also their authors and readers: the publication in 1938 of a new official history of the Communist Party was the signal that the purge which had decimated a whole generation of Soviet intellectuals had come to an end. Similarly, the Nazis in the Eastern occupied territories at first used chiefly anti-Semitic propaganda to strengthen their control of the local population. They liquidated the larger part of the Polish intelligentsia not because of its opposition, but because according to their doctrine the Poles had no intellect, and when they planned the liquidation they did not intend to frighten anybody but to save ‘Germanic blood’.

In the third place, since totalitarian movements exist in a world which itself is non-totalitarian, they are forced to rely on and use propaganda as their weapon. But such propaganda always makes its appeals to spheres that are external to it – be it the non-totalitarian strata of the population in the country itself or non-totalitarian foreign countries. These external spheres to which totalitarian
propaganda makes its appeals may vary greatly; even after the seizure of power it may be addressed precisely to those groups of its own population whose coordination was not followed by sufficient indoctrination. (In this respect Hitler’s speeches to his generals during the war are veritable propaganda models characterized mainly by the monstrous lies with which the Führer entertained his guests in an attempt to win them over.) These external spheres can also be represented by groups of supporters of the movement itself who are not yet ready to accept the true aims of the movement. Finally, the Führer’s inner circle and the members of the elite formations often regarded even party members as belonging to such external spheres, who needed propaganda because they still did not obey the party unconditionally. However, neither should we overestimate the importance of the propaganda lies – let us recall that Hitler was much more often completely sincere and brutally unequivocal in the definition of the movement’s true aims, but, since German society was unprepared for such consistency, it simply did not acknowledge them. Still, totalitarian domination used propaganda methods in its foreign policy or in its work with the supporters, supplying them with suitable material. But if totalitarian indoctrination at home comes into conflict with the propaganda line for consumption abroad (which happened in Russia during the war – not when Stalin had concluded his alliance with Hitler, but when the war with Hitler brought him into the camp of the democracies), the propaganda is explained at home as a ‘temporary tactical manoeuvre’. As far as possible, this distinction between ideological indoctrination for the initiated in the movement, who are no longer in need of propaganda, and pure propaganda for the outside world is already established in the period before the movement itself has seized political power. The relationship between propaganda and indoctrination usually depends upon the size of the movements on one hand, and upon outside pressure on the other. The smaller the movement, the more energy it will expend on purely propaganda goals. The greater the pressures on totalitarian regimes from the outside world – a pressure that cannot be ignored entirely even behind the Iron Curtain – the more actively will the ruling power-holders engage in propaganda. The most important point, however, is the following: the need for propaganda is always dictated by the outside world, while the movements themselves do not actually propagate but repeat and instil in the mass consciousness particular doctrines. Conversely, comprehensive indoctrination, inevitably coupled with terror, increases with the consolidation of the movements or the totalitarian governments’ isolation and immunity to external influence.

To sum up: there is no doubt that while propaganda is an inseparable part of ‘psychological warfare’, terror is much more. Why? Because totalitarian regimes continue using terror even after their psychological aims are achieved: what is most terrifying is that terror reigns over a population that is completely subdued. Where terror reigns supreme, as in concentration camps, propaganda and indoctrination disappear entirely. From this point of view, one may claim
that in Nazi Germany propaganda was expressly prohibited in concentration camps. In other words, propaganda is one and, moreover, the most important, instrument of totalitarianism in its relations with the non-totalitarian world, while terror, on the contrary, is the very essence of its form of government. The use of terror does not depend at all on minimal ‘subjective factors’, just as the existence of laws in a constitutionally governed country does not depend upon the number of people who transgress them. According to the apt definition of a German publicist, mass terror played the role of ‘power propaganda’ – it made clear to the population at large that the Nazis had greater power than the authorities and that it was safer to be a member of some paramilitary organization than a loyal Republican. This impression was greatly strengthened by the specific way the totalitarian rulers in Germany used their political crimes. They always admitted them and, moreover, publicly, without ever apologizing for ‘some overzealousness’ – such apologies were made only to their sympathizers – and, in this way, impressed the population as being radically different from the leaders of other parties.

Now let us move to a lower level of sociological analysis in order to shift the focus from the structural characteristics and, by extent, instrumental modality of propaganda in totalitarian societies to its substantive peculiarities, that is, its efficiency and effectiveness as an instrument of power. In the first place, totalitarian propaganda is characterized less by direct threats against individuals than by the use of veiled, menacing hints against all who will not heed its doctrinal messages and, later, the mass murder of millions of innocent people. Communist propaganda systematically threatened people that they would miss the train of history, remain hopelessly behind their time, waste their lives, just as Nazi propaganda threatened them that they were living against the eternal laws of nature and being, that their blood would irreparably and mysteriously deteriorate. (The strong emphasis of totalitarian ideology on the ‘scientific’ nature of its assertions is comparable to some advertising techniques which are also addressed at the masses. And it is true that the advertising columns of every newspaper prove this ‘scientificality’ – every manufacturer uses facts, figures and data from ‘research’ laboratories to prove that his or hers is the ‘best soap in the world’.) However – and this is a fact of exceptional importance – this obsession of totalitarian movements with ‘scientific’ proofs disappears as soon as they seize power. For example, the Nazis dismissed even those scientists who were able to serve them, while the Bolsheviks used the reputation of their scientists for entirely unscientific purposes and forced them into the role of charlatans. But it seems there is nothing more to the frequently overrated similarities between mass propaganda and mass advertisement. Why? Because businesspeople usually do not claim to have clairvoyant abilities, nor do they constantly declare how truly correct their predictions were. The ‘scientificality’ of totalitarian propaganda is characterized by its obsessive claim to rational prediction as opposed to the old-fashioned appeals such as ‘let’s go back to
our beginnings’. The ideological roots – of socialism in one case and racism in the other – are most evident in the open pretensions of their representatives that they have discovered ‘the hidden forces’ that will lead to true prosperity through a chain of predestined facts, events and processes. And of course ‘absolute systems that make all the events of history depend on great first causes linked together by the chain of fate and thus succeed, so to speak, in banishing men from the history of the human race’ (in the words of Tocqueville, 1986, p.62) naturally have great attractive and seductive power. There is no doubt, however, that the Nazi leadership actually believed in, and did not merely use as propaganda, doctrines of the following type: ‘The more accurately we recognize and observe the laws of nature and life, so much the more do we conform to the will of the Almighty. The more insight we have into the will of the Almighty, the greater will be our successes.’

It is completely obvious that if we change only a few words, the same two sentences will express the Lenin-Stalin creed, for example as follows: ‘The more accurately we recognize and observe the laws of human history and class struggle, so much the more do we conform to dialectic materialism. The more insight we have into dialectic materialism, the greater will be our successes.’ And this is an eloquent illustration of the Bolshevik notion of ‘correct leadership’.

In the second place, totalitarian propaganda raised ideological scienticality and its technical methods of making statements in the form of predictions to a height of efficiency of method and absurdity of content because, demagogically speaking, the safest way to avoid any dispute whatsoever is to release an argument from the control of the present and to say that only the future will reveal its true merits. In fact, however, totalitarian ideologies neither invented nor were the only ones to use this grand stratagem.Scienticality of mass propaganda has indeed been employed on such a large scale in modern politics that totalitarianism turns out to be simply the last stage in a process during which ‘science has become an idol that will magically cure the evils of existence and transform the nature of man’ (Arendt, 1979, p.346). And indeed, scienticality is connected to the rise of the masses: the ‘collectivism of masses’ was welcomed by those who hoped that the natural laws of historical development would eventually put an end to the unpredictability of people’s individual actions. The well-known positivist thesis that the future could become scientically predictable rests on the conviction that interest is an all-pervasive force in history and those objective laws of power can be discovered. But it was precisely totalitarianism which, for the first time in history, tried to actually ‘transform the nature of man’. Unlike totalitarianism, the classical ideologies implicitly or explicitly assume that human nature is unchangeable, that history is a chain of objective circumstances and that the human reactions to them and interest, rightly understood, may lead to a change of circumstances, but not to a change of the human essence. In addition, it is presupposed that ‘scientism’ in politics is aimed at securing human welfare: a notion that is completely
unacceptable to totalitarianism. The success of totalitarian propaganda is rooted less in its demagoguery than in the recognition of the fact that interest as a collective force can play a role only if there is a stable social body that provides the necessary transmission belts between the individual and the community. Among the masses, most of whom no longer constitute a social body and who therefore present a veritable chaos of individual acts, it is impossible to conduct an effective propaganda based on pure interest. The fanaticism of members of totalitarian movements, which is essentially different also from the most fervent loyalty of members of ordinary parties, comes precisely from the lack of self-interest of masses who are ready to sacrifice themselves. The Nazis have proved that one can lead a whole people into war with the slogan ‘or else we shall all die’ (a slogan which the war propaganda of 1914 would have avoided with the utmost care), and, moreover not in a period of chronic want, mass unemployment, or frustrated national ambitions. The same spirit showed itself also during the last months of a war that was obviously lost, when Nazi propaganda systematically consoled an already badly frightened population with the promise that the Führer ‘in his wisdom had prepared an easy death for the German people by gassing them in case of defeat’ (Arendt, 1979, p.348).

In the third place, totalitarian movements use socialism and racism by emptying them of their utilitarian content – the age-old interests of a particular class or nation. The form of infallible prediction in which these concepts were presented is more important than their content. Absolute infallibility has become the main attribute of the leader of the masses: he can neither err nor ever be wrong. What is more, the thesis regarding the leader’s infallibility is based less on superior intelligence than on the ability to correctly interpret the age-old forces of history and nature, where it is completely impossible to prove the inconsistency, thwarting or failure of these interpretations, which will show and demonstrate their verity themselves in the long run. Once in power, the leaders of the masses have only one concern which overrules all utilitarian considerations – to make their predictions come true. (At the end of the war, the Nazis did not hesitate to use the concentrated force of their still intact organization to bring about as complete a destruction of Germany as possible, in order to make true their prediction that the German people would be ruined in case of defeat.) The propaganda effect of infallibility, the incredible success of their assumed role of knowledgeable interpreters of predictable natural forces, has developed in totalitarian rulers the habit of announcing their political intentions in the form of prophecies. What is most important is the following: both Nazism and communism attained the same objective – the extermination of ‘the Jewish race’ or of the ‘dying classes’ is fitted into a historical process in which man only does or suffers what, according to immutable laws, is bound to happen anyway. Once the victims have been executed, the ‘prophecy’ becomes a retrospective alibi: what happened had already been predicted. It does not matter whether the ‘laws of history’ spell the doom of particular classes and their
representatives, or whether the ‘laws of nature’ exterminate all those elements – Jews, Gypsies, Eastern subhumans or the incurably sick who are not fit to live anyway. This particular method, like the other stratagems used by totalitarian propaganda, becomes publicly transparent only after the movement has seized power. Then all debate about the truth or falsity of the predictions made by totalitarian rulers becomes as absurd as arguing with a potential murderer about whether his future victim is dead or alive – since he can promptly prove that his statement is correct by killing the person in question. In such a situation, there is only one valid argument: to promptly rescue the person whose death is predicted. Before the leaders of the masses seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for all facts as such, because in their view every fact depends entirely on the power of the person who can fabricate it. In other words, the method of infallible prediction, more than any other totalitarian propaganda device, betrays its ultimate goal – that of conquering the world, because only in a world completely under his control could the totalitarian ruler make all his prophecies come true. The language of prophetic scientificity corresponds to the vital needs of masses who have lost their home in the world and are prepared to submit themselves to eternal, omnipotent forces which by themselves can take the human being, carried by the raging waves, to the shores of safety. ‘We shape the life of our people and our legislation according to the verdicts of genetics,’ the Nazis declared, just as the Bolsheviks assured their followers that economic forces have the power of a verdict of history; they thereby promised eternal victory regardless of ‘temporary’ defeats and failures in specific enterprises. Why? Because masses, in contrast to classes, want victory and success in the most abstract sense. They are not bound together by those specific collective interests which are recognized as essential to their survival as a group and collectively asserted in the face of the vicissitudes of history. More important to them is not the political cause that may be victorious, or the particular enterprise that may be a success, but the victory of no matter what cause, and success in no matter what enterprise.

In the fourth place, totalitarian propaganda perfects the techniques of mass propaganda, but it neither invents them nor originates their themes. According to Hannah Arendt (1979, p.351):

These were prepared for them by fifty years of the rise of imperialism and disintegration of the nation-state, when the mob entered the scene of European politics. Like the earlier mob leaders, the spokesmen for totalitarian movements possessed an unerring instinct for anything that ordinary party propaganda or public opinion did not care or dare to touch. Everything hidden, everything passed over in silence, became of major significance, regardless of its own intrinsic importance. The mob really believed that truth was whatever respectable society had hypocritically passed over, or covered up with corruption.
Thus, it turned out that ‘mysteriousness as such became the first criterion for the choice of topics’: the origin of mystery did not matter – it could lie in a reasonable, politically comprehensible desire to keep a particular fact or event secret; or in the conspiratory need of revolutionary groups, as in the case of various terrorist organizations; or in the structure of societies whose original secret content had long since become well known and where only the formal ritual still retained the former mystery; or in age-old superstitions which had woven legends around certain ethnic groups. There is no doubt that the Nazis were unsurpassed in the selection of such topics for mass propaganda, but over time the communists also learned the trick, although they relied less on traditional mysteries and preferred their own inventions: from the mid-thirties onwards, one mysterious world conspiracy followed another in Bolshevik propaganda, starting with the plot of the Trotskyites, followed by the rule of the 300 families, to the criminal global machinations of world imperialism. The results of this type of propaganda reveal one of the main characteristics of modern masses. They do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience. They do not trust their senses but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything so long as it has universal pretensions and logical consistency. What convinces the masses are not facts, even if they are made-up so as to seem consistent, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. Repetition, whose role is somewhat overrated because of the common belief that the masses are not particularly capable of grasping and remembering, is important only insofar as it convinces them of consistency in time. What the masses categorically refuse to recognize, however, is the fortuitousness that pervades reality; they are predisposed to ideologies of all sorts because they explain facts as mere manifestations of hidden ‘natural’ laws and thus eliminate coincidences by inventing an all-embracing omnipotence – the eternal original source of everything that happens. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from facts into ideology, from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency. However – and this conclusion is extremely important – the main shortcoming of totalitarian propaganda is its incapacity to fulfil the longing of the masses for a completely consistent, comprehensible, and predictable world without seriously conflicting with common sense. Thus, for example, if all the ‘confessions’ of political opponents in the Soviet Union are phrased in the same language and admit the same motives, the masses which are hungry for logical consistency will accept the fiction as supreme proof of their truthfulness, whereas to people who have common sense it is precisely this consistency which is unnatural and proves that they are a fabrication. Figuratively speaking, the masses demand constant repetition of a story about miracles, while to those with common sense such a legend is only a tale that differs from the truth. In other words, although it is true that the masses are obsessed by a desire to escape from reality because they have remained essentially homeless and can no
longer bear its accidental, unfathomable aspects, it is also true that their longing for fiction has some connection with the capacity of the human mind to reject mere coincidence and replace it with structural consistency. The masses’ escape from reality is a verdict against the world in which they are forced to live and in which they cannot exist, because it is governed foremost by coincidence and human beings must constantly transform chaotic conditions into a man-made ideal pattern of relative consistency. The revolt of the masses against ‘realism’, common sense, and all ‘the plausibilities’ of the world was the result of their atomization, of their loss of social status along with which they lost all their communal relationships created by everyday life. In their situation of spiritual homelessness, a measured insight into the interdependence of the accidental and the predictable, the arbitrary and the necessary, cannot operate. And totalitarian propaganda can outrageously insult common sense only where common sense has lost its validity. Before the alternative of facing anarchic growth and total decay or bowing down before the rigid, fantastically and thoroughly fictitious consistency of an ideology, the masses will probably always choose the latter and be ready to pay for their choice with individual sacrifices – and this not because they are stupid or depraved, but because in the general disaster this escape grants them a minimum of self-respect. Thus, it turns out that whereas Nazi propaganda perfected the art of exploiting precisely this longing of the masses for consistency, Bolshevik methods clearly demonstrated, as in a laboratory, its impact on the isolated mass individual. Undoubtedly, such an artificially fabricated insanity is possible only in a totalitarian world. Then, however, it is part of the propaganda apparatus of the totalitarian regimes to which confessions are certainly not indispensable for punishment. ‘Confessions’ were a specialty of Bolshevik propaganda just as much as the curious pedantry of legalizing crimes by retrospective and retroactive legislation was a specific characteristic of Nazi propaganda. The aim in both cases was the same: achieving consistency.

In the fifth place, before they seize power and reorder the world according to their own ideological doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself – a world in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted human masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks that real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations. The force possessed by totalitarian propaganda – before the movements have the power to drop iron curtains to prevent anyone’s disturbing, even by the slightest hint of reality, the gruesome quiet of their entirely imaginary world – lies in its ability to isolate the masses from the real world. The only signs of the real world that reach the masses which are not integrated or are rejected by propaganda are, so to speak, its ‘lacunae’; the questions it does not care to discuss openly, or the rumours it does not dare to contradict because they hit, although in an exaggerated and deformed way, some sore spot. From these sore spots the lies
of totalitarian propaganda derive some truthfulness and real experience, which they need in order to bridge the vast gulf between reality and fiction. Only terror could rely on pure fiction, but even the terror-sustained lying fictions of totalitarian regimes are not entirely arbitrary, although they are usually cruder, more impudent, but also more original than those of the movements. (It takes power, not merely skilful propaganda, to circulate a revised history of the Russian revolution in which the name of Leo Trotsky, commander-in-chief of the Red Army, is not even mentioned.) On the other hand, the lies of the movements are much subtler; they attach themselves to every aspect of social and political life that is hidden from the public eye. They succeed best where the official authorities have surrounded themselves with an atmosphere of secrecy. In the eyes of the masses, such lies turn into superior ‘realism’ because they touch upon real conditions whose existence is indeed being hidden. Revelations of scandals in high society, of corruption of politicians, of lobbyist interventions, of criminal acts, everything that belongs to yellow journalism, becomes in their hands a much more serious weapon than pure sensation. In the case of Nazi propaganda, its most efficient fiction was the story of a Jewish world conspiracy. Anti-Semitic propaganda had been commonly used by demagogues ever since the end of the nineteenth century, and was widespread in the German-speaking countries of the 1920s. The more consistently a discussion of the topic of the Jews was avoided by all political parties and public opinion, the more convinced the mob became that the real power was in Jewish hands, and that the Jewish question was the symbol for the hypocrisy and dishonesty of the whole system. The common notion of the Jew as the incarnation of evil is usually explained with superstitions from the Middle Ages, but is actually closely connected with the more recent ambiguous role which Jews played in European society since their emancipation. One thing is certain: in the postwar period Jews had become more prominent than ever before. Conversely, the problem for the Jews themselves was that their negative reputation and suspicions about them grew in inverse proportion to their real influence in the hierarchy of power. Every decrease in the stability and force of the nation-states was a direct blow to Jewish positions. The partially successful conquest of the state by the nation made it impossible for the government machine to maintain its position above all classes and parties, and thereby nullified the value of any alliances with the Jewish groups of the population, who were supposed to stay outside the structures of society and to be indifferent to party politics. In an atmosphere rife with anti-Semitism, Nazi propaganda approached the subject in a radically different, efficient and perfected way. Still, as Hannah Arendt (1979, pp.355-356) has proved, not one Nazi slogan was new – not even Hitler’s shrewd picture of a class struggle caused by the Jewish capitalist who exploits his workers, while at the same time his brother in the factory courtyard incites them to strike. The only new element was that the Nazi party demanded proof of non-Jewish descent for membership and that it remained, Gottfried Feder’s programme.
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notwithstanding, extremely vague about the actual measures to be taken against Jews once it came to power. The Nazis placed the Jewish issue at the centre of their propaganda in the sense that anti-Semitism was no longer a question of attitudes towards a distinct minority, or a subject exclusively of national politics, but the intimate concern of every individual in his or her personal existence. No one whose ‘family tree’ was not in order could be a member of the Nazi party, and the higher the rank in the Nazi hierarchy, the farther back the family tree had to be traced. By the same token, though less consistently, Bolshevism changed the Marxist doctrine of the inevitable final victory of the proletariat by organizing its members as ‘born proletarians’ and making other class origins shameful, scandalous, inadmissible, and ultimately – prohibited and punishable.

So, Nazi propaganda, concentrated on ‘the global Jewish conspiracy to rule the world’, was ingenious enough to transform anti-Semitism into a principle of self-definition, and thus to separate it from the sphere of the ordinary and fluctuating everyday opinions. It used the persuasion of mass propaganda only as a preparatory step and never overestimated its lasting influence, whether in oratory or in print. (I must note here that the forms of power that come from ordinary demagogy are unstable and could disappear instantly if a particular organization does not support propaganda with violence. The more an organization’s public influence grows, the less the impact of the traditional media of mass information.) This gave the masses of dispersed, undefinable, unstable and futile individuals a means of self-definition and identification which not only restored some of the self-respect they had formerly derived from their place and role in society, but also created a peculiar kind of spurious stability which made them ideal candidates for an organization. Through this type of propaganda, the movement could present itself as an extension of the mass meeting and rationalize the futile self-confidence and hysterical certainty that it instilled in the isolated individuals of an atomized society. According to the Nazi ideology: ‘The mass-meeting is the strongest form of propaganda because each individual feels more self-confident and more powerful in the unity of a mass. The enthusiasm of the moment becomes a principle and a spiritual attitude through organization and systematic training and discipline’ (Eugen Hadamovsky, quoted in Arendt, 1979, p.357, fn. 38). (Here one must add that from the very beginning, the Nazis were prudent enough never to use slogans such as democracy, republic, or monarchy, which indicated a specific form of government. It is as though, in this one matter, they had always known that they would be entirely original. Every discussion about the actual form of their future government could be dismissed as empty talk about mere formalities – the state, according to Hitler, was only a means for the conservation of the race, as the state, according to Bolshevik propaganda, was only an instrument in the class struggle.) Hence the famous Nazi slogan: ‘Right is what is good for the German people’. In other words, Nazi propaganda discovered in ‘the
supranational because intensely national Jew’ the forerunner of the German master of the world and assured the masses that ‘the nations that have been the first to see through the Jew and have been the first to fight him are going to take his place in the domination of the world’ (Goebbels, quoted in Arendt, 1979, p.360). The fiction of an already existing Jewish world domination was meant to pave the way for a future German world domination. In this way, Nazi propaganda presented world conquest as a practical possibility; this implied that the whole affair was only a question of inspired and shrewd know-how, and that the only opponent that stood in the way of a German victory over the entire world was a small people, the Jews, who ruled it without possessing mechanisms of violence – an opponent that could very easily be removed, once their secret was discovered and their method emulated strictly and on a larger scale. Nazi propaganda concentrated all these new and promising prospects in one concept: *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community). This new community, a central experiment realized in the Nazi movement in the pretotalitarian conditions, was based on the absolute equality of all Germans, an equality which, however, was not of rights but of nature, and their absolute difference from all other people. After the Nazis came to power, this concept gradually lost its importance and gave way to a general contempt for the German people, on the one hand, and a great eagerness, on the other, to enlarge their own ranks from ‘Aryans’ of other nations: an additional idea from the earlier period of Nazi propaganda. In practice, the *Volksgemeinschaft* was the key and systematic propagandistic preparation for the future ‘Aryan’ racial society. To a certain extent, it was also the Nazis’ attempt to counter the communist promise of a classless society. Here we see a fact of exceptional importance: if we disregard the ideological context, the propaganda appeal of the one over the other is obvious. Although both ideologies promised to eliminate all social differences, the classless society had the obvious connotation that everybody would be levelled to the status of a factory worker, while the *Volksgemeinschaft*, with its connotation of conspiracy for world conquest, held out a strong hope that every German could eventually become a true capitalist. The *Volksgemeinschaft*, however, had an even greater advantage – namely, that its establishment did not have to wait for some future historical moment and did not depend upon an objective social situation: it could be realized immediately, here and now, in the fictitious world of the totalitarian movement.

To sum up: the true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not to persuade people of the advantages of a particular ideology but to organize the ‘accumulation of power without the possession of the means of violence’, as Hannah Arendt (1979) has proven convincingly. For this purpose, any originality in ideological content would only be an unnecessary obstacle. It is no coincidence that the two totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, so ‘innovative’ in methods of government and ‘ingenious’ in forms of organization, did not preach a new teaching, did not introduce a doctrine which was not already popular. Not
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the passing successes of demagogy win the masses, but the visible reality and power of a ‘living organization’; the living organization of the movement is contrasted with the ‘dead mechanism’ of the bureaucratic party. (Hitler owed his position in the party not to his brilliant gifts as a mass orator but to the fact that he misled his opponents into underestimating him as a simple demagogue; Stalin was eventually able to defeat the greatest orator of the Russian Revolution, Leo Trotsky.) What distinguishes the totalitarian rulers is, above all, the single-minded purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundaments of another, entirely fictitious world. The fiction of the Jewish world conspiracy was as adequate as the fiction of a Trotskyite conspiracy, for both contained an element of plausibility – the covert influence of the Jews in the past, and the struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky – which not even the whole fictitious world of totalitarianism, can safely do without. Their art consists in using, and at the same time transcending, the elements of reality, of verifiable experiences, in the chosen fiction, and in generalizing them into regions which then are definitely removed from all possible control by any individual experience. With the help of such generalizations, totalitarian ideology establishes a world fit to compete with the real one, whose main handicap is that it is not logical, consistent, and organized. The consistency of the fiction and strictness of the organization make it possible for the generalization eventually to survive the explosion of more specific lies: the power of the Jews after their helpless slaughter, and the treacherous global conspiracy of the Trotskyites. The stubbornness with which totalitarian rulers have clung to their original lies in the face of absurdity is more than superstitious gratitude to what turned the trick and cannot be explained by the psychology of the liar whose very success may make him his own last victim. Once these propaganda slogans have become part of the ‘living organization’, they cannot be eliminated without wrecking the whole structure. An arguable matter, such as whether there was a Jewish world conspiracy or not, was transformed by totalitarian propaganda into the chief element of the Nazi reality – the Nazis acted as though the world were indeed dominated by the Jews and needed a counterconspiracy to defend itself. Racism for them was no longer a debatable theory of dubious scientific value, but was being realized every day in the functioning hierarchy of a political organization in whose framework it would have been very ‘unrealistic’ to question it. Similarly, Bolshevism no longer needed to prove the existence of class struggle, internationalism, and the dependence of the welfare of the proletariat on the welfare of the Soviet Union – the functioning organization of the Comintern was more convincing than any ideological argument.

So, the fundamental reason for the superiority of totalitarian propaganda over the propaganda of other parties and movements is that its content, at least for the members of the movement, is no longer an objective issue about which people may have opinions, but has become as real and untouchable an element in
their lives as a natural given. Organizing life in its entirety according to the precepts of a particular ideology is possible solely and only under a totalitarian regime. In Nazi Germany, questioning the validity of anti-Semitism when nothing mattered but race origin, when a career depended upon an ‘Aryan’ physiognomy (it is well known that Himmler used to select the applicants for the SS solely from photographs) and the amount of food upon the number of one’s Jewish grandparents, was like questioning the existence of the world. The advantages of a propaganda that constantly ‘adds the power and force of organization’ (Hadamovsky, quoted in Arendt, 1979, p.363) to the unreliable voice of argument, and thereby realizes, on the spur of the moment, whatever it says, are more eloquent than any arguments. Foolproof against arguments based on a reality which the movements promised to change, against a counterpropaganda disqualified by the mere fact that it belongs to or defends a world which the helpless masses will not accept, it can be disproved only by another, a stronger or better, reality. In sum, it is only in the moment of defeat that the inherent weaknesses of totalitarian propaganda become visible. Without the force of the movement, its members cease at once to believe in the dogma to which, until yesterday, they swore their personal allegiance and for which they were ready to sacrifice their lives. The moment the movement, that is, the fictitious world which sheltered them, is destroyed, the masses revert to their old status of isolated individuals who either happily accept a new function in a changed world or sink back into their old desperate superfluousness. The members of totalitarian movements, radically exalted as long as the movement exists, will not follow the example of religious fanatics and die the death of martyrs. Rather they will quietly give up the movement as a bad bet and look around for another promising fiction that can gain enough strength to establish a new mass movement.

We will now move our analysis from propaganda as a classic instrument of power used by totalitarian regimes to propaganda as an immanent functional moment of the postcommunist public sphere. Of course, such a comparative analysis does not dismiss the generally held view that a number of elements of contemporary anti-liberal propaganda are functioning also in the public sphere of the old European and American democracies. We will try to conceptualize the social continuity and social discontinuity between the two phenomena which, as we well know, emerged and function in ‘incommensurable’ historical contexts.

The social continuity between those two kinds of propaganda can be revealed best through the common characteristics of the different ‘ideological pictures of the world’ constructed by them – the one being, undeniably, total, monolithic and self-contained, the other heterogeneous, conspiratorial and rationalized, containing within itself incommensurable and mutually exclusive contents which construct, in a relatively easy and universally accessible way, a seemingly homogeneous and complete social reality. Multifactorial explanations, generalized conclusions or complex interpretations are not necessary here. In the first place – and this is an analogous mechanism between the two kinds of propaganda – the
ideologies constructed by them are capable of explaining absolutely everything, from a global event to a national fact to the most trivial occurrence, by deducing it from a single premise. Thus, what we see is an iron necessity, strict consistency and conclusive completion of the absolute logical explanation about ‘the true state of affairs’. In the second place, ideologies are known for their claim to be scientific – they try to combine the scientific approach with the conclusions of philosophical reflections and pretend to be scientific philosophy. The word ‘ideology’ presupposes that an idea may be accepted as the subject of scientific research, where the suffix -logy indicates nothing but a body of scientific statements on the subject-idea in question. But if that is so, then every ideology should be regarded as a quasi-science and a quasi-philosophy, for it rejects the fundamental principles both of science and of philosophy. In the third place, the very name of every ideology signifies its essence almost literally – the logic of a particular idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the ‘idea’ is applied, and the result is not a body of scientific statements about something that is, but revelation of a process that is in constant flux. In every ideology, events follow ‘the law’ in their development and present a logical exposition of its own ‘idea’. Ideologies claim that they know the mysteries of the whole historical process – the secrets of the past, the problems of the present, the uncertainties of the future – thanks to the logic inherent in their respective ideas. In the fourth place, ultimately no ideology is interested in ‘the mystery of being’ insofar as it claims that it reveals being completely, thoroughly. Essentially, all ideologies are historical and deal with the origin, development and decline, the rise and fall of cultures, even when they try to explain history by some ‘law of nature or of society’. The word ‘race’ in racism (the word ‘class’ in communism) does not signify a cognitive interest in human races (in social classes) as a field of scientific research, but the ‘idea’ by which the course of history is explained as a consistent and objective process. In the fifth place, the ‘idea’ inherent in one or another ideology is no longer some metaphysical essence or regulating principle, but has turned into a means of interpreting events. To an ideology, history does not appear in the light of an idea (which would mean that history is viewed as a specific realization of some ideal eternity which itself lies beyond the limits of progressive motion), but as something that can be calculated with the help of this idea. Such a function of the ‘idea’ follows from its own ‘logic’, according to which any movement that is a consequence of the idea itself does not need external factors to set it into motion. Racism is actually the belief that there is a motion inherent in the very idea of race, just as communism is convinced that there is a motion inherent in the very concept of class.

To sum up: every ideology (a key proposition that is valid in full for the totalitarian doctrines, but only in part for the classical ones – liberalism, conservatism, or socialism) supposes or presumes that the course of history and its logical process correspond to each other, which means that whatever happens is invariably predetermined by the logic of one ‘idea’. However, the only possible
movement within the framework of such logic is the process of consistent deduction of conclusions from a given premise. Dialectical logic, which basically follows a thesis–antithesis–synthesis pattern where the synthesis becomes the thesis for the next cycle, is not different in principle, once an ideology accepts it. The first thesis becomes the premise and its advantage for ideological interpretations lies in the possibility of using this dialectical method to explain all factual contradictions as interlinked stages of one identical, consistent movement. Once logic as an immanent movement of thought, not as a mechanism for control of thinking, is applied to an idea, this idea is transformed into a premise. The ideological explanations of the world performed this operation long before it demonstrated its fruitfulness for totalitarian reasoning. The purely negative coercion of logic – the exclusion of all contradictions – became ‘productive’ when, by drawing conclusions as ordinary ‘direct’ arguments, it initiated a whole series of reflections that had to be forced upon the mind. This process of drawing arguments could be interrupted neither by a new idea (which would have been another premise with different consequences) nor by a newly acquired experience. Ideologies assume that a single idea is sufficient to explain the entire course of events in the development from an absolute premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is interpreted within the framework of this consistent process of deduction. The danger in exchanging the necessary inconclusiveness of philosophical thought for the total interpretation of an ideology consists less in the potential risk of falling for some widespread and uncritical assumption than in exchanging the freedom inherent in the human capacity to think for the straitjacket of logic with which one can force oneself almost as violently as one is forced by outside powers. The ideologies of the nineteenth century are not in themselves totalitarian, and although racism and communism became the most significant and widespread ideologies of the twentieth century they were not, at least in principle, more totalitarian than the others. Why? Because their popularity was due to the fact that the elements of the accumulated historical experience on which they were originally based – the interracial struggle for world domination, and the class struggle in nation-states – were politically more important than the basic components of the other ideologies; in other words, all ideologies contain elements of totalitarianism which, however, are fully developed only by totalitarian movements, and this creates the deceptive impression that only racism and communism are in fact totalitarian. The truth, however, is that the real character of the different ideologies was revealed only by the place held by the respective ideology in the apparatus of totalitarian domination. Viewed from such a perspective, we can identify and point out three generalized elements that are characteristic of all ideological thinking – be it conservative or liberal, socialist or anarchist, totalitarian or anti-democratic.

Above all, in striving for total interpretation of the world, ideologies tend to explain not what is, but what becomes, what is born and passes away. They invariably focus on the element of motion, that is to say, on history in the traditional
sense of the word. Ideologies are always oriented towards history, even when, as in the case of racism, they seemingly proceed from natural premises, because here nature serves merely to explain historical matters; the latter are, in turn, reduced to matters of natural development. The claim to total explanation promises to reveal the essence of all historical events, it promises a total interpretation of the past, a total knowledge of the present, and a reliable prediction of the future.

Next, ideological thinking becomes independent of all experience of being, because it cannot learn anything new from it even if it is a question of something that has just come to pass and is not established yet. Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and stubbornly insists that behind the whole perceptible world there is a ‘truer’ reality that governs it but which we can become aware of only by a ‘sixth sense’. This sixth sense is provided by the ideology, by the specific ideas inculcated by, for example, the educational institutions, established above all for the purpose of training ‘political soldiers’ – be they Nazi or Bolshevik. The propaganda of the totalitarian movement, in turn, also serves to emancipate thought from experience and reality. It always strives to inject a secret meaning into every social event and to suspect a secret intent behind every political act. Once they have seized power, the totalitarian movements proceed to change reality in accordance with their ideological claims. The idea of the enemy is replaced by the concept of conspiracy, and this creates a mentality in which reality is no longer experienced and understood in its own terms but is automatically assumed to signify something else.

Finally, since ideologies do not have the power to transform reality, they achieve this emancipation of thought from experience through certain technical methods. Ideological thinking orders facts into an absolute logical sequence, starting from an axiomatically accepted premise and deducing everything else from it – that is, it proceeds with a consistency that is not to be found in the realm of reality. The deducing may proceed logically or dialectically, but in both cases it involves a consistent process of argumentation which, because it thinks in terms of a process, is supposed to be able to reveal the movement of the suprahuman, natural or historical processes. The essence is revealed by the mind’s imitating, logically or dialectically, the laws of ‘scientifically’ established movements with which through the process of imitation it becomes fully integrated. Ideological argumentation, which is always a kind of deduction, corresponds to the two components of all ideologies – movement and emancipation from reality and experience: first, because its thought movement does not spring from experience but is self-generated, and, secondly, because it transforms the one and only element taken from real experience into an axiomatic premise, leaving the entire subsequent argumentation process completely isolated from any experienced events. Once it has established its premise, its point of departure, ideological thinking stops taking experience into account and drawing its resources from reality.

Here we will make a final move: which are the focal points of difference-
repetition that make (in)commensurable the discursive strategies and, of course, the forms of ideological programming of totalitarian and anti-democratic propaganda? First, the anti-democratic discourse in Bulgaria is wholly and deeply rooted in an ideological matrix whose main organizational and subordinating principle is a particular ‘conspiratorial logic’; a logic that constantly produces various kinds of ‘abuses of power’, that is, hidden manipulations – covert promotion of foreign and hostile interests in Bulgarian society – by Bulgarian politicians. And, of course, the power-holders in Bulgaria are represented in the unenviable role of ‘puppets’ whose political moves are essentially predetermined because they are imperatively dependent on the intents of ‘villains/puppet-masters’. Hence also their wretched fates of exploited and disintegrated ‘victims’ who, however, have another discursive function, too: to be ‘antagonists’ in an anti-national and anti-social scenario. Unlike the totalitarian ‘iron’ necessity centred around ‘a global conspiracy to rule the world’ – whose logic is universal, global and final – what we see in Bulgaria is an ‘alogical’ conspiratorial logic which is constructed not through strict consistency but through simple associations, elementary analogies and contextual shifts, including through interchangeability of role repertoires. This accounts for a constant focus and key resource of the discursive strategy of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria: it is centred on all those risks, dangers and threats – at the national, regional and international level – which come from the contradictory past, pass like lightning through the present, and presage the unenviable-miserable future of the ‘homeland’. Consequently, anti-democratic propaganda always points out a hidden and dangerous villain/conspirator (antagonist) who initiates an inevitable apocalyptic scenario – this is precisely how it creates social panic, which is actually its true strategic goal; social panic, in turn, fosters an environment where anyone who opposes the conspiratorial villain – the one most often and categorically pointed out as such an agent of opposition to the US and the West is the Kremlin upon the annexation of Crimea, where the annexation stops being an ‘annexation’ and becomes an act of worthy resistance – implicitly or indirectly becomes a protagonist (‘saviour’). Such a procedure results in a ‘strange syllogism’: those who carry out an aggressive act against the international legal order (who brutally annex the territory of a foreign country and actively initiate a ‘civil war’ in some of its regions) are acting rightly and worthily because, by transgressing the international legal order, they are in fact standing up against and opposing the global villain (the US/the West). Their action is fair, historically justified and morally just because it is directed ‘against the villain’ and, from that point of view, the nature or content of the action itself no longer matters.

Second, the ideological matrix of the anti-democratic discourse functions also through an automatic inductive mechanism: it focuses on a particular, specific event, drawing from it a series of generalized conclusions that are deducible only from each other, and which reconfirm ‘the extremely bad plight of the country’. The event in question (‘fact’, opinion, statement, or position) is super-
imposed, without specification and analysis, on a particular discursive figure (the crisis in Bulgaria, the hegemony of the US, the aggressiveness of NATO, the collapse of the EU, the rise of Russia, and other discursive figures of this sort, most of them being mutually inferential), thereby directly interlinking an isolated fact, unrelated to other facts, and a maximally generalized discursive figure: the thus created anonymous monster (single fact/discursive rule) now has the discursive status of an axiomatic premise that serves as the basis for a progressive circular logical movement which erases all factual contradictions and has a universal pretension. In fact, however, what we have here and now is an inverted causality: the idea, an idea whose significance is over-emphasized – in this particular case, ‘the critical situation in Bulgaria’ – is represented not as the end result of a controlled reasoning process but as an unproblematic starting point. Hence also the total lack of self-critical reflection of propagandistic thinking, and its radical detachment from the actual processes in social reality.

Third, unlike the totalitarian discourse, which has a ‘positive’ horizon, anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria is above all negative, subversive and devaluing; it does not seek to organize the progressive movement of the masses towards an ultimate goal, it aims to publicly discredit every political opponent who is not just ideologically different but also allegedly socially inadequate, intellectually ‘imbecile’ and morally ‘corrupt’. Such opponents must be pointed out, condemned, disgraced and ultimately discredited as hypocritical, manipulative, or unscrupulous foreign lackeys/traitors, and gradually excluded, but strategically – forever – from public presence. The intense functioning of this mechanism is facilitated also by the invariably overemphasized presence of ‘objective’ expert and ‘competent’ citizen opinions – through an endless repetition of constant epithets, they give extra weight to the final political verdict: throughout his term in office, the media image of President Rosen Plevneliev was invariably and negatively constructed as that of a ‘non-autonomous, inconsequential politician without decisive importance’, while the main characteristics of Prime Minister Boyko Borisov’s media image are

that he is serving his masters from the West; that in order to serve them successfully, he is inconsistent and justifies his inconsistency by lying; that he brazenly does not hide his lies because he is a ‘simple guy of the people’, relying on the fact that both the people and he is simple, so the people ‘will always understand him’; that, consequently, he is a vulgar politician; that he is successful despite his vulgarity because he ‘has political acumen’; that because of his acumen he can behave shrewdly but not intelligently… (Vatsov et al., 2017, p.103)

Fourth, the ‘emancipation from experience and reality’, characteristic of all ideological thinking, and the consequent complete retreat into a realm of mutually deducing and justifying ideas, is realized in anti-democratic propaganda in
Bulgaria in a specific way. Here, of course, the totalitarian split of the world between a ‘real’ and a ‘fictitious’ one, and hence the strict consistency of fiction in contrast to the complete disorganization of reality, is presupposed, but in a peculiar way: contemporary anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria does not offer some new ‘doctrine’ that pretends to have strict and provable consistency, nor does it directly build an apparatus of totalitarian power through which to introduce ‘total order’ into reality. What, then, is the fiction of consistency that it promotes? We have already described it in part: it offers the conspiracy figure as a basic and most simple explanatory scheme for the world – everything can be explained by a conspiracy, such explanations are easy, simple, elementary; they do not require detailed knowledge and complex analysis; anyone can ‘think’ in terms of conspiracies, and conspiratorial explanations are contagious. Through such explanations, however, another important substitution is carried out, a substitution associated with a primitive intuition of contemporary people: namely, that everyone ultimately acts according to his or her own interest. This is the main ‘proposition’ of the new propaganda, which lends consistency to its messages however contradictory and chaotic they may be. And if there is indeed any ideology in it, then this ideology is the cynical ideology of ‘interest’. In fact, anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria is legitimating anew the concept of ‘unilateral interest’ (be it individual, group, party, popular or state interest) as the basic and invariable one and, through this concept, it is de-legitimating all general moral and legal norms of liberal democracy. Actually, the conspiracy figure serves exactly for achieving this goal: anyone who insists on basic principles beyond unilateral interest – on respect for and protection of human rights, on the separation of powers, on the territorial inviolability of states, etc. – is represented as a liar/deceiver who is covertly, surreptitiously and dishonestly promoting his or her own homogeneous interest; according to the conspiratorial logic, the liberal-democratic principles, norms and rules are nothing but a smokescreen for promoting covert interests, through which the age-old interests of the weaker (of ‘the people’) are violated. Hence the ‘exposing’ of covert interests, intensified by the tabloidization of contemporary Bulgarian media, becomes a main figure for discrediting political and economic opponents. Thus, the discursive focus falls on those invisible, subversive and retrograde forces that covertly synchronize and lend meaning to the seemingly random and unconnected factual, eventual and processual occurrences. Consequently, these occurrences are transformed, through the simple conspiratorial grammar, into a ‘short story’ which clearly points out the antagonist and the protagonist, and thereby seems completely logical, no matter that the different short stories produced by this grammar are mutually contradictory. In addition, this simple conspiratorial grammar acquires a peculiar ‘logical character’ when it is transposed to the geopolitical level – then the short story of the present day, but also of history, begins to look very easily like an endless chain of geopolitical predeterminations with a very frightening, dramatic, or catastrophic end for Bulgaria: the total anachronicity of the world.
order; the American global domination; NATO’s ‘insane’ policies; the total crisis of the European Union; the injustice of the sanctions against Russia; the hostile relations between Russia and Ukraine; the direct threats to Bulgaria’s national security; the real danger of a Third World War. What we see here is a technology that functions by borrowing key elements from reality which are abstracted from the realm of actual facts and transferred to the fictitious world where they are maximally generalized and conclusively detached from all experience. The simple but seemingly consistent and logical figure of conspiracy enables anti-democratic propaganda to discursively present itself as social critique of the (neo) liberal philosophy, values and governance. It pretends that its own ‘metaphysical’ postulates will be the fundamental conditions of possibility for designing and conducting an effective leftist policy.

Fifth, anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria does not inform the public, report news and cover significant events; it cannot be ‘objective’ in the sense of thorough presentation of mutually exclusive views on a particular issue. On the contrary: its instruments are ideological messages in the form of pre-reflexive ‘suggestions’ aimed at influencing the mass consciousness – not by persuading the undecided public opinion, but by confirming and reconfirming already constructed sketches of ‘self-evident’ ideas. These, however, are not so much the indoctrination practices characteristic of totalitarian propaganda (frightening the population by applying intense violence and constant realization of ideological clichés in reality) as massive, focused doctrinal inculcation, constant repetition and dogmatic instilling of ideological postulates. Anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria does not propagate some new, true and scientifically justified explanation of the world, nor does it construct some positive social project or offer some historically different doctrine; it manipulates, insofar as it suspects an ulterior motive or dishonest intent in every political act; it falsifies, for it always strives to inject a secret meaning into every real social event; in the final analysis, it is an ‘art of hypocritical lying’ because it is subversive with regard to the institutional foundations of the democratic order, trying to strip every value of worth, to invalidate every norm and to devalue every principle.

Sixth, prediction has a peculiar place and plays a peculiar role in anti-democratic discourse in Bulgaria. Unlike totalitarian propaganda, here we have not so much a complete attempt at scientific prediction mixed with clairvoyant and esoteric knowledge; a total pretension to ‘ideological scientificality’ despite the constant appeal to and integration of professional expert opinions for the purpose of reinforcing its power – but, rather, the construction of a catastrophic consciousness built and maintained through a series of fatalistic prophecies about coming natural disasters, social turbulences and historic cataclysms. At the centre of such an apocalyptic ideology are discursive units like ‘crisis’, ‘danger’, ‘threat’, ‘collapse’, ‘destruction’ and ‘humiliation’, and on its horizon there always appear ‘conflict’, ‘war’ and ‘catastrophe’. Here ‘the end of history’ may come as early as tomorrow or the day after, while ‘the death of humanity’ sooner or later –
sooner rather than later – is inevitable. There can never be any discussion as to whether such prophecies are true or false; they cannot be theoretically justified and logically proven, let alone actually, that is, empirically, verified. In other words, the method of infallible prediction as a central propaganda device used by totalitarian propaganda to achieve its ultimate goal – conquest and domination of the whole world, in which all prophecies will be made true – has acquired a new social meaning in anti-democratic propaganda. The ‘future of the world’ only at first sight seems to be full of multiple uncertainties, it is actually predetermined in two directions; but it is predetermined not because prophecy and reality are supposed to coincide in it, but because the ‘ideological scientificality’ has already announced its absolute infallibility: either the age-old forces of history will bring about a radically new world order, or humanity will disappear forever from the face of the earth.

Seventh, the main technique used by Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda is the endless repetition of negative messages which must be introduced, instilled and rooted into mass consciousness. The goal: reaffirmation of the logical consistency of the ideological ‘conclusions’ over time as an endless process on which everyday people rely as a prime source of their own thinking. And whereas totalitarian propaganda ‘explains’ social facts as elementary manifestations of natural or historical laws, denies accidental coincidences, inventing some all-encompassing power – the source of everything that happens – and flourishes on the basis of this escape from facticity into ideology, from reality into fiction, from the accidental into the consistent, anti-democratic propaganda fabricates, without entering into insoluble contradictions with the facts of common sense, thorough ‘proofs of veracity’ that systematically devalue and totally reject the principles of liberal democracy, and above all, the separation and mutual control of powers and the supremacy and protection of individual rights. And it is indeed anti-institutional and anti-civic not just because it does not offer any positive messages about a ‘different’ social life, but also because it nihilistically undermines the basic public trust in the public institutions, political elite and civil society, and cynically subverts the value-normative foundations of democratic governance. But it is also Eurosceptic because it constantly produces and massively disseminates ‘deadly’ expectations/attitudes towards the European Union (inefficiency of the model, crisis of the institutions, failure of neoliberal governance, inter-state conflicts, insecurity, disintegration, bureaucratization, risks, terrorism, extremism, nationalism, populism, revanchism, migration, refugees, authoritarianism, fundamentalism, unemployment and poverty), and, in this way, turns it into the arch-enemy of Europe itself. But why is it pro-Russian, too? Because its unified strategy is aimed, on the one hand, at Russia’s complete, irreversible and conclusive rehabilitation through intense destruction of its negative public image which demonizes and discredits Russia, and on the other, at the global political legitimation of the Russian alternative order of the world through accelerated construction of ‘the friendly face of the true Russia’ – a ‘reborn’, different,
well-intentioned, civilized and tolerant country. And of course, anti-democratic propaganda is also mass propaganda, yet not because behind it there is a mass movement which has to be organized for the purpose of seizing political power, nor because it has already conquered, in ideological terms, ‘the popular masses’ which will at long last break their eternal chains and win their own intoxicating freedom, but because it is an instrument of power which divides Bulgarian society into two parts and generates conflicting contradictions between them, drawing an insurmountable dividing line between the ruling and the ruled, those who have power and those who do not, the winners and losers of the ‘transition’, the illegitimately enriched and the legitimately impoverished, oligarchic structures and deluded voters, organized crime and honest people, while striving to keep in a state of permanent partial mobilization that overwhelming majority of the Bulgarian population which is ‘cheated, wronged and oppressed’, and, exactly in this way, to radically and frighteningly oppose it the ‘rootless’, venal and corrupt Bulgarian elites.

Finally, could we equate anti-democratic and totalitarian propaganda from the point of view of their own strategies – not to persuade and to ultimately successfully and effectively convince the masses of the significant advantages of some ideologies, nor to form, through doctrinal inculcation, an entire dogmatic consciousness, but to be organizational models for the accumulation of power without the possession of the means of violence? There is no doubt that in such a perspective, the two forms of propaganda are similar – they do not offer any originality in their discursive content, nor profess some new doctrine and introduce an ideology that is not already more or less popular. By contrast, whereas totalitarian propaganda practically succeeded in winning the masses, organizing a mass movement and seizing political power, anti-democratic propaganda – although it does not have an organizing potential, innovative methods of government and an alternative political model – intensely accumulates power by discrediting civil society and creating a cynical macro-environment, a key prerequisite for ‘modulating’ public opinion with the aim of reconsidering Bulgaria’s membership in the EU and NATO.

NOTES

1 The real impact of this motto, formulated by Heinrich Himmler himself, is indeed difficult to render. As Hannah Arendt (1979, pp.324-325) points out, ‘Its German equivalent: Meine Ehre heisst Treue indicates an absolute devotion and obedience which transcends the meaning of mere discipline or personal faithfulness.’

2 ‘The success of totalitarian movements among the masses meant the end of two illusions of democratically ruled countries in general and of European nation-states and their party system in particular. The first was that the people in its majority had taken an active part in government and that each individual was in sympathy with one’s own or somebody else’s party. On the contrary, the movements showed that the politically neutral and indifferent masses could easily be the majority in a democratically ruled country, that therefore a democracy could function according to rules which are actively recognized by only a
minority. The second democratic illusion exploded by the totalitarian movements was that these politically indifferent masses did not matter, that they were truly neutral and constituted no more than the inarticulate backdrop setting for the political life of the nation. Now they made apparent what no other organ of public opinion had ever been able to show, namely, that democratic government had rested as much on the silent approbation and tolerance of the indifferent and inarticulate sections of the people as on the articulate and visible institutions and organizations of the country’ (Arendt, 1979, p.312).

3 ‘Hitler stated in Mein Kampf … that it was better to have an antiquated program than to allow a discussion of program … Soon he was to proclaim publicly: “Once we take over the government, the program will come of itself. … The first thing must be an inconceivable wave of propaganda. That is a political action which would have little to do with the other problems of the moment”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.324).

4 As Hannah Arendt (1979, p.341, fn. 1) points out, the standard ‘scientific’ explanation is that “terror without propaganda would lose most of its psychological effect, whereas propaganda without terror does not contain its full punch” … What is overlooked in these and similar statements, which mostly go around in circles, is the fact that not only political propaganda but the whole of modern mass publicity contains an element of threat; that terror, on the other hand, can be fully effective without propaganda, so long as it is only a question of conventional political terror of tyranny. Only when terror is intended to coerce not merely from without but, as it were, from within, when the political regime wants more than power, is terror in need of propaganda. In this sense the Nazi theorist, Eugen Hadamovsky, could say in Propaganda und nationale Macht, 1933: “Propaganda and violence are never contradictions. Use of violence can be part of the propaganda” (p.22).’

5 ‘In the summer of 1942, Hitler still talks about “[kicking] even the last Jew out of Europe” … and resetting the Jews in Siberia or Africa … or Madagascar, while in reality he had already decided on the “final solution” prior to the Russian invasion, probably in 1940, and ordered the gas ovens to be set up in the fall of 1941 … Himmler already knew in the spring of 1941 that “the Jews [must be] exterminated to the last man by the end of the war. This is the unequivocal desire and command of the Fuehrer”’ (Arendt, 1979, pp.341-342, fn. 4).

6 ‘Education [in the concentration camps] consists of discipline, never of any kind of instruction on an ideological basis, for the prisoners have for the most part slave-like souls’ (Heinrich Himmler, quoted in Arendt, 1979, p.344, fn. 7).

7 ‘Terror as the counterpart of propaganda played a greater role in Nazism than in Communism. The Nazis did not strike at prominent figures as had been done in the earlier wave of political crimes in Germany (the murder of Rathenau and Erzberger); instead, by killing small socialist functionaries or influential members of opposing parties, they attempted to prove to the population the dangers involved in mere membership. This kind of mass terror, which still operated on a comparatively small scale, increased steadily because neither the police nor the courts seriously prosecuted political offenders’ (Arendt, 1979, p.344).

8 ‘It is also true that there is a certain element of violence in the imaginative exaggerations of publicity men, that behind the assertion that girls who do not use this particular brand of soap may go through life with pimples and without a husband, lies the wild dream of monopoly, the dream that one day the manufacturer of the “only soap that prevents pimples” may have the power to deprive of husbands all girls who do not use his soap. Science in the instances of both business publicity and totalitarian propaganda is obviously only a surrogate for power’ (Arendt, 1979, p.345).

9 ‘Similar formulations can be found time and again in the pamphlet literature issued by the SS for the “ideological indoctrination” of its cadets. “The laws of nature are subject to an unchangeable will that cannot be influenced. Hence it is necessary to recognize these laws” … All these are nothing but variations of certain phrases taken from Hitler’s Mein Kampf, of which the following is quoted as the motto for the pamphlet just mentioned: “While man attempts to struggle against the iron logic of nature, he comes into conflict with the basic principles to which alone he owes his very existence as man!”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.346, fn. 10).

10 ‘Hitler based the superiority of ideological movements over political parties on the fact that ideologies (Weltanschauungen) always “proclaim their infallibility” … The first pages of the official handbook for the Hitler Youth … consequently emphasize that all questions of Weltanschauung, formerly deemed “unrealistic” and “ununderstandable,” “have become so clear, simple and definite [my italics] that every comrade can understand them and co-operate in their solution”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.348, fn. 20).

11 ‘The first among the “pledges of the Party member,” as enumerated in the Organisationsbuch der NSDAP, reads: “The Führer is always right.” Edition published in 1936, p. 8. But the Dienstvorschrift für die P.O. der NSDAP, 1932, p. 38, puts it this way: “Hitler’s decision is final!” Note the remarkable difference in phraseology. “Their claim to be infallible, [that] neither of them has ever sincerely admitted an error” is
in this respect the decisive difference between Stalin and Trotsky on one hand, and Lenin on the other’ (Arendt, 1979, p.349, fn. 21).

12 The most famous example is Hitler’s announcement to the German Reichstag in January, 1939: “I want today once again to make a prophecy: In case the Jewish financiers … succeed once more in hurling the peoples into a world war, the result will be … the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.” … Translated into nontotalitarian language, this meant: I intend to make war and I intend to kill the Jews of Europe. Similarly Stalin, in the great speech before the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1930 in which he prepared the physical liquidation of intraparty right and left deviationists, described them as representatives of “dying classes.” This definition not only gave the argument its specific sharpness but also announced, in totalitarian style, the physical destruction of those whose “dying out” had just been prophesied’ (Arendt, 1979, p.349).

13 In a speech he made in September, 1942, when the extermination of the Jews was in full swing, Hitler explicitly referred to his speech of January 30, 1939 (published as a booklet …), and to the Reichstag session of September 1, 1939, when he had announced that “if Jewry should instigate an international world war to exterminate the Aryan peoples of Europe, not the Aryan peoples but Jewry will [rest of sentence drowned by applause]…” (Arendt, 1979, pp.349-350, fn. 25).

14 Hannah Arendt (1979, p.350) points out Hitler’s “phenomenal untruthfulness,” “the lack of demonstrable reality in nearly all his utterances,” his “indifference to facts which he does not regard as vitally important” … In almost identical terms, Khruschev describes Stalin’s reluctance to consider life’s realities” and his indifference to “the real state of affairs” … Stalin’s opinion of the importance of facts is best expressed in his periodic revisions of Russian history.’

15 It is interesting to note that the Bolsheviks during the Stalin era somehow accumulated conspiracies, that the discovery of a new one did not mean they would discard the former. The Trotskyites conspiracy started around 1930, the 300 families were added during the Popular Front period, from 1935 onward, British imperialism became an actual conspiracy during the Stalin-Hitler alliance, the “American Secret Service” followed soon after the close of the war; the last, Jewish cosmopolitanism, had an obvious and disquieting resemblance to Nazi propaganda’ (Arendt, 1979, p.351, fn. 29).

16 ‘The Soviet secret police, so eager to convince its victims of their guilt for crimes they never committed, and in many instances were in no position to commit, completely isolates and eliminates all real factors, so that the very logic, the very consistency of “the story” contained in the prepared confession becomes overwhelming. In a situation where the dividing line between fiction and reality is blurred by the monstrosity and the inner consistency of the accusation, not only the strength of character to resist constant threats but great confidence in the existence of fellow human beings – relatives or friends or neighbors – who will never believe “the story” are required to resist the temptation to yield to the mere abstract possibility of guilt’ (Arendt, 1979, pp.352-353).

17 ‘The actual content of postwar antisemitic propaganda was neither a monopoly of the Nazis nor particularly new and original. Lies about a Jewish world conspiracy had been current since the Dreyfus Affair and based themselves on the existing international interrelationship and interdependence of a Jewish people dispersed all over the world. Exaggerated notions of Jewish world power are even older; they can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century, when the intimate connection between Jewish business and the nation-states had become visible’ (Arendt, 1979, p.354).

18 In practice, Gottfried Feder’s twenty-five points contained only standard measures demanded by all anti-Semitic groups in Germany: expulsion of naturalized Jews, and treatment of native Jews as aliens. By contrast, the anti-Semitic oratory of the Nazis was always much more radical than their party’s programme.

19 SS applicants had to trace their ancestry back to 1750, while applicants for leading positions in the Nazi party were asked only three questions: 1. What have you done for the party? 2. Are you absolutely sound, physically, mentally, morally? 3. Is your family tree in order? It is characteristic for the affinity between the two totalitarian regimes that the elite and the police of the Bolsheviks (the NKVD) also demanded proof of ancestry from their members.

20 In the isolated instances in which Hitler concerned himself with this question at all, he used to emphasize: “Incidentally, I am not the head of a state in the sense of a dictator or monarch, but I am a leader of the German people” … Hans Frank expresses himself in the same spirit: “The National Socialist Reich is not a dictatorship, let alone an arbitrary, regime. Rather, the National Socialist Reich rests on the mutual loyalty of the Führer and the People” (Arendt, 1979, p.357, fn. 39).

21 ‘Hitler repeated many times: “The state is only the means to an end. The end is: Conservation of race” … He also stressed that his movement “does not rest on the state idea, but is primarily based on the closed
Volksgemeinschaft” [people’s community] ... This, mutatis mutandis, is also the core of the complicated double talk which is Stalin’s so-called “state theory”: “We are in favour of the State dying out, and at the same time we stand for the strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat which represents the most powerful and mighty authority of all forms of State which have existed up to the present day. The highest possible development of the power of the State with the object of preparing the conditions for the dying out of the State; that is the Marxist formula” (Arendt, 1979, pp.357-358, fn. 40).

22 ‘This promise, implied in all antisemitic propaganda of the Nazi type, was prepared by Hitler’s “The most extreme contrast to the Aryan is the Jew” (Mein Kampf, Book I, chapter xi)” (Arendt, 1979, p.360, fn. 49).

23 ‘Hitler’s early promise ..., “I shall never recognize that other nations have the same right as the German,” became official doctrine: “The foundation of the national socialist outlook in life is the perception of the unlikeness of men”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.360, fn. 51).

24 ‘For instance, Hitler in 1923: “The German people consist for one third of heroes, for another third, of cowards, while the rest are traitors” ... After the seizure of power this trend became more brutally outspoken. See, for instance, Goebbels in 1934: “Who are the people to criticize? Party members? No. The rest of the German people? They should consider themselves lucky to be still alive. It would be too much of a good thing altogether, if those who live at our mercy should be allowed to criticize.” ... During the war Hitler declared: “I am nothing but a magnet, constantly moving across the German nation and extracting the steel from this people. And I have often stated that the time will come when all worth-while men in Germany are going to be in my camp. And those who will not be in my camp are worthless anyway!” (Arendt, 1979, pp.360-361, fn. 52).

25 ‘Himmler in a speech to SS leaders at Kharkov in April, 1943 ...: “I very soon formed a Germanic SS in the various countries ...” An early prepower indication of this non-national policy (Reden) was given by Hitler ...: “We shall certainly also receive into the new master class representatives of other nations, i.e., those who deserve it because of their participation in our fight”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.361, fn. 53).

26 ‘For totalitarian purposes it is a mistake to propagate their ideology through teaching or persuasion. In the words of Robert Ley, it can be neither “taught” nor “learned,” but only “exercised” and “practiced”’ (Arendt, 1979, p.363, fn. 58).

27 ‘The experience of the Allies who vainly tried to locate one self-confessed and convinced Nazi among the German people, 90 per cent of whom probably had been sincere sympathizers at one time or another of Nazism, is not to be taken simply as a sign of human weakness or gross opportunism. Nazism as an ideology had been so fully “realized” that its content ceased to exist as an independent set of doctrines, lost its intellectual existence, so to speak; destruction of the reality therefore left almost nothing behind, least of all the fanaticism of believers’ (Arendt, 1979, pp.363-364).

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Martin Kanoushev: The Social (In)Commensurability


LOGICS OF PROPAGANDA

Part Two.
The Conspiratorial Logic of Populist Propaganda

1. The New Populist-Propaganda Front: What Is It?

Part Two of this study draws on the general typological features of the propaganda uses of language, identified in Part One, in order to trace the more specific logics of the contemporary populist-propaganda front.

Here we will leave the level of maximal abstraction and proceed to describe the specific features of populist-propaganda discourse as found through a careful study of Bulgarian media in the last few years. But these specific features, we suppose, are also characteristic of the common populist-propaganda front that has emerged at the global level in the last decade.

The task is to describe the typological meanings of the main discursive figures of this front – its elementary vocabulary – and above all the ways they are substituted and fixed by propaganda. Our main thesis is that contemporary populist propaganda systematically substitutes, through series of strategic metonymies, the empty signifier of ‘the people’, replacing it with personalized étatist reifications of sovereignty. In doing so, propaganda converts populism: it turns the emancipatory potential of populism into an instrument of governmentality.

And yet, the relationship between populism and propaganda is hardly so simple. Admittedly, up to this point we have conducted a systematic simplification, but the purpose of this simplification was to preserve the emancipatory impulse of populism, its ‘leftist’ spin. And since leftist critique usually associates reification and essentialization with domination and governmentality, we too, following Laclau and Mouffe, preserved for populism the ecstatic and uncertain – but immune to reification – territory of metaphor and catachresis.1

Indeed, especially in radical and ecstatic situations of the type of social protests and revolutions, the metaphoric dissolution both of identities and of the differences between them into the solidarity of a protesting ‘us’ seems to be a fundamental fact. Something like an explosion of ‘the people’ into the focus of indignation: an initial singular point of spontaneous collective mobilizations.
And yet, protest discourses, insofar as they endure and unfold over time, usually do not leave ‘the supernova of the people’ as an empty signifier – they begin to fill it, to inscribe in it one or other shared meaning. This, however, certainly does not happen according to some general quasi-a priori ‘logic of equivalence’. A direct analysis of the behaviour of the protesting crowd shows that this happens, as Milena Iakimova (2016, p.390ff) points out, through ‘milling’, through peculiar forms of repetitive bodily behaviour where – through direct mimesis of the bodily and discursive gestures of the others – elementary practical tautologies are forged, shared meaning is restored or new shared meaning is created. In my analytic key, here ‘milling’ is nothing other than practical metonymy: during a protest the multitude indeed forges shared meanings anew by multiple repetition of the same words and phrases, where different meanings of the respective words are layered metonymically upon one another as if those different meanings are the same (we can hardly imagine that when the protesting multitude chants ‘Oligarchy… Oligarchy…!’ all participants use the word in the same way right from the start; some of them probably don’t even know what it means at all – and yet, thanks to its repetition, at the end they all seem to have in mind one and the same thing). But we have metonymy also in the rhythmic accumulation of different words and phrases as if they have the same meaning, as if they are synonymous and form ‘a chain of equivalence’ (Mafia… Oligarchy… Red rubbish…!).

The metonymies of populist energy, however, do not unfold only in the bodily ‘drum-like’ rhythm of the protesting crowd (although the chanting seems to show the metonymy in practically pure form) – other metonymies, which are also constitutive for populist discourses, are at work at other levels, too: during a protest the metonymic work continues beyond ‘the body’ of the crowd as well, in the everyday conversations of the small groups that have split from or never joined the protest. Metonymic accumulations of different meanings in the vocabulary of populist critique are done – even if there is no large-scale social mobilization at the moment – in the endless chatter in which different everyday participants, at different places and by entirely different means, comment on ‘us ourselves’, ‘the people’, ‘the common folk’, ‘the ordinary citizens’ as opposed to ‘them politicians’, ‘the media’, ‘the corporations’, ‘the elites’. At the level of everyday life, critical chatter usually flows with small ad hoc modalizations, without heavy generalizations, and – apart from the rather exceptional and, as a rule, fast-fading moments of bullshitting – with the small plastic metonymies of everyday life which often borrow the general discursive grammar and the main lexical terms of populism, but do not heavily reify this vocabulary. The everyday populist metonymies do not reify meanings univocally; rather, they weave behind the words associatively scattering and overlapping webs of meanings, mildly and loosely reified, mostly as small plastic potentialities for continuing the conversation.

I am enumerating all those levels of metonymy in populist discourses in
order to stress that even though populism has its beginning in metaphor, it is not limited to metaphor – populism continues beyond metaphor, in ramifying metonymies at different levels which could hardly be ascribed a unified logic of equivalence. Populism thus turns out to be a quite complex as well as heterogeneous phenomenon, where the general discursive features we pointed out as a grammar of populist discourses work simultaneously at many levels and undergo different metamorphoses upon their uses – we cannot sketch out, let alone analyze in detail, this complex phenomenon in its entirety here.

However, we cannot but note something else: if the scattering everyday metonymies nonetheless have a chance to attain a level of consolidation, to form a common populist discursive front, it seems that this can happen in two typologically different ways: either primarily from below, through the accidental, but rooted in concrete practices, coordination of the metonymic series that will produce a self-explanatory common meaning of ‘the people’; or, conversely, their consolidation can be done primarily from above, through strategic steering of ‘the balloon of everyday metonymies’ so as to utilize their meanings for the purposes of governmentality. These two vectors of populist articulations – articulations from below and from above – in fact always flow in parallel, and the vectors are only provisionally two (they are actually many more in practice). And it even seems – if we look at any of the many historical examples – that populist articulations never succeed in consolidating into a unified front by themselves, only from below, from the level of everyday life: some institutionally stronger (elite) voices have to give the everyday articulations a common form, they have to provide (most often through the media) discursive models for everyday critique so that the latter will become more or less channelled and turn into a hegemonic front (let us recall the voices of Georgi Rakovski, Hristo Botev and Lyuben Karavelov upon the formation of the populist discourse of the Bulgarian national liberation in the nineteenth century!). Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that such consolidation of populist metonymies from above could occur without their propagandistic totalization (it, too, is to be found in the rhetoric of the Bulgarian national liberation, in that of the French Revolution, and so on). Thus, it seems that every populist discursive front is a populist-propaganda front.

But if the propaganda packaging of everyday populisms, especially in extreme social situations, seems to be unavoidable, could we then distinguish good from bad propaganda? This is no doubt a difficult question. If propaganda is a form of discursive terror, this doesn’t speak well of propaganda – of any form of propaganda. And yet, perhaps assuming that terror is sometimes practically unavoidable, we are often inclined to justify it from the point of view of its aims or outcomes. Of course, in peaceful times we prefer not to explicitly mention ‘terror’, to pass it over in silence, but we nevertheless legitimize it covertly: nations celebrate their national liberation struggles, and all of us Europeans are inclined to respect the English or the French Revolution.
And that is what gives us a clue to answering the above question. **We tacitly accept that terror is justified when it leads to liberation.** And it seems that which form of populism and, respectively, of propaganda we will be inclined to legitimate (or at least to turn a blind eye to) depends on what we mean by ‘liberation’ (political, socioeconomic, and so on).

Thus, **if we are witnessing the rise of a new populist-propaganda front today, we had better interrogate it about its liberating – emancipatory – power.** This is a question about legitimacy which, however, should be addressed not in abstract theoretical but in practical terms: What is the emancipatory potential of the present populist-propaganda front? And does it have such a potential at all? What’s more, insofar as we recognize the complexity of the ‘populist-propaganda front’ phenomenon, we ought to address the question about legitimacy from at least two perspectives. Once, from the perspective of populism: To what extent are the social discontents, which are giving rise to the populist wave from below today, justified – that is, to what extent is the populist protest energy reacting to real injustices, to real conspiracies of the elites against the people? And then again, from the perspective of the propaganda packaging of protest energies: To what extent do the strategic metonymies conducted by contemporary populist propaganda allow real emancipation and increase in equality, or, conversely, this propaganda itself is an asymmetric instrument in the conspiracies of (the local) elites against the people?

The populist suspicion of conspiracy is often well-founded – quite often, real conspiracies can be directly detected in the concrete actions and in the strategic policies of governance. The appointment of media mogul Delyan Peevski as chief of Bulgaria’s State Agency for National Security in June 2013 was a local but conspicuous conspiracy for taking control of the Bulgarian state’s repressive apparatus by a local politico-economic circle – a quite clearly personifiable conspiracy at that. A less conspicuous and less clearly personifiable, but far larger-scale, conspiracy can be seen behind the systematic promotion of the neoliberal policy of developing a global and weakly regulated (free) market. Although this is an inert structural policy that does not have its univocally personifiable ‘evil genius’ and which was launched at the end of the 1970s in a completely different context, today a conspiracy can easily be detected in it by the principle of ‘it’s ever more clear who the winners are’: as a result of this policy, the rich (Germany versus the other countries in the EU or the corporate 1% versus the remaining 99% of individuals on the global scale) are indeed becoming richer, while the poor are becoming proportionately poorer (and hence are being responsibilized for that through austerity measures). Besides this, the neoliberal doctrine, which enjoyed hegemony for decades, in many cases took the form of indiscriminate propaganda. Actually, the fact that liberal-economic globalization has by far outstripped liberal-political globalization, that the globalization of the political forms of regulation and redistribution is lagging behind the globalization of the free market, seems to us to be a main, directly
tangible and entirely legitimate reason for the rise of the discontents that have turned into a populist wave in the last decade. Occupy and the other populist protest movements, including the Bulgarian protests of 2013, have indeed come in response to the now systemic socioeconomic injustice that undermines the legitimacy of representative democracy and which ought to be recognized ever more distinctly (the more one-sidedly and systematically it is conducted) as a conspiracy.

The problem, however, is that populist discontents, as packaged and manipulated by propaganda at present, most often fail to address the real problems that motivate discontent – actually, this is also the purpose of the new propaganda manipulation. According to the data of a national survey conducted by Alpha Research (see Dimitrova in this issue), it seems that a significant part (albeit not all) of the propaganda clichés have already permeated the everyday life of the Bulgarians, they have turned into a basic grammar for a number of speakers and are about to channel discontents to their own advantage by shifting the latter’s focus. For the new populist propaganda does not serve for reducing social and economic asymmetries by introducing global political mechanisms of market regulation and redistribution; it is an instrument in the battle for appropriation of the economic asymmetries themselves by local economico-political actors: it is an instrument in the struggle of the local (sometimes wannabe) elites against the global corporate elites. Contemporary populist propaganda is anti-democratic precisely in this respect: it strategically deactivates ‘the citizens’ and ‘the people’ – it deactivates the impulse for broad political participation.

But this has to be demonstrated! The functions performed by the grammar and vocabulary of the new populist propaganda have to be demonstrated so as to show the metonymic meanings systematically accumulated in and through them. And to show who they serve.

In the next paragraphs, I will attempt to do this on the basis of the empirical results of the quantitative monitoring of Bulgarian media for the 2013 – 2016 period (Vatsov et al., 2017), and the qualitative analyses by Iakimova, Hranova, Znepolski, and Kanoushev (in this issue).

2. The Conspiratorial Grammar of Populist Propaganda

In order to guarantee the systematic character of its metonyms but also to control the layering of meanings in them, contemporary populist propaganda resorts to a strategic operation: it generalizes and totalizes the conspiratorial logic (grammar) which, as we already noted, is also the main mode of populist discourse. Of course, the totalization of the conspiratorial logic into a universal grammar is a practical gesture – in the case of propaganda, it consists in maintaining an overstrained discourse in which conspiracy is as if a universal figure. But this ‘universality’ remains only a pretence, because the propaganda totalization of conspiracy works as a practical (that is, distinctly incoherent,
adapted always ad hoc, not strictly formalized) logic. That is why it must be noted that the generalized descriptions of populist conspiratorial propaganda I offer below are practico-logical, not purely formal, generalizations.

Before proceeding further, however, we must again clarify the relationship between populism and propaganda, because populism also totalizes/generalizes conspiracy:

**Populist discontents address conspiracy directly: these are the ones who are conspiring against the people** (in the different discontents the addressee is different, but it is always directly – indexically – specified, even though it is named generally: ‘the old regime’, ‘the capitalists’, ‘the communists’, ‘the global corporations’, ‘the local oligarchs’, and so on). The indexical specification of the unjust power and its immediate identification in the general terms of conspiracy (that is, the direct totalization of the indexically and affectively identified injustice) is what most certainly unleashes protest movements and constitutes the protesting ‘us’ – it is its ‘constitutive other’. Although the injustice is indexically identified and at the same time totalized, this protesting ‘us’ (‘the people’, ‘the citizens’) is nevertheless not directly indexically indicated – rather, it is subjected to the indexically indicated injustice: it is this injustice that makes it imperative to initially create the ‘us’ as an empty place of metaphorical associations. We have said, however, that the initially still ‘empty signifier’ of the people, understood as an empty place for metaphorical associations and dissociations (a signifier with no meaning), begins to be filled metonymically with more specific meanings in the unfolding protest discourse – be it through practical metonymies from below, from the discourses of the protesters, or through strategic metonymies from above. At the same time, probably in each separate case in which we see gradual positive articulation of the negative terms of the discontents in one or other concrete framework – ‘the old regime versus the people’, ‘capitalists versus workers’, ‘communists versus citizens’, and so on – the logic of conspiracy is totalized but at the same time (at least to some extent) modalized as well. At the least, ‘the people’ acquires some specific features that distinguish it typologically from ‘the elites’ to which it is opposed. That is to say, the ‘empty signifier’ of the people is gradually filled metonymically until it becomes a ‘half-empty signifier’ and it seems that in all these cases, at least at certain moments, ‘the people’ of the respective populist discontent has been generalized by propaganda and used for terror.

What is new in the Bulgarian media in particular (and, for that matter, in world media) nowadays – and this is what we call new populist propaganda – is the tendency towards total and usually unaddressed generalization of the conspiratorial logic (without modalizing and specifying the injustice at stake). The tendency is to turn the conspiratorial populist logic, which is a practico-logical form with contextually limited application, into a quasi-formal conspiratorial grammar which, moreover, is totalized as the only – universal – grammatico-logical form. As a result, both ‘the conspiratorial elites’ and
‘the people’ are increasingly losing their concrete profile, their metonymically inscribed meanings, and hence, their possibility to be indexically relevantized. With the dissolution of the meanings metonymically inscribed in it, including of its natural everyday polysemies, ‘the people’ seems to have definitely lost its emancipatory potential.

The totalization of conspiracy has created a new propaganda imperative; this new propaganda imperative seems to be completely paranoid: everything that is happening in the social world is a ‘conspiracy’.

Formally, the grammar of conspiracy contains three main empty positions: the conspiracy is a ‘plot’, ‘surreptitious’ actions of (1) a villain protagonist (‘hegemon’, ‘puppet-master’) who, with the mediation of (2) stooges (‘puppets’, ‘paid agents’), is siphoning off the resources for life and even ‘the lifeblood’ (the conspiratorial plot is most often ‘demographic’, too) of (3) its victim – ‘the people’.

The totalization of conspiracy into a universal grammatical form of articulations has several main functions.

First, the totalization of the conspiratorial grammar opens the way for an infinite (quasi-logical) variation of the contents of the three empty grammatical positions. Each of the three empty positions can be arbitrarily filled metonymically with different names and phrases with different meanings. The conspiracy is a three-position relation – puppet-master–puppet–victim – where each place in the relation (each grammatical position) is already evaluatively connoted by the form of the relation.

The first two positions, of ‘the puppet-master’ and ‘the puppets’, are intrinsically connoted – by the grammatical form of conspiracy itself – negatively, that is, any name that appears in those positions is automatically vilified and discredited. The grammatical difference between them – a grammatical difference in meaning additionally enhanced by relevant propaganda epithets – is in that those who are cast in the role of ‘the villain/puppet-master’ become a grammatical subject (‘hegemon’), author and direct culprit (‘imperialist’, ‘colonizer’) of the conspiracy. While those who appear in the position of a ‘puppet’ are automatically disqualified as weaker, second-rate (‘the weakling’ is inevitably also ‘more disgusting’), non-autonomous, ‘venal’ and ‘dishonest’ actors – they are merely a grammatical instrumental object (enhanced by epithets like ‘puppet’, ‘servant’, ‘toady’, and so on) of the main villain. In contrast to the first two positions, the third one – that of ‘the people as victim’ – is connoted positively, as very worthy, even though this position, too, is inevitably passive: cast in this position, ‘the people’ is always a victim, not a doer, that is, the victimization of ‘the good people’ is a logical effect of the conspiratorial grammar itself.

The content analysis of propaganda publications in Bulgarian media identified several other typological uses of the conspiratorial grammar. The possibility of these typical uses is already presupposed to some extent, at least
loosely, in the conspiratorial grammar itself.

First, the same names appear regularly, depending on the tactical goal of propaganda, both in the position of the ‘villain/puppet-master’ (when the performative goal is direct accusation) and in that of ‘the puppet’ (when the performative goal is vilification through disparagement). In the media analyzed in our study, those who most often appear in position 1 – in the role of ‘the villain/puppet-master’ – are the US, NATO, Soros, Wall Street, Brussels, the Eurocrats, the liberasts, but also local actors – ‘the Capital circle’, the Greens, human-rights activists, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the America for Bulgarian Foundation, rarely Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, almost never President Rosen Plevneliev,7 often Ivan Kostov, Ivo Prokopiev, Hristo Ivanov, and so on. The same names, however, also often appear in position 2 – in the role of the puppet. The US often turns out to be a puppet of global capital; NATO – of the US; Brussels and the Eurocrats – of the US, NATO and global capital; while all Bulgarian civic and political organizations and persons subject to vilification are ‘puppets’ of some of those mentioned above. ‘Global capital’ (whose metonymy is most often ‘Soros’) seems to be the only doer in the proper sense of the word – it does not appear in the position of a ‘servant’ of another actor. The conclusion is: there is not only a constant and arbitrary metonymic accumulation of different names and epithets in each of the first two conspiratorial grammatical positions, there is also a constant, and no less arbitrary, metonymic transposition and accumulation of the same names and epithets between them. The possibility of having arbitrary metonymic accumulation in each position (possibility 1) as well as the possibility for metonymies to ‘fly back and forth’ between the first two positions (possibility 2) are due to the fact that (1) propaganda, by totalizing the conspiratorial grammar, maintains the grammatical positions as almost completely empty, almost formal, capable of absorbing (almost) any content; and (2) both of the first two positions – of the villain/puppet-master and of the puppet – are connoted negatively, they are positions for discrediting, although the discrediting aspect in them is different (the propaganda imperative most often is: if you want to maximally discredit someone, use both positions, depending on the context!).

Our second finding is that the first two positions – of ‘the culprits’ (‘the villain’ and ‘the puppets’) – are usually most often personalized, unlike the third position – that of ‘the victim’ – which is usually depersonalized. This, too, is a logical effect of the hyperbolized grammatical formula itself, which requires pointing out one doer (‘villain/puppet-master’), and hence, seems to demand that the villain be given a ‘face’, be personalized, through which the conspiracy can be seen as an ‘evil intent’; while, conversely, the conspiratorial grammar leaves the position of the suffering victim less defined – the victim doesn’t intend to do anything, isn’t planning anything, doesn’t have an original intent (it’s a victim, isn’t it!). That is precisely why the first two positions are most often filled by names of real persons – Soros, Obama, Merkel, Tusk,
Borisov, Prokopiev, Plevneliev, Hristo Ivanov, and so on – and those personal names work also as synecdoches personifying a larger entity produced through arbitrary metonymic accumulation that has already been done in the concrete text or intertextually (‘Soros’ instead of ‘global speculative capital’, ‘American colonialism’, ‘the liberal disease’, and so on; ‘Obama’ instead of ‘the US and NATO’, ‘American hegemony’, ‘multiculturalism’, and so on; ‘Merkel’ instead of ‘liberasty-ridden Europe’, ‘an EU helpless in the face of the migrant invasion’, and so on). Even when these grammatical positions are directly filled by complex realia, such as countries, international organizations, military and political inter-state alliances, personalization is systematically sought by substituting names of cities for them (Washington, Brussels, and so on) or by using their abbreviations as personal names (IMF, US, NATO, EU). The propaganda goal here is to reductively erase the internal complexity of these realia (the tensions existing in them and even the conflicts between different tendencies and policies in them) so as to represent the propaganda ‘villain’ as a single persona acting according to an evil plan and pursuing its own unilateral self-interest. Personalization, combined with a constant metonymic change of ‘personae’ (alternately, ‘Soros’, ‘Obama’, ‘Merkel’…), lends a somewhat ghostly aura to the conspiratorial position: in the political thriller, it is never known when and in whom ‘the evil’ will become incarnate, therefore ‘the evil’ remains somewhat transcendent. Personalization, furthermore, is a means for neglecting the principles and values that are possibly followed by the real political actors – it creates a feeling of personal decisionism (and suspense) in the political narratives, beyond principles, institutions, procedures. Of course, there often arises a practical contradiction between the conspiratorial grammatical rule, according to which the conspiratorial action must be an action of one actor, and the fact that the world is complex and multifaceted, with more than one actor. This contradiction is resolved simply by automatically representing all other actors as helpers (‘puppets’) of the main protagonist (‘puppet-master’). There is no interpretive collision because in different concrete contexts the ‘personae’ easily switch roles in order to present a semblance of reality (for example, Merkel is more often represented as a puppet of the US and corporations, but when she performed a practical action – opening Germany’s borders to migrants in 2015 – she was automatically cast in the role of ‘arch-villain’; and so on, back and forth…).

Conversely, ‘the victim’ is almost never personalized directly – here ‘the people’ is only provisionally a persona, but it is something like an ‘empty persona’ – because it only endures, suffers, it hasn’t yet risen to resist, hasn’t become a real sovereign, and hence, hasn’t acquired a ‘face’. It is an interesting fact that the voices of propaganda in the analyzed publications only rarely attempt to represent the people in the first person, in ‘we’-form, preferring to refer to it mostly in the third person. This is also an effect of the totalized conspiratorial grammar – of the passive grammatical position of the victim, which
has to be kept passive, in the third person (of course, here one must take into account that the propagandists – journalists, politicians, experts – are in fact elite voices that, themselves, also keep an elitist distance from the common folk they are speaking to). Conspiratorial propaganda, in addition, more rarely points out heroes/protagonists (the heroes/protagonists are almost half as many as the villains/antagonists – see Vatsov et al., 2017), and this is yet another indication in support of the same grammatical observation. The hero – the one who speaks on behalf of the victim, denouncing the conspiracy – is pointed out by the Bulgarian propagandists more often indirectly: through the very speech act of denunciation, through the negation of the conspiracy. Already at the beginning of our study, we defined this as a symptom of the basic negativity of present-day populist propaganda. Now we see another aspect of this negativity: the speaker doesn’t dare to directly refer to themselves as the hero, in ‘we’-form, because they do not offer a positive alternative project, but draw their own ‘positivity’ from denunciation.

The element of negation, contained in the conspiratorial grammar itself, is additionally enhanced towards total negativity through the totalization of the conspiracy figure. A main propaganda-rhetorical effect is that if everything is a conspiracy, then ‘they’re all scoundrels’. The fundamental negativity of populist propaganda is concentrated in this message – populist propaganda clears the way for total public cynicism. The universalization of the conspiratorial grammar is a universalization of cynicism.

If everything is a conspiracy, then the conclusion is: we have a Hobbesian ‘natural state of war of all against all’ – all principles and values that transcend the selfish interest are denounced; the only valid thing is the right of might. Besides being a systemic background effect of the totalization of the conspiracy figure, some of the main propaganda speakers in Bulgaria promote this message entirely directly, as a thesis:

Kevork Kevorkyan: ‘Everyone’s thinking about their own interests; we’re the only ones behaving like internationalists, like horses in blinkers. It’s high time we stopped listening to empty talkers like the French Ambassador [to Bulgaria] Xavier Lapeyre de Cabanes.’

Kalina Androlova: ‘In all cases, however, the sole objective of international politics is the fight for resources and control over them. If you want to be free and to have security, then you must be strong. That is why Russia was compelled to revert to the strategy of rearmament.’

Through the totalization of the conspiratorial logic, cynicism is presented as realism: the only legitimate figure through which the political is thought in populist propaganda is selfish self-interest. The totalization of the conspiratorial grammar aims to impose exactly this message: all who speak of something
else – of some more general values, principles, contracts, institutions designed
to limit unilateral self-interest – are either naïve and ‘horses in blinkers’5, or,
worse, outright liars and manipulators who use the democratic discourse as a
‘smokescreen’ for their conspiracies: for surreptitiously advancing their own
self-interest. The totalization of conspiracy is a means for inciting a paranoid
mindset, fear and suspicion that someone is always secretly persecuting, ma-
ipulating you, directing your life, watching you, and so on – yet not in your
but in their self-interest. Creating a total horizon of paranoia, however, popu-
list propaganda at the same time systematically appeals to common sense – it
tries to normalize anxiety by framing it as part of the everyday rationality of
interest: the practical rationality that no one wants to be lied to, to be cheated,
therefore everyone must firmly defend their self-interest. The paranoid men-
tality is overcome by routinizing cynicism. But here there is also a ‘moral’
inversion of meaning, through which cynicism stops being a bad thing and
becomes a virtue! The ‘moral’ inversion is done through opposition: opposition
against anyone who claims they are defending something more than their
self-interest – the values of liberal democracy most generally, human rights,
and so on; because anyone who does so is a ‘liar’ or a ‘puppet of the liars’.
Conversely, whoever is fighting to impose their self-interest, by all means,
from the position of strength, is honest, strong and even beautiful: they are
a sovereign. This ‘conversely’ is important as it seems to be a special practi-
co-logical operator of populist propaganda through which the negative is
turned into positive: if ‘they’re all scoundrels’, if there are no other values and
everyone is acting according to their own selfish self-interest, then, if you are
strong enough and therefore open about being a ‘scoundrel’ without pretending
that you aren’t, if you are pursuing your self-interest without using the ‘smoke-
screen’ of democratic values, then you stop being a ‘scoundrel’ and become a
‘sovereign’. And this is praiseworthy!

Two grammatical remarks can be made here: about the ways in which lib-
...
something different, it is at best its glossy packaging designed for fools.

Of course, here we are not dealing with any substantive concept of representative or liberal democracy: as in the case of populism, ‘liberal democracy’ is a name which, at best, summarizes in a list different discursive features and arguments sedimented as a specific political tradition of our Western societies in the last three or four centuries and integrated as regulative rules in our political institutions. Still, if any family resemblances can be found between the principles of liberal democracies (even if we understand them in a soft sense, as discursive features), they are in that these principles – from human rights to the rule of law guaranteed by and guaranteeing the separation of powers and of property, the protection of minorities from the diktat of the majority, the procedural rules for election to and term limits for governing positions, the maintenance of a public sphere open to contestation, the requirements for maintaining anti-monopoly economic measures and legislation and for guaranteeing one or other degree of equal access through redistribution (and so on) – all those principles have the character of critical barriers: they are political checks and balances on the possibility of monopolistic exercise of political and/or economic power. They do not eliminate and prohibit the pursuit of selfish self-interest, neither do they eradicate social inequalities (they do not abolish ‘capitalism’) or ever create a comprehensive and coherent system; they are very often in tension with one another, they may be more or less effective in practice, but their function is always one: to block the expansion of the self-interest of any individual or group whatsoever into a monopoly. This basic political function of democracy, which, by the way, is a specific historical, institutional achievement of modernity won in different battles – namely, the imperative for critical restriction of the expansion of self-interest into a monopoly, for blocking the totalization of asymmetries of all sorts – is precisely what populist propaganda wants to kill with its cynicism (in fact, this is another reason for calling it ‘anti-democratic’).

Curiously enough, although it borrows from Marxism the figure of totalization of conspiracy as represented by ‘capitalism’, contemporary populist propaganda cuts off the Marxist ideologico-utopian horizon. Here we must exclude a number of radical-left speakers who attempt, rather, to strengthen the critique of neoliberalism (a critique which, as I said, is entirely justified!) by returning to orthodox Marxism and above all to the radical utopia of ‘revolution’. They, however, in Bulgaria at least, either remain marginal as part of the common populist-propaganda front (with which they share a number of discursive features such as the totalized critique of capitalism and the West) or are discursively absorbed by the hegemonic tendency in populist propaganda, which has taken a sharp turn to the right. This ideological ‘deviation’, upon which self-proclaimed ‘leftist’ speakers naturally start speaking a ‘national-sovereignist’, almost-fascist-like language while apparently invariably undertaking also an apology of the nominally ‘conservative’ and ‘sovereign’ power
of Putin’s Russia, is specifically investigated by Boyan Znepolski (in this issue) as a feature of the (weak) ideological elasticity of the dominant populist-propaganda discourse. Still, why is the leftist critique of capitalism as if almost unavoidably sinking in the quagmire of national-sovereignism? And what is the strange ‘national-socialist mix’ we get as a result of that?

We have already answered those questions to some extent: by totalizing the conspiratorial logic, populist propaganda does not only not abolish unilateral interest (such as is the classical utopia of Marxism, which was supposed to be realized through the abolition of private property as a form of capitalization of interest) but, conversely, cynically re-institutes unilateral interest and the struggle for resources both as a de facto (‘natural’) state and as a normative horizon (because every normativity that transcends self-interest – democracy, liberalism, human rights, and so on – is a deceitful smokescreen). Furthermore, by totalizing the conspiratorial grammar, populist propaganda tries to fix a global conspiratorial pole: and if the main metaphor for globalization is the globe, then the pole of totalized conspiracy can most easily be represented as a geopolitical pole upon which are layered, through metonymic accumulation, the global corporate elites, bankers, speculators, Wall Street, Washington, the US, NATO, Brussels, the EU, the Eurocrats, the IMF, the WTO, Soros, Rockefeller, Obama, Merkel, Macron, liberalism, capitalism, multiculturalism, liberal democracy, human rights, and so on – or, in a word, the West. Once the protagonist (the West) has been fixed as a geopolitical half-empty signifier, and hence, denounced as pursuing its conspiratorial interest across the globe – and after a cynical ‘artillery preparation’ that there is nothing but interests – the way is cleared for the appearance of an ‘antagonist’.

An antagonist is anyone who dares to oppose the West – the geopolitical villain/puppet-master. Once the conspiratorial grammar has been totalized, the antagonist is inevitably positively connoted. What we have is a ‘moral’ propaganda quasi-syllogism that works automatically, even though it contextually conforms with the existing cultural stereotypes: anyone who stands up to the global conspiracy, anyone who defends his ‘sovereign interest’ against the interest of the conspirators – whatever he may do – is worthy (a hero). The antagonist may be a common criminal (annexing foreign territories, conducting hybrid warfare, capturing the judiciary and the media in order to control corruption, and so on), but this doesn’t matter because, like the local gangster, he has the aura of someone who stands up against a stronger power, who rebels against the Establishment (and who may condescend to stand up for us, too!). After all, he is a sovereign who is beyond the law, who can oppose and revoke the rules imposed on him by the global conspiracy. He – it is no accident that the antagonist is always connoted as male – is strong, so anyone who feels too weak to oppose the conspiracy on their own can easily identify themselves with him. The antagonist of populist propaganda is a direct outlet for resentment, while identification with him is a protection against paranoia, against the possibility
of constantly feeling weak and persecuted: identification with the antagonist of the conspiracy is a way of routinizing paranoia through ‘transference’ – the weak delegate self-care to the strong, and by doing so, think of themselves as strong. In fact, populist propaganda reactivates the premodern direct delegation of personal sovereignty to the more powerful sovereignty of the chieftain, without conditions and agreements, without mediated representation: you surrender yourself to a more powerful avatar who you hope will condescend to protect you.

It is hardly surprising that for populist propaganda in Bulgaria, above all Putin, more rarely Orbán, and recently Trump too, are the good bad boys – ‘the exemplary sovereigns/supermen’ who are thumbing their noses at the status quo from the edge of the law: after all, they are indeed opposing the West – liberal democracy – aren’t they? Of course, there are exceptions in the application of the propaganda syllogism which turns the mere act of standing up to the West into heroism: because of the negative historico-cultural stereotypes of the Bulgarians (and, for that matter, not only of the Bulgarians) against Turkey and Islam, Erdoğan, who is likewise standing up against the principles of liberal democracy, cannot explicitly be cast in the role of hero. It is even less possible to represent as a hero Daesh which, through direct terror, has posed the most radical challenge to the West (the paradox here is that according to the conspiratorial propaganda, which has already declared the West and liberalism a global villain-conspirator, that is, when this grammatical and geopolitical position has already been filled, Daesh cannot take this place; that is why populist propaganda systematically reworks Daesh, which turns out to be something that ‘doesn’t stand up to the West’ but that is both a ‘product’ and an ‘instrument’ of the West – more precisely, of the US and the CIA! – in their conspiracy to flood and destroy Europe through ‘the migrant invasion’). Incidentally, neither does the growing might of China, a rather distant and unfamiliar country for the Bulgarians, bring pleasure with its opposition to the West – populist propaganda in Bulgaria doesn’t have the resources to frame ‘China’s role’ through systematic metonymies and there are no already sedimented metonymies on the ground. On the other hand, in the Bulgarian context Orbán is the second hero after Putin, but Kaczyński isn’t a hero because the Polish propaganda nationalism-populism is strongly anti-Russian and more difficult to translate into the Bulgarian stereotypical clichés which conventionally – considering almost all previous modes of propaganda as well as Russian economic interests in Bulgaria – are pro-Russian. And so on.

The conclusion is: The logic of conspiracy and the resistance against it – although this logic is totalized by propaganda precisely as a pure and universal grammatical construction – is actually never pure and universal; it works only where there already are practically established cultural-historical and linguistic stereotypes whose meaning it can metonymically inflate and change: standing up to the West, totalized as a conspiratorial centre, is a virtue, but only if the
already formed various clichés of reception of the West are activated and come into play. In the Bulgarian case (because populist propaganda works selectively vis-à-vis the inert stereotypes of the context, and, in another typological context, its benchmarks would be and are different), populist propaganda activates the clichés about ‘the West’ as an enemy of Orthodox Christianity, Slavdom, communism, traditional rural values, and so on, regardless of the contradictions between those different cultural and historical stereotypes inculcated by propaganda in different periods of the country’s history. According to each of those clichés, however, it is worth standing up to the West – this makes you a hero. But standing up to the West cannot have a propaganda effect if you try to act directly against the existing firmer stereotypes – there’s no way you can achieve the desired propaganda effect if you try to turn Daesh into a hero. That is to say, standing up to the West is valuable and worthy if there is an already established routine of its cultural reception, otherwise the automatic syllogism (‘I’m standing up to the West, therefore I’m worthy’) won’t work. Contemporary propaganda, however, which strictly avoids anything it has no chance of ‘getting away with’ (that is, messages that will meet heavy resistances because of the absence of any pre-established stereotype whatsoever), metonymically dissolves all existing ‘convenient’ stereotypes regardless of the obvious contradictions between them: it dissolves into a common metonymic balloon all clichés which share the family resemblance of resentment against the West.

The message through which propaganda unites is this: they, the West, regard us ‘as second-hand people’.

And it no longer matters why they disrespect us – if there is such disrespect at all, to be reacted against (there is, of course, in quite a few concrete behavioural cases, but not in the politically institutionalized and therefore politically correct discourse of the EU, for example) – so it no longer matters why they regard us as ‘second-hand’: by this the differences between ‘communists’, ‘nationalists’, ‘Slavophiles’, ‘Eastern’, ‘poor’, and so on, disappear, as it were. Propaganda creates an ‘us’ that is consolidated beyond all differences: an ‘us’ of resentment, whatever the cultural or social cliché through which this resentment is ‘translated’. This ‘us’ inevitably, according to the logic of propaganda – and entirely intentionally – is maintained as anonymous, depersonalized and amorphous. The ‘us’ of ‘the people’ which is an originary – passive and therefore amorphous – victim of the conspiracy (totalized victimization seems to necessarily anonymize the victim).

It seems that the more anonymous and amorphous the ‘us’ of ‘the people/victim’ is, the more personalized is the antagonist who stands up in its defence: the more immediate is the relation of ‘personification’. Here the conspiratorial grammar again prescribes the general connotations: like the protagonist of the conspiracy, the antagonist must also be – even more – personalized (more personalized because he does not hide behind a smokescreen, nor does he use puppets; he comes out on his own, showing his face). In addition, he personally personifies another – counter-hegemonic – geopolitical pole.
It seems that the totalized conspiratorial logic inevitably leads to geopolitical étatization of resistance – to étatization of sovereignty. For if the centre of the conspiracy (the protagonist) is metonymically extrapolated in geopolitical terms (the West), then its opponent – the antagonist – must also be a geopolitical actor. In the ‘global’ cultural imagination of the conspiracy ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, if ‘the Euro-Atlantic West’ is the pole of the conspiracy, then ‘the Eurasian civilization’ is the inevitable antagonist in the just as inevitable clash of civilizations. But even if the ‘civilizational’ pretension is more toned down or at least more amorphous metonymically (narrated through Dugin, but also through other culturalist ideologies, Pan-Slavic, Orthodox Christian, or others, in an infinite mix), as it is in the more general trend of the propaganda of state-regulated Russian media, in all cases the centre of hegemonic opposition to the conspiratorial hegemony of the West is a geopolitical centre: a centre of state sovereignty (the sovereignty of the Russian Federation, but also the sovereignty of the US, of Turkey or of Hungary in the discourses of Trump, Erdoğan or Orbán and of the media supporting them). The personalization and geopolitical étatization of sovereignty, by the way, go hand-in-hand in the propaganda image of ‘the authentic leader’, of ‘the true statesman-sovereign’ (and not of a ‘politician’ who, by presumption, keeps a balance and is ‘compelled’ to follow abstract principles and procedures). In all cases, popular sovereignty is represented as immediately coinciding with ‘state sovereignty’ which, in turn, is immediately personified by the ‘personal sovereignty’ of the respective ‘true leader’. By this ‘triunity’ of sovereignty – popular, state, personal – present-day populist propaganda repeats the classical discursive scheme of every authoritarianism and clears the way for its (already achieved to one extent or another in each case) institutionalization. In addition, by this it reinstates the vocabulary of realpolitik and geopolitics – the vocabulary of the unilateral interests of nation-states personified by their leaders – as the only legitimate vocabulary for describing international relations.

Strong personalization – most visible in the image of Putin – is, besides, a way for metonymically inscribing the amalgam of different shared meanings and stereotypes in the empty position (the empty signifier) of ‘the people’, for uniting them in one ‘persona’ (because ‘the persona’ is more plastic than any ideological thesis; like the ‘good’ cartoon hero, ‘the persona’ can act depending on the context and unite ‘in one’ different ideological theses and regimes of behaviour, relying solely on ‘its own strength and integrity’). The persona can balance and rearrange in a sovereign way, of itself, different traditional legacies (discursive regimes) in a common ‘conservatism’ in which there is no conflict between ‘nationalism’, ‘internationalism’, ‘tsarist imperial regime’, ‘Soviet imperialism’, ‘Soviet antifascism’, ‘Eurasianism’, ‘Orthodox Christianity’ and ‘Pan-Slavism’, because all of them are ‘traditional values’ that can be used as ‘sovereign resources’ against the conspiracy of the West. The persona can, furthermore, of itself balance and rearrange the relations between different
concrete institutions and actors in the social field by adjudicating and resolving the conflicts between them ‘in a sovereign manner’, again relying solely on its own charismatic ‘strength and integrity’. In fact, the personal sovereignty of the leader appropriates the sovereignty of the state, a sovereignty constitutionally divided among different institutions and actors with different spheres of discretion, which, in turn – according to the principle of representation – have temporarily appropriated the people’s sovereignty (insofar as it is delegated to them). This also shows what the main function of the personalization of sovereignty is: to eliminate the separation of powers, that is, the modern critical barriers to the monopolization of sovereignty. The new monopolization of sovereignty, combined with maximal amorphousness of the metonymic meanings inscribed in it, opens up the possibility for terror – for discursive and physical terror.

But what happens with ‘the people/victim’ of the conspiracy, which the geopolitical antagonist ‘leads’ out of the position of passive suffering in order to personify it and, in fact, to appropriate its ‘awakened sovereignty’? What are the metonymic metamorphoses of ‘the people’ in populist propaganda – metamorphoses permitted by the conspiratorial grammar and empirically dominant in its present-day discourse in Bulgaria?


First, what is empirically observable today is a systematic metonymic dissolution of the two traditionally different meanings of ‘the people’ – without making a complex and detailed genealogy, we will generalize them as ‘the Left (Marxist and post-Marxist)’ and ‘the Right (nationalist)’ meaning of ‘the people’. This generalization is justified by the everyday uses which have banalized these meanings to the point of self-evidence: (1) ‘The Left people’ of the oppressed and disadvantaged economically and politically, of those whom the global forces of capitalism have turned into a ‘proletariat’ or ‘precariat’ and who, by virtue of being an effect of subjection to global forces, ‘have no homeland’, no ‘place’ of their own (the ‘internationalism’ of orthodox Marxism once was the ideological benchmark of this type of thinking); but also (2) ‘The Right people’ of kinship by blood, language, land and tradition, the primordial ‘ethnic community’ that became part of the ideological repertoire of the modern nation-states as well as of Nazism and fascism. In the hegemonic trend of populist propaganda, those two meanings of ‘the people’ have already been dissolved into one.

Of course, in order to dissolve ‘the Left people’ and ‘the Right people’ into a common metonymic balloon, populist propaganda relies on some tendencies that are empirically observable but also existentially tangible for many. Already Zygmunt Bauman (1998) noted that an overall effect of globalization is the localization of the economic losers of globalization. The mobility of the losers, who cannot afford to move, is very limited, local, they rarely leave
the place they live in and in the extreme case, which has become proverbial in Bauman, when they lose their property as their last anchor they become local ‘vagabonds’ (in contrast to the global ‘tourists’). The populist vote for Trump in the Rust Belt as well as the votes for national-populist formations in the European countries in regions hit harder by deindustrialization and economic decline as an effect of globalization, support the sociological diagnosis of Bauman (and of many others after him), but they also show the ingenuity of populist propaganda which has succeeded in exploiting and converting the meaning of this real problem to its own advantage.

The propaganda mechanism of converting meaning is simple: the ‘method’ used here is not that of totalization by extending the modal scope of the empirically verifiable phenomenon but, conversely, that of purposive limitation of its modal relevance. The operation performed in this way is not that of propaganda induction (‘fascists took part in the Euromaidan demonstrations’, therefore ‘all who took part in the Euromaidan demonstrations are fascists’) but, conversely, of propaganda reduction: from the wider fact that ‘there are different people and regions in the world that have been marginalized and localized by economic globalization’, the conclusion is drawn that, therefore, ‘only the Bulgarians – they and they alone – are the target of a conspiratorial plot (economic, demographic, and so on).’15 Of course, in other national contexts the propaganda reduction is directed at the respective other political and cultural majority, at the dominant ethnic community: ‘the ordinary Americans, French, Russians, Poles, Hungarians … – they and they alone – are hit economically by the global conspiracy.’

The propaganda reduction aims to ‘constrain’ the meaning of ‘the people’ for the sake of governmentality. In essence, it consists in the metonymic fitting of ‘the Left people’ into the tighter – ethnoculturally cut – clothes of ‘the Right people’.

This constraint of the meaning of ‘the people’ is done by means of a series of systematic racial and cultural but also political exclusions. They are of several main types:

1. Exclusion of internal ethnocultural minorities and of foreigners (in the Bulgarian case, populist propaganda systematically promotes the message that the Gypsies and migrants are almost one and the same thing, but in all cases they ‘aren’t of the people’). The logic of this exclusion, which represents the ethnic majority as a victim of the privileging of minorities (of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘liberalism’, of ‘human rights’ as instruments of the global conspiracy) has already been described in brief elsewhere (Iakimova and Vatsov in this issue). This type of exclusion, however, aims to consolidate rhetorically the body of the people as a homogeneous entity, without any differences, as a rounded ethnocultural body of governmentality. Hence, what follows is:

2. Exclusion of all general political ideologies (the above-mentioned ‘human rights’, ‘liberalism’ ‘multiculturalism’, and so on, without any difference
between them) that insist on tolerance towards the different or that pose any other barriers to the monopolization of sovereignty, as well as of all international institutions and regulations that implement them to one extent or another. This type of exclusion frees populist propaganda, when it achieves hegemony and comes to power (as in Russia and Turkey), from the need to keep any undertaken international commitments and to tolerate external criticism and control. Finally, there is also another exclusion:

3. **Exclusion from the body of the people** – and labelling as ‘foreign agents’ – of all internal actors who insist on limiting sovereignty (as well as discursive and physical terror) by placing different ‘liberal’ barriers to its expansion. This form of exclusion aims to constrain and, ultimately, to **kill civil society** as an independent and in-principle non-homogeneous sphere of contestation of the public power and authority of the state through constant competitive redefinition of ‘the common good’.

If we take into account those three simultaneously activated forms of exclusion, we can say without hesitation that populist propaganda is **racist** (it excludes ‘foreigners’ on a racial basis), **isolationist** (it excludes international control and cooperation according to common principles) and **authoritarian** (it excludes internal resistances).

Indeed, it succeeds in packaging existing and entirely justified social discontents. Such entirely legitimate discontents are:

- The discontents about the structural processes of growing internal inequalities and marginalization of different populations under pressure from economic and technological globalization.
- The discontents about the impossibility of the present political framework of liberal democracies, which is still limited above all to nation-states, to provide new forms of global political representation of those who are affected by the global economic and political processes. **These are the discontents about the blurring of the political base of liberalism** – still limited to a national framework – in the absence of forms of political representation on the European, let alone the global, scale.
- The discontents about the impossibility of the present political institutions to conduct fair regulation of markets at the global level, and above all, the reactions against the neoliberal amnesia that the redistribution of resources is the only known form of guaranteeing (albeit partly) an equal opportunity for individual self-realization. **These are the discontents about the blurring of the social base of liberalism.**
- The discontents about the indiscriminate ‘multicultural’ turn of ‘liberalism’, upon which the classical modern value – the rejection of discrimination against cultural difference (tolerance) – is increasingly substituted by demands for politics of full recognition of every cultural difference. **These are the discontents about the blurring of the cultural base of liberalism,** upon which individuals are guaranteed freedom of self-realization, but within the frame-
work of a – be it minimal and subject to renegotiation – common horizon of shared cultural meanings.

All those discontents are entirely justified because they are a reaction to real processes that create new economic, social and political asymmetries – new injustices.

The question is, does the new propaganda provide any emancipatory resources for overcoming the new asymmetries? Or at least for overcoming some of them?

**Racism, isolationism and authoritarianism are incapable of responding to any of these challenges – even if just because globalization has already taken place in many respects.** Present-day populist propaganda relies on the nostalgic reflex of its addressees/voters – on the reflex of the ostrich which buries its head in the sand so as not to see globalization. Still, this propaganda does not provide a solution to any of the challenges enumerated above, because:

Racism will not restore the dignity of those who have been marginalized economically, politically and culturally by globalization. Seemingly restoring their privileged position (conducting a sort of positive discrimination of the majority), it can only make them more vulnerable to subjection to the local economic elites that have captured the respective state. For racism removes the institutional barriers to terror not only against individuals from minorities but also to arbitrary encroachments on the individual freedom of everyone. Isolationism, in turn, precludes the possibilities for democratic external pressure and for international control over the ruling economico-political elites (the local oligarchs) – thus, it facilitates political capture of the state aimed at siphoning off economic resources via the state. However, there is no conceivable way isolationism can create conditions for political representation at the global level or help to create mechanisms for global redistribution. Authoritarianism at home, on the other hand, is an instrument for eliminating any internal dissent and resistance – in a dystopian scenario, the whole civil society (read: every dissenter!) will be declared a ‘foreign agent’. I don’t see what ‘the people’ stands to gain from all this! Nor do I see emancipation and increase in equality of any type whatsoever! It is clear who stands to gain, though: the local oligarchs who want to use the nation-state, including its media and repressive apparatus – beyond any liberal barriers to abuse of public power – as a resource against global economic competition as well as against internal civic resistances and economic rivals. As we have already shown (see Iakimova and Vatsov in this issue), the authoritarian oligarchy of Putin’s Russia – where populist propaganda is strongest and, furthermore, where political corruption is most institutionalized – is a role model for many stakeholders in Bulgaria. They don’t necessarily have to be ‘Russian agents’, although there are such, too. What we see in contemporary populist propaganda is ordinary fascism in which, however, there is less ideology and much more cynicism and greed: it is precisely these last that
populist propaganda serves.

In conclusion, I want to address my leftist friends, in particular, many of whom were somewhat upset after the publication of the first results of the study on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria* and claimed (be it in public or in private) that by this study we were stifling the possibility for social critique. If the present populist-propaganda front is such as we have described – and even if many of the speakers in it have entirely pure critical intentions, as we have no doubt they do – even so, no social critique is possible anymore through this vocabulary and through the thus-packaged, by propaganda, figures of conspiracy. The new étatist propaganda has already devoured populism to the last crumb, so to speak: and anyone who repeats its clichés loses the emancipatory potential of his or her voice: he or she turns out to be a ‘useful idiot’. For the only ones who stand to gain from the new propaganda (and that is why it is no accident that they are deliberately conducting it – this is an all-too-real conspiracy) are those local economic elites which are accustomed to leeching off the state and to increasing their economic power through the state – it is actually they who find the liberal political barriers requiring publicity, transparency, separation of powers, and so on, to be a hindrance. But I don’t see in what way the local oligarchs are ‘better’ than the global corporations – both types of actors have a stake in increasing the existing economic and social asymmetries, although the means (including propaganda) they use are different. That is why from now on we had better look for a new language or for far more relevant uses of the present populist vocabulary so as to open some utopian critical horizon for resolving the actual and ever more global injustices and challenges. I hope this is a shared task! And yet, it seems to me that if we don’t use and reinforce the critical barriers, inherited from modernity, to the expansion of monopolies of all sorts (barriers inscribed in the institutions of liberal democracy), or if we help rejecting them, we will find it much harder to empower ‘ourselves’ anew against the practical monopolies of the local and global oligarchs.

**NOTES**

1 This move is not simply a concession to leftist critique, it is a regulative constraint on the possibility of total reduction of populism to propaganda. Besides this, it is founded on two shared and interrelated quasi-axiomatic theses: (1) Our discursive practices indeed work, at the most basic level, through metaphoric dispersion of the conventional meanings of words and things (although conventional meanings are more or less reified through repetitive usage, every actual articulation, even the most banal one, nevertheless metaphorically dissolves their conventionally reified meanings – see Vatsov, 2012); but if we accept that metaphoric de-essentialization and de-reification of meanings is a basic feature of every discourse, that is, if we accept that pure reification is not possible in principle, then we must admit that (2) Not every practical reification, but certainly every attempt at total reification of meanings or at totalization of an ‘empty signifier’ is a clear indicator of domination, of terror, of propaganda.

2 If a protest is successful, it will be successful because it has succeeded in metonymically creating a basic and widely shared vocabulary of synonyms and antonyms; if it fails, that will be because the metonymies
have scattered in different directions and a common vocabulary has not been consolidated in practice. This was largely the case also in the example given above – from the protests in the summer of 2013 in Bulgaria – when part of the protesters did not take up the metonymies layering the vocabulary of the anticommunist protests of the 1990s (‘Red rubbish!’) upon the protests at the time, or drove a discursive wedge between ‘the people’ at the June 2013 and ‘the people’ at the February 2013 protests, and so on.

3 On this point, I disagree with Todor Hristov (2013), who finds a potential for ‘absolute freedom’ in the discourses of the speakers of the April 1876 Uprising of the Bulgarians against Ottoman rule. My thesis is that the practical metonymic work of discourse always and inevitably inscribes in the emancipatory terms of ‘freedom’, ‘the people’, and so on, more or less specific meanings which are part of power games and of the regimes of governmentality entailed by the latter.

4 See Piketty, 2014.

5 The neoliberal (libertarian) ideology certainly has had and continues to have its powerful propagandist uses, strongly totalizing its abstract terms and concepts and excluding (viliﬁying and/or stiﬂing) above all the vocabulary of solidarity: neoliberal propagandist stigmatizes the demands for solidarity primarily through the imperative of individual responsibilization. Although these effects have been the subject of many studies by the members of the team of the HSSF’s research project on Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception, including by the author of this text, neoliberal propaganda is not a special subject here – here the purpose is to identify the features of the new populist propaganda. Incidentally, all common features of propaganda discourse identiﬁed here – total generalization of discourse by dissolving the modality of the messages in it, metonymic accumulation of different meanings while creating the appearance of saying ‘one and the same thing’, and hence, use of propaganda labels – all those features are also features of the propaganda uses of the vocabulary of neoliberalism.

6 Or at least those in the Western cultural area. We must bear in mind, though, that neither the vocabulary of liberalism nor that of populism are propagandistic in themselves – they are put to propaganda use when the main features of the discourse are those already enumerated.

7 It seems that a campaign of disparagement was launched against President Rosen Plevneliev from the very start of his term in ofﬁce, that is, he is usually cast in the role of ‘puppet’. On the systematic disparagement of President Plevneliev as a ‘lackey’, ‘servant’, ‘wimp’, and so on, see the Bulgarian-language version of Vatsov et al. (2017, p.98ff).

8 Perhaps an exception in this regard are the voices self-styled as ‘people’s tribunes’, according to the apt deﬁnition of Albena Hranova (in this issue).

9 Vatsov et al. (2017, p.8).

10 Kevorkyan, K. (2015) Bezhanskite ordi shte ni prevaram v katun [The refugee hordes will turn us into a Gypsy camp]. Weekend (19 – 25 September). Reprinted many times, this is an excellent example of the propaganda network of websites intensifying dissemination:


12 For a similar approach in the description of liberalism as a political tradition, see Bell (2014), where the ‘family resemblances’ are what has linked the arguments of liberals ever since John Locke.

13 This is a quotation from a focus group conducted within the framework of the collective study on Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media.

14 Here, of course, the effect of ghost-like metonymic substitution, upon which the role of the villain-protagonist is alternately taken by ‘Soros’, ‘Obama’, ‘Merkel’, or someone else, is absent; the antagonist is personally completely consolidated – Putin, and Putin alone (Lavrov, Dugin, Fursov, and the rest are ‘his’ assistants, speakers, ideologues, and so on, but they never take the role of the antagonist).

15 As if the Turks and the Gypsies in Bulgaria as well as the other minorities across the world are not suffering from deindustrialization and the robotization of labour.
REFERENCES


More than two years ago, a small group of Bulgarian researchers in the social and human sciences (including ourselves) was struck by the rise of anti-liberal discourse in Bulgaria. Although common sense told us that it was most likely due to the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, we decided to study it. In 2016, we conducted the study. It was large, covering the anti-liberal discourses disseminated by Bulgarian media over a period of four years (2013–2016), and popular, day-to-day perceptions of their main figures and messages. We did not research sources of funding, but some things are obvious even without research. The study clearly identified several types of anti-liberal and anti-democratic discourse which, in Bulgaria, are undoubtedly propagandistic and pro-Russian.

So we were more than amazed when we started hearing the talking points identified by our study now coming from the mouth of the new US President, Donald Trump:

• The independent media are an ‘enemy of the people’;
• Civic protests are paid-for; those who are protesting are ‘professional protesters’;
• ‘The courts are slow and political’ (i.e. not independent);
• The nation ‘first’;
• NATO is ‘obsolete’.

Can we simply assume that Moscow’s long arm is feeding identical talking points to Trump and the Bulgarian media? And to Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński and Marine Le Pen? The Kremlin is waging a propaganda war against the West, but the official Russian media as well as the captured local pro-Russian media are far from attaining total global coverage. Even so, their messages – the primacy of national sovereignty, criticism of the hegemony of the West and of human rights, anti-Americanism and Euroscepticism, subversion of the independence of liberal institutions (of the media, the judicial system, the NGO sector and civic protests) – are gaining traction – and, moreover, are doing so in different socio-political and cultural contexts. What makes
them resonate in these contexts?

Here we present the results of our study, guided by the hypothesis that we have witnessed the formation of a common populist-propaganda front that gathers and deploys forces, processes and actors that differ in scale, structure and level of organization, such as centres for strategic studies and analysis, the centrifugal forces of popular discontent, opportunistic political players and local business interests, major changes in the energy markets, and the growing difficulties of liberal governments in acting as a counterbalance to this complex, dynamic network. Large-scale as it was, our study does not unravel this entire network, but it does point to reasons why the ordinary person in the street, Donald Trump, and the Kremlin are all saying the same things.

The point is that Russian propaganda, which undoubtedly exists, co-opts themes from Western grassroots critique of liberalism and globalization, recasts both left and right populist critique in national-sovereignist and geostrategic terms, and promotes them as a free resource for undermining liberal democracy from within. And vice versa: various local actors borrow the ‘Russian propaganda package’, or parts of it, and use it for their populist-political and/or specific economic purposes.

In other words, we are witnessing a cross-pollination between local grassroots populist critique, on one side, local economic agents accustomed to leeching off the state on another side, and the anti-liberal propaganda of the state-controlled Russian media on a third side. In this process, different actors, who do not necessarily know about each other, form a common populist-propaganda discursive front, a specific ‘language’ that works with a limited set of interpretive clichés. The rise of this front is an important moment in the overall process of shifting political demarcation lines today – demarcation less and less along the lines of left/right and more and more along the lines of liberalism/anti-liberalism, globalism/isolationism (see Krastev, 2017).

Although it is not a solely national phenomenon, the rise of this front was analysed in detail in the study on Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Print Media: 2013 – 2016. The quantitative data from this study are startling: between 2013 and 2016, the number of Bulgarian-language Eurosceptic publications per year increased 16-fold; the number of anti-US and anti-NATO publications increased 34-fold; the number of publications attacking, on the domestic political plane, the independence of the media, the independence of the judicial system and pluralism in civil society increased 23-fold; and the number of publications praising Russia for one thing or another (its ‘increased political and spiritual might’, ‘the power of Russian weapons’, etc.) increased between 42 and 144 times. As we can see, the populist-propaganda discursive front developing in the Bulgarian public sphere since 2013 is distinctly ‘pro-Russian’, although the data show that it is not always directly inspired by Russia.

What, then, are the talking points – the interpretive clichés – of the anti-
liberal populist-propaganda front in Bulgaria? What exactly is Russia’s role in its rise? What types of actors use the language of anti-liberal and anti-democratic propaganda? How do populist and propaganda messages intertwine and overlap in the language of anti-liberal discourse?

We presume that Bulgaria is a specific but not isolated case – it can be used as a laboratory for analysing other contexts, too.

The Talking Points of Anti-Liberal Propaganda: Semantic Analysis

We use the term ‘propaganda’ – not the now far more popular ‘disinformation’ – to shed light less on ‘fake news’, which is only a small segment of contemporary techniques of influencing public opinion, nor even on ‘hacking’, ‘trolling’, and the use of social networks, which are the focus of most contemporary studies. Far more important, to us, is the classical function of propaganda to disseminate ‘general interpretations’ (Ellul, 1973, pp. 11, 57ff.) – talking points, stereotypical clichés – which turn into a primitive ‘grammar’ framing the linguistic articulations of the world for a multitude of individuals. We are aware that unlike in the Cold War period, present-day anti-liberal propaganda is less ideological but above all negative, subversive; it does not offer an alternative positive image of the world but focuses, instead, on undermining public trust in liberal-democratic principles and institutions. Still, it works precisely by disseminating talking points.

To identify these, we chose to analyze Bulgarian print media and news websites. Print media and news websites in Bulgaria are economically the most vulnerable, meaning they easily turn into tabloids. They are also open to economic and political influences – their revenues from sales have declined drastically and, since 2002, so have their revenues from advertising, which is moving to national television stations and social networks. On the other hand, print media and news websites are the main producer of media content that is then disseminated both by television and radio stations, and by social networks.

The study was conducted in three phases: 1) Semantic analysis of the complete editions of 20 Bulgarian news websites and print media outlets; 2) Frequency analysis in the electronic archive of 3,080 Bulgarian-language websites, newspapers and blogs; 3) Content analysis of a sample of 3,305 publications in eight typologically different media outlets.

The semantic analysis and content analysis of 597 publications identified four simplistic and interrelated anti-liberal and anti-democratic theses:

- The US and NATO are a global hegemon/puppet-master which is pulling the strings both of Brussels and of national governments;
- Europe is dying because of its cultural decline (‘liberasty’) under the blows of the migrant invasion unleashed by the US, and because of the lame-duck, puppet European bureaucracy (‘Eurocracy’). In the final analysis, Europe is dying because it is united: the EU is a construction which serves the interests of the US and of global corporations, and it is an enemy of the European...
peoples;

- Russia is rising. Although it is a victim of Western aggression, Russia is a guardian of its age-old sovereignty and of traditional values, and it is actually the true saviour of Europe;

- Bulgaria’s liberal elites are venal: civic movements, human rights organizations, independent media outlets, pro-Western politicians and parties are represented as an indistinguishable whole, and all of them are ‘foreign agents’ – puppets of foreign interests.

So far, there is nothing surprising – taking into account also some variations, these are the much-studied talking points of official Kremlin propaganda.5

The connection between the above talking points is conspiratorial, and the conspiratorial grammar is simple: global hegemon (a role most often assigned to the US and NATO, or to George Soros6) – puppets (all inconvenient institutional and personal actors) – victims (‘the people’). On the international plane, the conspiratorial logic serves to discredit human rights, which are represented as a smokescreen for promoting ‘hegemonic interests’ (thereby eliminating any international pressure and control over the ‘sovereign’ agent conducting the propaganda in question). On the domestic plane, conspiratorial propaganda serves to silence every inconvenient speaker, who is represented as an ‘agent of foreign interests’ (thereby eliminating domestic pressure and control). Of course, the use of conspiracy for propaganda is nothing new: condemning ‘the enemies of the people’ – on the domestic and international planes – is well-known from the time of Stalinism as an effective mechanism for consolidating totalitarian power and, in a softer version, it is also effective in consolidating the authoritarian-oligarchic power of the present regime in the Kremlin. However, what are the origins and functions of this vocabulary of conspiracy in Bulgaria? After all, it is an EU member country with stable pro-European public attitudes in recent decades, and with democratic institutions that are, if not well-functioning, then at least not totally captured. When, and how, does the anti-liberal discursive front go on the offensive?

One of the important empirical findings of the semantic analysis was that each of the talking points of anti-liberal propaganda already has its specific vocabulary (idiolect) – a semantic cluster of labels and labelling phrases was identified for each of the talking points, through which the respective talking point is promoted.7 For example, the Eurosceptic cluster is represented by a list of 53 keywords and specific phrases, such as ‘Gayrope’ and ‘European oligarchy’. The fourth cluster, designed to discredit Bulgarian civil society and domestic political opponents, is the richest – it contains 119 keywords and phrases, such as ‘tolerasts’, ‘grant-spongers’, ‘liberal fascists’, and ‘Western lackeys’.

Precisely the existence of common talking points outlining a conspiratorial ‘grammar’ of articulation of the world, as well as of a specific ‘vocabulary’, allows us to speak of ‘propaganda’ and of ‘propaganda language’ in a narrower sense (taking into account the high level of coincidence of Bulgarian talking
The Rise of the Anti-Liberal Front: Frequency Analysis

As we already noted, if we compare 2016 with the ‘distant’ 2013, the number of publications per year reproducing one or other of the above talking points increased between 16 and 144 times. The data are from an automated analysis of the number of articles promoting each of the propaganda theses, found in the electronic archive of 3,080 Bulgarian-language news websites, newspapers and blogs for the period between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2016.8

Here are just some of the main data and conclusions from the measurement of the frequency of use of each of the talking points:

The talking point about ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’, which is designed to discredit civic movements, independent media outlets, human rights organizations, and pro-Western political leaders and parties, is the most frequently reproduced. In addition, this is the only talking point found in a significant number of publications already in 2013 (494 articles). Although it did not increase the most (by 26 times in four years: to 11,394 articles in 2016), the number of articles using this semantic cluster remained almost double the size of all other semantic clusters until the end of the period. Through a content analysis of publications on peak days, we found that the articles promoting this talking point most often directly discredit pro-reform movements and initiatives (the anti-government protests of the summer of 2013, the attempts at conducting a serious judicial reform after 2014, etc.), as well as the civic organizations, media outlets and political actors supporting those initiatives. The absolute peak in the number of such publications was on 13 November 2016 (232 publications on this day alone), the day Bulgaria’s incumbent President Rumen Radev won the second round of the presidential election (it is noteworthy that his election campaign was largely based on Russian talking points: ‘Crimea is de facto Russian’, ‘the sanctions against Russia must be lifted’, ‘Bulgarian foreign policy must be made in Sofia [i.e. not in Brussels]’, etc.).

We also found that the Kremlin’s anti-Maidan talking points are directly translated for domestic political uses and purposes. What was yet to happen, as of 2013, was the alignment of these domestic uses to the direct promotion of geostrategic theses. That is because foreign-political propaganda theses were practically absent in 2013: Euroscepticism in newspapers and websites was low (109 publications lamented ‘The decline of Europe’ in 2013 – as compared with 1,841 in 2016) and there were almost no anti-US and anti-NATO discourses (69 publications in 2013 – as compared with 2,361 in 2016).

Praise for Russia was also very low in Bulgaria in 2013. For the purposes of frequency measurement, ‘the rise of Russia’ talking point was subdivided into five separate propaganda sub-theses: 1) ‘Russia’s increased political and spiritual might’ (epithets building Russia’s overall positive image); 2) ‘Russia’s enemies’ (epithets labelling Russia’s critics as its ‘enemies’); 3) ‘the power
of Russian weapons’ (epithets praising Russian military power); 4) ‘Crimea and Ukraine’ (epithets promoting the thesis that Crimea is intrinsically Russian and that the Euromaidan was a Western coup); 5) ‘sanctions against Russia’ (epithets promoting the thesis that the sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea are unjust and part of the West’s war against Russia). The purpose of this subdivision was to find to what extent, and when, the specific theses of official Russian propaganda are directly translated into the Bulgarian public sphere.

The data are startling:

- In 2013 there was no discourse against the sanctions since they had not been imposed yet. In 2016, however, we found 4,005 publications containing the keywords of this discourse.
- The number of publications supporting the official Russian thesis about Crimea and Ukraine in 2013 was 56 (all of them at the very end of the year, after the beginning of the Euromaidan protests). This grew to 6,109 in 2016.
- In 2013, the Bulgarian media made no mention of ‘Russia’s enemies’, even though the EU and NATO had long since expanded and reached almost their present extents (we found just 54 publications). In 2016, however, phrases such as ‘enemies of Russia’, ‘aggression against Russia’, and ‘war against Russia’ were found in 7,511 publications.
- The number of articles praising Russian weapons rose from 22 (in 2013) to 745 (in 2016), while articles praising Russia in general soared from 44 to 1,326.

The conclusion is that Russian propaganda theses were introduced directly into the Bulgarian media sphere at the end of 2013 (after the beginning of the Euromaidan protests), and especially in March 2014 (with the annexation of Crimea). The talking point promoted in the highest number of publications is that Russia is a victim of aggression by the West (Russia is encircled by ‘enemies’); compared with this, the number of publications praising Russia’s political and spiritual might is significantly lower. This confirms our conclusion that present-day anti-liberal propaganda is mostly negative and subversive, aimed more at discrediting liberal democracy than at building a positive image that offers an alternative way of life. The data also show that the two practical-political theses of official Russian propaganda – *Krym nash* (Crimea is ours) and ‘the Euromaidan was a putsch orchestrated by the West’ – as well as the thesis that the Western sanctions are unjust, predominated in a specific way: they saw the most sustained and steepest growth from 2014 to the end of 2016, and were promoted by a significant number of articles.

The direct links of Bulgarian pro-Russian propaganda to Russian official propaganda are obvious upon comparison with the international and the Russian political calendar. All five pro-Russian theses spiked in connection with the events in Ukraine in November–December 2013, the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the imposition of sanctions in July and September 2014 and the
escalation in Donbas in the same year, the migrant crisis in Europe and the Russian intervention in Syria (portrayed as a campaign ‘to save Europe’) in 2015 and the meetings of the G7 in Davos and of NATO in Warsaw in 2016.

The frequency of pro-Russian publications in Bulgaria is also dictated by the Russian political calendar, particularly the celebration of the first anniversary of the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2015 and around the 9 May Victory Parade in Moscow in the same year, and Vladimir Putin’s statement in Dushanbe in September 2015, in which he declared Russia to be Europe’s saviour from the migrant invasion. Eurosceptic (‘The decline of Europe’) and anti-US and anti-NATO publications (‘The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master’) also first appeared at the end of 2013 and had analogous peaks.

The general conclusion is that the mass dissemination of all geopolitical propaganda theses – ‘The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master’, ‘The decline of Europe’ and ‘The rise of Russia’ – began simultaneously and followed approximately the same ‘Russian’ curve in its peaks.

The data prompt two important questions:
1. Why was the propaganda vocabulary first put to use for discrediting domestic political opponents and civil society in Bulgaria?
2. What exactly was the Kremlin’s role in the rise of the populist-propaganda front in Bulgaria, and what was the contribution of local actors?

In 2013, a wave of civic protest swept across Bulgaria. It began with mass anti-monopoly protests in February and March against the lack of state control over the electricity distribution companies; this led to the resignation of Boyko Borisov’s government (the GERB party). After a brief lull and elections, June 2013 saw a new wave of mass and anti-oligarchy protests (lasting, with varying intensity, until mid-2014). The latter were caused by the appointment of a notorious Bulgarian oligarch, Delyan Peevski, as head of the State Agency for National Security (DANS) and eventually led to the resignation of Plamen Oresharski’s government. In a sense, the Bulgarian civic protests of 2013 were the culmination of previous discontentment: a mass teachers’ strike in 2007, but also a series of protest actions by various occupational groups, protests against ACTA (the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), and intense and large-scale protests by environmentalists.

Culminating in the massive protests of 2013, all of these were similar to the global protest movements (Occupy, Indignados, Gezi Park) and differed significantly from the Bulgarian and other Eastern European protests of the 1990s, as well as from the later ‘colour revolutions’. The ‘velvet’ and the ‘colour revolutions’ demanded a change of the political system, but did not question the role of ‘the state’ as a framework for the political. Conversely, the Bulgarian protests of 2013 (and, more generally, after 2007, the year Bulgaria was admitted to the EU), as well as protests in countries with a more established democracy, increasingly questioned precisely the role of ‘the state’ as a reliable and honest regulator of social relations: they accused the state, personified by the political
class, of failing to perform its function of a just regulator of the public interest, and of turning into an instrument of injustice: serving ‘private’ corporate interests that are ‘foreign’ to the public interest. Hence also the accusation, characteristic of both the global and the Bulgarian protests, that the political elites were ‘conspiring’ against the public interest (the ‘1%’ versus the ‘99%’) and had turned into an ‘oligarchy’.

Of course, in the Bulgarian protests of 2013, as well as in all similar protest movements, there was a distinct populist moment. The criticisms of those protests, similar to the criticisms of the Occupy movement and of the Indignados, focused above all on the fact that they were negative, without a positive project for the future, that they were a moment not a movement of protest (Gitlin, 2012, pp.105-112). Negativity – and this is a commonplace in social theory – is something natural for protest movements because it is readily universalizable and can mobilize support effectively (ibid., pp.95-98; see also Rosanvallon, 2008). What is interesting, however, is that these diffuse and dispersed protest movements subsided when their idioms were expropriated and subverted in a way which, amazingly, was the same in the US, Hungary and Bulgaria.

Of course, it is a standard move by governments trying to discredit the protests against them to claim that these protests serve ‘private interests’ or that they are directly ‘paid for’ by somebody. After the 2011–2012 protests in Russia and fearing a ‘colour revolution’, the Kremlin exposed ‘the sponsor of the protests’ in a univocal geopolitical direction: Soros, the Americans, and the political hawks in the West who are their allies. Similarly, in Bulgaria, the anti-oligarchy protests, as well as all human rights organizations, independent media outlets and independent judges, were declared to be paid-for by ‘Soros’ and by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. Critics of oligarchy were thus declared to be oligarchs – their language was expropriated, stereotyped and turned against them: now it was not the political elite but the protesters who turned out to be promoting both private and ‘foreign’ interests with public funds. The strategic use of the techniques of ‘post-truth’ – propaganda – injects inverted but persistent meanings into the turbulences of social discontent, thereby silencing them. Leeching off the language of social discontents, propaganda becomes an instrument for blocking civic resistance.

Thus, in the Bulgarian case, the populist negative critique was expropriated and inverted by the local oligarchic circles which turned it, through their media outlets, into a Russian-style propaganda instrument silencing every criticism against the oligarchy. The vocabulary of Russian propaganda turned out to be convenient, and Russia turned out to be a ‘role model’ for local business interests using the nation-state as their ‘private’ resource both against global competition and against local civic resistances.

This partly also answers the second question about the extent of the Kremlin’s role in the rise of the populist-propaganda front in Bulgaria. It is certain that the introduction of anti-liberal propaganda discourse into Bulgarian media
was not directly inspired by the Kremlin – at least, not entirely, nor even for the most part. In 2013, anti-liberal propaganda initially worked entirely on the domestic political plane: it tried to discredit the mass anti-oligarchy protests that called for the return of the institutions of the liberal democratic state to their main function: the protection of the public interest and the guarantee of pluralism and of the separation of powers. In 2013, geopolitical propaganda – anti-EU, anti-US, anti-NATO, and praise for Russia – was practically absent. Both the introduction of anti-liberal propaganda and its increasing use must therefore have been inspired by local politico-economic interests. Anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria started out above all as a home-grown phenomenon, not as an effect of direct Russian interference. Russian interferences, however, can be detected at a later stage, as evidenced by the coincidence both of the introduction of the geopolitical aspects with the annexation of Crimea, and of their coincidence with the Russian political calendar.

This indicates an initial tactical borrowing of Russian propaganda tropes and their implantation into the Bulgarian media discourse for domestic political purposes. What is more, a significant part of the vocabulary for discrediting domestic political opponents is directly calqued from Russian: words like ‘tolerant’, ‘liberal-fascist’ etc., are used like ready-made meals and popped in the local oven to serve a complex alliance of interests. This alliance of interests in Bulgaria does not have a single party representation or work consistently ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ any party; rather, it creates different media outlets, often with different party affiliations – media outlets that can be used tactically at any moment to discredit both the government, whichever it may be, and any other political or civic actor. In fact, insofar as the politico-economic interests behind the media outlets are different, so the targets of populist propaganda also vary. However, these interests form an alliance, reaching ‘consensus’ whenever they want to attack an initiative or actor fighting for more control and public transparency, above all through reform of the judicial system.

**Propaganda Uses of the Talking Points: Content Analysis**

In 2013, the initial import of Russian propaganda tropes was in the form of ‘ready-made meals’, of ready-to-use interpretations, fast theses in a scarce and underpaid journalistic environment prone to serving conflicting domestic interests. Only half a year later, the picture was quite different. After the annexation of Crimea, the number of publications using the keywords from the Eurosceptic, anti-American, and pro-Russian semantic clusters began to grow exponentially. Were they also ready-made interpretations for domestic-political and oligarchic consumption? To identify the different use of the populist-propaganda tropes, we drew an additional sample of 3,305 publications from eight media outlets that differ by type of generated information, type of dissemination, and type of target audience. In this analysis of media content, we united the topics on American hegemony and on the death of Europe into
one topic called, for short, ‘The decline of the West.’ Here we present some of the conclusions of the content analysis.

Publications devoted to geopolitical topics are predominantly anonymous. The favourite topic of anonymous publications is the rise of Russia, and the favourite genre on this topic is the news report. The anonymous news report is definitely not part of the repertoire of popular discontents. It is pure propaganda – a technique of saturating the information environment with materials that resonate not with any social discontent or aspiration, but with the view of contemporary reality as a set of facts. The accumulated ‘facts’ are intended to ‘speak for themselves’. What, then, does the ‘reality’ fabricated by this technique look like?

Russia’s image is promoted elliptically by historical analogies. There are two main lines of analogy. First, Russia is portrayed as an innocent victim of aggression, as it was during the Second World War. Recent aggression towards Russia is of three types: the creation of a front along its Western border; unwarranted sanctions; and a smear campaign by Western media which wrongfully accuse it of being a military aggressor, while it is in fact a peacemaker (analogies are drawn between Donetsk, Aleppo and Stalingrad). Second, Russia is portrayed as Europe’s liberator. While, in the Second World War, Russia liberated Europe from fascism, now it is liberating Europe simultaneously from Islam, from American hegemony and from the moral corruption of liberalism. The more anonymous the publication, the more likely it is to promote these items of official Russian propaganda.

Another geopolitical thesis that is predominantly expressed anonymously (although not as much as the pro-Russian one) is that Europe has been captured by the institutions of united Europe which, in their turn, are a conduit of US interests. In other words, the aim is to promote Euroscepticism through anti-Americanism. Liberal values are a US weapon that is weakening Europe – multiculturalism and human rights are American weapons against European identities. In addition, after destroying Europe’s immunity through multiculturalism and human rights, the US is also using a more direct weapon – the Islamic deluge. So what is left of Europe? Nation-states.

However, aren’t we classifying as propaganda something which is in fact criticism? This is precisely what anti-liberal propaganda plays on: it uses critical figures that are immanent to the liberal political and cultural universe. But, we must remember that propaganda (as well as ‘post-truth’) is not simply lying: it is a regime of partial truth, half-truth, truth out of context, which is packaged, mobilized and used to play on existing stereotypes and resentments.17

How does this play out in domestic-political publications? This is done by denouncing multiculturalism and political correctness, which are American weapons against Europe. To reject them is not wrong, it is a noble and brave act. Those who accuse you of hate speech only prove that they are American agents (in the softer version: a conduit of foreign interests). Hate speech is assigned
the status of a civic virtue – it alone is ‘sincere’ and ‘truthful’.

This clearly shows how anti-liberal propaganda reworks and packages the aspirations of home-grown populism. Sociologists in Bulgaria have long since pointed out one typical effect of the sense of social injustice: the accusation of parasitism against the Roma minority, a condition that is claimed to be ‘inborn’ and which the political elites use in order to stay in power (Iakimova, 2012; Pamporov, 2009). The home-grown populist moment here is in the notion that Roma rights are not rights but privileges that deprive the rest of the population – that is, the non-Roma population – of rights. Here, propaganda – and it is obvious that this is propaganda, not disinformation – resorts to the classical time-tested techniques of creating moral panic about a minority, adds to its image that of the refugees and migrants, and declares hate speech towards all of them to be a civic virtue. The effect of this transformation of civic resentment (the populist moment) into a virtue goes far beyond inciting the public against minorities. It above all promotes the thesis of national sovereignty as the prime European value – one which is being systematically destroyed by the EU, a conduit of American hegemonic interests. Which, exactly, is the populist resentment that is cultivated by this propaganda scheme? That we – Bulgarians – are ‘second-hand Europeans’ and that they – Westerners – ‘come on all-inclusive package deals to Bulgaria on their welfare payments, while we care for their old people and clean their houses.’

In order to distinguish between direct Russian propaganda in Bulgaria and the tactical uses of its freely circulating clichés, we looked at three types of media: 1) geopolitical propaganda media outlets (prevalence of foreign-political publications and prevalence of the topic ‘Russia’ over the topic ‘Bulgaria’ – the newspaper Rusiya Dnes, the magazine A-specto and the PIK News Agency); 2) media outlets using propaganda tropes for domestic political purposes (prevalence of domestic-political publications and categorical prevalence of those on the topic ‘Bulgaria’ over those on the topic ‘Russia’ – the daily newspapers Duma and Trud, and the weekly tabloid Weekend); and 3) media outlets combining geopolitical propaganda with domestic politics (prevalence of foreign-political over domestic-political publications, but prevalence of the topic ‘Bulgaria’ over the topic ‘Russia’ – the websites Pogled-info and Glasove).

A-specto is a magazine with elitist pretensions, something like a journalistic ‘think tank’ in which most of the articles are devoted to global political and economic problems, and whose editors as well as whose leading authors are relatively well-known and identified as ‘leftist’ journalists. The ‘leftist’ profile of the magazine, however, is very problematic because, ever since its launch, the critique of the hegemony of neoliberalism has been automatically and systematically ‘translated’ into realpolitik, geostrategic and even directly nationalist terms such as ‘hegemony of the US and its Euro-Atlantic allies’. The US is the ‘arch-villain’ in 43% of the articles in A-specto – wholly in line with the Russian model, with distinct defence of Russian ‘national-sovereignism’. Also
symptomatic is the moment of the launch of the magazine – the maiden issue was published in April 2014, a month after the annexation of Crimea, and even in this issue there are articles defending Ukraine’s geopolitical kinship with Russia or telling the history of ‘Ukrainian fascism’. Issue no. 28 of July 2016 is wholly devoted to defending the thesis that Crimea is Russian – staff members even went to Crimea to interview senior government officials. In other words, A-specto is a direct conduit of the Russian geopolitical talking points and functions entirely in line with the agenda and priorities of official Russian propaganda. The articles in it are widely disseminated through the newspaper Duma, which represents the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party), through the propaganda digest Pogled-info, which is linked to the same party, and through media outlets such as Glasove, Epicenter, and Trud. Of late, A-specto has increasingly been reprinting ‘appropriate’ articles translated from Russian, probably because most of its leading authors are already busy pursuing a political career: in the last presidential and parliamentary elections, the BSP tried to ride the propaganda-populist wave, with the journalist Ivo H. Hristov becoming PR officer and then Chef de Cabinet of the newly elected president, Rumen Radev, and the journalists Alexander Simov and Toma Tomov and the sociologist Ivo A. Hristov becoming BSP MPs.

Unlike the directly propagandistic magazine A-specto, the tabloid Trud, which belongs to the second type of media outlet, also uses geopolitical talking points as a general framework, but it uses them purely tactically, simply because they are convenient and accessible, to promote properly domestic-political messages – here the use of propaganda clichés for discrediting domestic political opponents is more frequent than the use of geopolitical clichés.

This is most obvious in the data from the structural analysis to which the articles from the archive were subjected. In Trud the US is the arch-villain in 5.3% of the articles, but these are nevertheless outnumbered (7.2%) by those in which the arch-villain is ‘the Capital circle’ – a specific local propaganda label designating two pro-liberal media outlets (the weekly newspaper Capital and the news website Dnevnik) and implying their oligarchic connection within a wider oligarchic network. Trud also consistently uses the discursive strategy for de-legitimizing the Maidan in Kiev and the colour revolutions more generally, in order to vilify all sorts of organizations and activists connected to judicial reform and the environmental protection movement. Trud, incidentally, was bought by its present owner, Petyo Blaskov, with a loan from First Investment Bank, a bank connected to a major entrepreneur in ski tourism and in the development of areas for whose status environmental activists are fighting to preserve as protected areas. Here the vilification of the NGO sector and civic movements, used by the Kremlin to prevent and suppress the rise of Maidan-like sentiments in Russia itself, is used as a rhetorical smokescreen in the promotion of entirely concrete economic interests.

It is also symptomatic that although the media outlets sampled promote
clearly anti-liberal, Eurosceptic and pro-Russian propaganda, they do not identify themselves explicitly with a single party – neither the openly pro-Russian nationalist party Ataka nor the BSP, a party traditionally oriented, at least through one of its factions, towards the Kremlin and Russian energy projects. The attitude towards Boyko Borisov (the incumbent prime minister for the third time and leader of GERB, a centre-right party that is a member of the European People’s Party) is emblematic, though. In the overall list of antagonists from the sample, he is second after the US. However, in three of the media outlets – Trud, Weekend and PIK – we see that he is seldom, if ever, cast in the role of ‘villain’. It is precisely these three media outlets, which overtly encourage cynicism through messages that ‘all politicians are scoundrels’, that covertly support Borisov, advising him to avoid ‘bad partners’ who want greater public control over institutions and, above all, deeper judicial reform.

Populist critique calls for popular sovereignty and the return of nation-states against the international community, which allegedly is nothing other than a mask for the greed (colonialism and imperialism) of the West combined with its logistical and military weakness. What does this national-sovereignism look like? The semantic analysis of the messages from all media outlets shows that national-sovereignism is the negation of multiculturalism, of intercultural coexistence and of institutionalism; it rhetorically takes away democracy from institutions, but also from the civic process, and assigns it to the people. But isn’t this true of democracy, albeit of an illiberal type?

To answer this question, let us see what the demos of this ‘democracy’ looks like, and ask: what does it want? The answer is that it doesn’t want anything, except to be left in peace to look after its private affairs and not to deal with the big issues, because ‘small humans aren’t cut out for big things.’ What does this demos do? Nothing, because whatever it may do wouldn’t matter, while the fact that it does nothing shows that it is wise; it is wise because it is inactive and this is a virtue. In addition to being wise, it is naturally honest, calling a spade a spade – it calls refugees ‘Gypsies’, and Gypsies ‘animals’. Packaged by propaganda, the leftist and rightist populist voices have lost their differences, merging into a nationalism of the most banal and primitive kind. There are many reasons for this, among which just one is the easy adoption of the Kremlin’s ready-to-use interpretations, which serve to maintain an authoritarian-oligarchic regime that structurally has a stake in the inaction of citizens.

It is not only the Kremlin that has a stake in the inaction of citizens and in the weakening of international regulations – in the Bulgarian case, in the weakening of the EU. The stakeholders are many – and most of them are local.
NOTES


2 The study was conducted by a team from the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia with the financial support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. For its results, see Vatsov et al. (2017).

3 Such is the focus of studies by international institutions (NATO, the EU), e.g., http://www.stratcomcoe.org/kremlin-and-daesh-information-activities; https://euvsdisinfo.eu/commentary-means-goals-and-consequences-of-the-pro-kremlin-disinformation-campaign/, as well as of a series of academic projects, e.g., http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/about-the-project/.


6 George Soros in the role of ‘puppet-master’ is the most widespread metonymy: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4598796/Lauded-loathed-Whos-afraid-George-Soros.html.

7 It is precisely the existence of stable semantic clusters for each of the talking points that allowed the automated search and measurement of the frequency of use, identifying the number of publications using the respective vocabulary.

8 The frequency measurements were conducted with SENSIKA, a media monitoring and analysis system which maintains an archive of publications on 3,080 Bulgarian-language websites.

9 After the law on DANS was amended precisely so as to allow Peevski to be appointed head of the agency without having previously worked in the national security system.

10 Nominated by a coalition of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, the former Communist Party) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS, the party of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria) and elected with the support of the pro-Russian nationalist party Ataka. The summer 2013 protests failed to directly oust the coalition, but de-legitimized it to such an extent that after the BSP’s catastrophic loss in the European Parliament elections in May 2014, the other coalition partner, the DPS, broke up the coalition.

11 In the summer of 2013, the propaganda language aimed at discrediting the protests was introduced precisely by media outlets owned by or connected to the above-mentioned would-be boss of DANS, Delyan Peevski – an MP from the DPS and media mogul (at that time, his mother Irena Krasteva was the owner of New Bulgarian Media Group, which publishes multiple newspapers and holds a monopoly on the distribution of print media in Bulgaria).

12 Of course, before 2013 there were also organizations and parties in Bulgaria which directly promoted the Russian propaganda vocabulary – above all, the nationalist and pro-Russian party Ataka, as well as a number of representatives of the BSP, the former Communist Party – but their voices had remained largely marginal until then.


14 To understand the intertwining of local economic interests and Russian propaganda, however, one must bear in mind that Russia’s economic influence in Bulgaria is very strong: Russia’s ‘economic footprint’ in Bulgaria exceeds 25% and some sectors – above all, the energy sector – are dominated by Russia (http://www.csd.bg/fileadmin/user_upload/160928_Conley_KremlinPlaybook_Web.pdf). In other words, a significant part of the economic interests in Bulgaria are directly Russian or pro-Russian. This partly explains also why the populist-propaganda anti-liberal discourse in Bulgaria does not deviate substantially from Russian official propaganda. Furthermore, as in the case of most of the Balkan peoples which received their independence as a result of the Russo-Turkish wars in the nineteenth century, Russophilia and gratitude to ‘the liberators’ are part of the Bulgarian state-creation myth and national identity. This makes the use of the pro-Russian vocabulary easy and effective.

15 A main element of non-transparency in Bulgaria is the Prosecution Service, which is part of the judicial system but is a centralized, single-command hierarchical structure that is not subject to any control, with all appointments in it being dominated by the political apparatus and the prosecutor general. In this form, the Prosecution Service can and is used for settling scores with inconvenient political and economic opponents – that is why the civic demands after 2013 were, and are, above all for its reform.
For details of the sampling and registration methods, see Vatsov et al. (2017). The materials from the media outlets Rusiya Dnes, Pogled-info, Trud, A-specto, Glasove, Duma, PIK, and Weekend, archived in the database, were described through: information about the author, the media outlet, the rubric and genre of each publication (formal analysis); the main theses and the arguments for them in each publication (content analysis); identification of key negatively-represented and positively-represented actors – individuals, political figures, institutions, more rarely processes (structural analysis); the ways of this representation – through epithets, actions, characterizations, etc. (semantic analysis).

On those functions of propaganda, see Ellul (1973, pp.35-37).

Protagonists and antagonists were identified and coded for each of the archived units. The quantitative analyses of all articles from the selected eight media outlets enabled us to draw interesting general conclusions about contemporary anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria: 1) There are almost no matches between the lists of protagonists and antagonists, that is, Bulgarian anti-liberal propaganda depicts a split – black-and-white – world; 2) The antagonists significantly outnumber the protagonists, that is, Bulgarian anti-liberal propaganda can be proved to be negatively subversive; 3) The protagonists are most often affirmed indirectly, not directly – as antagonists of the antagonists, or as their victims.


REFERENCES


INFLUENCE OF ANTI-DEMOCRATIC PROPAGANDA ON BULGARIAN PUBLIC OPINION: BETWEEN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE AND THE POLITICAL CHOICES

Having subsided somewhat after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the ideological battle for the public opinion and dominant interpretations of the political and geopolitical processes has flared up with new intensity in recent years. According to a growing number of studies conducted by reputable research centres and media outlets, the anti-democratic propaganda (catastrophic images of a ‘dying’ liberal Europe, epidemic of fake news, etc.) has proven capable of influencing voters at key political moments. In the short term, these strategies for mass influence seem to be very successful and as if unquestioned by academic analyses, which remain confined within narrow expert communities. Yet although the efforts at objective empirical research of the new propaganda phenomena by accumulating systematic data on their constituent elements (such as scope and volume of the propaganda messages, sources and networks spreading fake news, dynamic in the political calendar of individual countries, recurrent clichés, etc.) cannot claim to be as powerful as this propaganda, they can counter it in the long term in several reasonable and meaningful ways. ‘Illumination’ and demystification of the propaganda field, an enhanced capacity to recognize manipulative messages and fake news and, as a result, transition to media self-regulation, are only three of the effects that make it worthwhile to collect data, develop methodological tools and open a forum for debates.

The research project on Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria, the first of its kind in the country, aims to identify, systematize and analyze the language and objects of anti-democratic propaganda along four thematic lines (1. The image of Europe and the EU/‘The decline of Europe/the West’; 2. Russia/‘The rise of Russia’; 3. Bulgaria’s venal elites and civil society; 4. The image of the US/NATO as ‘global hegemon/puppet-master’) in the 2013–2016 period, on the basis of publications in 3,080 Bulgarian-language print media and websites. Identifying and registering the specific manifestations of anti-democratic
propaganda in the Bulgarian media-political context, it has laid the foundations of a database that enables objective investigation of this phenomenon and development of defence mechanisms against it.

This paper presents a summary of the results of the second part of the project – a study on the influence of anti-democratic propaganda on Bulgarian public opinion. It was conducted in the period from 16 May to 7 June 2017 by qualitative and quantitative methods. It will be followed by a second wave of the study at the beginning of 2018, which will enable comparing and identifying more stable trends in the research area.

In the past twenty-year period of transition from a totalitarian to a democratic political system, Bulgarian public opinion has been characterized by a very high level of instability, volatility and internal contradiction. There are no clear value-benchmarks based on the principles of rule of law, civil and human rights, which have been unconditionally shared by the political elite and for which Bulgarians assume that they should be consistently safeguarded. In this context, the increase in anti-democratic propaganda messages of various kinds and character risks exerting momentary pressure on voters (a situation similar to the impact of fake news on the elections in a number of Western countries) as well as eroding more basic value- and/or geopolitical orientations. The difficulty in researching these processes is due not only to the instability and fast change of attitudes, but also to the circumstance that in the rather ambivalent and toxic media environment in Bulgaria, a sort of vicious circle is observed. The unstable democratic-institutional values increase the susceptibility to concrete anti-democratic messages while the latter, in turn, undermine these values. The question is, how far has this process gone, is the impact of the aggressive propaganda messages the same in the different thematic fields and among the different social groups, where is the most resilient resistance against them? Taking into consideration all these peculiarities, the study aimed to identify the public attitudes and to analyze their dynamic in the following dimensions:

- Attitude towards basic democratic values and institutions of the rule of law;
- Influence of main propaganda clichés identified in the first part of the project;
- Measurement of the elasticity of the propaganda clichés and their capacity to erode basic democratic values. For this purpose, the study tracked their differentiated perception by social groups with a different attitude towards these values as well as by social groups with opposite political orientations. Special attention was paid to the role of fake news in this process.

Importance of Basic Democratic Values and Assessment of Their Implementation in Bulgaria

The way in which Bulgarian citizens prioritize the key values underlying contemporary democratic societies reflects the general regulatory role of these
values in their lives as well as the level of their deficits. The dynamic and relation between these two components determine the range within which potential propaganda messages can work most effectively.

The value that is given absolute priority (by 66%) by the Bulgarians is equality before the law, followed by fair justice and punishment for anyone who has violated the law (57%), and guaranteeing national and personal security (51%). Conversely, the separation of powers, fair competition, and free media, although basic elements of democracy, are given less priority, to some extent because of their less visible relevance to the major problems Bulgarian citizens encounter in their everyday lives as well as probably because they have been seriously discredited as values in recent years.

The dynamic through which these principles function in public attitudes becomes more visible upon comparison of the hierarchy of basic democratic values with the ranking of those which, according to the respondents, are actually implemented in Bulgaria. (Chart 1)

Five main conclusions can be drawn from this comparison:
● First, regardless of all aberrations and ad-hoc changes, the values of the rule of law, at least as postulates, continue to be the most important to Bulgar-
ian citizens.

- Second, the assessment of the extent to which they are actually implemented in Bulgaria is extremely low. That is to say, although there is no visible erosion in the importance of basic values, the more delicate question is: Could we be witnessing their specific and gradual emptying of content? Another question which this study tried to answer is: To what extent is the distrust of Bulgarian democratic institutions and of the implementation of democratic principles due to the anti-democratic propaganda discourses which aim to infect citizens with negativism and political apathy? Or is democracy itself in Bulgaria a ‘façade’ democracy that is very different from the Western one?

- Third, and directly related to the above questions, there is a significant difference between the importance ascribed to a given value and the assessment of its implementation in practice. The biggest differences, which concern equality before the law and fair justice, exceed 50 percent. Bulgarian public opinion views the things it values the most as the worst-functioning. Just 0.9% think that there is fair justice and punishment for anyone who has violated the law, 6.3% are of the opinion that there is equality before the law in Bulgaria, 4.8% believe there is accountability of power-holders to the citizens, etc. The critically low assessments of the implementation of the principles of rule of law are accompanied also by consistently low assessments of the activity of the legislature and the judiciary. This duality between ‘importance’ and ‘reality’ is one of the main reasons for the instability in the attitude towards values which are regarded, ‘in principle and by default’, as important but have begun to be perceived as consistently non-functioning because of their deficiency or intentional discrediting. In parallel with that, the present study, as many others, has found that the attitude of the Bulgarians towards the political elite is extremely negative. The political elite are assumed to be responsible for all failures, but for none of the successes of Bulgaria, and this creates a favourable environment for messianic-populist messages.

- Fourth, part of the values that are formal characteristics of democratic societies (such as free media and the separation of powers), but which are not directly and visibly associated with the quality of governance and life, are assessed both as relatively less important and as more implemented in practice. The deviation between desired and actual in their case is between three and seven percent. Nevertheless, this doesn’t mean that the actual situation is satisfactory. The focus groups and interviews with journalists showed significant criticism regarding the independence both of the different powers and the media. However, insofar as mainly the individual points of view are projected in the assessments, it is obvious that the things the individual assumes cannot directly hurt him or her are given less priority than those by which he or she feels potentially personally affected.⁴

- Fifth, it is particularly symptomatic that the only value on which there is a prevalence, albeit by little, of the assessment of implementation (21.5%)
over importance (20.1%) is ‘protection of the rights of groups different from the majority’. Different models of interpretation of this ‘exception’ may be sought, especially considering that in all international rankings by objective criteria, Bulgaria by no means stands out for its protection of any minority groups whatsoever.

This perception may be due to the low tolerance towards differences in an until recently homogeneous and closed society in which many differences were regarded as crimes; it may come from aggressive speakers against minority rights as well as from extrapolation of negative everyday experience in which absent justice is replaced by political abuses. In the logic of the above, however, it may also be a projection of the ‘personal’ point of view of the ‘victim’ – when you think that your own rights are violated and feel that you are treated unjustly, any attention to other underprivileged groups seems excessive.

We shall return to this question in assessing the impact of the separate propaganda messages. However, we would like just to note here that three groups of values could be outlined depending on how they are perceived: 1) categorically shared values, those of the rule of law and equality before the law, which can be implemented only if they are applied to everyone in society; 2) values undergoing erosion – media freedom and integrity, free and fair market competition, free and fair elections – perceived as functioning in some cases and absent in others; 3) weakened values – separation of powers, citizen control over them, solidarity with minority groups – perceived as having been unilaterally imposed and therefore not requiring strong personal commitment.

Hence, our next research task is to see how these diverse perceptions feed the particular propaganda messages, in what way, and with what success.

Messages and Social Perceptions

Fourteen statements were tested in the study, where respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they considered them to be true or not (completely true, rather true, rather not true, not true at all, don’t know). The purpose was to assess the scope of penetration and the social impact of the most widespread propaganda messages in the Bulgarian media. Among the propaganda messages (a total of ten), we inserted, without special indication, four statements expressing basic liberal-democratic values and principles (1. The state must guarantee the individual rights and freedoms of everyone, otherwise anyone’s rights and freedoms could be abused; 2. The non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria help people to put forward their demands and to defend their interests) and the attitude towards Bulgaria’s present foreign-policy national doctrine (3. NATO is the best guarantee for Bulgaria’s security; 4. The European Union will emerge stronger from the crisis). What do the results show? (Chart 2)

As the chart shows, a first group of messages is supported by more than
Chart 2. Please indicate to what extent each of the following statements is true: (%)

- The state must guarantee the individual rights and freedoms of everyone, otherwise anyone's rights and freedoms could be abused
  - Completely true: 65.8%
  - Rather true: 21.6%
  - Rather not true: 6.7%
  - Not true at all: 24.3%
  - Don't know, can't say: 3.4%

- The refugees are threatening Europe with Islamization
  - Completely true: 56.2%
  - Rather true: 28%
  - Rather not true: 7%
  - Not true at all: 3.9%
  - Don't know, can't say: 4.9%

- The Bulgarians are treated by the EU as second-hand people
  - Completely true: 43.2%
  - Rather true: 29.3%
  - Rather not true: 11.1%
  - Not true at all: 4.6%
  - Don't know, can't say: 11.8%

- Bulgaria's foreign policy is dictated by Brussels, not by the national interest
  - Completely true: 43%
  - Rather true: 28.7%
  - Rather not true: 9%
  - Not true at all: 6.1%
  - Don't know, can't say: 13.3%

- The sanctions against Russia are unjust, they must be lifted
  - Completely true: 27.1%
  - Rather true: 24.9%
  - Rather not true: 11.1%
  - Not true at all: 7.2%
  - Don't know, can't say: 29.7%

- Russia is becoming ever stronger and Bulgaria should orient itself towards it
  - Completely true: 22.6%
  - Rather true: 28.6%
  - Rather not true: 19.6%
  - Not true at all: 9.9%
  - Don't know, can't say: 19.3%

- The EU is harming Bulgaria by stopping the Russian energy projects in our country
  - Completely true: 19.5%
  - Rather true: 21%
  - Rather not true: 14.7%
  - Not true at all: 14.9%
  - Don't know, can't say: 29.8%

- NATO is the best guarantee for Bulgaria's security
  - Completely true: 15.2%
  - Rather true: 28.3%
  - Rather not true: 18.7%
  - Not true at all: 18.4%
  - Don't know, can't say: 19.4%

- The EU will emerge stronger from the crisis
  - Completely true: 14.6%
  - Rather true: 24.2%
  - Rather not true: 21.4%
  - Not true at all: 11.7%
  - Don't know, can't say: 28%

- The non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria help people to put forward their demands and to defend their interests
  - Completely true: 9.3%
  - Rather true: 23.1%
  - Rather not true: 19%
  - Not true at all: 16.1%
  - Don't know, can't say: 32.4%
70% of the respondents. It has greatest popularity and influence. What is most remarkable in their common ‘denominator’ is that they are aimed at achieving a psychological effect and exercising a kind of psychological pressure creating a feeling of dependence among Bulgarian people. All three propaganda statements that are supported by more than 70% of the respondents – ‘The refugees are threatening Europe with Islamization’, ‘The Bulgarians are treated by the EU as second-hand people’ and ‘Bulgaria’s foreign policy is dictated by Brussels, not by the national interest’ – reproduce the psychological opposition between ‘the strong’ and ‘the weak’. This opposition turns out to be extremely effective, insofar as it transcends political dividing lines such as ‘East/West’, ‘democratic/anti-democratic’, or ‘liberal/illiberal’, each one of which has its proponents and opponents. All these messages work both at the macro-level and at the everyday level, reducing very different types of problems to ‘diktat over the Bulgarian people which is deliberately held in subjection’. Some of the ‘methods’ of this subjection, cited in the focus groups, are: ‘forceful settlement of refugees, stopping energy projects, granting concessions to foreign companies for the extraction of underground resources which are ours by right, the quality of the foods on sale in Bulgaria’, etc.

The only basic democratic value that falls in this group is the thesis that the state must guarantee the rights and freedoms of all its citizens. But it is only partly an antipode to the other three generally accepted propaganda theses. It is formulated as a value-statement and receives high support precisely as such – we have seen above that the assessment of its implementation in practice is very low. It turns out that the state is incapable of guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of its citizens and that is why it is fulfilling orders dictated from the outside. At the level of the respondents’ assessment of realities, not on that of the general values, anti-democratic propaganda seems extremely effective: the victimization of ‘us Bulgarians’ (or of ‘us Europeans’ – in the thesis regarding Islamization) as a special propaganda instrument shows the highest levels of social perception. As suggested also by the very high level of support for the three negative propaganda messages (approximately and over 70%), they have found their way into all sorts of social and electoral groups. There are certain differences in the levels of support for each of these statements among the higher- and lower-educated, among younger and older people, as well as among the supporters of the different political forces, but these differences are of low statistical significance. Conversely, their acceptance as ‘true’ predominates in all social groups. (Charts 3 and 4)

Another dimension of the message regarding the pressure on nation-states is ‘the public perception of the geopolitical balance of forces on the world stage’ and ‘the assessment of the acceptability/unacceptability of the role of “the great powers”’. A significant part of the propaganda rhetoric and the formation of a conspiracy-theory mindset about the existence of a ‘world conspiracy’, of ‘forces pulling the strings and dictating to the national governments what to
do’ rests on the understanding that there is a single global hegemon that dictates the world order. To the majority of Bulgarians (83%), having a single state or organization as the distinct leader in international relations is absolutely unacceptable. Such leadership is directly associated with the exertion of pressure, which is one of the issues on which public opinion is most sensitive and about...
which it is most suspicious. Eighty-two percent of the Bulgarians are of the opinion that it will be better for the world if there is no single state or organization that is the political leader.

Half of them (39.6%), however, think (Chart 5) that there is a global hegemon and identify it as the US. This causes both the negative reactions towards the US as a country that imposes its position on the other countries and the more general suspicion that the relations between countries and citizens are based not on values and principles, but on the diktat of force. Against this background, Russia is seen as the country that is trying to ‘restore the balance’. As such, it arouses the sympathies of considerably wider strata than those who support a change in Bulgaria’s present geopolitical orientation. That is to say, even among the respondents who remain resistant to the propaganda attempts to undermine the general liberal-democratic values and who are continuing to support them, pro-Russian propaganda has made a breakthrough on the geopolitical plane: the US is represented in the role of ‘global hegemon/puppet-master’ which is opposed by Russia. By this, Russia automatically turns out to be a protagonist because it is standing up for a ‘multipolar world’. In this way, the questions about the annexation of Crimea, about maintaining a civil war beyond its own borders, about hacker interventions and propaganda at home and abroad, about the violation of rights at home, etc., remain in the background, eclipsed by the ‘moral rectitude of standing up against the hegemon’.

An additional role in this process is played by the overemphasizing of the image of Russia’s ‘strong leader’, as opposed to the European politicians who
are entangled in complicated relations and procedures. Vladimir Putin is the winner of this political PR. Also indicative of the influence of this model is the high confidence in the ‘illiberal democrat’ Viktor Orban, who is just 1% behind Angela Merkel and ahead of Emmanuel Macron. Obviously, the pendulum of anti-globalization has swung for Bulgarian public opinion, too. Rejecting domination by any global hegemon, it admires the ‘defensive’ national politicians.

If there is a country whose image has sharply deteriorated in recent years, it is the US with its President Donald Trump. One of the main focuses of propaganda against the US as the biggest global puppet-master (identified in the first part of the project) de facto intensifies the deterioration of its image. At the same time, the behaviour of the newly elected president doesn’t counter this tendency. (Chart 6)

**Chart 6. What is your attitude towards the following leaders: (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neither positive nor negative</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vladimir Putin</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Merkel</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>25.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktor Orban</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmanuel Macron</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Trump</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>43.6</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recep Erdogan</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>25.8</td>
<td>67.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A provisionally distinguished second group of messages consists of those which tend to polarize Bulgarian society (they are supported by approximately 40%–50% of the respondents). It includes statements describing Bulgaria’s foreign policy orientation along the Russia–EU/NATO axis. Such are the theses regarding the injustice of the sanctions against Russia, its growing power, eventual reorientation of Bulgaria towards a union around Russia, NATO as a guarantee for Bulgaria’s national security, etc. These messages are shared by strictly defined social groups and are therefore more limited in their scope than those in the first group. The thesis appealing for lifting the sanctions against Russia is the only exception in this regard. Support for it is high and goes beyond core party voters.

What distinguishes the content of these messages from those in the first group discussed above? All of them contain clear political markers: Russia, the
EU, NATO, Bulgaria’s foreign policy orientation. It is these markers that make their addressees and direction of impact clearly identifiable.

- For example, support for the messages focusing on changing Bulgaria’s foreign policy orientation, on the role of Russia as a model for development or on the stopping of the Russian energy projects, predominates among the voters of left-wing and nationalist parties. The level of approval for each of those messages among them is two to three times higher than that among the voters of right-wing and centrist parties. The overwhelming majority of voters of left-wing and nationalist parties practically identify themselves with those messages. (Chart 7)

![Chart 7. Russia is becoming ever stronger and Bulgaria should orient itself towards it (%)](image)

- At the same time, the responses to other questions show that, once again, when the propaganda clichés leave the political framework and appeal to people’s more basic fears and anxieties, their influence grows sharply. In these cases, the ‘Chinese water torture’ effect also comes into play: in the absence of a serious public debate on the reasons for the introduction of sanctions against Russia and for Bulgaria’s position on them, and given the natural economic concerns of Bulgarian citizens, the multiple repetition of, for example, the propaganda thesis that these sanctions are economically harmful to Bulgaria (but also to Europe) leads to high support (52%:18%). In this way, propaganda feeds on and intensifies people’s fears; for the time being it could not threaten the common democratic values and political orientations, but it has managed to promote some of its suggestions ‘piece by piece’.

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This layer of public opinion, which shares a wide range of fears and a feeling of injustice, is very closely correlated to the dissatisfaction with the way democracy is functioning. And more specifically, to the total distrust of institutions, the political, and the political elite. In this sense, the discrediting of the Bulgarian political elite, which supports Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic orientation, and the creation of a wholly negative image of the societies which share this orientation are the two sides of the same coin that are pursued as a parallel strategy.

The last group of statements covers different topics, but we can generally classify them as statements describing a negative impact of external factors on Bulgaria. As a whole, they are more extreme and radical, or concern specific issues on which Bulgarian citizens do not feel sufficiently well-informed. This group includes statements such as that the US and NATO are a threat to our national sovereignty, that the EU is exercising a negative influence on Bulgaria by stopping energy projects, that Russia is deterring militant Islamism in Europe, that civic organizations are defenders of the rights and freedoms of citizens. As a whole, these statements have a lower degree and scope of impact, but insofar as they are part of the actively circulated propaganda messages, their trajectory in public opinion ought to be monitored.

If we summarize the results of this part of the study, we can say that the anti-democratic propaganda messages identified in the first part of the project have a different – in scope, strength and intensity – impact on the perceptions and attitudes of Bulgarian citizens. Not all are (equally) successful or, for that matter, relevant to the specific characteristics of Bulgarian public opinion.

The most powerful multipliers of impact turn out to be those that avoid or disguise political divisions. Instead, they exercise a sort of psychological pressure of dependence, at once relying on and reinforcing the ordinary Bulgarian’s feeling of victimization. The messages that show the Bulgarians as a victim and the Bulgarian political elite as a servant of the Western diktat are received equally well by diverse social as well as electoral groups. Their strength is in that they build a simplified but comprehensive image of the world – such as are the images created by any propaganda – based on basic deficits and attitudes of the Bulgarians in the last twenty years. As representatives of the poorest country and the country with the highest corruption index in the EU, the Bulgarians have begun to view themselves as a sort of ‘minority’ in the EU and to develop defensive reactions to a model they are told is deliberately keeping them in this situation. Especially symptomatic in this respect are the following opinions, widely shared by practically all participants in the focus groups, regardless of their political orientation: ‘Bulgaria is deliberately kept poor and without industry so that the rich countries can sell their superfluous goods here, use us geopolitically, achieve their own goals at the expense of the Bulgarian people.’ This attitude gives special vitality to the suggestion that ‘the Bulgarians are seen as second-hand people’.
develops the victim syndrome, representing as ‘unjust’ any support for more disadvantaged groups such as refugees, minorities, etc., and reinforces aggressive attitudes – ‘they are not just keeping us poor, they are also forcing us to accept and help others, too’…

Messages that have a more explicit political character are less effective because they meet with ‘resistance’ from social groups who share alternative political views. They play, rather, a unifying and mobilizing role for the groups with a similar political orientation, but have no impact on wider social communities. For example, the majority of those who support the thesis about the need for Bulgaria’s reorientation towards Russia also support the thesis about the diktat of the West over Bulgaria. The opposite dependence is not observed, however – a large part of those who support the thesis about the diktat of the West do not want Bulgaria to reorient itself towards Russia. It is very likely that this phenomenon is a specific manifestation of the overlapping of populist and geostrategic propaganda rhetoric, a phenomenon noted by Milena Iakimova and Dimitar Vatsov.5 In this particular case, however, the ‘universal’ populist discourse proves to be more effective than the polarizing geopolitical messages.

Which of the two approaches will become more effective in the longer term is difficult to say at present. In all cases, however, the political demystification and identification of anti-democratic propaganda methods plays a restraining and deterrent role vis-à-vis the feeling of helplessness and doom fostered by this propaganda.

Elasticity of Propaganda Messages and their Influence on Key Political Choices of Bulgarian Citizens

Like a number of other studies conducted in recent years, this study also found multiple layers, contradictions as well as collisions in Bulgarian public opinion. On the one hand, there is significant support for fundamental democratic values, even though the support for some of them is declining. At the same time, along with support for basic values of liberal democracy, Bulgarians share a series of fears and stereotypes that devalue or call into question the identification with these values. They simultaneously believe that the Bulgarian institutions and political elite cannot guarantee the values of the rule of law and seek justice from the European institutions, but readily define Bulgaria’s relations with the EU also as ‘diktat of Brussels and “the West” over Bulgaria’s foreign policy’, ‘treatment of the Bulgarians as second-hand people’, ‘loss of energy power’. These attitudes lead to striving for isolationism, or for ‘closer alignment with Russia’, characteristic of the supporters of left-wing and nationalist parties.

Precisely because of the existing symbiosis of more basic attitudes of Bulgarian citizens, on the one hand, with their ad-hoc perceptions, life experience, or real governance deficits on the other, this study would not have been full if it was limited to identifying the scope of impact of the key propaganda theses. We
believe it was important to go a step further – to analyze how this symbiosis of attitudes and propaganda influences the fundamental political choices made by Bulgarian citizens. Given the existence of different vectors acting upon public opinion, their overall influence could be measured by the degree to which they manage to shift key political choices of Bulgarian citizens.

In this study we identified two indicators of such key political choices – support for Bulgaria’s EU membership and democratic development, and civic activism as a pillar of real, not façade, democracy. In the next two sections, we will present and examine the results of the measurement of both indicators.

Attitude towards Bulgaria’s EU Membership and the Country’s Possible Reorientation

The data from the study show very clearly that Bulgaria’s membership in the EU (and, to a lesser extent, in NATO) is considered to have no alternative. At least three groups of indicators confirm this – the support for Bulgaria’s EU membership remains almost as high as in the first years after its accession in 2007 (51% approval versus just 15% disapproval); the overall balance of accession to the EU and NATO is assessed as positive for Bulgaria; the major political events listed by the respondents in response to an open-ended question are also related to various visible aspects of Bulgaria’s accession to the EU – free movement, work, and education in Europe, contribution of the European programmes and subsidies to the development of the economy and life of people in Bulgaria.

But whereas ten years after Bulgaria’s accession to the EU the attitudes of Bulgarian citizens are definitely in favour of European integration, they are polarized regarding the intensity of European integration. Close to 45% of the citizens want Bulgaria to continue towards stronger European integration by joining the Eurozone and Schengen. Slightly less (41%) are of the opinion that Bulgaria should remain a member of the EU, but without further integration in the European structures, and that it should strengthen its ties with Russia. (Chart 8)

The study also found significant differences of opinions on the scope and intensity of Bulgaria’s European integration depending on age, type of settlement, income per household member, and political orientation:

- Those in favour of stronger European integration are mostly young people, Sofia residents, people with higher incomes, supporters of GERB and the extra-parliamentary right-wing parties.
- Those in favour of closer ties with Russia are mostly older people (aged over 60), village residents, people with low incomes, supporters of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) and of part of the nationalist parties.

To summarize: as an overall attitude, Bulgarian citizens do not see realistic alternatives for Bulgaria’s development, other than its Euro-Atlantic orientation. As the media content analysis conducted in the first part of this project has shown, neither are such alternatives offered by Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, which seeks solely to create negative images and fears, not to offer
solutions. Bulgaria’s present geopolitical orientation is not called into question. That is to say, when thinking in terms of alternatives, and more specifically in terms of political alternatives, the choice of Bulgarian citizens remains unchanged; it has not been influenced even by the most widely shared propaganda clichés – *that Europe treats us as second-hand people and that Brussels is dictating Bulgaria’s policy (by default – to our detriment)*. At the everyday level, however, these clichés, generated with the obvious purpose of eroding the formation of a stable European identity, are shared very widely and in all sorts of versions. They have a psychological effect, reproducing the image of ‘the arrogant West’ without (for the time being) managing to bind it to a political alternative. As a result, the battle between ‘the negative images’ and ‘the strategic choice of the Bulgarians’ has been won so far by the values of Western democracy. The latent and stoked fears, however, should not be underestimated, because in a definite political situation they may escalate fast and, in combination with the deep distrust of the political elite, cause radical turns.

This conclusion is confirmed also by the responses to another question, which faced the Bulgarians with a choice of alternatives, asking them to indicate the form of government they would like to live under. Answering this question, 65% chose liberal democracy. (Chart 9)

Faced with another dilemma – *Which period of Bulgaria’s history would you like to live in?* – 46% chose the present one, after 1989. (Chart 10) This applies to all social and demographic groups, except for pensioners aged over 60, where the ratio is 33%:51% in favour of Bulgaria of the time of ‘real socialism’, and for BSP supporters, where this ratio is even more pronounced – 26%:59%. (Charts 11 and 12)
Chart 9. Which form of government do you think is the best and you would like to live in such a country? (%)

- Western liberal democracy: 64.7%
- Communism: 20.5%
- Authoritarian regimes: 3.6%
- Military regimes: 2.7%
- Monarchy: 0.2%
- Presidential republic: 0.5%
- Socialism: 0.7%
- Rule of law: 0.5%
- Other: 1.5%
- No answer: 5.1%

Chart 10. If you could choose, which Bulgaria would you like to live in? (%)

- In present-day Bulgaria, after 1989: 46.1%
- In Bulgaria as it was at the time of ‘real socialism’: 33.5%
- In Bulgaria as it was before the Second World War: 4.9%
- I wouldn’t live in Bulgaria: 14.9%
- No answer: 0.6%
Regardless of the fluctuations in the responses to the two questions, which are related to the respondents’ life path, it is obvious: first, that there is no public support for an alternative way of Bulgaria’s development, and second, that insofar as there is support for an alternative way of development, its only political
proponent are the BSP voters. Despite their party’s official declarations, 63% of them are in favour of less European integration and more close ties with Russia, as well as a return to ‘real socialism’ (59%).

All these results lead to the general conclusion that at present (2017), the fears and negative images of liberal democracy and Europe, disseminated by anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria, have not changed the strategic choice of Bulgarian citizens. This conclusion is valid for all social groups, except for the older generation with primary education – the BSP electorate, and part of the electorate of nationalist parties (mainly that of the Russophile party Ataka). This social type is the strongest carrier of anti-liberal and anti-Western attitudes. The extent to which it can expand during elections is one of the key questions about the effectiveness of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria.

**Anti-Democratic Messages and Civic Activism**

The second dimension regarding which the study tried to establish the influence of anti-democratic messages is civic activism. A real (not propaganda) critique of key social problems, governance deficits, and political or administrative abuses, would also mean strengthening the capacity of institutions and citizens for counteraction. Without real participation of citizens and civic organizations, without an independent judicial system, the democratic procedures could easily turn into imitative ones, and democracy itself into a façade democracy. The more disheartened, passive and discouraged a country’s citizens are, the wider the potential limits of abuse of power are. Conversely, the existence of an independent judicial system, independent media, civic organizations and citizens are the strongest guarantees for control over power.

As an indicator of the extent to which the diffuse social and media environment, as well as the propaganda messages, are managing to influence the civic reflexes of adult Bulgarians, we asked the question, ‘What actions have you personally taken if you’ve come across an injustice?’ The results are shown in the next chart. (Chart 13)

What is very striking about these data (apart from the general passivity, characteristic of most societies with a high level of institutional distrust and low civic activism) is that every third respondent claims that he or she has not encountered any injustice worth taking action, as well as that another 20% haven’t done anything because they know that nothing will change… This, considering that 90% of the Bulgarians claim that there is no equality before the law, that there is no fair trial and punishment for criminals, and that corruption, poverty and deceit are endemic.

Viewed in the context of the fears, alienation and distrust that things can change, the responses to this question show very clearly one of the main results achieved, or at least contributed to, by propaganda – disheartening and disempowering people, making them believe in the suggestions of
dependency, doom and impossibility of counteracting.

The erosion of confidence in institutions and politicians goes hand in hand with loss of confidence in one’s own powers and possibilities for change. In this situation, two main types of reactions are observed – Bulgarian citizens either place their trust in supranational institutions (the EU, the European Parliament and Court of Justice) and their regulatory functions vis-à-vis the Bulgarian political elite, or fall into conspiratorial negative scenarios and fears that form the perfect environment for discrediting constructive political acts, while promoting engineering and/or populist projects.

In this regard, the study showed that fake news has turned out to be a quite powerful resource for blurring the political dividing lines and alternatives. That is why the question of recognizing and building a sort of ‘immunity’ to fake news is of key importance. In mid-2017, twenty-two percent of the adult Bulgarians claimed that they are well aware of the term ‘fake news’. Fifty-one percent said that they have ‘heard generally’ about it. It is certain that in this group there are people who have ‘heard something’, but also people who gave a purely prestigious response without being aware of what ‘fake news’ actually means. Twenty-seven percent admitted that they hadn’t heard about fake news. (Chart 14)

Although they use the internet the most, the youngest respondents are the
least aware of this term and probably in many cases do not recognize the fake news on the ‘net’. Conversely, the most aware of this phenomenon are the middle-aged groups with higher education from big cities, who inform themselves much more carefully and critically about socio-political events. Afraid of being exposed to ‘fake news’, this group is more suspicious of the various ‘facts’ and ‘opinions’ circulated online.

Those who are at the highest risk of falling prey to fake news are the low-educated, younger, and lower-income residents of small towns and villages. They have little interest in political life, more rarely follow the news, and hence, are neither well-informed about fake news nor more critical and selective of the information offered.

Apart from the self-assessment of their awareness of the term ‘fake news’, a very important indicator of the Bulgarians’ ability to discern fake news is found in the responses to the question of ‘what people perceive as fake news’. (Chart 15)

The data show that ‘fake news’ is mostly equated with compromising materials, sensationalism, discrediting of famous people. Three-quarters of the Bulgarians who have recognized a news story as fake associate it precisely with these characteristics. This perception of fake news largely prevails in the mass consciousness. The focus groups also showed that the fake news stories which participants mentioned were again related mostly to sensational stories and gossip about famous people.
The specific fake news used in the propaganda geopolitical war remains widely unrecognized and is quite likely doing its job, influencing the opinions and beliefs of large groups of people in Bulgaria. Just 16% associate fake news with the fabrication of non-existent events designed to change the public attitudes. This group again consists mostly of middle-aged people with high education living in big cities, members of the intelligentsia and the liberal professions. In terms of political affiliation, most of them are supporters of the smaller right-wing and part of the nationalist parties.

Concrete cases of ‘fake news’ were cited very rarely, and they can be outlined into three groups:

- Fabricated events and facts of political life;
- Unfulfilled promises of politicians;
- Counter-fake news as a reaction to the initial fake news.

It is noteworthy that in close to one-fifth of all cited cases, Russia’s name was mentioned – regardless of whether it was regarded as a source or, conversely, as a victim of fake news. In all cases, however, for those who recognize the phenomenon, Russia is a key player in this field.

The general conclusion that could be drawn from the way and forms of perception of fake news is that this term has already entered into serious circulation not only in the Bulgarian media but also at the level of everyday con-
sciousness. For the time being, however, fake news is associated mostly with the sensational, the scandalous, with news about ‘miracles’, with gossip and compromising materials. Much fewer Bulgarians realize that fake news can also circulate in serious politics. This is the greatest potential danger of its influence – dispassionately, dryly, factually reported pseudo-‘news’ may be accepted as true precisely because sensitivity to untruth is focused mainly on yellow, sensational headlines. This can be defined also as one of the main ‘contributions’ of fake news to the propaganda messages. The focus on sensations allows the other fabricated ‘events’ to exercise undisturbed their damaging influence on public opinion. Yet as the results of the second part of the project have shown, the more neutral, factual and general a message sounds, the stronger its impact is. That is because it disguises the fact that what ultimately matters is not the news itself, but its influence on the civil and political choices of people.

NOTES


2 Six focus groups in different cities in Bulgaria with representatives of different target groups.

3 A nationally representative survey of the adult population, with the following characteristics: the sampling was conducted in two stages, stratified by region and type of settlement; one thousand respondents were selected by quota sampling; the data were collected by face-to-face structured interviews with respondents in their homes.

4 The opposite view is held by politicians – starting from the same principle of personal importance, they place ‘media attacks’ at the centre of their problems.

5 See Iakimova and Vatsov in this issue.
When we were discussing the methodology of a study on anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria, I proposed a largely intuitive hypothesis (May 2016) which, as is proper, could be confirmed or rejected empirically. The results of the study (June 2017) partly confirmed it. Now, with those results in mind and after further consideration, I will propose another hypothesis that also has an intuitive component – a hypothesis that can be tested in a future empirical study.

1. Hypothesis 1 (2016)

This was a specific hypothesis concerning only one aspect of our study. This part of the hypothesis, which to an extent was founded on previous research, pertained to the correlation of the attitudes of the majority of Bulgarians towards Russia and, respectively, towards the West. The intuitive part was a predictive hypothesis about the dynamic of this correlation in the so-called ‘foreseeable future’. I had started thinking about this in 2014, when I heard empirical data that, at first sight, were paradoxical. Two, completely independent from each other, nationally representative polls (conducted by Alpha Research and Gallup Bulgaria) had produced a similar result: more than two-thirds of the respondents had declared they were pro-Russian – and at the same time, more than two-thirds had declared they were in favour of Bulgaria’s pro-Western orientation. It turned out that there were two majorities with an opposite political orientation in Bulgaria. This was possible since some one-third of the respondents obviously supported politically both Russia and the West, putting into practice the slogan of Bai Ganyo, Aleko Konstantinov’s character: ‘Our fraternal embrace both to the Russians and the Germans!’

The hypothetical intuitive explanation that removed the feeling of paradox was that the data were such because:

- the majority of Bulgarians want to be Russophiles ‘for their soul’s sake’ and, at the same time, to have a pro-Western orientation ‘for their body’s sake’;
- because they think that (regardless of conjuncture and concrete behaviour), the West today is stronger than Russia in terms of 
  o military power  
  o economic power  
  o organization;  
- because the West offers an attractive lifestyle, while Russia doesn’t offer any attractive life;  
- because the West is the leader in culture and sets the global values and fashions;  
- and, ultimately, because even the (relative) negation of the West – the New Left – was born in the West, not in the East, where what we see is mere repetition of authoritarian and totalitarian anti-Western material from the Soviet and even from the tsarist past.  

My forecast was that in the foreseeable future the strength of pro-Russian attitudes in Bulgaria could fluctuate aperiodically, but without growing to the point where it would invert the country’s orientation from pro-Western to pro-Russian.

The main suppositions made here were the following:

1. In evaluating Bulgaria’s foreign policy relations, the majority of Bulgarians demonstrate a conformist rationality.

2. This conformist rationality may appear to be contradictory in itself – but it isn’t. It is only a general basis for two lines of behaviour which are politically opposite. What is remarkable is that one and the same subject follows both lines of behaviour – without viewing them as opposite. At the same time, the subject who follows these opposite lines of behaviour doesn’t see them as contradictory. To such subjects, the lack of contradiction follows from their perception that in both cases they are attaining one and the same thing: personal gain. They are simply attaining it in different areas, therefore the nature of their personal gain is different.

When demonstrating a pro-Russian attitude, our rational conformists expect to win social capital. They presume that in Bulgaria the positive attitude towards Russia is a value generally accepted by the majority. Then we have a typical conformist gain: possible winning of positive points in some specific probable situations – and certain protection against negative sanctions from the majority in all situations.

When demonstrating their pro-Western attitude, the same persons expect material gains, be they direct or indirect. Their presumptions are (as noted above) that the material benefits from allying with the West are significantly greater than the possible material benefits from allying with the East.

When pro-Russian-minded people ask rhetorically, ‘Why should we counterpose Russia and the West?’, what they usually have in mind is not Bulgaria’s official position, but precisely those two types of personal gains from their ambivalent personal position.
The presumption of the rational conformist that the material benefits from the alliance with the West are greater than those from a possible alliance with Russia is, for the time being at least, impossible to verify empirically. But the perception that this is precisely the case is sufficiently widespread to produce a (as a rule) silent majority. By contrast, in Bulgaria we don’t need to check empirically the veracity of the rational conformist’s other main perception: that a positive attitude towards Russia is a value generally accepted by the majority in Bulgaria – hence, its adoption brings social gains while its non-adoption brings social losses. This has been confirmed and is reconfirmed by every relevant study. But unlike the conformist rationality in elections, in this case the conformist behaviour is not due to the fact that the subjects in question have informed themselves about the reality by consulting polls. What they rely on here is not sociology, but national and personal history – their life stories. The presumption here is that the majority has received its pro-Russian attitude by the same pattern by which the conformist remembers how he or she received it personally: from the family and from school, as compulsory knowledge and a personal story from an authoritative relative.

Here we have a pattern that is not at all compulsory logically, but that is real historically and imposed biographically. For the majority of Bulgarian children, the self-identification as ‘a little Bulgarian’ is directly founded on the negation of things Turkish, and prompts praise for things Russian. Hence, the majority of Bulgarians perceive Russophilia as inseparable from – and directly proportional to – Bulgarian patriotism. Insofar as it is patriotic, the majority is also Russophile. Such Russophilia urges this majority towards anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim behaviour. At the maximal extreme of this Russophilia are positions of the type ‘To be good for Bulgaria, it must first be good for Russia!’ At the minimal extreme are positions of the type ‘Respect for Russia because it has liberated us – and zero tolerance for anyone who sets out to enslave us again, be it Russia!’

After Bulgaria’s Liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, the official, state political line of interpreting the past suppressed that part of family cultures which marked the Ottoman period positively in any way whatsoever, and amplified the common negative memory in every possible way. As the most powerful resource of the state, national education was included in this process; supposedly informing children about the world with the aim of ensuring their more accurate orientation, national education indoctrinated them by a historical scheme of national romanticism that was one of the most primitive of those possible at the time. This scheme has remained at the basis of school history education in Bulgaria to this day, it is well-known enough and I don’t need to give examples.

As for literature, to my mind the most eloquent example of maximal extreme Russophilia is Ivan Vazov’s short story ‘Inhospitable Village’ (Negostolyubivo selo), and of minimal Russophilia, Yordan Yovkov’s short story
‘Hermina’. Vazov’s story is very well-known, while Yovkov’s is very little-known, therefore here is its culmination in short:

Two Bulgarians, a peasant and a military officer (who is also the narrator – that is, Yovkov himself), sigh in compassion at seven fresh graves of Russian officers killed by Bulgarians in a battle in Dobrudzha in 1916. Their sighs are sincere and go a step farther than Dimcho Debelyanov’s ‘He’s a foe of ours no more’ – ‘… and what a pity that these dead former enemies are precisely Russians!’ This isn’t an exact quote, I’m summing up the message of the whole short story, but I’ll quote verbatim the words of the peasant at the graves. The peasant tries to explain why the young women from the village brought flowers to the graves every day: ‘After all, we’re humans, we’re Christians, and then they, so to speak, liberated us.’ Flowers on Bulgarian graves – of soldiers against whom those ‘heroes’ (this is a quote – that is what both the peasant and the officer call them) fought are not mentioned.

My last hypothetical conclusion was that we can accept the pro-Russian component of the political consciousness of the majority of Bulgarians as a quasi-constant – and place it in front of the brackets of the formulas and equations of practical political science.

Now let us look at the relevant results of the Alpha Research Agency’s studies of 2017 (six focus groups plus a nationally representative survey).

2. Sociological Data (2017)

The studies confirmed the hypothesis that Bulgarian society is divided into two groups with opposite attitudes – one being in favour of keeping Bulgaria’s present orientation towards the EU (and, to a lesser extent, towards NATO), the other wanting better relations with Russia. Contrary to my expectations, however, this confirmation wasn’t the most interesting result of the studies. Some concrete quantitative proportions, as well as the reasoning of some of the attitudes shared in the focus groups, turned out to be much more interesting. Here we use sociological data to draw, in the final analysis, politological conclusions. Hence, it is good to remind the reader from the very beginning that we are starting from the empirically recorded words in order to deduce from them real present attitudes that can help us in forecasting future behaviours. To this end, we will analyse the shared present attitudes not just by comparing them with each other but also from the perspective of presumable – and not shared in questionnaire responses or free statements – present-day behaviours of the respondents. These presumable behaviours will become the core of the next hypothesis, which is subject to future research.

The most interesting of the new quantitative proportions, as compared with those of 2013, is along the main dividing line: pro-Western versus pro-Russian. In the new data, there is no overlap between the two opposite attitudes. Unlike before, the numbers do not confirm that there are people whose attitudes are at once pro-Western and pro-Russian. Here, for example, are the numbers for
respondents who agreed with the following opinions in the quantitative survey (here and below I have rounded the percentages to whole numbers):

1) Bulgaria should continue towards stronger European integration by joining the Eurozone and Schengen: 45%.

2) Bulgaria should continue to be a member of the EU, but without further integration, and it should strengthen its ties with Russia: 41%.

3) Bulgaria should leave the EU and NATO: 10%.

Here we see a practically exact division of attitudes into halves (with a prevalence of the pro-Russian attitude by five percentage points if we – justifiably – add the numbers for respondents who agreed with opinions 2 and 3). So we no longer have reason to speak of two conflicting majorities, but simply of a split in public attitudes. I underline that, unlike in 2013, the 2017 studies did not find a group with both pro-Western and pro-Russian attitudes. What are the reasons for such ‘normalization’ (which seems likely to be the result of a process of polarization in Bulgarian society) is a question that we won’t discuss now; at this stage, it suffices to note it.

At the same time, the opinions on the question about whether Bulgaria has benefited more or lost more from its membership in Western alliances are divided, but with an unquestionable prevalence of the positive ones. With regard to the EU, the difference is more than double (55% for ‘benefited more from membership’ versus 21% for ‘lost more’). With regard to NATO, the difference is considerably smaller, but nonetheless with a prevalence of the positive attitude by one-third: 37% for ‘benefited more’ versus 24% for ‘lost more’.

The survey has also provided data about the motives for these attitudes. Above all, this is the consideration that ‘we have to be with someone’. The response to the option of whether Bulgaria could cope on its own is no, by a majority of almost 3:1. Here are the numbers for the respondents who agreed with the following alternative opinions:

1) Bulgaria should be able to protect its national security on its own: 26%.

2) Bulgaria should have reliable foreign policy allies because in the contemporary world it cannot possibly guarantee its security on its own: 71%.

Since ‘we have to be with someone’, how are we to choose whom to be with? Here there are two lines of reasoning, as suggested by the participants in the focus groups. One is the line of rational free choice – for civilizational, economic and/or military reasons; it is precisely by such reasons that some of the participants in the focus groups motivated their pro-Western, and others their pro-Russian, attitudes. The existence of a rationality common to both groups has led, for example, to the following dialogue which begins with general principles and ends with the benefits and how to get them:

Focus group 30-45 year-olds, Plovdiv:

‘I personally think that our place is in the EU because we are in Europe, because it’s civilized there; in many respects, people [in the EU] have good welfare systems which we can take from them – something which isn’t being
done, nobody knows why. People [in the EU] have built states that are infinitely well-ordered, while we here [in Bulgaria] are reinventing the wheel. But still, I think that we must stick to the EU because that’s where our place is.’ The participants agreed with this opinion – ‘It’s going right’ (i.e. Bulgaria as part of the EU). Another participant thinks that this is a redundant question because the country’s course has been set and hasn’t been changed for years.

‘I [a third participant] think that there should be a balance’ – depending on what our priorities and the interests of our state and people are. He mentioned some cultural elements that are common to the Bulgarian and the Russian people. Fourth participant: ‘The fact that we’re oriented towards the EU and the West doesn’t mean that we should be in confrontation with the Union [the participant has in mind the Soviet Union, which he is confusing with the Russian Federation] or with China. There simply shouldn’t be any confrontation – after all, some people like Russia and that’s it.’ (This participant obviously views ‘the Union’ and ‘Russia’ as synonymous, which is somewhat surprising considering that he is relatively young in age.) Another participant mentioned that this is a matter of flexibility on the part of politicians – that is, safeguarding national interests. This is something which Hungary has achieved – open markets, flexibility. Our politicians don’t have flexibility, they can’t show the West that our contacts with Russia aren’t a threat to our orientation, we’re simply looking for our benefit: ‘They [Bulgarian politicians] simply aren’t doing it elegantly’; ‘They aren’t presenting the benefits from the East in the right way.’

As for the military rationality, here we have direct agreement/disagreement with two statements (the respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they considered them to be true or not – I’ve united the positive responses, ‘completely true’ and ‘rather true’, as well as the negative ‘not true at all’ and ‘rather not true’):

1) NATO is the best guarantee for Bulgaria’s security:
   True: 44%
   Not true: 37%

2) Russia is becoming ever stronger and Bulgaria should orient itself towards it:
   True: 51%
   Not true: 30%

The rational reasons for supporting Russia – and, respectively, for not supporting the West (more specifically, NATO) – include, along with the economic and military reasons, one that is rather unusual in that it is purely politological. I will not speculate about why this reason has been accepted and how it is understood; again I will only note it so that we will bear it in mind in our further reflections. This is the politological construct that a ‘unipolar world’ is something bad. I quote from the Alpha Research analysis (see Dimitrova in this issue):
Eighty-two percent of the Bulgarians are of the opinion that it will be better for the world if there is no single state or organization that is the political leader. Half of them [i.e. of these 82%, namely] (39.6%) however, think that there is a global hegemon and identify it as the US. This causes both the negative reactions towards the US as a country that imposes its position on the other countries and the more general suspicion that the relations between countries and citizens are based not on values and principles, but on the diktat of force. Against this background, Russia is seen as the country that is trying to ‘restore the balance’. As such, it arouses the sympathies of considerably wider strata … .

I will note that the opinions shared here contradict – at least, at first sight – the first hypothesis in which I used the metaphors that we are for the West ‘for our body’s sake’ (according to the economic rationality – but here we have grounds to consider the military one, too) and for Russia ‘for our soul’s sake’ (based on an unclear, for the time being – if it is such at all – rationality). Of course, I could belittle this contradiction by claiming that it is ‘merely’ a metaphor in the hypothesis, which can be overlooked as non-binding. But I will choose to take this metaphor seriously and define the contradiction as heuristic – with a potential of leading me to a new hypothesis. Therefore, we will discuss it in more detail below.

The second line of reasoning is that we didn’t and don’t have a choice; at best, this is a dilemmatic choice made unfreely, under pressure, with the awareness that we are choosing between two bad alternatives. To illustrate, here are several opinions:

*Focus group 30-45 year-olds, Sofia:*

‘Nothing depends on us.’ ‘On the whole, we don’t have any choice.’ This is what they determined for us, this is how it happened, ‘but it’s the lesser evil.’ ‘We should stay at this level and, most importantly, avoid internal and external unrest.’

‘As someone said at the beginning, “geopolitical” [referring to what Bulgaria’s advantage is]. The question is whether it will be the ones or the others… who’ll gobble us up.’ Moderator: ‘Who are the ones and the others?’ ‘The ones are the European Union, the others Russia.’

In an older and provincial focus group, these attitudes are even stronger:

*Focus group over-45 year-olds, Veliko Tarnovo:*

Participant: ‘In principle, nothing depends on us, once the big ones come to terms as to who’ll take us…’

Another participant: ‘Despite everything, there ought to be contacts both with the ones and the others.’ This participant thinks that we are dependent on different countries in different ways and shouldn’t break off contacts with them. ‘Today we’re going from one extreme to another. After all, you’re breaking off
some contact.’
Third participant: ‘Nothing depends on us.’ The participants think that nothing depends on ordinary people and that we’ve always been ‘pawns’.

Is there a reasonable way in which those diverse attitudes can be arranged in a general explanatory scheme? This should be answered by the second hypothesis.

3. Hypothesis 2 (2017)
I mentioned that what turned out to be the most interesting in the empirical studies wasn’t the direct test of the hypothesis (to be followed by an analysis both of its partial confirmation and its partial non-confirmation), but some quantitative proportions; it is precisely they that were analysed above. As a result, I changed my research focus. Up to this point, it was on a comparison of the groups with a pro-Western and a pro-Russian orientation. After making sense of the results of the studies, I decided to focus exclusively on studying the behaviour of the pro-Russian group. In order to understand its behaviour, however, I first had to understand its motivation. This meant entering into the field of psychology. Indeed, this could be justified on principle from the perspective of the fundamental interdisciplinary nature of political science. At the same time, we shouldn’t forget the constant dangers along this way: dilettantism and methodological eclecticism. My goal in using elements of psychology – and, as it will become clear – of psychiatry – is to do it as a professional practical politologist.

Before we formulate the new hypothesis that made it possible to order the material discussed above, we should also add a completely novel empirical moment. This is the reaction of the respondents to a concrete recent event (May 2017) which, having occurred later, cannot be linked to the first hypothesis of 2016. I quote the quantitative survey:

*Vladimir Putin’s statement [made during a visit in Macedonia] that the Slavonic alphabet had come to Russia from the Macedonian lands was recently much-commented upon. Which of the following comments is the closest to yours?*

1) This is an arrogant statement typical of a great power: 26%
2) This is simply a mistake, it shouldn’t be paid much attention: 21%
3) This is a manipulation on the part of the Macedonian authorities: 11%
4) This is historically true, even though we might not like it: 6%
5) This represents an alarming sign that Russia doesn’t care about Bulgaria: 10%
6) Can’t say: 25%

We see that the respondents ‘excusing’ Putin/Russia (responses 2, 3, 4, and 5) are *almost double* as many as those ‘accusing’ Putin/Russia: 47%:26%. Moreover, we should bear in mind that there is a strong positive correlation, repeatedly empirically confirmed, between the profile of Bulgarians with pro-
Russian attitudes (older people, less-educated, ‘for’ the Bulgarian Socialist Party, BSP) and traditional Bulgarian nationalism. In this case even such a traditional mainstay of the ‘Bulgarian’ as the Slavonic alphabet gives way to the ‘pro-Russian’ attitude.

The subject in question did not come up in the focus groups, even though they were conducted in the interval of just one to two weeks after the above-mentioned event (nor was this subject introduced by the moderators). It is remarkable that for one of the participants, the subject of Macedonia and Bulgarian history exists and is important because Macedonia, in his words, is a threat ‘as appropriation of [Bulgarian] history’, but in his statement he did not make a connection with Putin/Russia. So I will supplement the quantitative data with two relevant opinions that are not part of the survey.

When Putin decided to celebrate 24 May, the Day of the Slavonic Script, in this memorable way in 2017, my best student of thirty years ago, a talented historian and now a teacher at an elite high school in Sofia, a moral person and personal friend – and a supporter of the BSP – was on a trip abroad. When I asked her what she thought about Putin’s statement, she told me that she hadn’t heard/read his exact words – but she was sure that whatever he may have said, it ‘had nothing to do with history’ – it was ‘only politics’. A day before that, the same thesis was advanced in the Bulgarian media, in almost the same words, as an official position of the BSP (something which my friend hadn’t heard either).

My first conclusion is that this ‘talking point’ of the BSP perfectly coincides with the prejudices of its supporters, which obviously determine their behaviour more strongly than their knowledge and intelligence. That is because this way of thinking goes basically as follows: Russia may do its ‘big politics’ in any way it deems fit – by means of violence (before – in Crimea), by means of falsification (now – in Macedonia) – but this doesn’t concern us even when it does concern us!

A similar devotion to ‘big politics’ solely on the part of big Russia is seen by the Russian Andrei Zubov in the relations between the Russian and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. He also offers a line of explanation for why that is so. Here is an excerpt from an interview he gave recently to a Bulgarian media outlet:

[Q.:] At the top, the Russian hierarchy follows an ecumenical policy (the meeting with Pope Francis, the intense activity of Metropolitan Ilarion of Volokolamsk) but, at the same time, the Russian Church overtly or covertly supports the ‘zealot’ circles in every local Church (for example, in Bulgaria). How would you explain this apparently inconsistent policy?

Zubov: This is a continuation of the Soviet policy and, for that matter, of any imperial policy. Vassals must only obey the suzerain (i.e. they must be zealots), while the suzerain may engage in dialogue with the other masters who are his equals. (Zubov, 2017, p.10)
The two schemes – that of the Bulgarian historian and the BSP, and that of the Russian Orthodox Church – are obviously isomorphic, but they are seen from the opposite ends of the power relationship. The Bulgarian historian, who ignores her professional knowledge, declares (small) Bulgaria’s withdrawal from big politics which is proclaimed to be Russia’s domain. The big Russian Church, on its part, expects – and demands – that the (small) Bulgarian Church give up its sovereignty in big politics, seen as Russia’s domain.

The term domain is used here consciously as an allusion to the mediaeval language employed in this particular case by Andrei Zubov, a language that adequately describes a suzerain-vassal relationship which, to this Russian, is archaic and unacceptable today. At the same time, however, he speaks of Soviet policy as an imperial policy. Empire presupposes metropolis-colonies relations – in this particular case, the Soviet Union in the role of the metropolis and Bulgaria in the role of a colony. In a lapidary answer in an interview, the historian Zubov can take the liberty of describing a relationship as being at once feudal and imperial, regardless of the fact that, from the perspective of political science, here we have two fundamentally different ways of government. In my view, though, this mix of metaphorical explanations (for Zubov’s words here are an explanatory-illustrative metaphor) suggests the truth about the attitudes of the majority of present-day Bulgarians and of present-day Russians towards each other. This is also the essence of my new intuitive hypothesis:

Today the majority of Bulgarians think of Russia in the way vassals think of their suzerain – and would like their country to behave accordingly as a vassal of Russia. At the same time, Russia’s rulers – and the majority in Bulgaria that supports them, insofar as it understands Russian affairs – think of Bulgaria not in the way a suzerain thinks of his vassals, but imperially – as of a colony; and expect Bulgaria to behave accordingly. This means a dual mismatched complex: an imperial complex on the part of the Russians and a vassal complex on the part of the Bulgarians.

3.1. Is the Term ‘Complex’ Appropriate?

Some explanations are in order here, in the first place – why I’m using the term ‘complex’. Do I actually think that the majorities in Bulgaria and Russia are mentally ill? This would be very much like the exclamation of an eminent Russian liberal of the 1990s who, upon learning in an election night studio that the majority had voted for people from the ‘old regime’, shouted, ‘Russia, you’ve gone mad!’ – which sounded not like an insult but like a cry of an insulted child…

To begin with, the term ‘complex’ is not used here specifically, as in Freud or in Jung. I’m using it in a sense closer to that of Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud’s Parisian teacher in psychiatry from whom Freud borrowed the concept, devel-
oped and called it *complex*, using it as the basis of his psychoanalysis. Without going into the methodological problems of interdisciplinary thinking, I simply presume that since it is less developed, Charcot’s concept is wider and allows metaphorization in other fields with less loss of correctness. It can be schematized as follows:

1. An *idea* (or ideas), interwoven and mutually reinforcing;
2. induced accidentally or by intentional *hypnosis*;
3. which becomes lodged in the human mind like a *parasite* in a host;
4. exists *without any connection* to all the other ideas;
5. and can cause physical *paralysis* just like any physiological disorder.\(^{18}\)

From this point on, I have to check to what extent the material available to me about the Bulgarians and the Russians can fit into the scheme of this hypothesis – in order to justify it as a hypothesis. If the hypothesis proves to be justified, then this process must have given the main guidelines for its operationalization in a possible future empirical study that would confirm or reject it.

### 3.2. Inadequacy and Adequacy of Behaviour: A Politological Description of Reality

Thinking about the attitudes of the present-day Bulgarians and Russians towards each other, we can summarize the above analytical description, for example, as follows: an unshakeable inadequate notion of reality that can lead to inadequate behaviour or even block real capacities for action. Now let us see whether the attitudes of the Bulgarians and Russians towards each other can be reasonably described in this way.

To justify the claim that a particular attitude is inadequate, we must describe what is in our view the adequate attitude; to this end, we first have to describe the reality as we perceive it. In our case, the reality is complex in the literal sense, because it is made up of components from different fields. In the field of international law, the relations of the Republic of Bulgaria and the Russian Federation are politically symmetric: both are mutually independent states which have no binding ties to each other: neither imperial nor feudal. On the other hand, in a number of fields vis-à-vis which international law can be viewed as ‘theory’ related to ‘practice’, the co-relations are strongly asymmetric in favour of Russia. For example: size of territory and population, economic and military power, production of arts (quantitative and qualitative).

### 3.3. Opposite Lines of Behaviour of the Bulgarians

In such a situation, for the Bulgarians there are two intuitively clear and polar-opposite lines of behaviour. One is to make such choices, followed by corresponding actions, that will make the above-noted asymmetric practical correlations as symmetric as possible and bring the ‘practices’ of life closer to the ‘theorems’ of law. In this way, the Bulgarians – all Bulgarians – will cut their losses from the said asymmetries in favour of Russia. The other line
of behaviour is to take these asymmetries for granted and use them for securing gains. Here there is a sub-variant for the Bulgarians: in order to increase these gains, they can work also for the increase of these initial asymmetries in favour of Russia. In this line of reasoning, the phrase ‘against Bulgaria’ is usually added to the above. This is understandable, insofar as if the decrease of the asymmetries is of benefit to all Bulgarians, that is, ‘to Bulgaria’, their increase (as well as keeping them from decreasing) will be of benefit only to some Bulgarians – and, hence, to the detriment of all the rest. But let’s think a step further. An increase of the asymmetries will be to the detriment of all Bulgarians without exception – including of those who get direct gains from it. That is why the addition that asymmetries work for Russia and against Bulgaria is reasonable. It is simply that the gains secured by those Bulgarians who work for increasing the asymmetries are different in character from the losses which they, at the same time, would sustain. In principle, these gains are actual (and usually concrete – money, objects, power), while the losses are – or are at least thought to be – potential. ‘After us, the deluge!’ (It is no accident that the pro-Russian attitude normally correlates positively with an anti-ecological attitude – or with ecological indifference.)

3.4. Vassal Complex and Imperial Complex: A Mismatch of Mutual Expectations

Since the pro-asymmetry group is partial (i.e. not the whole, from which notion the word ‘party’ derives), it needs a legitimating ideology in order to demand a tolerant attitude from the others. The vassal complex is precisely this ideology.

Vassals take the inequality between themselves and the suzerain for granted – and conclude a (written or unwritten, but real) contract with the suzerain. The object of the contract is simple: exchange of obedience for protection. The position of the present-day Bulgarian with a vassal complex is: ‘Yes, I’m working for the Russian interests and am getting personal gain from this. I know that this strengthens the asymmetry and strengthens Russia. But that’s good for all Bulgarians, it’s good for Bulgaria. Because a stronger Russia will protect Bulgaria better.’

Once again, let me explain why I call this attitude a complex, not rationally chosen behaviour, i.e. behaviour which, whether I like or not, I must accept as a consequence of free choice. I call it a complex because if it is a free choice, then it is obviously unrealistic. For here we don’t have a contract. Neither a written nor an unwritten one. Even if vassal-minded present-day Bulgarians were to present such a contract to Russia for signature, present-day Russia wouldn’t sign it. Because, as noted above, Russia doesn’t have a suzerain mindset but an imperial one. It expects Bulgaria to behave not as a vassal but as a colony. It is true that both are asymmetric relations, but the main difference between them is that there is no contract between a metropolis and a colony. Colonies are
conquered and ruled by force: what is taken from and given to them depends exclusively on the will of the colonialist. The pro-vassal Bulgarian tells Big Brother:20 ‘I’ll obey you in everything, but you’ll always protect me, won’t you?’ To which pro-imperial Russia’s response is: ‘Fine, obey now – and we’ll see about the rest later…’ Not to mention that our Russia-obeying Bulgarian obviously doesn’t realize that by saying ‘I’ll obey you in everything’, indeed everything can be demanded from him or her – and taken away by force if he or she refuses to give it. By way of comparison, here is the first example that comes to mind from mediaeval Western Europe, an example that isn’t entirely correspondent but that is good as an illustration: the infamous ‘right of the first night’, *jus primae noctis*, according to which the seigneur had the right to copulate with any bride from his vassal villages before she did it with the man whom she had only just married ceremonially in church.21 But on the first night only, not on the second. Because – opprobrious as it may look to us today – this was a *right*. In an analogous situation, the colonizer may say: ‘For as many nights as I want to.’ And do it.22

**3.5. Dynamic of Complexes and Realities**

Thinking of the relations between Bulgarians and Russians in terms of complexes naturally leads us to the history of the dynamic of those complexes – for example, from the appearance of the presumably first Bulgarian complex, ‘Grandpa Ivan’,23 onwards. This, of course, is impossible to test empirically and cannot be part of my hypothesis. It requires historical investigation. So what follows is only meant to provide some context for the hypothesis. All the more so, since there is no consensus among experts either about when this first complex appeared or about how its content has evolved.

For example, Yurdan Trifonov, who opened the debate on the subject in Bulgaria in 1907, thinks that its beginning should be sought in the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries – in the names of Ivan III and Ivan IV. It was then, Trifonov said in a public talk,24 that:

both among the Russians and among the other Orthodox Christian peoples, the *fiction gained ground*25 that the Russian autocrat was a successor to the Byzantine emperors as he was the husband of the only ruling princess of the family of the Byzantine emperors, that he was the heir to Tsar Constantine’s throne; or, in the words of Chorbadji Micho [from Ivan Vazov’s novel *Under the Yoke*], that he was a ‘mirasçtı’ [direct heir] to the new Turkish kingdom. A visible sign of this fiction was the adoption of the Byzantine coat of arms, the double-headed eagle, as the coat of arms of the Muscovite state. Ivan III’s successes, which came soon after his marriage to Sophia Palaiologina, gradually consolidated the conviction among the Orthodox Christians that this state was destined to destroy the power of the crescent and to raise the Orthodox Christian cross above the converted-into-a-mosque Hagia Sophia. (Trifonov, 2006-2014; emphasis added)
During the reign of Ivan IV (the Terrible), grandson of Ivan III and the above-mentioned Zoe Sophia Palaiologina, this fiction began to turn into reality. As Trifonov went on to say (ibid.):

> What was important to the Orthodox Christians in Turkey, however, was that his [Ivan the Terrible’s] reign, especially during its first half, became famous for great military deeds and, what’s more, against Mohammedans. Even before he did these deeds, Ivan the Terrible crowned himself tsar (in 1547). But the tsar of Russia was seen by the then Orthodox Christians in Turkey as tsar of the whole Orthodox Christendom. [emphasis added] …

In 1548 the whole Orthodox Christian world learned and formally confessed that it now had its own tsar. In that year Patriarch Joasaph of Constantinople, at the request of Ivan the Terrible, confirmed his title of Tsar, and ordered also that his name be mentioned in all churches where prelates served, in the same way as the name of the Byzantine emperor was mentioned in the past, and that it be recorded in the sabornik or the synodikon.

Our contemporary, Nikolay Aretov (2012), however is sceptical about the spontaneous popular character of the images of Russia in Bulgaria:

> The images of Russia occupy an important place in Bulgarian national mythology. They are presented as ancient, widespread and they were dominant in the twentieth century, they are found in numerous texts, their forging and imposition was undertaken by various ideological and propaganda structures and institutions. This state of affairs is comparatively new. Russia is practically absent or has a peripheral place on the mental map of the world that is to be found in Bulgarian literature of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Research has shown that the familiar images of Russia actually emerged comparatively late in time and were imposed by the state institutions (in the first place, the education system) and by propaganda. Despite their great diversity, the main variants can be reduced to two figures and the narratives about them: Grandpa Ivan and Rayna, Bulgarian Princess. The first one has two variants: the Russian tsar (potential) liberator and the Russian general.

Further on, Aretov (ibid.) focuses on the persistence of pro-Russian attitudes, which seem not to be influenced by Russia’s anti-Bulgarian actions (something that is characteristic of complexes, as noted above):

> Russia categorically took the side of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople [during the struggle for an independent Bulgarian Church in the nineteenth century]. The teleological arguments put forward by K. Leontiev and others proved to be in sync with the imperial policy and this Russian position led to radical opposition of the Bulgarian ecclesiastical-national movement. … Its concrete realization included forcible removal
of the leaders of the Bulgarian ecclesiastical-national movement, Neofit Bozveli and Ilarion Makariopolski, who were sent in exile as a result of the intervention of the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, G. Titov, who was a supporter of the Patriarchate and an enemy of the aspirations of the Bulgarians for a national hierarchy. … Another important political action was directed against the Uniates and ended with the [abduction and] internment of Joseph Sokolsky, the head of the [Bulgarian] Uniate Church, in Russia; P. R. Slaveykov took part in this action, which was actively assisted by the Russian diplomats (Count Nikolay P. Ignatiev).

Such actions obviously gave rise to negative, or at least critical, attitudes among part of the Bulgarians, but it seems that a popular and clear negative image of Russia is not to be found. Later, after the establishment of the Bulgarian state [in 1878] … two things are noteworthy. First, the negative sentiments and later Russophobic political prejudices (for example, of Zahariy Stoyanov and Stefan Stambolov), on the one hand, gave rise to disproportionately few literary texts. On the other hand, practically always, regardless of which party was in power, the literary canon was inclined to reject such texts and they remained marginal.

Thus, the ‘Grandpa Ivan’ fiction as well as the images of Russia in general, have characteristics that justify thinking of them as a complex in the sense meant in this paper. The inadequate notion of reality (‘Grandpa Ivan will liberate us’) led to inadequate (in)action. That is why when Grandpa Ivan conquered Bulgaria, he didn’t ‘liberate’ us – he was the empire that colonized us, as it had done in the Caucasus with regard both to the Muslim principalities and the Christian Georgia and Armenia. For example, in the period between the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish War and the 1885 Serbo-Bulgarian War, we cannot speak of a Russian colonial complex – because there was a colonial reality and the Russian attitude towards the Bulgarians as colonized people was adequate. This also applies to the situation in the 1944-1989 period, intuitively summarized accurately by the Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov (2016, p.52) in the 1970s:

Without doubt, the end of the Second World War brought the biggest change in Bulgaria’s entire modern history. … On the map there is a state called Bulgaria, with its own language, its own national anthem, its own diplomatic representatives abroad, i.e. the form is present. But this state doesn’t have an independent domestic and foreign policy [e.g. the subordination of State Security, the Bulgarian communist-era secret police, to the KGB; or the ostracization of Yugoslavia, 1948], an independent economy [the reason for the execution of Traicho Kostov], an independent army [the invasion of Czechoslovakia, 1968], an independent press [the joke about Rabotnishesko delo being a translation of Pravda] and literature [the Union of Bulgarian Writers voted against the ‘traitor’ Solzhenitsyn], i.e. the content is absent. One … may say that today the life of the individual Bulgarian citizen depends on the USSR more than it depended on the Ottoman Empire one hundred years ago.
After this contextual excursus, we will return to the main subject, the Bulgarian vassal complex today, in order to check whether there are behavioural realities that correspond to its basic characteristics.

3.6. Manifestations of the Vassal Complex in Individual Behaviour

Let us go back to the example of the Bulgarian teacher in history who declared a statement by Russia’s boss concerning Bulgarian history to be words that had nothing to do with history, but which belonged to (big) politics which, in its turn, belonged to Russia. In this line of reasoning, it ‘naturally’ follows that Russia should be permitted to do even that which is impermissible for anyone else to do. More specifically, that within the framework of ‘big politics’, Russia may place Bulgaria wherever it wants to and label Bulgaria however it wants to. Based on such labellings and allocations, Russia can, if it so decides, motivate as well as justify real actions on its part, both past and future, which disregard Bulgaria – for instance, actions that are detrimental to our political independence or territorial integrity. The examples from history are legion and, being a good historian, our teacher knows them all. But, as Aretov notes, the existence of knowledge that contradicts the positive image Bulgarians have of Russia doesn’t turn this image from a positive into a negative one. And, in my view, it doesn’t even add negative features to the positive ones, which would have made Russia’s image more contradictory – and hence, more realistic. This is consistent with Charcot’s thesis that, once it becomes lodged in the mind, the parasitic knot of ideas remains isolated and exists without any connection to all the other ideas. It is important to note that here we are not talking about conscious juxtaposition of ideas which express values and are ordered in a common hierarchy – therefore allowing one to say, for example, ‘Being an adherent of a country is valuable, feeling part of a larger group of people is valuable – and, to me, Russia ranks higher than Bulgaria in those hierarchies – that’s why I support Russia.’ We may suppose that very few of Russia’s supporters in Bulgaria today would agree with such a position. They have simply accepted it – irrationally – and it functions and drives them in practice as something subconscious, inaccessible to their own critical consciousness – as a complex. This complex, on the one hand, has been induced accidentally in the individual, that is, the individual hasn’t made any conscious effort to develop such a complex. In Bulgaria, those interwoven and mutually reinforcing ideas about Russia are a by-product of the process of socialization (the family) and education (state schools). On the other hand, however, hypnosis is also at play here – for present-day pro-Russian propaganda functions hypnotically. The end result may be paralysis – inadequacy of one’s behaviour to the point of blocking any opposition to Russia, even in cases where such opposition is the only adequate behaviour.

I must stress here that I am talking about a possibility, not about a reality. What’s more, about a possibility with low politological probability. This is also
indicated by the data from the focus groups (a direct relevant question wasn’t asked in the quantitative survey): only once did someone say, and jokingly at that, ‘let’s hope [Bulgaria] won’t turn into Southern Crimea’. (Still, this thought exists considering that it was shared, albeit in this belittling manner.) My intuition is that in the event of direct forceful confrontation with Russia, the shock will cure the majority of pro-Russian Bulgarians of their vassal complex and they will take adequate actions in defence of Bulgaria. I hope this intuition of mine will never get to be tested empirically in our historical future. My reasons are that, as noted above, the complex blocking active actions is so strong that it will probably block active pro-Russian actions, too; and then conformism will push such an individual towards a pro-Bulgarian behaviour. But we must bear in mind that the complex will most probably block pro-Bulgarian behaviour, too. Former sufferers of complexes find it difficult to act, even when they have to undertake some action that is independent from their complex – let alone against it. The initial state of such actors is in the range from demotivated to blocked. Obviously, in such states adequate positions are difficult to elaborate, and the actions following from them are undertaken slowly. So, they may prove to be ineffective.

But until such an event takes place, such people (who are, as we’ve seen from the empirical data, practically half of all Bulgarians) will keep talking. They will hear and keep talking about how great Russia is, therefore… No, there’s no therefore. From such talk practically nothing follows – in terms of direct behaviour. As noted by a focus-group participant (from Veliko Tarnovo, over 45 years old), he doesn’t know of any Bulgarian having emigrated to the East – including any ‘of those who talk such [nonsense]’. But although no action follows from such talk, it creates a truly complex-ridden atmosphere that lulls reason to sleep and may give birth to monsters. The Nazi and the communist experience have shown that an unclean atmosphere cannot be cleansed by ‘cleansing’ the environment from some people, on an ethnic or class basis. The only viable option is to counter the clouding words that secrete such an atmosphere by cleansing ones. Like the famous words of General Ivan Kolev to his cavalry division before leading it into battle against Russian cavalry in the Dobrudzha plain in 1916:

Cavalrymen, God is my witness that I’m grateful to Russia for liberating us. But what are the Cossacks now doing in our Dobrudzha? We’ll beat them and chase them away like any enemy that obstructs Bulgaria’s unification!

The accuracy of this quote is uncertain, so is its attribution, and, moreover, we might not agree with all the words. But its cleansing power can be felt. I hope!

All other hypothetical propositions set forth here are testable empirically.
NOTES

1 See Vatsov et al. (2017).

2 Both Alpha Research and Gallup Bulgaria are leading Bulgarian pollsters of good repute, based on accurate enough electoral forecasts and exit polls in the last twenty years. It should be noted that Gallup Bulgaria is closely connected to the ex-communist Bulgarian Socialist Party (pro-Russian and pro-nostalgic), while Alpha Research is loosely associated with the liberal Right. Thus, when both produce similar data, political bias should be ruled out.

3 Aleko Konstantinov is one of the most beloved and popular today Bulgarian writers of the nineteenth century. He makes light fun of the slapdash modernization of Bulgaria, following his ‘New Bulgarian’ character, Bai Ganyo, through travels in the West. He is also one of the most insightful analysts of the same character at home, where Bai Ganyo abuses democracy and free speech for his personal gain. Pertinent parallels between this nineteenth-century literary character and contemporary Bulgarian politicians and businessmen are made in the Bulgarian media practically every day. For an English translation of Konstantinov’s book, see Konstantinov, A. (2010) Bai Ganyo: Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian. Edited by Victor A. Friedman. Translated by Victor A. Friedman, Christina E. Kramer, Grace E. Fielder, and Catherine Rudin. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

4 For example, the three mainstays of the Russian Empire, formulated by Nicholas I’s Minister of National Education Sergei Uvarov in his doctrine of ‘official nationhood’: Orthodoxy, Monarchy, Nationality. N.B.: The concept of nation in Russian may be designated by the word natsiya, which is the foreign word borrowed from the Latin natio, as in English. However, it is used much less frequently than the word narod, which is the Russian calque for natio. However, the basic meaning of narod is not the nation, but the people, and accordingly, in English narod is usually translated as people. If one follows this style of translation, we’ll have Uvarov as Minister of People’s Education, and his three mainstays would be Orthodoxy, Monarchy, and Popularity (for in both cases narod is used, not natsiya). Russian nationalism is populism!

5 Such a conformist rationality is probably demonstrated not only in evaluating foreign policy relations – but that issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

6 This type of Bulgarian behaviour was established and discussed by Kiuranov and Alexandrieva (2013a; 2013b). The authors have also established other cases of such behaviour (for example, in 2005 – personal archive).

7 Up to this point I wrote in the I-form; here I’m using the we-form. Bai Ganyo constantly switches between the informal, singular you-form and the formal, polite, plural you-form – in his case, this is a form of intuitive manipulation. My motive is differentiation aimed at specifying the author’s position. Of course, the author is equally responsible for the whole text. By using the I-form, I simply want to underscore my personal commitment at some points. The we-form (which has nothing to do with the allegedly objectivating academic ‘We, the author,’ form of the nineteenth century) is a nod to the reader in the hope that he or she has joined – or will join – the author in thinking together about the matters at issue.

8 What I have in mind, of course, is the kind of behaviour that has become quite normal for many voters: they follow the news about forecasts based on pre-electoral polls, as well as media that publish exit poll data. (It is illegal to publish exit poll data during electoral hours, but creative media outlets find ways to circumvent the law – for example, by broadcasting winner lists for non-existent song competitions.)

9 A great poet’s intuition has prompted Ivan Vazov (1850-1921) to write ‘I Am a Little Bulgarian’ (Az sam balgarche), his programmatic poem addressed to children, using exclusively positive rhetoric. Unfortunately, in popular consciousness Vazov’s ‘free little Bulgarian’ has become ‘freed little Bulgarian’, i.e. freed from the Turks thanks to the Russians. Vazov himself uses as a rule that chain of thoughts in his other writings, among which ‘I Am a Little Bulgarian’ is an exception. The connection between Turkophobia and Russophilia has been discussed by, among others, Tzvetkov (2010) and Petsinis (2016).

10 See, e.g., Yovkov (1956, p.41).

11 ‘Inhospitable Village’ is a fictional story about a Russian, who, in the late nineteenth century, is mistaken for a German by some villagers. He tries in his broken Bulgarian to ask for a drink of water and a bite, but the locals won’t give him anything, pretending they don’t understand him. Exasperated, he curses at them in colloquial Russian. Then they smile beatifically and start preparing a feast for him: the Russian curse makes them understand that he is Russian. Russians they love. (Or is it that they love Russians that curse them?)

12 The great romantic (and also symbolist) poet Dimcho Debelyanov (1887-1916) was 29 when he was killed
in action as a volunteer in the First World War. The reference is to his poem ‘A Dead Soldier’ (Edin ubit), written at the front, in which the point is that death turns an enemy back into a human being.

This ‘so to speak’, dropped by the peasant, has extremely rich anthropological and political implications – but they are beyond the scope of this paper and should be studied by literary theorists.

The focus groups were conducted in May – June 2017; the representative survey was conducted in June 2017 (see Dimitrova in this issue).

Hence, I decided not to comment on the attitude towards the EU (because I would no longer deal with the pro-EU group, therefore speaking about the EU solely on the basis of the pro-Russian group would have been unjustifiable). For similar reasons, I won’t discuss the attitude towards the US. The question remains open as to whether there are Bulgarians with complexes towards the EU and the US (Intuitively: there are!), and if there are, what are they, more exactly.

The ‘psychological’ appears – and not by accident – also in the Alpha Research Report (Anti-Democratic Discourses and Propaganda Messages in the Bulgarian Media, 10 July 2017; in Bulgarian): ‘The reactions to the main propaganda clichés, which were identified in the first part of the project and tested in this study, also show that it is not the purely political messages that have the greatest force and impact, but those that are aimed at achieving a psychological effect and at exercising a sort of psychological pressure – “that the Bulgarians aren’t choosing their own path by themselves but are compelled by external forces to follow models that are disadvantageous for them.” All three statements that received over 70% support … reproduce the psychological opposition between “the strong” and “the weak”. It is extremely effective, insofar as it transcends the East/West political dividing line …’

Andrei Zubov, born in Moscow in 1952, specialized in history and history of religion. Because of his religious convictions, his works were banned from publication in the Soviet Union (1985). Because of his criticism of Putin’s policy (Crimea), he was fired from his position as professor at the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs (2014).

‘We know that, in individuals in a state of deep hypnosis – and this is a fact that is commonly known today – it is possible to bring forth by suggestion or intimation, an idea, or a coherent group of associated ideas, which become lodged in the mind in the manner of a parasite, remaining isolated from all the rest and interpreted outwardly by corresponding motor phenomena. If such is the case one can conceive that an inculcated idea of paralysis, being of this type, results in an actual paralysis’ (Charcot, 1890, pp.335-336).

Of course, no one in Bulgaria articulates such a position in public. One of the main reasons is that the simpler explanation for such behaviour (an explanation that is true in many cases) is that it isn’t about any complexes whatsoever, it’s about cynically selling oneself. But this is a banal case that is impossible to prove by sociological means in principle and unproven by police means in practice.

A reference to the USSR, very popular in communist Bulgaria. The coincidence with Orwell’s Big Brother is tell-tale, but still just a coincidence!

The Church ‘didn’t see’ any contradiction and humiliation for itself in this, regardless of all its theocratic appetites at the time – because it looked away. Why did it do so? The reason is the same as that why the above-mentioned Bai Ganyo advises an orderly to look away from the soiled underpants of ‘his officer’s’ kid which he was made to wash on the pretext that this was part of his duty to Bulgaria: ‘Politics demands it!’

From this it becomes clearer why, for example, Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria’s communist dictator from 1962 to 1989, not only behaved in a servile manner but also blatantly demonstrated his servility to the Soviet bigwigs: he perfectly understood the colonial reality, but constantly deceived himself that he was a vassal and tried to somehow deceive them, too, that they were his suzerains, not colonizers… This was one of his ‘peasant tricks’.

‘Grandpa Ivan’ (Dyado Ivan) stands for Russia in Bulgarian popular culture. It was frequently used throughout the nineteenth century; active use has dwindled since, but if used in context it would be universally understood as ‘Russia’ even today.

Delivered at the Slavyanska Beseda Chitalishte (community cultural centre) in Sofia on 11 March 1907.

I will note that the most active propagators of this fiction were the Greeks – on the one hand, because Ivan III’s wife was a descendant of the Byzantine imperial family, and on the other because they saw the rise of Muscovite Rus’ as the beginning of the fulfillment of the psychological-defensive prophecies from the time of the fall of the Constantinople that a ‘tribe from the North’ would expel the Muslims from the Byzantine capital.

To illustrate my idea of how this subject may be developed in future research, here I offer only a bulleted politological sketch (naturally, without any historical pretensions):
Ottoman period

o International reality: Bulgaria gradually enters into ‘the Russian sphere of influence’; from some point on – the Russian tsar as protector of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire (beginning – in the sixteenth century?)

Post-Ottoman period, 1878 – (1885) – 1908 (?)

o Complex: Grandpa Ivan the liberator

First World War, 1914 – 1918

o Practically independent policy

Between the two world wars, 1919 – 1939

o Practically independent policy

Second World War, 1939 – 1944

o Practically independent policy – especially that of King Boris III (refusal to send a Bulgarian army to the Eastern Front not as a pro-Russian, but as a pro-Bulgarian, patriotic position)

Post-war period, 1944 –1989

o Colonial reality

Pro-democracy period

- 1989 – 1997: process of liberation from the colonial reality (ending with the unanimous vote in the National Assembly for joining NATO). Attempts to turn the vassal complex into a practical policy (the BSP).
- 1997 – present: non-colonial reality, owing to which Russia’s imperial policy is now motivated inadequately and has turned into a complex. In response, intensification of the vassal complex and hence, mismatch between the vassal complex and the imperial complex.

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minological connection made here between political science and psychiatry is tense, it can reasonably describe a particular behaviour as a complex – but only the behaviour of individuals. I believe that expanding the scope of the term ‘complex’ beyond individual behaviour will reduce it to a metaphorical suggestion, stripping it of its heuristic value.

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Zubov, A. (2017) Zilotstvoto e zadanena ulitsa, novo “staroobryadchestvo” [Zealotry is a cul-de-sac, a new ‘old belief’]. Hristianstvo i kultura, 121 (4), pp.5-10.
In 2016 a team of researchers conducted an extensive study of Bulgarian print and online media to find out the scale, circulation, and temporal dynamic of the frequency of use of specific words and phrases – mostly denigrating and pejorative ones, such as Gayrope, tolerast, grant-gobbler, liberal fascist, and others of this sort. I will not enumerate them here, since their lists are available online. I will only point out, yet again, that the epithets in question are very specific and they are undoubtedly intended to discredit. The initial hypothesis was that they were intended to discredit principles and values of liberalism, but the study surprisingly showed that they were attacking not merely ‘liberalism’ in some of its more specific ideological forms, but the very principles and institutions of liberal democracy. The frequency of use of these words and phrases grew exponentially in the four years studied in detail (2013 – 2016) – they were repeated over and over again without variation, but with growing intensity. There is no doubt that this is propaganda, although we met and continue to meet with opposition against our use of this word. The opposition seems manifold, but it is actually along two lines. One is the global intellectual fashion, according to which ‘propaganda’ is an outdated term, a relic from the Cold War era; nowadays it is more adequate to speak of disinformation and hybrid warfare. The other line of opposition says that ‘propaganda’ is an offensive word that denies the right to disagree with the present-day neoliberal order of the Western world, a disagreement voiced by a number of its critics like Noam Chomsky and Jürgen Habermas – so are they supposed to be propagandists? I myself am not an apologist of the neoliberal order and can provide bibliographical proof of this. The point, however, is that if I had the standing or fame of, say, Joseph Stiglitz, I would have easily turned out to be a subject of my own study of propaganda. That is because today’s propaganda is parasitic, it borrows critical theses in the form of ready-to-use interpretations, decontextualizes and reconnotes them geostrategically (see Iakimova and Vatsov in this issue).

In other words, propaganda and propagandists are two different things. Propaganda theses are not necessarily believed by the propagandists themselves. Propagandists can be identified as such at another level: they know that they might have to say one thing today and the exact opposite tomorrow,
therefore they don’t believe in their own words much. This text, though, is about people who likewise have to say one thing today and the exact opposite tomorrow, but who are not propagandists. This text is about journalists. For when we were conducting the study of media content, we consistently kept in mind that this content was generated, put together and published by individuals, by people. And that by no means all, not even most, journalists are propagandists. Had every circulation of propaganda clichés been a strategic one, there wouldn’t have been any efficient propaganda. Propaganda is successful when its strategically disseminated clichés reach a point beyond which they no longer need to be disseminated strategically: when they become part of everyday talk, including of the everyday talk of journalists.

In this sense, propagandists proper were not the subject of our study. The subject-matter was the contents of the anti-democratic propaganda language of Bulgarian media: the repetitive, dialogue-preventing, screaming yet unconflicting clichés identifiable as a sustained vocabulary which we have described and on which we haven’t come across any commentary so far. The propagandist, the technologist of words and moods, who him/herself does not identify with them, is no doubt important for the success of propaganda. But s/he is not crucial. What is decisive for this success is to wrap up in stereotypes existing diffused biases, to channel existing diffused anxieties and discontents towards an object (‘migrants’, hence ‘Europe’), to wrap up and channel them in such a way as to keep them heteronomous. This means that those who experience the anxieties and discontents should not be able to talk and discuss them but only to chant them as catchwords and slogans, using a language which claims not to be a language but the reality per se, a language supplied by the propagandist. It means that what is crucial for the success of every kind of propaganda is social fragmentation, social solitude. Social solitude, however, has been intensified by neoliberalism in recent decades, and this effect of atomization and fragmentation has been discussed in a number of critical texts by members of our research team, including by myself (see Iakimova, 2010). Hence, the study of populist propaganda in Bulgaria, which takes advantage of but also aims to intensify social fragmentation, simply to channel it towards a definite type of governmentality, is a completely natural continuation of the social critique of the present, which our team has been engaged in academically for more than ten years now. The critique of neoliberalism, however, has received little, if any, public attention in Bulgaria until recently precisely because it is academic. Today, though, it is being reworked in vulgar étatist terms and packaged in populist rhetoric by certain geopolitical isolationists for governing purposes, and is even liked by about one half of all adult Bulgarians. This is paradoxical, to say the least!

As I already said, here I will talk about people who are not doing propaganda although they have participated in or attested to how it is done. I will
talk about people who go to work and earn a living for their families, people who once sought high professional recognition but who no longer believe that what they are practising is a profession; people who have turned from elite into lonely fatalists. People whom we asked what Bulgarian media look like today, how they themselves feel in those media, how they ended up in them, how they work in them. The most important thing their voices will tell us is not so much the scandalous stories – how memory sticks with ready-written pieces (black PR or paid content to be presented as editorial content) are delivered to the editors, how journalists are ordered to run smear campaigns, and so on – as the very narrative about the terrible solitude, uncertainty and insecurity in which the only solidarity is the solidarity of collective humiliation. But before we hear them, let us say a few more words about propaganda.

**Self-Loathing as a Bulgarian Cultural Stereotype**

What makes us particularly vulnerable to propaganda, says Jacques Ellul (1973, p.52) is the conviction that propaganda consists only of lies. What can protect us to some extent – temporarily and partly – from its toxic action is paying attention to the regimes of playing with the truth. Toxic is any action that conceals its political character, that conceals its character as an action. What are the pre-existing peculiarities of the institutional environment, attitudes and stereotypes which allow anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria to play with the truth? And, most generally, what does this play look like?

To put it briefly, and exactly in line with Harold Lasswell's (1939, p.9) theory of propaganda – like manipulation of representations with the aim of influencing our attitudes for action. Based on the frequency analysis of all publications in 3,080 media outlets over four years, and on the content analysis of a sample of those publications, we can say that the main aim of anti-liberal propaganda in Bulgaria is to raise doubt as to whether the values upon which democratic institutions are built are generally shared, and to carefully foster civic inaction. No propaganda can be effective unless it builds on already existing, diffuse stereotypes, shared clichés, social sentiments, which it organizes, universalizes, and ultimately turns into an expectation of inevitability. Apart from the concrete prerequisites for the success of anti-liberal propaganda in present-day Bulgarian society, we must say that every complex and differentiated social life known to history and the other social sciences already presupposes the need for and possibility of success of propaganda because, as Tom Nichols (2017) says, both experts and lay-people are ensnared by the need to act in the absence of knowledge.

But this fate, so common in our modern, rationalized times, has its concrete faces. In the Bulgarian case, we must mention a widespread feeling of injustice, systematically encouraged by populists of all sorts under various political regimes and implanted even in the national literary canon. In our survey of public attitudes, we found unambiguous evidence of this feeling: when we asked who
was to blame for the failures of Bulgarian society, there was always somebody to blame; but when we asked who was to be credited for its successes, it turned out that we deserve them by nature.

This feeling is complemented by the way the producers of interpretations of our life-together interpret their task – the most dominant form is that of a total split between what we, as a community, should be proud of and what we should be ashamed of. The two seem to have nothing in common – neither authors nor figures nor stories. On the one side are the lofty stories in the national heroic register (and their authors); on the other, the critique of the decline of mores, the pictures of vulgarity and degeneration (and their authors). It seems that in order to feel proud as a collective, we need to totally dissociate ourselves from the traits and deeds that make us feel ashamed. These traits and deeds cannot be mocked without malice, so let us accept them as our own peculiarities and move on.

In this context, the self-loathing of intellectuals has become an enduring distinctive feature of the cultural life of the Bulgarians as a political body, that is, of their life-together.

This feeling of injustice and the self-loathing of intellectuals are two of the contextual factors which facilitate the purely negative, resentment-inciting propaganda messages identified in our study. In fact, this propaganda incites the feeling of injustice into resentment and calls such resentment ‘justice’, while carefully cultivating the feeling that there is no point in taking any action. Thus, after the fragmentation of Bulgarian society and the cultural stereotype of self-loathing, and by no means unrelated to them, the third contextual factor that facilitates the work of propaganda clichés is the state of Bulgarian media and journalism.

**On Freely Expressed Opinion: Tabloidization and a Shrinking Market**

Here we will try to see how the Bulgarian media environment is perceived from the perspectives of journalists, basing our analysis on a small component of our research project, which included a field study in which we conducted thirteen semi-structured interviews with journalists from different private print and online media outlets, whose professional paths have passed through more than one media outlet. We selected journalists from two age groups: journalists with professional experience from before 1989, and younger journalists without such experience. The other criterion in selecting interviewees was that they should have worked both in media outlets disseminating the talking points of anti-democratic propaganda and in media outlets that are critical of the latter. The interviews have been anonymized and are quoted without editing. Here our purpose was to gain an insider’s look at the field, because the propaganda topics and publications analyzed in the other module of our study are both an effect of and a factor influencing the overall media environment in Bulgaria. Their wide dissemination has become possible because of a series of processes that have
taken place in the media and in the nexus of journalism, economy and politics in Bulgaria. Processes which, let us reiterate, are not specific to Bulgaria, such as the infection of the Bulgarian media environment with the phenomena that are now criticized by many – economic dependence, political alignment, serving political ambitions, hatchet journalism, off-limits topics and people, etc. (Angelova, Popova and Neykova, 2017).

We will say in advance that the observations on the print and online media outlets in the sample clearly showed the tabloidization of media, where the Bulgarian media sphere is simply a more distinct case of a process found practically everywhere. This process is not limited to print media, but it is precisely they that are in the most difficult financial situation because advertising budgets have been largely redirected to TV channels (because of their larger audiences) and social media (because of the possibility to target specific consumer profiles).

But both tabloidization and the shrinking market seem to be merely moments in a more general process:

Without exaggeration, both the analysis of media and the interviews with journalists have shown **the disintegration of the field of journalism as a differentiated field in Bulgaria.** What is this due to? Our interviewees explained it with the commercialization and shift in focus from winning trust to securing higher ratings – the media have come to be understood as entertainment and journalism is trying to adjust to this ‘commercial’ requirement. But this is not the main (or at least not the sufficient) reason. The market, in turn, is changing under pressure from free online media, the reorientation of television towards new formats (of entertainment), and the subsequent fragmentation of audiences. This has different effects on journalists from the different types of media outlets (print media on one side, and television on the other), but in both cases there is something in common: the formation and promotion of ‘attention-grabbing’ journalism – fast, sensational stories whose circulation is more important than credibility and educating the public. Evaluating television by ratings, not by trust, intensifies this diverse process which targets and fragments audiences. Profiling viewers and targeting them through these profiles is becoming ever more important to advertisers, on whom the existence of media outlets directly depends. Breaking out of this circle of retreat of audiences into bubbles is provided for – or at least, intended – by the Radio and Television Act, which obligates broadcast media to air independent, external productions (the presumption being that an independent, external production will introduce an independent, external point of view – a presumption that is highly questionable). But the redirection of advertising investments to television has dealt a direct blow to print media, whereupon, as one of our interviewees said, ‘the new masters of media content are not the editor-in-chief, at some moments, but the advertising department or the boss to whom it’s very important that something concerning this friend of his be published’ (I2-6). If journalism in television is becoming ever more indistinguish-
able from entertainment, in the print media this amalgamation serves for direct promotion of policies (‘so it then became obvious, relentlessly clear who’s giving the money, but since you have no other choice you must clench your teeth and comply – that’s it, unfortunately,’ I1-4). If you don’t want to be part of this game, you must retire to deeper waters and stick to safer topics. If this turns out to be impossible, you do your best to move to another media outlet (‘now when you actually get kicked out, you can find a job in another newspaper, but the situation there will be more or less the same,’ I2-1); radio journalists don’t have even this option, though (see Popova, 2015). This is quite a predicament: how to keep one’s sense of dignity? What seems like a normalization of cynicism is in fact an effort to keep one’s sense of personal and professional dignity, to cope with the horrific alienation imposed by one’s work situation.

Our interviewees without any journalistic experience from before 1989 narrated this picture as a global fate of media in the digital era. What is more manifest in Bulgaria, however, is the loss of distance between tabloidized entertainment and day-to-day politics. Media are used as political instruments not in a mediated way, as possessing some resource of their own (journalism), but directly for disseminating political messages. We heard this in all of our interviews, here is one of the voices: ‘Actually, this truly kills pluralism: being sure that every opinion – to say nothing of facts – that every opinion isn’t a freely expressed opinion but simply the product of some [vested] interest…’ (I1-3). And even more directly, in mundane terms: ‘there’s no barrier between power and media. They are on first-name terms, they drink their whisky together.’ This, of course, has become possible not just because of the media and their deregulation. It has become possible because, as one of our interviewees said, the other public institutions are much too tolerant of their own systemic problems, which have no chance of being resolved unless they make scandalous headlines. This, in turn, creates an expectation on the part of media that they can do politics.

The other distinctive feature of the Bulgarian media environment is the lack of clarity as to whose interests are at play behind the unfree opinions: ‘I never ask who the owner of a newspaper is. Because I know that even if they tell me who, it most probably won’t be him. So there’s no point in asking’ (I2-1). Here is a younger journalist: ‘So this of course leads to huge interference of owners in editorial policies. First of all, you don’t even know who your owner is’ (I2-6). Besides, in the search for ways to keep newspapers afloat (because the cover prices of Bulgarian newspapers usually cover printing costs only, that is, there might be money only for printing, but not for producing content), all sorts of shady interests can come into play entirely legitimately – by concluding a contract between two commercial companies. Thus, by and large, the ‘interests’ read in the newspapers what they themselves have ordered. Here is what this model looks like, as described by one of our interviewees:
They [journalists] sometimes go and offer their services to various such clients for pay, for example, to local companies. I know a journalist who has a website devoted to a [local urban] neighbourhood… on which he’s announced that he can write a PR piece for anybody who contacts him, in return for three leva. … A series of pieces costs five leva, and so on. As a sample, he had written some piece about how good the coffee in some café was. (I2-3)

The thus described picture is of media outlets which are in fact bulletin boards for posting paid classified ads, this being their actual function while the form remains hidden. Here we must note that two of our interviewees said that Bulgarian print media belong to two groups: ‘the Peevski media’ (i.e. those that belong to media mogul Delyan Peevski) and Economedia. And although in part of their generalizations and accounts of how editorial policies are made our interviewees pointed out similarities, they nevertheless distinguished Economedia (regardless of whether they have worked in its media outlets) in that ‘it’s clear who its owner is’. The noted similarities concern the tacit knowledge about which topics are allowed, while the pointed-out differences are in that at least memory sticks with ready-written pieces are not delivered to the editors of Economedia-owned media outlets. In contrast to them:

How does the Peevski model work? With memory sticks – instead of research, instead of articles, instead of looking for sources, instead of looking for the true problem of the day, journalists are given ready-written stuff – ‘memory stick’ has become proverbial now – which is sent to editorial offices on memory sticks. I’m talking about print media here, but to my mind things are similar in the internet space and these texts are posted entirely uncritically. (I2-4)

**On Professionalism**

According to all our interviewees, there is a decline in professionalism, explained mainly with the lack of market demand for professionalism as a product:

What do the media actually need? … microphone holders. That’s to say, you need a group of people who will stand opposite you and do this (*mimics holding out a microphone*). … And that’s enough for you to flood the information space of the so-called media with some news content and coverage. … No one needs people with a long memory, really – in fact, it’s like we all too readily forget everything that’s written in news-writing manuals and in codes of ethics, and so on. I don’t know if you know what I mean. (I2-3)
Translated into sociological terms, the general conclusion is that the Bulgarian media field has disintegrated. It has disintegrated as a field of communication and battle (despite their vehement tone, Bulgarian media are not engaged in open conflict). It is disintegrating also insofar as its specific capital is disappearing – that is, journalism as empowering the public to make informed decisions on the issues of the day, as professional work that is partly autonomous from the strong of the day. The term ‘field’ is used here in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu and although this text is not concerned with theory, we must mention that the field is a relatively autonomous and dynamic correlation of forces that is defined by a specific resource, or what Bourdieu calls ‘capital’, whose accumulations determine the positions in the field. And although in Bourdieu there is some ambivalence between the terms ‘media field’ and ‘journalistic field’ (see Bourdieu, 1998, p.39; Popova, 2015), what defines the media as a field is the partial autonomy of the relations of forces within it. This autonomy stems from the fact that the freely expressed opinion, that is, free journalism, has become a resource for gaining positions within the media universe. Leaving aside the possible critiques of structural determinism in such a theoretical construction, we must say that the interviews told us, over and over again, that freely expressed opinion is simply not a resource that helps in securing stronger positions.

What, then, does the profession of journalism look like in Bulgaria? There’s no such profession, our interviewees said. There’s no autonomy of the code of ethics (it is written by publishers/owners, but they hide their identity;8 our interviewees said that they don’t even ask who the owner is because they won’t be told the truth), no trade union protection, no barrier whatsoever between journalists and owners, while owners have business interests which they pursue via the state and which they do not announce publicly as their own interests.

This deprofessionalization is part of the processes of liberalization of education, communication and the labour market in Bulgaria. Let us remind the reader that ‘deprofessionalization’ is not a pejorative word. ‘Profession’ is a type of exercising skilled labour which guards its own boundaries. That is to say, those who exercise it have their own collective bodies which license those who are eligible to exercise this profession. Hence, ‘deprofessionalization’ does not mean loss of skills but elimination of this control over boundaries, that is, over eligibility. In other words, those who want to become journalists become journalists, there is no collective body responsible for licensing, and the exercise of the journalistic profession has become totally subservient to the market: ‘Because anyone could do anything to us – fire us, pay us off-the-books salaries – a small salary in return for paying our social security contributions and some off-the-books account, [we’ve seen] all this over the years. And anyone can order [stories]’ (I2-1).9 Here we will not discuss the question of when and whether this process inevitably leads to loss of skills.10 We will only note that this was pointed out by all our interviewees (‘the [journalistic] profession has
become extremely devalued, but that’s why it doesn’t enjoy sufficient respect. And from a certain point of view, absolutely rightfully so,’ (12-5).

The processes of deprofessionalization in Bulgaria began with the liberalization of the Union of Bulgarian Journalists (UBJ). The question of who can call themselves a journalist has become a matter of who can get a job as a journalist.

Until 1989 the UBJ was an elitist organization which had to recognize you as a journalist. This card [of UBJ membership] opened many doors, abroad too – I mean museums and that sort of thing. And many people wanted to be [UBJ members], even if just for the sake of the card. And gaining admission [to the UBJ] was indeed as [difficult as getting admitted] to the Union of Hunters and Anglers – somebody had to die so that somebody else would be admitted. And then suddenly something happened and we still didn’t understand what it was, we went to revise the UBJ Statutes. … And this was the start of a huge dispute – actually, about what kind of organization the UBJ should be. Should it remain an elitist organization recognizing that so and so is a journalist, or should it become a mass, general organization admitting anyone who wants to join it, a trade union organization defending professional rights. And we were so unaware of what was coming. We believed it was so prestigious to keep that whole ridiculous idea that it was well-nigh the UBJ which certified you were a journalist, but then along came some unscrupulous and arrogant people who could do whatever they wanted to you, imitate codes [of ethics] – because having an employer write a journalistic code is, to my mind, a disgrace. (12-1)

Here a journalist with long experience has outlined the projection of rapid liberalization in Bulgaria very clearly: the rapid transition from a system of very difficult and rigid access to the journalistic profession in an environment of centralized censorship to a new type of censorship, commercial-lobbyist, with extremely easy access to the profession, whereupon journalists have become replaceable spare parts.

Entry into the profession has become very liberal (‘there are no educational and licensing barriers’ – Daskalova in Spassov, Daskalova and Georgieva, 2017). In the absence of licensing for entry into the profession, it is up to the journalistic community to serve as a regulator, deciding who is fit to be a journalist. But the journalistic community does not have the necessary mechanisms and resources for that. Those who do are the media outlets themselves – which often is to say, the employers, that is, the owners who are unknown both to the general public and to the journalists at the media outlet.

The term ‘deprofessionalization’ presupposes that the journalistic profession was once partly autonomous. But it wasn’t, actually – before 1989, too, the exercise of the profession in Bulgaria was controlled, even if not commercially
but through party and party-network loyalties. This, however, meant security and lent distinct prestige to the profession. What is missed now is precisely the sense of security and prestige, not the autonomy of journalists, which apparently appeared but was short-lived (we cannot date it exactly, but our hypothesis is that it appeared in the late 1980s and existed for a short while in the 1990s. And that was it). In a sense, it is no accident that when our interviewees talked – without being prompted by the interviewers – about deprofessionalization in journalism, the main subject was the linguistic illiteracy of newcomers to the profession, an issue they harped on continuously. Judging from the interviews, it seems that the high professional standards of the past have been reduced to the ability to write in Standard Bulgarian without spelling and punctuation mistakes.

The deregulation of the codes of ethics and the deregulation of entry into the journalistic profession was probably seen at the time as a great freedom, although our interviewees spoke only with bitterness, without bright memories. This freedom, however, quickly collapsed – deregulation, reduced to purely commercial regulation, quickly gave rise to monopolies, initially overt (such as was the monopoly of the newspapers owned by German media conglomerate WAZ) and later simply a public secret. Thus, one form of dependence of the profession on extra-professional loyalty (party-network loyalty), was replaced rapidly, albeit after a short period of elation and freedom, by another form of extra-professional loyalty, that is, corporate-network loyalty. After a short-lived elation at the freedom of speech in the early 1990s, the fusion of party and state was replaced by the fusion of business and state, while the lack of self-regulation of the profession became a lack of media freedom.

On the Conscientious Pursuit of the Truth: The Forms of Compromise

The general feeling is that there is no autonomy of the media in Bulgaria. There is only an autonomy of the journalist, which, in all our interviews, was proudly, solitarily or hesitantly articulated as internal exile (‘if you’re told something you’ve written cannot be published, you quit and look for a job at another newspaper,’ I2-1). We might be tempted to term this search for a ‘place of conscience’ as ‘normalization of cynicism’, but we ought to take into consideration the existential situation of people who are not simply looking after their families, paying mortgages, and so on; they are looking for recognition in a sphere that has withered to the point of ephemerality. Recognition is not obtained through status and merit, the profession has fallen apart, that is, there are no professional bodies to license those who are eligible to exercise this profession and to judge who exercises it in what way. The only way to obtain recognition and get heard is to say something outspoken. The problem, however, is that parrhesia is turning into a typical myth-making technique. And that is exactly how celebrity journalists are behaving – they seem to have no qualms about mixing journalism, entertainment and direct politics. The shift
of recognition from professional work to parrhesia and celebrity is yet another indicator of the disintegration of the field. In fact, what has become normalized is the feeling that there’s no such field as a field of journalism. There are journalists only. Being a journalist is perceived – not by the celebrity journalists who, by their behaviour, perpetuate this disintegration, but by our interviewees – as manœuvring away from obnoxious topics, as finding an island for writing freely. This is an individual moral escape route, not a public cause. And one must take a very clear position on this point: we cannot blame journalists for the present situation where the ethical codes that define what it means to be a journalist are written for or by employers and are not even read by the majority of journalists, a situation where journalism is no longer a differentiated professional field, having become fragmented and marginalized in multiple individual internal exiles.

Here is how the technical parameters of this situation were described by our interviewees: at the editorial offices of all media outlets, there is tacit knowledge of the rules about which subjects (topics, but also persons) are off-limits, so there is no need to read the codes of ethics. If those rules are broken (above all, due to ignorance of their existence), the editor-in-chief turns down the article (‘When you write your piece and then half or all of it is edited out, that’s enough to make you understand clearly that the interests are such and such,’ I1-2). That is to say, editors-in-chief have this tacit knowledge as overt and conduct the policy of non-aggression against the strong of the day through their media outlets. Here, by the way, we can add another detail to the explanation of one of the findings of Angelova, Popova and Neykova (2017) that, despite their often vehement tone, the media are in fact unconflicting. No conflict is played out in public, there are no polemical media outlets since the subjects of criticism are distributed among media outlets, that is, my media outlet criticizes you and yours criticizes me, mine doesn’t criticize you and yours doesn’t criticize me. Thus, criticism becomes abuse, not an instrument of public debate. Policy is conducted along two lines: omerta (‘what the media outlet must remain silent about’ – this is a quote about a written positive article on a reform, to which the editor responded by telling the journalist, ‘But you know very well that we’re against it [the reform in question], don’t you?’ I2-1) and the strategy of not attacking the strong of the day, a strategy known as ‘striking the fallen’ (‘and this is a mass practice. You’ve vilified someone until yesterday, but then they come to power, something happens or they start giving you money, and you start saluting them – it’s disgusting,’ I1-4). And the buffer in this system is the editor-in-chief. Here are the editor-in-chief’s ideally-typical characteristics:

Pressure on journalists is exercised directly through the editor-in-chief. In a sense, the great editors-in-chief (leading figures of the UBJ) have disappeared, while the present-day ones ‘work under conditions of control on the part of their publishers who, for their part, are direct conduits of business interests, personal business interests, group business interests’ (I2-7). The editor-in-chief of our
times is, to a large extent, a front person for the owners, a fictive face of journalism, the thin barrier stopping the media outlet that is directly conducting a policy from showing its true face. The editor-in-chief assigns the tasks ordered from above (write against X, praise Y, don’t criticize the activities within the remit of Z), brings the memory sticks, they are in charge of censorship, they are the person who – although wretchedly – nevertheless looks after their staff, which they are compelled to keep in this wretched state. They have turned into the paternal figure of the proletarian family – they are the person who somehow earns the money, for which they deserve domestic gratitude. This gratitude becomes all the more enthusiastic when the editor-in-chief personally takes on the dirty job of vilifying the inconvenient instead of forcing their staff to dirty their hands with it. The editor-in-chief secures funds from somewhere without burdening us with the knowledge of their exact source and with the duty of paying their cost, ‘simply some funds simply come from somewhere, ensuring the [media outlet’s] existence in the next half or whole year, and so on’ (I2-6). Daddy’s received his day’s pay for today, hooray! This is yet another dimension of the insecurity of the journalistic profession in Bulgaria – the shrunken temporal horizon, the disappeared future.

In the interviews, but also in the two cited studies (of news content – Angelova, Popova and Neykova, 2017; and on the state of the profession – Spassov, Daskalova and Georgieva, 2017), there is no evidence of competition among media for information, for being better at informing the public. To the extent that there is such evidence (in the study on the state of the profession, as well as in a study of the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria, AEJ-Bulgaria), where there is competition it is within the respective media outlet, among the staff, often encouraged by the management, and not among different media outlets.

Self-censorship is also a personal professional strategy for coping with this competition. Here is what your life looks like: you are confined to a particular environment, sometimes you feel sick at looking at your laptop, competition is confined to it. The competition is for extra pay, apart from your low on-the-books salary, pay for a job done, that is, the competition is actually for taking on an extra job. This is a purely corporate model – we can safely say, a model of exploitation where you can earn 50 percent on top of your salary if you also become a producer in television or if you undertake to develop a new rubric. At first glance, there’s nothing wrong – but that’s only at a first, cursory glance. Otherwise this means cutting leisure time, downsizing staff, ending specialization by subject, and in the final analysis, insurmountable pressure to reduce journalism to reading and referring to websites, ever more superficial and un-specialized piecing together of bits of information from here and there. Your world has shrunk to this office, even though at first glance this is in contradiction with the findings of an AEJ-Bulgaria study that three-quarters of the journalists in Bulgaria have worked in more than three media in the last ten years,
and 90 percent in at least two (Valkov, 2017, p.6). But this is a contradiction only at first glance again – every job at a media outlet is your last, you have the feeling that you are dropping out until something else happens, finding a job at another media outlet is a matter of pure luck. At the same time, the number of journalists and editorial staff at media outlets is shrinking, while there is growing concentration of media ownership. Fewer and fewer people hold more and more media outlets with a less and less clear structure of ownership and, accordingly, there are more and more rumours about the overconcentration of ownership. Yet rumour is something to which we adjust our behaviour before checking out if it is true or false. And it is precisely this capsulation that is the absolutely firm ground for making you feel solidarity with fellow-journalists from ‘enemy’ media outlets when you are together at news conferences. This, of course, is only an imaginary picture drawn on the basis of thirteen interviews.

Still, against this background, what does it mean to be a journalist in Bulgaria? To work for a media outlet or to distinguish journalism from entertainment and doing politics even though you might be left ‘without a media’ (Encheva and Popova, 2016). It seems that this turns out to be a practical dilemma before people working in journalism. This practical dilemma also outlines the two paths to self-censorship: entry into syncretism (conducting direct policy, which is in fact the strategy of corporate loyalty, where the media outlet is understood as a corporation – ‘when you know that your media outlet’s policy is to like this … government minister,’ I2-3), or internal exile (withdrawal into journalism without a media or, in the softer version, self-marginalization from the top topics: ‘you start with, you know, some hints, or out of time and space, you write some sort of stories, you take up minor topics that aren’t related to politics; in general, it’s quite complicated and tiring’, whereupon the journalist’s ‘entire background and professional experience has now actually become a burden for him,’ I1-4). This is the most drastic form of the dilemma. But it rarely appears in such drastic form to people, although it is present nevertheless:

Regrettably, I think that things have come to the point where the [proper] position, the only thing a self-respecting person working at this type of media outlet can do is not to write anything – which is also absurd. [It’s absurd to have] silence as the measure of the dignity of the journalist. … I’ve already talked about the compromise of silence. This is a compromise. But sometimes it’s a positive compromise because the other option is: you quit and are left without a job. (I2-4)

In their everyday lives they are forced to make and routinize more minor choices whose general form, however, is the dilemma described above. I underline this because we must realize the gravity of what a Polish study of the present-day challenges before the media has found: that journalists are much more often faced with painful ethical choices.
And it may turn out that most of your time is spent not on producing some journalistic product that meets some professional standards, but on writing materials your boss has paid you to write, for which he’s received money, and that this may even look good to you because this way you’re certain that you’ll get some salary at the end of the month. So it’s quite wrong to accuse the journalists who work in such structures, it’s rather rash or, actually, yes, that’s why in the journalistic community, actually in quite [a few media outlets], at the lower level, there isn’t this [mutual] hatred [as] between media owners. They are split into corporate groups, fighting each other very loudly, but in fact the colleagues – who go together, for example, to the meetings of the Supreme Judicial Council or have to cover the Council of Ministers – get together, they don’t quarrel with each other, I mean they know very well that everyone has decided in some way to earn their living in this way. Because this is a matter of financial survival, being a journalist in Bulgaria. And they know that everyone, everyone makes compromises to a different extent, to a different extent on different things. (I2-3)

There are no internal tensions within the network of journalists who are sent to cover various events after being instructed to follow their media outlet’s policy (for example, to praise a particular government minister or to write against him or her), because its members know that they share a common fate.

We all know what ethical compromises are made by the other – this has become the backbone of the common journalistic work ethic, this unites people from warring media outlets, and the cause of the enmity between the latter is not love for the truth but the poverty of the public sphere, or in other words, huge heteronomy. Viewed from the perspective of public ethical standards of independence and professionalism of journalism (including from that of either of the two existing codes of ethics in Bulgaria), such compromises are directly at variance with the standards – they are cynical and unprofessional; viewed from the perspective of personal relations, however, they are an instance of humanity – both the solidarity and the empathy by which we excuse them are also an instance of elementary humanity. There is an enormous rift between public and personal morality, therefore personal morality has become an excuse for the abuse of public morality.

The feeling of moral poverty is the only form of solidarity. This shared feeling transforms in my own eyes a behaviour I dislike into a sort of stoicism.

This is neither a purposive nor a painless conformism; one may say that the overwhelming majority of journalists in Bulgaria have become precariat: your social security contributions are paid by your employer based on a minimal salary, while your real salary is paid off the books. And you are constantly afraid that it may be taken away from you. The only structure of solidarity you can rely on is the feudal-like corporate structure of the media, where the editor-in-chief can order you to drop a news story and to publish another that has been deliv-
ered ready-written to the editorial office. In this way the media (as institutions) acquire a very high threshold of tolerance for their systemic problems. You are compelled to be loyal to your corporation even if you loathe it, even if it makes you loathe yourself for being loyal to it simply because there is no other structure of solidarity.

At this point we will probably arrive at a conclusion that goes beyond the concrete study: the situation of precariat is a situation of moral unfreedom which, once it is recognized as such, gives rise to the strategy of internal exile as a quasi-escape from conforming to a difficult-to-bear situation. What’s more, this dilemma, this drama, is collective, but the strategies for coping with it remain individual (there are no collective bodies). Internal exile becomes a way to escape from self-loathing, to estrange it. But its traces remain (‘they move you like sheep and send you to bleat elsewhere’). In fact, the estrangement is from the self – from your work as part of you. ‘Sometimes I, too, have done it, as I’ve admitted; you can spare yourself something but still, to my mind, if you respect yourself you’ll find a way to avoid insulting yourself, because this is very important – you feel awful afterwards’ (I1-4).

Another form of compromise and compliance – both with the demands of the employer (because you need a job) and the demands of conscience – is writing anonymously or writing under a pseudonym. A very interesting and sad phenomenon in recent years (according to our interviewees, ‘recent years’ means since around 2008) are collective pseudonyms, where several people use a fictitious name to write something that pretends to be journalism but in fact directly expresses the media owner’s point of view. (‘It’s a shame that this stuff is written by people.’ In some cases, they don’t even have to write it because it is delivered ready-written: ‘At [name of newspaper] the stories ordered from above were delivered ready-written, no one signed them, the fact that someone’s decided to sign them as [fictitious name] doesn’t make a difference, it’s all the same whether one signs them or uses the name of a fictitious character,’ 1-2). In some cases it is known that this point of view is the point of view of an identifiable owner, while in others it is itself collectively-anonymous as well – some sort of politico-economic dependence, because, ‘considering that the oligarchs or the oligarch who controls [the media in Bulgaria] – the oligarchs controlling the media are probably one or two – directly collaborate with the government, one may safely say that an oligarchic centre of power is being, has been, formed, in which all branches of government are actually enmeshed’ (I2-7).

In fact, the latest financial crisis has dealt a crushing blow to media freedom and to the remnants of autonomy of the journalistic profession in Bulgaria. This happened by a simple mechanism: following the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, big business in Bulgaria has become dependent on public procurement contracts under EU projects (while Bulgarian media, in turn, have become dependent on the latter’s communication budgets). The ties of big business to political parties, and especially to the ruling parties, have become decisive for its
profits – both for winning public procurement contracts and for making profits from the only other available resource – the few remaining state-owned assets. The fact that the state has become a direct business source at a time of crisis has actually directly led to the replacement of surreptitious advertising with more brutal techniques of political (but politico-economic) pressure on the media.

This way of functioning of big business in Bulgaria – which has become fused with the state – and the direct dependence of media on big business in a shrunken market, has undoubtedly made print media as a whole the most vulnerable to such pressure. Some print media are more vulnerable than others, though. This applies especially to regional print media, media in places where most business is done through EU projects whose budgets for publicity and promotion serve as a direct instrument for exerting pressure on media as to what to publish, about which businessperson and municipal councillor, and what not to publish:

Not to mention that there are curious cases, a type at the regional level, where things are even worse. For example, a municipality (I can’t remember exactly, I think it was municipality X), initiates a procedure for the award of a public procurement contract for advertising, meaning for PR publications, and it’s written in the contract that twelve months after the expiry of the contract the media outlet may not, meaning that the media outlet is obliged, as it were, to work for promoting the image of the municipality. And some sort of absolutely unimaginable stories. This, of course, demotivates people, it makes them super-cynical and, at the end of the day, turns the [journalistic] profession into a trade-off, not a vocation. (I2-6)

All our interviews suggest that there is a widespread fatalism.

Still, there is a way out for a number of our interviewees: to try to set up their own – as a rule, with several like-minded partners – media outlet (on this practice, see Daskalova in Spassov, Daskalova and Georgieva, 2017). But how is it to be financed, considering that precisely the financing mechanism is the main reason for the impossibility to do journalism, to express free opinion and to properly inform (and not to directly manipulate) the public? The main solution pointed out in our interviews is to apply for project funding. But whom to apply to? To the foundations accused by anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria of being foreign agents and conduits of foreign interests. In this way, the newly created – mostly online – media outlets immediately fall within the interpretive frame prepared for them in advance: anti-patriotic, sold out to foreign interests, grant-gobblers, and so on. This is something that was recently (22 February 2018) reproduced also by MEP and former journalist Nikolay Barekov who, however, called it ‘absence of a legitimate reason for the origin of capital’ (see note 7). The latest media bill, submitted to Parliament by Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) MPs Yordan Tsonev and Delyan Peevski, is in the same vein: ostensibly designed to shed light on media ownership in Bulgaria, it provides for declaring
the financial sources only of donations and sponsorships, but not of advertising and bank loans.

Propaganda Revisited

Actually, our interviewees used the word ‘propaganda’ themselves, without our asking them about it. For them, this is advertising that is surreptitious. But why is it propaganda, why did they use – of their own accord, without any prompting from us – such a strong word? If we unfold the syllogism, it is because, according to them, what we have in Bulgaria is not merely big business using dirty tricks for purely commercial purposes, but big business fused with the state, directly making a profit from the state. Incidentally, the analysis of media content found that this is the first and main channel along which the Kremlin’s propaganda clichés make their way into Bulgaria – it is not that Russian propagandists who want to change our geopolitical orientation are coming to Bulgaria; it is that local business political circles – whose business is directly from, not with the mediation of, the state, who pay media outlets miserably (they pay them to publish or broadcast what they order) – are using the Kremlin’s clichés (starting with those against the Maidan in Ukraine) to crush non-governmental organizations which are preventing them from, for instance, surreptitiously removing particular areas from the Natura 2000 network through their political connections. Ill-paid journalists agreeing to on-the-books salaries that guarantee them even more miserable pensions, some loathing their own situation and blaming it on somebody’s ill will, others loathing themselves and writing with some colleague under a collective pseudonym, still others being only short-term interns at media outlets (who are told that this is how things are done, and are hired to cut costs) or people who are simply cynical – they all produce fast stories, using the Kremlin’s clichés like ready-made meals popped in the oven and served to a public sated with scandals. Actually, the more appropriate term is ‘crowd’ or ‘masses’ – there is no fragmented public, such high levels of privacy and solitude are to be found only in the masses, which propaganda can manipulate by making them feel they are a rational multitude, all the more rational the more private the life led by each individual. This is hammered home in so many words by one of the embittered celebrity journalists who, in his loathing (as well as self-loathing, I believe), promotes in quasi- elitist style the convenient message, ‘Keep a low profile’ (actually, the exact quote is ‘Just sit on your miserable ass and keep a low profile’, see Kevorkyan, 2016), a position promoted as a virtue also in Bulgarian Socialist Party MP Ivo Hristov’s election campaign in 2017.

We will give an example from our interviews which simply adds some specific details to something we established in the analysis of media content regarding the tactical vilification of NGOs aimed at clearing the way for somebody’s business with the help of the state:
And, at the end of the day, something comes from somewhere. That was very interesting at [name of daily newspaper], because the piece was about the green octopus again, you know, the [environmental] NGOs that want to destroy Bulgarian business because they want to preserve the environment, and so on. And it was an interview with some boss connected to [Bulgarian banker and ski entrepreneur] Tseko Minev, but I’m not sure if [the person in question was a boss] in First Investment Bank or in one of his skiing enterprises. But the piece contained some unfounded accusations without, you know, any proof, and then somebody had taken the trouble to check. I can’t remember if they had checked with the Bank or with somebody else, but it turned out that this was sponsored content, an advertorial, which however wasn’t indicated as such. (I2-6)

It is for such very simple and entirely local purposes that the Kremlin’s clichés are used – initially, simply because they are ready-made and easily accessible for fast use. Of course, there is also direct propaganda interference, but we will not discuss it here. What is important is that when it becomes clear that something is an advertorial (advertorials were mentioned spontaneously in half of the interviews), nothing follows – the editor-in-chief simply makes excuses. But in fact what follows is something very important and difficult-to-rectify – the absence of institutional consequences of the moral sanction leads to loss of meaning of the moral sanction, which thus becomes inconsequential and irrelevant. But this infects society at large with cynicism, creating an atmosphere where everyone is believed to be lying and where lying is accepted to be inevitable. And people start claiming that they don’t believe anybody, but this is psychologically impossible – they believe various fleeting things but don’t believe any authority or institution, they believe only in ‘facts’ but don’t check them, and since everyone is lying they have nobody to ask to check the ‘facts’ for them, so that is why ‘such absolutely fake news is spread by various websites and goes viral. There are quite a few people who follow these media outlets because they believe all other media outlets are bought and paid, and we read alternative news sources where everything is absolute lies’ (I2-6). This is the major problem. The other problem – that in this environment, even if there had been somebody to check the ‘facts’, their report would have been edited or turned down – is merely a consequence. The social problem is that public naming and shaming has no consequences for the named and shamed, but it has consequences for society at large – normalization of the feeling that everyone is lying, and acceptance that this is an unquestionable and acceptable fact.

NOTES

1 See Vatsov et al. (2017).
2 Here I am talking about the two lines of opposition that use arguments, and not about the purely propagandistic response to the use of the word, a response that was anticipated already in the analysis of media
content which says that whoever is talking about propaganda is conducting propaganda against the Kremlin. This line is a pure subject of the conducted analysis.

3 See Arendt (1979, p.478); Ellul (1973, p.8).

4 On the models of the professional paths of Bulgarian journalists, see Spassov, Daskalova and Georgieva (2017).

5 This retreat into bubbles, by the way, has its supporters among our interviewees: ‘Television will become more modern when TV programming becomes available on-demand. Then people will be able to take over the role of television programme director and actually order their favourite programmes to be broadcast in a sequence of their choice, or stop and rearrange the television schedule from their devices by which they are commanding the TV screen’ (I1-1).

6 As if this were not enough, in AEJ-Bulgaria’s regular end-of-year survey of journalists and media experts, 2017 is described as the year of direct warnings targeting journalists, see http://www.aej-bulgaria.org/eng/p.php?post=2637&c=287 (accessed 16 April 2018).

7 And it is precisely there where the identity of the owner is clear to the public and journalists, that we are now witnessing a direct attack: under the aegis of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group, and more specifically of MEP Nikolay Barekov, and in partnership with the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, also known as UNIBIT or the Librarians’ University, a roundtable on corruption and fake news was held, at which Nikolay Barekov actually produced the thesis that if there is no legitimate reason for the origin of the capital supporting the media, this means that they are producing fake news and that this is the case with the so-called ‘Capital circle’ (the Econmedia-owned media outlets) – which, by the way, is also a main target of attack by the tabloids that promote propaganda theses, as we established in our analysis of media content. Generally, the initiatives on legislative amendments concerning print media in Bulgaria tolerate their anonymity, but want to certify legitimacy of the origin of the relevant capital, see https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/6733636 (accessed 16 April 2018).

8 So said our interviewees. Media experts and experts in media history describe a more complex picture: the first code of ethics of Bulgarian media, adopted in October 2004, was developed by a consortium led by the BBC World Service Trust, that is, it was literally an imported product designed to replace ideological socialist regulation with professional self-regulation; the latter, however, did not materialize. This first code was written not by publishers/owners but by journalists and experts (see Angelova, Popova and Neykova, 2017). In 2013, however, the Bulgarian Media Union (known as ‘the Peevski media’) adopted another professional code of ethics, which was written by publishers, not by journalists. At that time the president of that Union and co-author of the code was Valeri Zapryanov, now a member of the Management Board of Bulgarian National Television, the public-service television broadcaster which is a signatory to the first code of ethics.

9 We must keep in mind that our interviewees are journalists in private media. In public-service media the problems, of course, vary although the general situation of the media environment in Bulgaria reflects on them too – at the least, on their style.

10 Nor will we discuss the socially important issue about which our study provided evidence as a side effect, without this being among our goals – how these highly educated people will live when they retire.

11 According to a national, albeit non-representative, study of freedom of speech in Bulgaria, conducted in 2017 by AEJ-Bulgaria among 200 journalists from all over the country, almost 72% of the respondents have worked in more than three media in the last ten years, see Valkov (2017, p.6).

12 ‘Experience gained during the many years of working with the media allows us to assume that a journalist, more often than it is commonly believed, is faced with ethical dilemmas’ – Wieczorek and Szumer (2012, p.206), quoted in Angelova, Popova and Neykova (2017).

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ANALYSIS OF THE ONLINE MEDIA REACTIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT’S ANNUAL NATIONAL SECURITY REPORT FOR 2016

Introduction
The Annual Report on the State of National Security of the Republic of Bulgaria for 2016 (‘the Report’), submitted by the Bulgarian government and subsequently approved by the National Assembly on 5 October 2017, aroused intense media and public interest, which was one of the reasons for studying the media reception of this document.

The annual national security reports are drafted by the Security Council under the Council of Ministers. They are intended to cover the executive’s assessments of the risks, dangers and threats to national security, the efficiency and effectiveness of national security policy in the respective year, and the actions planned by state institutions for the next period.

The draft annual reports are put forward to the Council of Ministers by the prime minister. They are adopted and submitted by the Council of Ministers for debate and approval to the National Assembly. Final approval is by a simple majority vote of the National Assembly. These annual reports are part of the system of accountability and parliamentary control over security services and institutions in Bulgaria, along with other documents elaborated by different institutions.

A report of the parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee of Inquiry into the conduct of the selection procedure for a new-type multirole jet fighter for the Bulgarian Air Force, which deals with some national security issues as well, was also produced in the second half of 2017. The media coverage of its discussion overlapped with that of the National Security Report and, to some extent, impeded the analysis of the latter’s media reception.

One of the main highlights in the Report is related to the definition of the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. Since the military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, the Republic of Bulgaria’s relations with the Russian Federation have become a sensitive issue for Bulgarian public
opinion. The Report is the first ever official document, adopted by a Bulgarian government and approved by the National Assembly, to identify Russia’s policy as a threat to European security and hence, implicitly, as a threat to Bulgarian national security too.

This study aims to trace the dynamic of online media coverage of the Report, and to classify and analyze the public reactions provoked by the latter. It takes as its point of departure precisely the role of Russia regarding Bulgaria’s national security because this issue in the Report turned out to be the most widely discussed in the Bulgarian media sphere.

The main research method applied in the study is content analysis, based on a diachronic frequency analysis for the period from 1 September to 30 November 2017, conducted with the SENSIKA system which collects and aggregates data from more than 3,500 Bulgarian-language websites and blogs. The system operates on queries, that is, logical expressions that are combinations of strings, searching for matches of the relevant logical expression in the publications in its database. The search results provide information about the number of publications per day that match the query terms in the specified search period, allowing tracing the dynamic of relevant publications day by day. For the purposes of this study, the search was limited to the period between 1 September 2017, the month the existence of the Report became known to the public, and 30 November 2017, when the reactions to it and to its approval by the National Assembly had practically ended.

With minor exceptions, the study covers only Bulgarian-language publications on blogs, news-analysis and institutional websites. It does not include publications posted by users on social network sites, online comments on media publications, and foreign-language publications, unless they are referred to or quoted in a media outlet of the types enumerated above.

Duplicate publications, that is, identical publications accessible by different URLs in one and the same media outlet, were eliminated from the list of search results. Publications from other media outlets, most often television interviews and discussions, referred to in one or more search results and published online, were added to the list.

This study presupposes a clear distinction between publications and reactions on the subject. In it every publication of a definite text in an online media outlet, even if it is exactly the same as a text published in another media outlet, is counted as a separate publication. Every statement by a speaker or institution at a particular time and physical place, regardless of the number of media outlets or publications reporting, quoting or reprinting it, is counted as a separate reaction.

The speakers are divided and analyzed into three groups classified by occupation: politicians, experts, and journalists. In some cases, there is an overlap between the groups, therefore this division is somewhat provisional and gives only a general idea of the media coverage of the different types of speakers.
The institutional reactions on the subject, be they official or unofficial, are also analyzed, and the difficulties in their analysis are indicated. The plenary debate and vote on the Report in the National Assembly and its media coverage is examined as a case study, including the ratio of media coverage of political forces and speakers.

**Results of the Study**

1. **Dynamic of Media Coverage**

   The search for ‘National Security Report’ in Sensika returned 685 results, distributed over time as shown in Figure 1.

   ![Figure 1. Number of publications per day matching search for ‘National Security Report’ in Sensika](image)

   The timeline of media coverage clearly shows six peaks in media interest in the Report. The first and highest peak, consisting of two parts (separated by the weekend of 16/17 September 2017) was in the period between 12 and 19 September, when the existence of such a report became known to the media and the public and its presence and content were widely reported and commented on by the media, and when the document and its content were commented on for the first time by representatives of different political forces in the lobby of Parliament and in the media. The second peak in media coverage was in the period between 26 and 30 September, when Kornelia Ninova, the leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the biggest opposition party, returned from sick leave and made statements on the subject. Timewise, her statements coincided with two international conferences related to the subject of national security – the conference on ‘Terrorism and Electronic Media’, held in Sofia between 26 and 29 September, at which Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov made a statement; and the conference on ‘NATO Strategy for Security in the Black
Sea Region’, held in Varna on 28 and 29 September, regarding which numerous comments were made, including by Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva. The third peak, almost as high as the first, was related to media coverage of the plenary debate and vote on the Report in the National Assembly on 5 October. The fourth peak was connected to the reaction of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department to the Report, and the fifth and last peak was related to the widely reported position of the National Movement of Russophiles on the Report, after which media coverage of the Report practically ceased.

Figure 2 shows the dynamic of the reactions themselves, that is, of each statement, publication or event in real life containing a comment by a speaker on the Report or on national security issues. The reactions on the subject of national security until 7 September, when the first public reaction to the Report appeared on the news website Terminal 3, were related to other issues – the report of the State Intelligence Agency for the first half of 2017, and the state of and challenges before Bulgaria’s armed forces.

There was a clear peak on 13 September, when the Report was commented on for the first time by MPs, journalists, President Rumen Radev, the National Movement of Russophiles, when information began to appear about the discussion of the Report in the parliamentary committees, and when several media outlets published its full text for downloading. The peak continued on 14 September 2017, when the Report began to be commented on by experts (Kolyo Kolev, Plamen Miletkov, Georgi Kotev, Boyan Chukov), journalists and bloggers (Valentin Georgiev, Valeria Veleva, Georgi Kotorarov (ibid.), Yordan Halachev, Alexander Yordanov), and politicians and diplomats (Sergei Stanishev, Metodi Andreev, Nora Stoichkova (ibid.), Iliyana Yotova, Boyko Kotsev, Ekaterina Zaharieva, Velizar Enchev, Atanas Atanasov), and when numerous anonymous commentators were also quoted.

A comparison between Figure 1 and Figure 2 clearly shows the differences between the dynamic of media coverage and the dynamic of the reactions of different speakers on the subject. The most intense day of media coverage was 13 September, when MPs from different political forces commented on the Report for the first time and their comments were widely reported by online media. In terms of reactions, 14 September was almost as intense – that is when the largest number of speakers commented on the issues raised in the Report, but their comments attracted significantly less media attention.

2. Reactions of Politicians

2.1. Debate and Approval of the Report by the National Assembly

The plenary debate and vote on the Report in the National Assembly took place on 5 October 2017. The rapporteurs of the parliamentary committees, who presented the positions of the respective parliamentary committees on the Report, were heard first. This was followed by a debate and a vote, in which the document was approved by 104 votes in favour and 96 against, with some MPs
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Figure 2. Number of reactions per day in the period from 1 September 2017 to 15 November 2017
of the United Patriots (UP) coalition, which is part of the ruling majority, voting against. This parliamentary sitting and the statements made by MPs at it were widely covered by online media, as Figure 3 shows.

![Number of media publications by party allegiance of quoted speakers](image)

**Figure 3.** Number of media publications by party allegiance of quoted speakers who addressed Parliament. The data on Ataka and the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), which are partners in the United Patriots coalition, are given separately, as the two parties had radically opposite positions on the Report. The data include the number of media publications mentioning the position of a given political force in the parliamentary debates, but not the concrete speaker who articulated it. The positions against the Report are in black, and those in favour are in light grey. The position of the speakers of the DPS (Movement for Rights and Freedoms) was nuanced – as a whole, it approved the content of the Report, but not the highlights in it, which was pointed out by the DPS as sufficient reason for voting against the document.

The opposition BSP attracted the most media attention (see Figure 3). The division of opinions in the United Patriots Parliamentary Group was obvious – the speakers of the VMRO spoke out in favour of the Report, those of Ataka spoke out against it, while the MPs of the NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, the third member of the United Patriots coalition) did not take part in the debate and did not express positions on the Report although they voted in favour. The MPs of the Volya party likewise did not express positions on the Report, but they voted against it. The DPS’s nuanced position against the Report, articulated by the party’s leader Mustafa Karadayi, was third in terms of media coverage.
Figure 4. Number of media publications by quoted speakers in the 5 October 2017 parliamentary debate on the Report. The number of media publications of opinions of MPs who voted in favour of the Report is in light grey. The number of media publications of opinions of MPs who voted against the Report because they disagreed with the text is in black. The number of media publications of opinions of MPs who voted against the Report because they disagreed with its highlights is in dark grey. Each publication is counted as many times as the number of speakers quoted in it.

The most-quoted speaker was Tasko Ermenkov (BSP), followed by Tsvetan Tsvetanov (GERB) and Mustafa Karadayi (DPS). Karadayi was the only quoted speaker of the DPS, hence his third place in the general ranking of speakers on the subject, although the relative share of media coverage of the DPS’s position is smaller than that of the first two parties. There is a notable prevalence of speakers of the BSP both in terms of number of speakers (seven out of a total of 13, more than half) and number of publications covering their opinions (87 out of 196, approximately 44% of all publications). Also noteworthy is the absence of party leaders from the first eight places, with the exception of Mustafa Karadayi. This also holds true for the floor leaders of parliamentary groups, with the exception of Tsvetan Tsvetanov, GERB Floor Leader.
Figure 5. Media coverage of opinions in favour and against the Report voiced in the 5 October 2017 parliamentary debate and vote on it. The number of media publications covering the opinion of speakers of the DPS is included in the opinions against the Report.

The ratio of the number of media publications quoting MPs who voted in favour of the Report to those quoting MPs who voted against is approximately 1:2 in favour of the votes against\(^\text{21}\) (66 to 130 publications, see Figure 5).

2.2. Round-Up of Politicians’ Reactions
The Annual National Security Report for 2016 made waves among a wider circle of politicians, not just among MPs. A total of 52 politicians commented on the Report or on issues raised in it (see Figure 8 in Appendix). The politician whose comments were the most quoted is Milen Mihov of the United Patriots (VMRO). While the larger political forces (such as GERB and the BSP) had numerous speakers expressing opinions on the Report, those of the United Patriots coalition were fewer in number; Mihov was much quoted also because he was the only member of the coalition who made a detailed statement\(^\text{22}\) to the media already on 13 September, when interest in the Report was highest and when MPs publicly commented on it for the first time. The same reason also explains the high ranking of Anton Kutev (BSP)\(^\text{23}\) and Tsvetan Tsvetanov\(^\text{24}\) – in third and second place, respectively – who were the first members of their parties to comment to the media on the content of the Report. The fourth most-quoted politician was Mustafa Karadayi,\(^\text{25}\) who spoke most often for the DPS,
while the other speakers of the DPS made significantly fewer comments which, accordingly, received less media coverage.

The ranking of politicians from different political forces by media coverage of their reactions to the Report shows that the top places are occupied not by the party leaders but by other speakers of the respective political force (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Place of the leaders of parliamentary parties in the ranking of politician speakers by media coverage of reactions to the Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Leader</th>
<th>Place in the overall ranking of speakers</th>
<th>Place in the ranking of speakers of the same party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GERB</td>
<td>Boyko Borisov</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BSP</td>
<td>Kornelia Ninova</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP – VMRO</td>
<td>Krasimir Karakachanov</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP – Ataka</td>
<td>Volen Siderov</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DPS</td>
<td>Mustafa Karadayi</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volya</td>
<td>Veselin Mareshki</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UP – NFSB</td>
<td>Valeri Simeonov</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mustafa Karadayi (DPS) and Krasimir Karakachanov (VMRO) are an exception in this regard, but it should be noted that much of Krasimir Karakachanov’s media coverage concerned his statement\(^27\) as Defence Minister at the 13th International Conference on ‘Terrorism and Electronic Media’, in which he commented on national security issues, but not specifically on the Report as such. Kornelia Ninova, the leader of the opposition BSP, ranks third among speakers of the BSP, after Anton Kutev and Tasko Ermenkov, and only eighth in the overall ranking, although the BSP is the main opposition party and the positions of its speakers received the most intense media coverage online. Prime Minister and GERB leader Boyko Borisov, who presides over the Security Council, the institution that drafted the Report, and with whose signature the document was submitted to the Council of Ministers for discussion, is in twenty-second place in the overall ranking of speakers and fifth among speakers of GERB. Ataka leader Volen Siderov ranks third – not first – among speakers of his party, after Desislav Chukolov and Stanislav Stanilov. Veselin Mareshki, the leader of Volya, made a single statement\(^28\) regarding the Report, but practically avoiding the subject; this statement, which earned him fourtieth place in the overall ranking, was the only reaction from Volya to the Re-
Deputy Prime Minister and NFSB leader Valeri Simeonov is absent from the ranking, as he did not comment on the Report at all and hence received no media coverage.

President Rumen Radev and Vice President Iliyana Yotova are well-represented in the ranking of politicians by media coverage of reactions to the Report – President Radev is in eleventh and Vice President Yotova is in fourteenth place. Their high ranking is due to an interview given by Rumen Radev to Nova TV on 13 September (quoted ten times by online media) and a joint interview of Iliyana Yotova and Sergei Stanishev29 (President of the Party of European Socialists, former prime minister of Bulgaria and former leader of the BSP) in the lobby of the National Assembly on 14 September (quoted eight times) as well as Yotova’s appearance30 on the bTV morning show on 19 September 2017 (quoted eight times).

Further analysis could be conducted on the nuances in the positions against the Report – ranging from those that accepted the Report as a whole but disagreed with the passages describing Russia as a ‘threat’ to national security (such as Sergei Stanishev’s position), to those that claimed that Russia is named as a ‘main threat’ and categorically rejected the Report (this, for example, was the position of the BSP’s Alexander Simov31 and Valeri Zhablyanov.32)

2.3. Official and Unofficial Reactions of Parties, Institutions and Organizations

Since the Report was drafted by the Security Council under the direction of the Prime Minister and submitted with his signature to the Council of Ministers for discussion, one may assume that the document itself expresses the opinion of Prime Minister Borisov and his government on the state of and threats to Bulgaria’s national security.

Boyko Borisov’s interview33 on Tazi sutrin (This morning), the bTV morning show, was, despite the strong public and international interest, his only reaction on the Report and ought to be regarded as justification and public defence of the theses set forth in the Report and, more specifically, the formulations regarding the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security.

The Prime Minister’s statement was unofficial and indirect, using incomplete grammatical forms and allegorical language.34 For the purposes of this study, a semantic analysis was conducted to reconstruct Prime Minister Boyko Borisov’s theses (see Table 2 in Appendix) containing the political considerations that led to the inclusion of the respective formulations in the texts of the Report.

The Defence Ministry may also be regarded as co-author of the Report, since it takes part in the drafting of the annual national security reports by way of the Defence Minister or a representative selected by the latter in the Security Council. On the other hand, the Ministry also produces its own reports related to Bulgaria’s national security. These are the Annual Report on the State of
Defence and the Armed Forces\textsuperscript{35} and the Annual Report on the Activities of the Military Information Service.\textsuperscript{36}

Although the Report on the State of National Security of Bulgaria in 2016 and the revised version of the 2016 Report on the State of Defence and the Armed Forces were submitted to the Records Office of the National Assembly just a few days apart, there is a visible difference in the formulations in the two reports regarding the threats to Bulgaria’s national security.

The two reports contain the same findings regarding the risks posed by extremist groups, the risks of infiltration of members of terrorist and extremist organizations into the territory of Bulgaria and increase in terrorist threats, the processes of mass migration and the large-scale humanitarian crises in the Middle East and North Africa, cross-border organized crime, and drug and human trafficking.

As for the role of Russia, the 2016 Report on the State of Defence and the Armed Forces does not specifically point out the Russian Federation, its policy or its actions as risks, but ‘the dynamic processes on the Eastern and Southern peripheries of NATO and the EU’, ‘conflict confrontation in the Black Sea-Caspian region’, ‘the crisis in Eastern Ukraine’, without going into details. The role of the Russian Federation for Bulgaria’s national security is mentioned specifically only in the context of the growing Russian military capabilities in Crimea and the closer relations and cooperation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with Russia.

Those differences in the findings of the two reports gave rise to a public debate.\textsuperscript{37} Slavcho Velkov, MP of the BSP, noted\textsuperscript{38} that the two documents are substantially different and supposed that the findings in the Report on the State of Defence were not taken into account in the Report on the State of National Security. According to Vladimir Toshev (GERB), Deputy Chairperson of the National Assembly’s Defence Committee, it is precisely the Report on the State of Defence and the Armed Forces which points out the true threats to Bulgaria, while the Report on the State of National Security has ‘regional significance’\textsuperscript{39} and was elaborated ‘in the context of the membership’ of Bulgaria in NATO and the EU.

The Annual Report on the Activities of the Military Information Service for 2016 also enumerates a series of risks to Bulgaria’s national security, but does not specifically name Russia, its policy or its actions as a risk. The document points out ‘the dynamic and contradictory character of the situation in crisis states’, focusing mainly on the situation in ‘immediate proximity’; the asymmetric risks and threats; the spread of international terrorism and religious extremism; the growing hybrid challenges and the issues of cyber, energy and environmental security as well as the challenges and risks generated by the refugee flow towards Bulgaria. Unlike the report of the same institution for 2015, which enumerates a series of conflicts in which Russia is involved, the report for 2016 does not mention them expressly.
In a large part of the media appearances of Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, national security issues were commented on also in the context of the rearmament of the Bulgarian Army and of the report of the parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee of Inquiry into the conduct of the selection procedure for a new-type multirole jet fighter for the Bulgarian Air Force. In practice, the Defence Minister’s media reactions to the two reports were indistinguishable from each other, unless he was answering a concrete question asked by journalists (as, for example, on the news and analysis website Club Z).

The visit of Russia’s Prosecutor General Yury Chaika to Bulgaria on 18 September helped shed light on the official Russian reaction to the Report, as it had all characteristics of an emergency visit – it was kept secret, it came in the wake of another meeting of the Russian and Bulgarian prosecutors general held just two months earlier, and there was a difference in the versions of the two prosecutors generals about the reasons for it.

Bulgaria’s Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov also expressed disapproval of the findings in the Report regarding the role of Russia, explicitly declaring that he was expressing a personal opinion. Tsatsarov voiced support for Bulgaria’s Euro-Atlantic orientation and ruled out the possibility that it might be called into doubt or changed. At the same time, he gave arguments why Russia should not be identified as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security and why the attitude demonstrated through the Report was ‘narrow-minded’ and aimed to win the approval of ‘one or other’ world power. Tsatsarov expressed solidarity with President Rumen Radev’s position that ‘we should not talk about Russia but with Russia’, pointing out the following arguments:

- the impossibility to ignore Russia as a foreign policy factor;
- the psychological impossibility of the Bulgarian people to view the Russian people in any way other than as ‘fraternal’;
- the common enemy for Bulgaria, Russia and for the whole ‘civilized world’;
- the ‘true’ national interests that remain after the rejection of ideology and history.

Chaika, for his part, also condemned the Report (ibid.) and formulated something like a program for the possible Bulgarian-Russian cooperation, including the fields of legal assistance, extraditions, migration policy and the fight against Islamic terrorism. He called ‘rotten policies’ the artificial, in his view, confrontation between the EU and Russia and the naming of Russia as a threat, associating the possibility for many Russian citizens to buy property in Bulgaria and the fact that his own sister lives in Latvia with the state of bilateral relations and the state of security of Bulgaria and of the EU. He described the inclusion of Russia in the Report as a threat to security almost equal to foreign invasion and, in this connection, quoted ‘Alexander Nevsky’s testament’ that ‘Whoever will come to us with a sword, from a sword will perish’, predicting
that Bulgaria was bound to lose from confrontation with Russia.

Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva commented on the content of the Report on several occasions, engaging in an indirect dialogue with Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova and debating with MPs in the Bulgarian National Assembly, while gradually expounding her theses. On 14 September Zaharieva mentioned⁴⁴ that it was not Russia that was a threat to Bulgaria, but only some of Russia’s ‘actions’. On 29 September she elaborated on her thesis⁴⁵ – in Zaharieva’s view, Russia continued not to be a threat and it was necessary to develop ‘practical and equal-footing’ relations with Russia, but she had nothing against the establishment of a NATO base on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast because NATO guaranteed Bulgaria’s national security. For Zaharieva, the thesis that the Report was directed against Russia was ‘speculation’. On 3 November, responding to a question from MP Ivo Hristov (BSP), Zaharieva specified⁴⁶ the actions of Russia leading to security risks – the crisis in Ukraine, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the large-scale military exercises conducted by Russia. She continued to insist that it was not Russia that was identified as the main threat in the Report, but the challenges and risks related to refugee and migration pressure, to the negative transformations in the EU, to the state of stability in Southeast Europe and, above all, to the infiltration by extremist cells and the danger of international terrorism, literally repeating the findings of the Report itself.⁴⁷

The political party ABV (Alternative for Bulgarian Revival) came up with an emotional official position⁴⁸ expressing ‘absolute bewilderment’ about the findings in the Report and pointing out that Bulgaria’s bilateral relations with Russia were at an unsatisfactory level, having become victim to ‘an unclear, confused and chaotic policy towards Russia’ that had turned the country into ‘a hostage to ad-hoc political or personal attitudes’ and a victim ‘to foreign national global strategies’. ABV proposed a political program consisting of six pillars on which bilateral relations with Russia should be built: the right to ‘a specific, active position’ of Bulgaria in the EU and NATO as regards relations with the Russian Federation; recommendations about the media climate, including ‘refusal to fan up anti-Russian, anti-American and anti-European sentiments’; active participation within the framework of the EU and NATO in elaborating positions on Russia; finding a balance between ‘the past’ and ‘the new quality in the conditions of market relations’; and Bulgaria’s return onto ‘the energy map’ of Russia.

At the end of September, Nikolay Nenchev, Chairman of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS) and former defence minister, said he felt there was hypocrisy⁴⁹ on the part of the politicians who had read the Report since, in his view, they were not telling the public what the real state of Bulgaria and its national security was. He denied the possibility of a lack of professionalism on the part of the authors of the Report, who work in the foreign intelligence service, the military intelligence service, and the State Agency for
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National Security (DANS). Nenchev said he wanted the findings in the Report to remain as worded. As regards the role of Russia, he drew attention to the fact that NATO reports contained findings that Russia was a threat to NATO and that Russia was a country that was not keeping its commitments. Hence, according to Nenchev, the Russian Federation is a threat to Bulgaria, too. Several weeks later, he said he was worried about the fact that the Defence Minister, the Prosecutor General, the President and the Prime Minister were denying the existence of a threat from Russia, and recalled that it was impossible for anyone who had read the reports of the security services not to feel worried.

The President’s Office did not formulate an official position on the Report, but both Rumen Radev and Iliyana Yotova made categorical statements to the media, declaring their disagreement with the definition of Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security. President Radev, whose 13 September interview for Nova TV coincided with the peak in media interest in the Report, pointed out that the document does not say anywhere that Russia poses a direct threat to Bulgaria’s national security. He refuted the passages in it related to the Russian threat to ‘united and peaceful Europe’ by citing the actions of a number of European leaders who had expressed intentions for dialogue and improvement of relations with Russia. Radev said he wished Bulgaria would not become ‘hostage to foreign interests’ and noted with regret that there are politicians in Bulgaria for whom the relations with Russia are never ‘sufficiently bad’.

Yotova said she doubted that the Report was an authentic position of the Bulgarian government, and suggested that the passages in the Report about the role of Russia were most probably ‘copied and translated’.

Two weeks after the Report was approved by the National Assembly and a month and a half after its existence became known to the public, the Russian administration took an official public position on it for the first time. The Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department published on its website an official position—‘Comment’ expressing strong disagreement with the document, calling it ‘openly Russophobic’ and finding it to be ‘starkly at odds’ with the Bulgarian government’s stated intentions to promote bilateral relations and with the sentiments of the local population. The Department pointed out that the Report disregards the opinion of 85% of Bulgaria’s population who do not see Russia as a threat, citing an unspecified Bulgarian public opinion survey. The Department presumed that the passages in the Report describing the role of Russia may have been ‘prompted’ by ‘Western partners’.

According to the Department, the political responsibility for the content of the Report belongs to GERB, to the MPs who are members of the Friendship with Russia Group, and personally to Krasimir Velchev, co-chairman of that group. The Department asked him personally, ‘Are you afraid of us, Mr Velchev?’ and reminded him that friendship should be true.

According to its Statutes, the National Movement (NM) of Russophiles is a civic non-governmental association and legal entity within the meaning of
the Non-Profit Legal Entities Act, but it is one of the organizations that most actively formulated political positions on the Report, which received wide media coverage.

The official reactions of the National Movement of Russophiles marked the beginning and the end of media coverage of official reactions on the Report. Theirs was the first official reaction, as early as on 13 September 2017, as well as the last, on 11 November 2017, in the studied period.

The second reaction of the National Movement of Russophiles, a declaration, was much more detailed both in its findings and in its recommendations. In addition to the indignation at Russia’s presence in the Report as a threat and the finding that the passages referring to Russia are at variance with Bulgaria’s national interests – moments present in both reactions – the declaration claimed that the Report is ‘in complete contravention’ with the attitudes of the Bulgarian people and with the adopted National Security Strategy. According to the National Movement of Russophiles, the Report serves ‘foreign aims and ambitions’ interested in ‘the demonization and isolation’ of Russia, while the Report itself poses a risk to national security because Russia would likewise begin to perceive Bulgaria as an enemy.

The Movement offered its own analysis of the situation – according to it, the hybrid war is actually being conducted by Europe against Russia: through sanctions, through ‘military siege’, through ‘malicious propaganda’ and through pressure on governments and media. According to the Movement, the Report had provoked an increase in confrontation in Bulgarian society.

The Movement recommended that Russia be viewed not as part of the enumerated threats to Bulgaria’s national security but as a partner in coping with them, and thus overcoming ‘the myth’ of the Russian threat.

It also expressed a desire that ‘the double standards’ in international relations and ‘the tragicomic anti-Russian obsession’ be overcome, which would make Bulgaria ‘a bridge bringing closer together’ Russia and the EU. The Movement pointed out that the dynamic in international relations is such that the changes in the attitudes of some EU member countries are bringing about a desire for ‘new dialogue’ with Russia, which is a prerequisite for normalizing Bulgarian-Russian relations, too.

In addition, it recommended lifting the sanctions against Russia and turning Russia into a full-fledged participant in Black Sea cooperation.

3. Experts’ Opinions on the Report

The group of experts commenting on the Report comprises speakers in the media who hold academic titles or expert positions in state institutions or in non-governmental organizations, but who do not hold strictly political offices such as those of MPs or government ministers. On the other hand, in this analysis MPs and government ministers are viewed solely as politicians regardless of their professional profile.
3.1. Most-Quoted Experts

The most-quoted expert was the sociologist Kolyo Kolev (quoted ten times) analyzing the results of a nationally representative survey conducted by the Mediana Agency, according to which public opinion in Bulgaria disagrees with the findings in the Report, especially with regard to those about the role of Russia.

The second most-quoted expert was nuclear energy expert Georgi Kotev (quoted five times), who commented solely on the energy aspects of national security in the Report.

Also quoted five times was Simeon Nikolov, Director of the Centre for Strategic Research in the Field of Security and International Relations, who commented on the statement of Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova about the decisive role of the Red Army in saving Bulgarian Jews from deportation to the Nazi death camps during the Second World War.

Next is Georgi Krastev (quoted four times), Secretary of the Security Council under the Council of Ministers, whose statement pronounced in the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs, ‘Nowhere in the Report is the policy of the Russian Federation in any way indicated as threatening Bulgaria’s national security’, was quoted as a response to Valeri Zhablyanov’s objections to the formulations in the Report regarding the role of Russia.

Chief Assistant Professor Dimitar Dimitrov (quoted four times), a political scientist from Sofia University, pointed out the impossibility of finding a formulation in the Report that would be acceptable to everyone, precisely because of the controversy over the thesis regarding the Russian threat.

Political scientist and Head of the National Security Department at the University of National and World Economy, Professor Dimitar Panayotov Dimitrov (also quoted four times), made a detailed analysis in an interview for Radio Focus of all aspects of the Report, including the modernization of the Bulgarian Army. At the end of the interview, the expert commented also on the neglected, in his view, Bulgarian national security issues – education, health-care and the demographic problems.

Professor Evgeny Gindev (quoted four times) – who presents himself on his blog as Chairman of the Scientific Council of the Bulgarian Eurasian Scientific Centre, Foreign Member of the Academy of Technological Sciences of the Russian Federation, member of the UK Safety and Reliability Society, and Cold War veteran – disapproved of the Report because he deemed it wrong to proclaim as an enemy the country that had liberated Bulgaria from five-century-long slavery, and offered the public an extensive geopolitical analysis, spanning the period from 1018 to around 2267, in support of his theses. According to Professor Gindev, Bulgaria’s enemies are in NATO and the EU, while the plan about ‘the golden billion’, which he claimed was being implemented at present, did not provide for the survival of the Bulgarians.
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Boyan Chukov (quoted three times), writing in A-specto, defined the Report as a ‘gross mistake’ of the government and criticized its qualities – both the capacity of the experts who drafted it and the methodology used – reaching the conclusion that the Report itself is not in the interest of Bulgaria’s national security.

According to Associate Professor Darina Grigorova (quoted three times), Russia is not a threat either to Bulgaria or to the EU. She pointed out that the true threat to Bulgaria is the ‘unipolar hegemony’ of the US, defining the Report itself as ‘an echo of the North Atlantic viewpoint’, not as an expression of ‘our’ national position.

As early as on 6 September, before the submission of the Report to the Records Office of the National Assembly had become known to the public, Associate Professor Alexander Yordanov (quoted three times) commented on another document – the 2016 Annual Report on the Activities of the State Agency for National Security, noting that the issue of a threat to Bulgaria’s territorial integrity was present ‘very diplomatically’ in the document. He concluded unambiguously that this threat actually comes from Russia, and pointed out the absence of Defence Minister Karakachanov from the public debate on the subject. After the submission of the 2016 Annual Report on the State of National Security, Yordanov also published a detailed and extensive analysis of the document on the news website Faktor, identifying the Russian Federation’s aggressive policy after 2008 as the main threat to Bulgaria and assessing the subject as unpopular for the Bulgarian media. Yordanov also found that there is a skilfully orchestrated ‘settlement campaign’ in Bulgaria and that organized crime and corruption are phenomena ‘reinforced’ by the Kremlin.

Among the experts commenting on the Report, the most important dividing line was also that of the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security, although part of them were of the opinion that the Russian topic should not be the leading one in the discussion of the Report. The only exception among the expert-speakers on the Report was Georgi Kotev, who focused solely on Bulgaria’s energy security, but who also mentioned the role of Russia for it.

### 3.2. Classification of Experts’ Opinions by Content

Depending on their content, experts’ opinions on the Report can be classified into several groups (see Table 3 in Appendix).

Part of the experts were of the opinion that the Russian topic was being given disproportionate media and public attention:

- the emphasis in the Report is not on Russia (Professor Dimitar P. Dimitrov);
- the topic of Russia is blown out of proportion (Professor Dimitar P. Dimitrov, Metodi Andreev, Tihomir Bezlov);
- important threats to national security are neglected – the state of education, healthcare, demography, the energy sector, etc. (Professor Dimitar P. Dimitrov).
The experts who agreed with the findings in the Report that Russia is a danger to Bulgaria’s national security pointed out the following arguments in support of their view:

- political arguments:
  - ‘Russia is a big friend we must beware of’74 (Chief Assistant Professor Dimitar Dimitrov),
  - undoubtedly, ‘there is a problem which no government dares turn a blind eye to’75 (Professor Georgi Dimitrov),
  - the Report contains ‘an adequate assessment’76 of Moscow’s policy (Mihail Naydenov),
  - the Report contains correct formulations and findings77 (Associate Professor Ognyan Minchev),
  - Russia is building powerful military capabilities that ‘could be a threat’78 (Sabi Sabev),
  - there are ‘significant problems’79 in the behaviour of the Russian Federation (Vladimir Shopov),
  - the problem is Putin, his regime is a threat to Bulgaria and the EU (Mетоди Андреев),
  - the Annual National Security Report for 2015 contains almost the same formulations – ‘about Crimea, about the growing Russian efforts in building up its military capabilities in the Black Sea, and about hybrid warfare’ (Тихомир Бездов);

- philosophical and geopolitical arguments:
  - Russia is not an enemy of Bulgaria, but it will always oppose NATO and this is what leads to the problems with the relevant formulations in Bulgaria (Chief Assistant Professor Dimitar Dimitrov),
  - NATO is a key guarantor of Bulgaria’s security (Vladimir Shopov).

The experts who did not express an evaluative opinion on the findings in the Report discussed it in the context of its relevance to other political issues. Parvan Simeonov80 saw the document as an instrument of the political conversation between Rumen Radev, Boykov Borisov and Krasimir Karakachanov. In an article published in the period under study but written long before the publication of the Report, Petar Nenkov81 compared the guarantees for Bulgaria’s national security as a member of the Warsaw Pact and then as a member of NATO, his sympathies definitely being in favour of the Warsaw Pact. Expert Dimitar Gardev82 recalled that Russia is indicated as threat number four in the Report but it could also be an ally of Bulgaria in the fight against terrorism, without offering a concrete evaluation of the document. Krasimir Grozev83 and Colonel Dimitar Stoyanov84 also commented on the rearmament of the Bulgarian Air Force with a new-type multirole jet fighter, defining as ‘schizophrenia’ the fact that Russia is declared to be a threat in government documents and, at
the same time, assigned to repair Bulgaria’s MiG-29 jet fighters.

The experts who disagreed with the findings in the Report criticized it mainly for including Russia’s policy in the list of threats to Bulgaria’s national security, the only exception being, as already noted, Georgi Kotev who focused solely on the issues of Bulgaria’s energy security and criticized Russia’s role for it.

The experts who disagreed with the findings in the Report regarding Russia’s role pointed out the following arguments in support of their view:

sociological arguments:
- the Report demonstrates disregard for public opinion in Bulgaria, whose attitude towards Russia is different (Kolyo Kolev),
- the government is working against its people, which is ‘pro-Russia-oriented and Slavic’ (Plamen Miletkov),
- the Report is ‘very far’ from actual public sentiments in Bulgaria (Professor Nina Dyulgerova);

political arguments:
- defining Russia as a threat is a political mistake (Simeon Nikolov, Boyan Chukov),
- the authorship of the Report is inauthentic (the document contains ‘ready-to-use phrases provided from outside’, according to Boyan Chukov; it is an echo of ‘the North Atlantic viewpoint’, according to Associate Professor Darina Grigorova; it is a carrier of a foreign, ‘NATO’ script, according to Associate Professor Alexander Sivilov; it is something unexpected, the product of people performing ‘vassal functions’ under ‘the Washington obkom’ (a common abbreviation during socialism for oblasten komitet, regional committee of the Communist Party, which, used as a metaphor, would mean ‘the real power behind the Government’s decision’), according to Professor Petko Ganchev),
- the Report is nothing but ‘anti-Russian fireworks’ without any real value whatsoever (Boyan Chukov),
- the perception of Russia as a threat is the dividing line that stops the BSP and GERB from working together (Professor Vanya Dobreva),
- including Russia in a negative connotation ‘in any document whatsoever doesn’t sound logical, diplomatic and politically perspicacious’ (Professor Nina Dyulgerova);

philosophical and geopolitical arguments:
- NATO membership increases the threats to Bulgaria, and there is a ‘doctrinal untenability’ of the small countries which prevents the preservation of ‘the Slav-Bulgarian value system’ (Professor Evgeny Gindev),
- there is a danger of Bulgaria’s incorporation into ‘the world of George Soros’ (Boyan Chukov),
- the danger comes from ‘the unipolar hegemony of the US’ (Associate Professor Darina Grigorova),
- the Report lacks ‘a good analysis of the political situation in our region’
Georgi Kotev’s criticisms\(^94\) in the field of energy security, which are in a category of their own, were focused on two points in the Report: on the attempt to extend the life of units 5 and 6 of the Kozloduy Nuclear Power Plant, and on the ‘tariff deficit’ indicated in the Report, that is, on low electricity prices as a threat to Bulgaria’s energy security.

There is an ambivalence about the role of Russia in the position of Solomon Passy,\(^95\) who claimed that Russia is not a threat but ‘a worry’, while pointing out the need to establish a NATO naval base on the Black Sea coast because of the existence of ‘a serious disbalance’ between the forces of Russia and NATO in the Black Sea region.

3.3. Positions of Analytical Centres and Polling Agencies

The analyses of two analytical centres and two polling agencies, devoted to national security and commenting on the Report, received media coverage in the studied period. The first two were produced by the Institute for Strategies and Analyses (ISA), founded by journalist Valeria Veleva, and by New Bulgarian University’s Risk Analysis and Management Centre, directed by Ivan Kostov, former prime minister of Bulgaria.

The ISA analysis (quoted by Epicenter\(^96\)) of Bulgarian foreign policy defined the messages of this policy as disparate, placing Bulgaria in the difficult situation of possibly remaining without allies, but, as a whole, demonstrated approval for Prime Minister Borisov’s overall policy.

The Risk Analysis and Management Centre published a comprehensive analysis\(^97\) (quoted by Mediapool) of the risks to Bulgaria posed by Russia’s foreign policy.

The analysis found that there is ‘Russian propaganda aggression’ in Bulgaria.

The analysis mentioned the Report on the State of National Security in 2016, and expounded and justified the theses regarding the threat posed by Russia that stems from ‘the Russian imperial and the Soviet doctrine’, analyzing its propaganda theses, speakers and the development of the manifestations of this aggression over time.

In the period under research, two polling agencies – Mediana and Gallup International – published the results of their public opinion surveys on the issues related to the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. Both surveys were widely covered by online media (see Table 4 in Appendix). The Gallup International survey received additional media coverage since it was quoted, albeit anonymously, in the only official position of the Russian administration on the Report – in the Comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department.
4. Opinions of Journalists, Commentators, Bloggers and Public Activists

4.1. Most-Quoted Journalists

The most-quoted journalist (see Figure 6) was Vladislav Vorobyov, a journalist of Rossiyskaya Gazeta, who published an article presenting his reflections on the adopted Report as well as his impressions of the Bulgarian media environment and his son’s visit in Bulgaria. Second by online media coverage, with the same number of quotations as Vorobyov but from three articles, each quoted between two and three times, was Ivo Indzhev (also here and here) who has a long track record of covering Bulgarian-Russian relations. Third was Valeria Veleva, who opined that the Report contains clichés ‘copied from statements of Western leaders, among whom George Soros and Donald Tusk’, but that nowhere in the Report is Russia directly declared to be a threat to Bulgaria and, furthermore, that the thesis about the Russian threat would be at variance with Bulgaria’s current foreign policy. Georgi Koritarov was the fourth most-quoted journalist. In his view, the texts of the Report do not mean that Russia is described as a threat to Bulgaria but, rather, that the relevant passages are meant to express ‘literally’ positions solely of the EU, demonstrating Bulgaria’s aloofness from the thus taken positions and showing that Bulgaria is an EU member that is ‘disciplined, obedient, and without any imagination and contribution’ of its own. Ivan Bedrov was fifth, with an analysis of the public perception of the Report and of ‘the Russian threat’ in particular, published on dw.com, in which he pointed out the difference between the public perception and the actual content of the report. The sixth most-quoted journalist was Grigor Lilov, for his analytical Facebook status on the reaction of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department, in which he described it as ‘furious’. Mejdu Redovete and Duma published digests of very critical comments by anonymous Bulgarian and Russian internet users on the Report.

Velizar Enchev, Velislava Dareva, Ivo Makedonski (also here), Yordan Halachev, Stefan Severin, and Yuri Mihalkov (also here and here) published emotional comments strongly critical of the findings of the Report, in which they unequivocally interpreted the passages describing the role of Russia as naming Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security, and expressed their absolute disagreement with such a thesis. The opinions of those authors represented the most negative reactions to the findings in the Report among all speakers on the subject, not only among journalists.

Svetoslav Terziev attempted to analyze the subject from a new angle, looking for parallels between the wavering attitude of Donald Trump and of Boyko Borisov towards NATO.

The other journalists who commented on the Report are present only with their own publication online and were not quoted by other media outlets. All of them strongly criticized the findings of the Report, contesting the role of Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security.
A total of twenty journalists commented on the Annual Report on the State of National Security for 2016. The majority of them thought that the Report names Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security and declared their absolute disagreement with such a thesis. This group demonstrated a mostly emotional behaviour, using some rational arguments as well. The group of journalists without a clearly expressed opinion about whether Russia is a threat is comparatively small, publishing purely analytical pieces on issues indirectly related to national security. There were also journalists who were of the opinion that the Report actually does not define Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security (see Table 5 in Appendix). In some cases it is difficult to draw a clear dividing line between experts and journalists (for example, in the case of Vladimir Shopov119).

![Figure 6. Journalists, commentators, bloggers and public activists who commented on the Report, ranked by number of publications quoting them.](image-url)
4.2. Classification of Media Outlets by Interest in the Subject of National Security

A total of 172 online media outlets, plus five aggregators of online content, were found to have published information on the subject (see Table 6 in Appendix) in the studied period. Apart from the aggregators, the media most interested in publishing information about the Report and about national security are Club Z and Faktor, followed closely by Epicenter, pan.bg and Pogled.info (see Figure 7).

4.3. Thematic Distribution of Publications on the Report According to National Security Threats

An analysis of the thematic distribution of publications on the national security threats described in the Report shows a distinct thematic disproportion between publications focusing on the Russian threat and publications focusing on other potential threats. A total of 611 publications, or 93% of all publications in the studied period devoted to the national security threats identified in the Report, focused on the role of Russia (see Table 7 in Appendix). Next, by a wide margin, are the publications focusing on the dangers of Islamism and Islamization, and the terrorist threat.

Conclusion

A main conclusion of this study is that from the very beginning of the researched period, there was a visible disparity between the dynamic of reactions to the Report and their media coverage. Whereas the statements of politicians, and especially of MPs, attracted strong media interest, analytical publications and TV discussions received almost no coverage. Media attention was almost exclusively focused on the passages in the Report describing the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security, which became the subject of lively public debate although many speakers tried to draw attention away from this issue, pointing out that it is not central in the Report.

There was also a strong disproportion in media coverage of the plenary debate and vote on the Report. The opinions of MPs who voted against the approval of the Report were quoted approximately twice as much as those of MPs who voted in favour. The same disproportion holds true for politicians in general, but also for experts and journalists who commented on the subject – those who denied or contested the findings in the Report defining the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security were quoted much more than those who accepted these findings.

The parliamentary parties avoided taking an official position on such a hotly debated and widely covered document. In the case of the parties which supported the document in Parliament this is understandable and explicable, since the Report itself presumably contains their official positions on the issues...
Figure 7. Media interest in national security issues in the studied period. Media outlets with five or more publications on the subject.
under consideration, even though this was never expressly mentioned in any of the reactions of the speakers of those parties. On the other hand, the parliamentary parties which disapproved of the submitted Report and voted against it did not formulate their official position at the national level, nor were their leaders (see 2. ‘Reactions of Politicians’) the speakers who most often expressed opinions on the issues in the Report. An exception among the party leaders was the DPS’s Mustafa Karadayi, but his objections and the objections of his party were in fact not about the content of the Report but about the highlights in it.

In the BSP, official reactions to the Report were formulated at the local level by BSP – Yambol and BSP – Sofia. The party’s leader, Kornelia Ninova, used a Facebook status to expound the BSP’s position upon the vote on the Report in Parliament, but an official position of the BSP on the Report was not formulated at the national level.

Further analysis could be conducted on the nuances in the positions against the Report – ranging from those that accepted the Report as a whole but disagreed with the passages describing Russia as a ‘threat’ to national security to those that claimed that Russia is named as a ‘main threat’ and categorically rejected the Report.

Another specific case is that of Krasimir Karakachanov, VMRO leader and Defence Minister, whose reactions on national security issues received comparatively wide media coverage. First, in his statements he referred mostly to national security issues that are included both in the 2016 Annual Report on the State of Defence and the Armed Forces and in the report on the selection of a new-type multirole jet fighter for the Bulgarian Air Force, but did not expressly mention the 2016 Annual Report on the State of National Security, except when answering concrete questions of journalists. Second, another discrepancy is also noteworthy – whereas the VMRO supported the Report in plenary without revision, VMRO leader Karakachanov recommended that it be revised precisely with regard to the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. As for the other members of the Council of Ministers, although the Bulgarian government and, in particular, Prime Minister Borisov, were also immediately involved with the Report, the government ministers expressed divergent opinions on the findings in the Report itself regarding the widely discussed role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. Borisov made only a single media appearance in which he declared that Russia is a ‘main threat’ to Bulgaria’s national security, but in which he also admitted his own role in wrecking the idea of creating a joint NATO flotilla to counter Russia’s increased presence in the Black Sea region. Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva said that the Russian Federation is not a threat to Bulgaria’s national security – which demonstrates, at least on the surface, disagreements in the government on the assessment of the Report itself.

This study shows that the opinions against the Report expressed during the parliamentary debate on it were quoted almost twice as much as those in favour.
There is a visible prevalence of speakers of the BSP in online media outlets in terms of both number of speakers and number of publications quoting their opinions.

With the exception of the DPS’s Mustafa Karadayi, the leaders of the parliamentary parties were reluctant to actually take part in the public debate on the Report and on national security issues, and the reasons for that could be the subject of another study.

The opinions of President Rumen Radev and Vice President Iliyana Yotova, who were against the description of Russia as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security, received comparatively wide media coverage. Their opinions slightly differed – whereas President Radev reckoned that the Report does not contain passages in which Russia is described as a direct threat to Bulgaria’s national security, Vice President Yotova was of the opinion that the presence of such definitions is due to the inauthenticity of the document which, in her view, was copied from similar documents of the EU and NATO.

Despite its direct involvement in the debate on the Report, the Russian Federation did not formulate an official opinion either. Information about the institutional reaction of the Russian Federation appeared unofficially by way of the words of Yury Chaika, Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, who visited the Prosecutor General’s Office of the Republic of Bulgaria on a working visit that was obviously urgent and shrouded in mystery but which included high-level meetings, as well as through the relatively low-level reaction of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Comment by its Information and Press Department.

As a whole, the institutional reactions against the findings of the Report received much more media coverage online than the institutional reactions defending its findings. The declarations of the National Movement of Russophiles and of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department were the most-quoted institutional reactions to the Report in the Bulgarian online space.

The analyses of experts covered a very wide thematic spectrum – from national security issues to the judicial reform, diplomacy and foreign policy, history, and so on. In the case of online media coverage of experts’ opinions, too, there is a visible prevalence of opinions criticizing the passages in the Report describing Russia’s role for Bulgaria’s national security, over neutral voices and voices critical of Russia.

Two reports of analytical centres analyzing the role of Russia and Bulgarian foreign and domestic policy – of the Institute for Strategies and Analyses and of the Risk Analysis and Management Centre at New Bulgarian University – were published in the studied period, but received almost no media coverage.

Two polling agencies – Mediana and Gallup International – published the results of their surveys on public attitudes towards the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. Both surveys attracted strong media interest, but
the Gallup International survey was more quoted because its results were also quoted in the official position of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department.

The majority of journalists commenting on the Report were of the opinion that Russia is named as a threat to national security and declared their absolute disagreement with such a thesis. A smaller group of journalists were of the opinion that in fact Russia is not named in the Report as a threat to Bulgaria’s national security. The detailed analyses of Ivan Bedrov and Vladimir Shopov deserve special attention in studying the online media reception of the Report.

It is highly likely that the subject has not exhausted its media potential and will be brought up again – for example, in the context of security issues in and around the Black Sea.
Figure 8. Media coverage of opinions of politicians who commented on the Report (number of publications). Opinions that Russia is not a threat
to Bulgaria’s national security and that such a finding in the Report is inadequate are in black. (There was a slight difference of opinion in this group: some of the speakers in it reckoned that there is such a finding in the Report, while others reckoned that there is no such finding in the Report.) Opinions agreeing with the findings but disagreeing with the highlights in the Report are in dark grey. Opinions agreeing with the findings in the Report are in light grey.

* Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, leader of the VMRO, can be regarded as co-author of the Report, although the findings concerning the threats to Bulgaria’s national security in the documents elaborated by the Defence Ministry are different from those in the Report. Furthermore, the Defence Minister spoke out in favour of revising the section in the Report in which the role of Russia is described as a threat to national security.

** Rumen Radev and Iliyana Yotova, the President and the Vice President of the Republic of Bulgaria, categorically objected to the identification of Russia as a threat to national security, but their opinions on the Report itself slightly differed. According to Radev, the Report does not say anywhere that Russia poses a direct threat to Bulgaria’s national security, while according to Yotova, the Report contains formulations that are inconsistent with Bulgarian reality and are probably due to the ‘anonymity’ of the Report. The Vice President suggested that these passages in the Report were most probably copied from similar documents of the EU and NATO.

*** Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov’s statement on national security issues and the role of Russia was made in a personal capacity.

**** Veselin Mareshki, the leader of Volya, did not comment on the Report, but the parliamentary group of Volya voted against its approval in the National Assembly.

**Table 1.** Chronology and media coverage of official and unofficial positions of parties, organizations and institutions on the Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Official positions</th>
<th>Unofficial positions</th>
<th>Form of the position</th>
<th>Media coverage, number of publications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep</td>
<td>Rumen Radev, President of Bulgaria</td>
<td>Interview, Nova TV</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep</td>
<td>National Movement of Russophiles</td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep</td>
<td>Mustafa Karadayi, DPS</td>
<td>Statement in the lobby of Parliament</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Sep</td>
<td>Jean-Claude Juncker*</td>
<td>State of the Union speech at the European Parliament</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep</td>
<td>Sergei Stanishev, PES President</td>
<td>Statement in the lobby of Parliament to journalists</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep</td>
<td>Iliyana Yotova, Vice President of Bulgaria</td>
<td>Statement in the lobby of Parliament to journalists</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep</td>
<td>Atanas Atanasov, DSB</td>
<td>Interview, bTV</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sep</td>
<td>ABV</td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Sep</td>
<td>BSP – Yambol, Regional Council</td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Sep</td>
<td>Volen Siderov, Ataka</td>
<td>Interview, <em>Nedelnik</em>, Alfa TV</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Sep</td>
<td>Boyko Borisov, GERB</td>
<td>Interview, <em>Tazi sutrin</em>, bTV</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Sep</td>
<td>Krasimir Karakachanov, VMRO</td>
<td>Interview, <em>Litse v litse</em>, bTV</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Iliyana Yotova, Vice President of Bulgaria</td>
<td>Interview, <em>Tazi sutrin</em>, bTV</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Komelia Ninova, BSP</td>
<td>Facebook status</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Yury Chaika, Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>Interview, 24 Chasa</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Sotir Tsatsarov, Prosecutor General of Bulgaria**</td>
<td>Interview, 24 Chasa</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Prosecutor General’s Office of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>Press release</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Sep</td>
<td>Executive Bureau of the City Council of BSP – Sofia</td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Sep</td>
<td>Ekaterina Zaharieva</td>
<td>Interview, <em>Zdravey, Balgariya</em>, Nova TV</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Sep</td>
<td>Nikolay Nenchev</td>
<td>Interviews for gramofona.com and bTV</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Oct</td>
<td>Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department</td>
<td>Comment, press release</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Nov</td>
<td>Ekaterina Zaharieva</td>
<td>Reply to parliamentary question, and statement in the lobby of Parliament</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Nov</td>
<td>National Movement of Russophiles</td>
<td>Declaration</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In his State of the Union speech, Jean-Claude Juncker spoke about European security issues and did not explicitly refer to Bulgaria’s security or to the Report.

** Sotir Tsatsarov explicitly declared that he was expressing a personal position in his comments on the Report.
Table 2. An attempt at reconstructing Prime Minister Boyko Borisov’s theses regarding the content of the Report on the State of National Security of the Republic of Bulgaria in 2016 and the inclusion of Russia in it as a threat to European security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original text</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘This is the NATO doctrine – if there’s a war, the Russian missiles are targeted at Bulgaria.’</td>
<td>According to the NATO doctrine, it is impossible to be a NATO member and not to identify Russia as a threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...I’ve heard that Mr Stanishev, whom I respect, said that Russia isn’t our enemy and, at the same time, we are in NATO. These two theses are entirely contradictory as a military doctrine.’</td>
<td>Sergei Stanishev is wrong in thinking that it is possible to be a NATO member and not to identify Russia as a threat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Turkey is NATO’s Southern flank next to us but, at the same time, it has been in heaviest conflict with the main countries in the European Union for many years now.’</td>
<td>NATO’s Southern flank is unstable because it includes Turkey, which is in bad relations with key EU member countries which are also members of NATO.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘And that’s why we very pragmatically say – God forbid that there should be war.’</td>
<td>In the event of war, it is not known to what extent NATO is capable of guaranteeing Bulgaria’s national security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Land operations are OK, land exercises are OK, but if we deploy large military ships in the Black Sea, if we start moving around in submarines, it will boil up eventually.’</td>
<td>Bulgaria will participate only in land exercises of NATO. The creation of a NATO flotilla in the Black Sea may lead to an escalation of tensions between NATO and Russia, including to an open military conflict.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...I made efforts to prevent this from happening.’</td>
<td>That is why Borisov wrecked the idea of creating a joint NATO Black Sea flotilla, leaving the Black Sea entirely in the hands of the Russian Navy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...I suffered quite a few reproaches from my NATO colleagues about the flotilla in the Black Sea.’</td>
<td>For which he was criticized by other leaders of NATO member states.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...we have a big interest in Russian tourists visiting Bulgaria. For two years now, President Putin has been keeping our agreement. The Balkan gas hub, in order for the European Balkan gas hub to become powerful, we need also Russian gas.’</td>
<td>In return for wrecking the project for creating a NATO Black Sea flotilla, Borisov has agreed with Putin that Russian tourists will be allowed to visit Bulgaria* and that Russian gas will be redistributed via the Balkan gas hub.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...when we’re in NATO, we pursue our own strategy and it takes into account its own threats in the event of a global world war on our territory, I mean European [territory]. At the same time, we pursue our pragmatic friendship with Russia.’</td>
<td>That is why the definition of Russia as a threat was included in the Report. In the event of a European or world war, Bulgaria will fight on NATO’s side and the agreement with Putin (‘our pragmatic friendship’) will become null and void.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...I spoke with Tsipras now, and with others, next year, during our Presidency [of the Council of the European Union] – may God grant also that the Minsk process become stronger – we should speak about lifting the sanctions.’</td>
<td>If the agreement with Putin remains in place and if there is progress on the implementation of the Minsk accords, Bulgaria, along with Greece and other EU member countries, will use the opportunities provided by its Presidency of the EU Council to work for lifting the EU sanctions on Russia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* It doesn’t become entirely clear from Borisov’s statement whether the agreement between him and Putin (between Bulgaria and Russia?) includes that Putin will allow Russian tourists to visit Bulgaria, or whether Borisov is worried only about the possibility that the number of Russian tourists will decrease as the result of a change in the situation on the tourism market caused by growing confrontation if a NATO Black Sea flotilla is created. Still, it is more likely that tourists are part of a current political agreement kept by the Russian President ‘for two years now’, since the other hypothesis – that the Russian commitment is about the Balkan gas hub – concerns a hypothetical project with unclear chances of realization and very vague parameters for the time being.
### Table 3. Distribution of experts’ opinions by attitude to the Report’s findings regarding Russia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No explicit or categorical opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Names</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of publications</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Georgi Kotev mentioned Russian influence in the energy sector as negative, but did not focus explicitly on the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security. Since he discussed only matters of energy sources, he may be placed elsewhere in the table.

** Solomon Passy expressed the opinion that Russia is not a threat but ‘a worry’, yet he recommended establishing a NATO naval base on the Black Sea coast.

### Table 4. Media coverage of public opinion surveys and analyses related to the subject matter of the Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Form of reaction</th>
<th>Number of quotations/reprints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mediana Agency</td>
<td>Nationally representative survey conducted between 12 and 18 July 2017</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gallup International Agency</strong></td>
<td>Express nationally representative survey conducted by phone on 26 and 27 September 2017</td>
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* Most quotations of the Gallup International survey are anonymous, reprinting or referring to the Comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry’s Information and Press Department, without naming the agency that conducted the survey.
Table 5. Distribution of journalists’ opinions by attitude to the Report’s findings regarding Russia

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<th>Number of reactions</th>
<th>Media coverage, number of publications</th>
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<td>(none)</td>
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<td>The findings in the Report don’t mean that Russia is identified as a threat to Bulgaria</td>
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<td>No explicit opinion on whether Russia is identified in the Report as a threat to Bulgaria</td>
<td>Valeria Veleva, Georgi Koritarov, Grigor Lilov, Svetoslav Terziev</td>
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<td>Russia is identified in the Report as a threat to Bulgaria, and I disagree with this thesis</td>
<td>Vladislav Vorobyov, Velizar Enchev, Velislava Dareva, Ivo Makedonski, Yordan Halachev, Stefan Severin, Yuri Mihalkov, Petar Volgin, Valentin Georgiev, Georgi Nikolov, Georgi Petrov, Ekaterina Kaprova, Nora Stoichkova, Rumen Petkov</td>
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### Table 6. Publications on the subject of national security, published in online media in the period from 6 September 2017 to 31 November 2017

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**Konstantin Pavlov: Analysis of the Online Media Reactions**

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Konstantin Pavlov: *Analysis of the Online Media Reactions*

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### Table 7. Main subjects in publications covering the Report and dealing with national security threats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Phrases used</th>
<th>Number of publications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>Russia, Moscow, ‘the Russian threat’, ‘the bear’, ‘Putin’s regime’, ‘actions on the part of Russia’, Putin, Warsaw Pact</td>
<td>611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Terrorism, ‘terrorist acts’, ‘terrorist threat’</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Energy risks (Russia is either absent or isn’t the main subject) | ‘poli
| Crime                                        | ‘organized crime’, ‘conventional crime’                                                          | 3                      |
| Corruption                                   | corruption                                                                                       | 2                      |
| Extremism                                    | ‘extremist cells’                                                                                 | 1                      |
| Hybrid warfare                               | ‘hybrid warfare’                                                                                  | 1                      |
| Risks in justice and home affairs            | ‘ordered-from-above investigations and/or charges’                                               | 1                      |
| Border security                              | ‘the fence on the border with Turkey’                                                            | 1                      |

**NOTES**

9. https://a-specto.bg/kabinett-borisov-3-otnovo-s-gruba-greshka-.
Critique & Humanism, vol. 49, no. 1/2018

ya-evropejski-sayuz-a-bojko-se-yavyava-kato-edin-malak-putin-u-nas/.
19 https://goo.gl/3UrFbh.
21 Publications quoting more than one speaker are counted as many times as the number of speakers quoted in them.
26 Krasimir Karakachanov, the VMRO leader, commented on the threats to Bulgaria’s national security in his capacity as Defence Minister, but rarely commented on the Report itself. Milen Mihov, also from the VMRO, was the most-quoted speaker commenting on the Report.
34 The style of Prime Minister Borisov’s statement on the subject was analyzed by Vladimir Shopov. Shopov saw in this style an attempt to profanate the Russian threat by representing it in semi-cartoonish form. In his statements Borisov uses ‘improbable but traumatic images’, the analyst claimed. He concluded that, by speaking melodramatically and constantly hyperbolizing, Borisov achieves displacement of the picture of the real threats from the consciousness of citizens, thereby confusing the already confused Bulgarian public even more.
37 According to Georgi Angelov of Dnevnik, the findings in the Report on the State of National Security are ‘more pessimistic’ than those in the Report on the State of Defence. Atlantic Council member Mihail Naydenvov, on the other hand, argued that there’s no point in comparing the sharpness of the formulations in different documents.
42 This was also the opinion of the analyst, Associate Professor Atanas Slavov, according to whom Chaika was most probably carrying out ‘political orders’ of the Russian President. Mediapool also pointed out that it wasn’t just the Russian Prosecutor General who was raising political issues – Bulgaria’s Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov, too, was making political statements although prosecutors are not supposed to have political functions.
Konstantin Pavlov: Analysis of the Online Media Reactions

45 https://goo.gl/LiHtQ.
46 https://www.dnevnik.bg/politika/2017/11/03/3071505_zaharieva_otgovaria_na_zaharova_nadiavam_se_che_e/.
47 Analyzing the reactions of members of the Council of Ministers to the Report, journalist Mikaela Vazharova suspected that there was disagreement in the government on the matter. She pointed out that the explanations of Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva and of Dzhema Grozdanova, Chairperson of the parliamentary Foreign Policy Committee and GERB MP, regarding the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security were at odds with the position of Prime Minister Borisov, who had named Russia as a main threat, while Zaharieva and Grozdanova refrained from doing so. Thus, Vazharova concluded that Bulgarian foreign policy is ‘cacophonous’ and ‘meandering, without a clear image’, pointing out that this type of foreign policy prevents the country from winning the trust of the international community.
50 President Radev probably meant that by declaring Russia to be a threat, Bulgaria would become ‘hostage to foreign interests’. Although the expression is ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways, considering the context, this is most probably what he meant.
51 Since the quoted percentage coincides with the results of a survey conducted by the Gallup International Agency, in all likelihood this was the survey the Department was referring to, see 3.3. ‘Positions of Analytical Centres and Polling Agencies’.
54 Yordanov claimed that he was commenting on the Report on the Activities of the State Intelligence Agency in 2016, but he was obviously mistaken since that report does not contain passages about threats to Bulgaria’s territorial integrity. Such passages are contained in the Report on the Activities of the State Agency for National Security in 2016.
55 https://goo.gl/pCU3aF.
56 https://goo.gl/2cYUSP.
62 Yordanov claimed that he was commenting on the Report on the Activities of the State Intelligence Agency in 2016, but he was obviously mistaken since that report does not contain passages about threats to Bulgaria’s territorial integrity. Such passages are contained in the Report on the Activities of the State Agency for National Security in 2016.
On the other hand, the Institute for Strategies and Analyses, founded by Valeria Veleva, claimed that Bulgarian foreign policy defines Russia as a ‘main threat’ to Bulgaria’s national security and conveys ‘disparate messages’.

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111 https://goo.gl/Ade58x.
119 https://goo.gl/6bSTmb.
120 Petar Nenkov could not have commented on the Report since his article was written before the latter’s publication, but it was reprinted during the public debate on national security stirred up by the Report. As his opinion was categorically in favour of the Warsaw Pact as a guarantor of Bulgaria’s national security in contrast to NATO, it is very likely that his opinion on the findings in the Report, especially those regarding the Russian Federation, would be negative.
THE CONSPIRACY THEORY
OF IGNORANCE IN THE CLASSICAL
SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

‘Then came, it seems, that wise and cunning man,
The first inventor of the fear of gods…
He framed a tale, a most alluring doctrine,
Concealing truth by veils of lying lore.’

Critias
(as quoted in Popper, 1966, p.142)

‘Se pensassi che questo mio Trattato potesse avere molti lettori
non lo scriverei.’

Vilfredo Pareto
Trattato di Sociologia Generale (1916)

‘Of course conspiracy theories are an absurd deformation of our
own arguments, but, like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy
border to the wrong party, these are our weapons nonetheless.’

Bruno Latour

In its subject matter, as a left-wing satire of Reaganomics, John Carpen-
ter’s 1988 film They Live is very much of its time. The approach, however, is
a throwback to 1950s black-and-white science-fiction parables like Invasion of
the Body Snatchers or The Twilight Zone TV series. For this and other reasons,
it was not particularly successful when it was released, but it has come to be
critically reassessed over the years, becoming the object of homages\(^1\) and rein-
terpretations.

The main character is a construction worker who discovers that yuppies are
aliens exploiting the working class and covering it up with a hypnotic broadcast
signal that creates a false reality. The only way to see the true reality is using
special sunglasses manufactured by the resistance.
When the hero puts the glasses on, he can see not only the cadaverous real faces of the aliens who are feeding off human work, but also the subliminal messages hidden in advertisements, billboards, TV, magazines, etc. Messages such as ‘Obey’, ‘Marry and reproduce’, ‘Don’t question authority’, ‘Stay asleep’, and, in dollar bills, ‘This is your God’.

The film can be used, as an allegory, to illustrate the Marxist theory of ideology, and no less an authority than Slavoj Žižek\(^2\) has done precisely that. But this is not the only possible interpretation. Over the last ten years or so, conspiracy theorists from David Icke to white supremacists have read the allegory in quite different terms. As stormfront.org user Crowstorm enthused on 11 March 2008:\(^3\) ‘This movie is great. It really says it all about our society… the Jews really are the aliens controlling everything. Living among us and we don’t even know it.’

The brief but convoluted history of the interpretations, reinterpretations and misinterpretations of They Live shows how short the distance can sometimes be between social theory and conspiracy theory. In this case, we seem to go from the Marxist theory of ideology to reptilians and the Elders of Zion via political satire. This might suggest that both are not as radically different as we students of social theory would like to think they are.

In order to understand how this and similar feats can be accomplished, and perhaps to properly assess the seeming similarities, we need to go, as usual, back to Popper.

1. The Conspiracy Theory of Ignorance

Conspiracy theory scholars usually refer to, and criticize, Popper’s notion of the ‘conspiracy theory of society’ (as established, for example, in Popper, 1984 [1966]): the idea that social reality, or relevant aspects of it (social inequality, economic crises, revolutions, etc.), can be explained as the result of covert actions by specific groups. Of course, most people do not know about them because of such secrecy. Once the explanation is provided, and the hidden truth is uncovered for everyone to see, it should be generally accepted. The fact that it is not, and that conspiracy theorists are often met with scepticism and even ridicule, begs the question: why do we resist accepting their theories when the conspiracies they explain are not a secret anymore?

Besides the conspiracy theory of society, there is also a ‘conspiracy theory of ignorance’, which, as Popper (2002 [1963], p.4) defined it, ‘interprets ignorance not as a mere lack of knowledge but as the work of some sinister power, the source of impure and evil influences which pervert and poison our minds and instill in us the habit of resistance to knowledge.’ This should explain not only why we do not know, but also and perhaps more importantly, why we do not want to know, even when someone pushes the evidence under our noses.

The prime example of this, according to Popper, was one of his usual bêtes noires, Marxism, specifically the Marxist theory of ideology as false con-
consciousness, according to which the cultural productions of capitalist society are epiphenomena of the economic infrastructure and legitimize it, obfuscat ing its underlying mechanisms.

It would seem that each theory complements the other: while the conspiracy theory of society reveals the conspiracy that shapes social reality, the conspiracy theory of ignorance explains how the true nature of social reality is covered up.

Popper’s discussion of conspiracy theories was intended to show what the social sciences should not do: instead of looking for unfalsifiable and highly unlikely successful grand conspiracies, the social sciences should focus on the unintended consequences of intentional actions. Popper wasn’t particularly fond of the sociology of knowledge, either: in Chapter 23 of The Open Society and Its Enemies, he thoroughly criticized the discipline as a Hegelian byproduct inheriting most defects of Hegelian and Marxist epistemologies, and, ultimately, failing to be a true sociology of knowledge for not being social enough; that is, for failing to grasp the intersubjective nature of its subject matter. It was, as he wrote, another example of ‘vulgar Marxism’, characterized by

the tendency to unveil the hidden motives behind our actions. The sociology of knowledge belongs to this group, together with psycho-analysis and certain philosophies which unveil the ‘meaninglessness’ of the tenets of their opponents. The popularity of this views lies, I believe, in the ease with which they can be applied, and in the satisfaction which they confer on those who see through things, and through the follies of the unenlightened. This pleasure would be harmless, were it not that all these ideas are liable to destroy the intellectual basis of any discussion, by establishing what I have called a ‘reinforced dogmatism’. (Popper, 1984 [1966], p.215)

From Popper’s standpoint these seem to be, then, perspectives on social reality which obfuscate rather than illuminate it, placing the (social/conspiracy) theorist in the unassailable and very comfortable rhetorical position of being always ‘right’.

2. Before the Sociology of Knowledge: The Psycho-Sociology of Error

Historically, as Mannheim (1954 [1929]) himself pointed, the sociology of knowledge descends from theories of ignorance, conspiratorial or otherwise, starting from Bacon’s theory of idola mentis. Error, deception and prejudice were essential both to the Enlightened and the Romantic forerunners of the discipline. The Enlightened wanted to remove them, so that we could achieve true knowledge, while the Romantics argued that it could not be done and, even if it could, it should not be done.

Over the centuries, we will encounter two basic attitudes regarding intentionally induced error: (1) the urge to unmask the deceivers and free humanity
from ignorance, and (2) an endorsement of necessary illusions, socially useful deceptions which contribute to the general well-being or, in any event, to main-
tain order. Pareto, as a late heir to Machiavelli, is an eloquent example of this attitude when he states that, should he know that his treatise on general sociol-
yogy (*Mind and Society*) was going to be read by many, he would not write it, for the knowledge he is sharing should be for the select few. Whether there is or has been a conspiracy of ignorance, Pareto and many others (including the Romantic conservatives) have strongly argued for one, and it seems that they would have gladly taken part in it. This is the anti-Enlightenment tradition of thinkers who defend ideology (Lenk, 1971). According to Popper, one of the forerunners in this tradition was Plato’s uncle Critias, one of the leaders of the Thirty Tyrants of Athens, ‘the first to glorify propaganda lies, whose invention he described in forceful verses eulogizing the wise and cunning man who fabricated religion, in order to “persuade” the people, i.e. to threaten them into submission’ (Popper, 1966, p.142).

In spite of their differences, thinkers of the radical Enlightenment and the Romantic conservatives shared one essential assumption: prejudices and ideology play an important role in the forms of social domination.

In the French *philosophes* we find another of Popper’s examples of the conspiracy theory of ignorance: the notion of ‘priestly deception’, which points to a very specific group that is out there to fool us. They have a vested interest in promoting ignorance, both in the sense of not knowing and not wanting to know. According to Holbach and Helvetius, only those who profit from the spreading of prejudices are interested in promoting them (Lenk, 1971). Popper (2002 [1963], p.9) notes:

> The conspiracy theory of ignorance is fairly well known in its Marxian form as the conspiracy of a capitalist press that perverts and suppresses truth and fills the workers’ minds with false ideologies. Prominent among these, of course, are the doctrines of religion. It is surprising to find how unoriginal Marxist theory is. The wicked and fraudulent priest who keeps people in ignorance was a stock figure of the eighteenth century and, I am afraid, one of the inspirations of liberalism. It can be traced back to the protestant belief in the conspiracy of the Roman Church, and also to the beliefs of those dissenters who held similar views about the Established Church.

Bacon’s theory of idols was perhaps a tad more sophisticated, since it explained the distortions in our knowledge pointing to different psychological and social factors besides simply being fooled by others. However, like the *philosophes*, Bacon argued that there were reasons which explained our ignorance and, while we were not entirely responsible for it, we could do something to avoid error and reach the truth.

The Romantics disagreed: culture was not possible without prejudice, and
culture was obviously essential to any society. In his criticism of Kant’s categories, Herder anticipated Durkheim’s later position in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*: they were not transcendental, but rooted in life and its organization. Therefore, our knowledge is socially conditioned from its very roots: removing social conditions would imply removing knowledge altogether, making it impossible.

The Romantics went a few steps further than the Enlightened philosophers: there were reasons that explained prejudice, we were not entirely responsible for it, there was nothing we could do to avoid it, and in fact there was nothing we should do about it. Unsurprisingly, scholars like Werner Stark (1958) and Robert Nisbet (1986) have argued that, of these two traditions, the Enlightened and the Romantic, the latter is the more substantial contribution to the development of a sociology of knowledge and sociology in general, at least to the extent that they promote an approach based on social structure rather than voluntarism.

3. The Sociology of Truth and the Sociology of Knowledge

In addition to a sociology of error (in this case, false consciousness), in Marx we find also a sociology of truth. The theory of ideology (Marx and Engels, 1998 [1932]) does not only explain prejudice and ignorance: true knowledge is socially conditioned as well. This means that both knowledge and ignorance are placed out of our reach: we are not responsible for either. We are powerless to acquire true knowledge or get rid of our ignorance, since both depend on forces beyond our control. And, very importantly, these forces are not random: they are shaped by the interests of specific groups. These interests are defined by the place the groups hold in social structure, the true reality hidden under apparent reality.

When this structure is understood in terms of conflict between groups, as it is in Marx, where one group is exploiting others, we are really not that far from a conspiracy theory (indeed, Popper would argue that *this* is a textbook example of the ‘conspiracy theory of society’). With the social conditioning of true knowledge, Marx contributes another feature which seems key to the conspiracy theorizing potential of the sociology of knowledge: the idea that, while most positions get distorted visions of reality, there are specific places from which you can see things as they really are. It’s not really up to the subject, since it depends on social structure, and also, you cannot make others see reality if they are not in your position.

Prior to Mannheim, other early sociologists of knowledge insisted on some elements of such vision. Durkheim’s approach was not particularly conflictive, but he reinforced the idea of knowledge being fundamentally conditioned by social structure (Durkheim, 2014 [1912]). With Marxism, Durkheim’s sociology is the most direct ancestor of the sociology of knowledge (Wolff, 1968): from the former, it takes its critical, ‘unmasking’ outlook; from the latter, the
interest on the relation between primitive forms of social organization and the
categories of thought.

Among the many substantial contributions that Lukács (1972 [1923]) made to the sociology of knowledge in *History and Class Consciousness*, the distinction between the real consciousness and the potential consciousness of a class seems particularly relevant to our purposes. The real consciousness of a class is what its members happen to think at a given moment in history, while its possible consciousness is the potential awareness of their place in society and history. The development of capitalist society should lead to a convergence of both real and potential consciousness in the working class but, if that did not happen, the depositary of the possible consciousness of the working class would be the Communist Party. This implies that we can explain not only why the many who don’t occupy the same position in social structure that we do cannot see reality the same way as we do, but also why most of those who do share our position cannot see it either.

Lukács’s estranged friend Karl Mannheim (1954 [1929]) took Marx’s theory of ideology and expanded it to create the canon of classical sociology of knowledge. Instead of limiting ideology to particular elements in someone’s beliefs, he promoted a notion of ‘total ideology’, where the whole structure of thought is socially conditioned according to the person’s position in social structure (including factors such as class, age group or generation, and nationality). Famously, the notion of total ideology was one of the main objects of Popper’s derision in his chapter on the sociology of knowledge in *The Open Society*, where it was characterized as a rhetorical tool that the sociologist uses to invalidate other positions while she remains unaware of the relativistic, self-defeating implications of such a concept. But Mannheim was aware of them:

Mannheim realized that the reciprocal unmasking of the unconscious roots of intellectual existence contributed to the erosion of man’s confidence in thought as such. Surrounded by the political self-consciousness and cultural neuroticism of Weimar Germany Mannheim, however, permitted the thrust of his intellectual energy to carry him beyond the confines of the ideological zone. He turned the weapon of ideological analysis against himself in the attempt to lay bare the social roots of all theories including his own. (Remmling, 1973, pp.219-220)

Or, as Stark (1958, p.152) put it:

though the sociology of knowledge as such is not concerned with the problem of truth, it has consequences which bear upon that very problem and imperatively demand attention. Indeed, its whole origin as an interesting and independent study was connected with, and occasioned by, a situation in which the truth had become deeply problematic.
As one way, among others, to avoid relativism, Mannheim also pointed, like Lukács, to a specific group that could acquire an accurate vision of reality: not the working class, nor the Communist Party, but a scholarly intelligentsia that was able to rise over its own class and national origins and transcend the perspective derived from such positions. On the other hand, as Popper argued, Mannheim was a member of such scholarly intelligentsia and the total ideology of any group should include the belief that its perspective is the correct one. Therefore, Mannheim’s intelligentsia was as trapped in its total ideology as anyone else in societies past, present and future.

Mannheim wished to preserve natural science and mathematics from the relativistic reach of total ideology, but a few decades later Kuhn, Feyerabend and the Strong Programme of the Sociology of Science would demolish that wall of contention too: natural science and mathematics are as conditioned by interests and social structure as any other form of knowledge. Science is like any other political institution, and its claims to knowledge are, essentially, based on authority and sustained by ideological reproduction:

We have a vast system of scientific education wherein, it seems, deference to the authority of the teacher is essential, as is a willingness to set aside one’s own individual thoughts, ideas and criticisms. And we have a very high level of intellectual division of labour within science, which again seems to require that one person defer to the perceptions, the reasoning and the recommendations of another purely on the basis of his standing, the letters after the name perhaps, and the cognitive authority they imply. (Barnes, 1985, p.81)

It is not difficult to see how such conception of science facilitates conspiracy theorizing about, for instance, vaccines. Why should we defer to the authority of a white coat and the letters ‘M.D.’ or ‘PhD’?

4. Unconscious Conspiracies: The Problem of Intentionality

The sociology of knowledge shows us that social reality is not what it seems, and that only some, by virtue of their epistemologically privileged social position, or their specialized training as sociologists of knowledge, can see it as it really is. If you don’t see it like I do, that is just another proof that I am right, and your perspective is distorted. It is nothing that you can amend, since it depends on forces beyond your control. And even if you are placed in the best structural position to perceive reality, perhaps you will not get to see it and will need others to interpret it for you, maybe against your will if you resist to see the real truth, to acquire the possible consciousness that befits your class. Like the conspiracy theorist, the sociologist of knowledge seems to be placing herself in an unfalsifiable, unassailable position: as is the case with Latour’s
'critical minds’ (Latour, 2003), she will always be right.

Certainly, there are key differences between the sociology of knowledge and conspiracy theories, which Popper originally overlooked. As Boltanski (2012, p.331) noted, Popper’s argument required the creation of a necessary link between the reference to collective entities and the reference to a conspiracy, as if both were equivalent operations. But, if nothing else, intentionality marks a key difference between both. Popper acknowledged that conspiracies are a possible form of collective action, and that these have historically happened. But, like Boltanski points out, arguing that there are patterns of behaviour and belief that apply to specific groups is quite different to claiming that these groups act in a coordinated conspiracy, which is seldom claimed by anyone but, unsurprisingly, conspiracy theorists. We may postulate similar interests and points of view for all the members of a given social class, but that does not imply that we are inferring they share the same intention. However, by confusing both claims, Popper could label a conspiracy theory any approach to social science that deviates from his methodological individualism, which Boudon (1986, pp.53-79) would later develop, rejecting both holism and irrationalist individualism, and focusing on understanding the actors’ motivations for holding and spreading beliefs.

The distortion of knowledge is not intentional in post-Mannheimian sociology of knowledge… but perhaps that would make for an even more perfect conspiracy, one in which we all unwittingly collaborate, unconscious conspirators against our own best interests.

And, anyway, once you have established a self-sufficient, self-working machine, perhaps you only need to add a prime mover, or a few agents here and there to periodically check that everything works as it should. The unsuspecting public will take care of it most of the time.

This is, then, the road from the sociology of error (and Popper’s ‘conspiracy theory of ignorance’) to the sociology of knowledge, which removes the intentionality behind priestly deception and theorizes a much more perfect mechanism for covering up the true nature of reality, producing not only our prejudices but also the truths that we get to know, and, hypothetically, from the sociology of knowledge to proper conspiracy theories, which can take those mechanisms conceptually informed by the sociology of knowledge and re-instate intentionality, placing key agents in key positions to start up the engine and keep it well-greased. In Latour’s words (2003, pp.229-230):

What if explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse, had outlived their usefulness and deteriorated to the point of now feeding the most gullible sort of critique? … these are our weapons … In spite of all the deformations, it is easy to recognize, still burnt in the steel, our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*. 
If conspiracy theorizing may have learnt something from ‘vulgar Marxism’ (as Popper would say), critical theory and the sociology of knowledge… is there anything that the sociology of knowledge can learn from conspiracy theories?

Perhaps we might want to start by trying to avoid the *ad hominem* arguments which are often used both by conspiracy theorists and their critics. Labeling someone a ‘conspiracy theorist’ shouldn’t always be the end of the conversation. At the very least, we should be interested in how this label is used: the work of Hustig and Orr (2007) in this respect is pointing to a potentially very fruitful direction.

Some authors, like Karl Maton (2014) in his legitimation code theory, have argued that we should reclaim Popper’s notion of ‘objective knowledge’ and move from a sociology of knowing, focused on the subjective process of formation of beliefs, to a proper sociology of knowledge examining the product of such a process once it is objectified. We could also try the classic Reichenbachian distinction between context of discovery and context of justification, in order to sociologically examine conspiracy theories at both levels.

Alfred Schutz, who thought that the sociology of knowledge shouldn’t have anything to contribute to epistemological problems and authored at least two essays that could prove very illuminating in the study of conspiracy theories (‘The Well-Informed Citizen’, about the social distribution of knowledge, and ‘Don Quixote and the Problem of Reality’), wrote that sociological concepts are second-order concepts based on the first-order concepts that lay people use to make sense of social reality (Schutz, 1962). These hypothetical similarities between sociology of knowledge and conspiracy theories should help if we intend to study conspiracy theories.

If conspiracy theorists can enrich their theories by taking elements from sociology and adding intentionality, perhaps we could modify intentionality in conspiracy theories and see if we can build heuristic models that might be useful even if they are not empirically real. Adam Smith never claimed that there was indeed a material invisible hand consciously harmonizing economic activity… which doesn’t make the metaphor any less useful, even to those who criticize his theory. As Clare Birchall (2006, p.89) wrote in the closing remarks of a chapter on Cultural Studies as conspiracy theory:

The idea is not to replicate the failures of conspiracy theory but to take on board the lessons to be learnt from conspiracy theory regarding authority, legitimacy, and how to approach cultural phenomena without silencing it, in order to re-imagine cultural studies and what it is capable of becoming.

Perhaps, the one essential hint that we social scientists might take from conspiracy theorizing is about rhetoric and the creation of powerful images. Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset (1977 [1939], p.33), in an essay on ‘ideas’
and ‘beliefs’ published in the late 1930s, which, very much in line with the sociology of knowledge of his time, understood the former as the ideas that we have and the latter as the ideas that we inhabit, wrote:

The gaps in our beliefs are, then, the vital place where ideas intervene. The point of ideas is always replacing the unstable, ambiguous world with a world where ambiguity disappears. How can we achieve that? Fantasizing, dreaming up worlds. The idea is imagination.

Maybe it should be pointed out that this comes from an epistemological relativist who, a few lines below, equates mathematics to poetry.

5. Afterword: They Live Happily Ever After
What is, finally, the correct interpretation of John Carpenter’s film They Live? And who is authorized to establish it once and for all? When told about the neo-Nazi readings of his work, the director felt compelled to tweet (on 3 January 2017) and set the record straight: ‘They Live is about yuppies and unrestrained capitalism. It has nothing to do with Jewish control of the world, which is slander and a lie.’

In response to this rather unambiguous statement, Carpenter received a great number of variations of a main theme: ‘Well, of course you would say that, nobody really expected you to admit it.’ Perhaps the most telling of these was a meme, tweeted on the same day, which showed the film’s hero putting his special sunglasses on and seeing the truth behind John Carpenter’s tweet: ‘They Live is about Jewish control of the world.’

The fading trademark in those anti-ideological glasses, created by Carpenter and now used against him, for purposes completely removed from his original intentions, surely reads, like Bruno Latour’s weapons, Made in Criticalland.

NOTES
1 Including a shot-for-shot remake of one of its key set-pieces in the South Park episode ‘Cripple Fight’.
2 In The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology (“What is Ideology?”), available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Ch5ZCGi0PQ.
3 https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t537459/.
4 This leads Remmling to admiringly state that ‘Mannheim seems to belong to those intellectuals who derive their creative strength from the act of standing close to an abyss’ (1973, p.220).
5 https://twitter.com/TheHorrorMaster/status/816486706186596352.
6 https://twitter.com/shodandice/status/816524192476708864.
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THE DEEP STATE BETWEEN
THE (UN)WARRANTED CONSPIRACY THEORY
AND STRUCTURAL ELEMENT
OF POLITICAL REGIMES?

Introduction

In this paper I would like to address a more general issue of conspiracy theories (CTs) as knowledge, its (mis)treatments, as well as specific features and outcomes of different epistemic approaches to CTs. Following that, I will explain why the concept of the deep state is a good candidate for the research of conspiratorial knowledge and reasoning. Furthermore, I will try to answer through the analysis of the literature on the deep state how the knowledge produced by scholars who deal with the deep state, in comparison with other social agents, can be useful for the study of warranted and unwarranted CTs.

Through most of the twentieth century, especially after the end of World War II, CTs were considered as an illegitimate knowledge (Bratich, 2008). Several prominent social scientists have contributed to the general public attitude that belief in CTs is a flawed and improper way of thinking. Among others, those are: Karl R. Popper (1972, pp.123-125), who accused the logic of CTs of being unable to predict unintended consequences of social actions and emphasized their detrimental role in Nazi counter-conspiracy. The next one is Harold Lasswell (1930; 1948), who considered CTs as the source of production of exaggerated mistrust in public affairs and prejudices. Franz Neumann (1957; 2017) conceptualized belief in CTs as the consequence of an alienation on the psychological, socio-economic, and political levels. Richard Hofstadter (1965) described CTs as paranoid fantasizing and as an irrational style of political imagination that threatens liberal democratic order. Gradually, the ideas of these prominent scholars became the mainstream attitude of Western media and political discourse. Currently, this kind of thinking about CTs is exercised on an automatic level in most of the world. If anyone mentions CTs, the first reaction is that such interpretation is unwarranted, and people who produce and consume them are stigmatized as unserious, bizarre, if not pathological, subjects.

Nevertheless, that mainstream attitude has been severely criticized and
deconstructed in the last two decades by several authors, such as Coady et al. (2006), Bratich (2008), Pigden (2007), Blanuša (2011), Fenster (1999), and Dentith (2014), among others. What is common to all these authors is an attempt to depathologize the general approach to CTs and to show that the logic of CT does not lead necessarily to irrational and politically dangerous consequences. According to these authors, conspiratorial arguments are in many cases a necessary supposition. Furthermore, if we accept a formal definition of CT as any interpretation which implies conspiracy, then such interpretations are much more widespread than it is usually hypothesized. Logically flawed or unwarranted CTs are becoming, then, just one group of CTs among other, more valid conspiratorial interpretations. Being aware of this fact produces another effect: selective denigration and stigmatization of CTs becomes much more visible.

Accordingly, a better approach would be to consider CTs as the ‘wild’ hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970) and those who interpret socio-political reality in that way can be metaphorically described as awkward guests who disregard the ‘table manners’ and tacit sociability rules of mainstream intellectuals and go beyond acceptable cheekiness in the liberal-democratic order (cf. Arditi, 2007, p.78). From such mouths, CTs are enunciated as blustering and blabbing indecent words in the eyes of mild-mannered unpretentious critics.

Nevertheless, for a proper psycho-political analysis this kind of talk is not empty words. We are more prone to consider them as a sort of symptomatic reading of reality, wherein it is assumed that, under the influence of the undeclared (hidden) interest (in domination, exploitation, etc.), there is a gap between the ‘official’, public meaning of some interpretation and its ‘actual’ intention (Žižek, 1994, p.10). Such reading tries to demonstrate the gap between surface and depth, between appearances and ‘true reality’, very similar to the ideology critique in its attempt to demystify social and political events and processes. Furthermore, we contend that CTs as such could be considered as symptoms of wider processes, e.g. structural, historical and political cleavages in a given society. In short, we do not perceive them as whimsical, disarranged, fragmented and shallow expressions. On the contrary, by analyzing them in an aggregated way as broader tendencies in everyday political thinking, we suppose they can give us an insightful picture of political frictions, antagonism, hopes and fears, desires and traumas on the collective scale. Conceived in that way, CTs are compact, affectively saturated interpretations of the socio-political field of human affairs.

CTs have been studied from various disciplinary angles: psychological, sociological, historical, from the angles of literary studies and political science, philosophy, etc. Nevertheless, for the proper socio-political analysis we assume it is possible to adopt two general approaches to CTs, which differ by their epistemological stance, or by whether they are concerned or not with the question of the justifiability of CTs. The first one does not bother itself with the question of whether, if studied, CTs are justified or unjustified, warranted or unwarranted. The issue of whether there is some truth of conspiracy behind the conspira-
rial explanation does not concern this approach. Here it is enough for a scholar to apply the Thomas theorem: ‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and Thomas, 1928, pp.571-572). In other words, if people believe that some CT is true, then they will behave as if such a conspiracy really exists.¹ In that sense, this approach can treat CTs as a subjective knowledge which influences the behaviour of those who possess it. Such an approach can be found in numerous researches dealing with causes and consequences of conspiratorial beliefs and attitudes based on such a form of thinking. The second approach deals explicitly with the question of knowledge and asks itself questions such as: What differentiates warranted from unwarranted CTs? Is it possible to set up clear standards to discern between them? Who believes in (un)warranted CTs? And with what consequences? In comparison to the first one, this approach involves another dimension, which deals with the quality of argumentation, the reasoning process and justifiability of at least some CTs. Furthermore, it poses the question of whether there is a form of prudent conspiracism that goes against the grain of mainstream thinking about this phenomenon.

Figure 1. Types of conspiracy theories according to their public acceptance.²

If someone would like to study the problem of differentiation between warranted and unwarranted CTs, the next question would be, where to search for them? Are there some areas or types of CTs more suitable for such a search than others? If we imagine provisionally different types of CTs, as represented in Figure 1, then the first choice for such a quest might be the study of disputable CTs, or those which represent competing interpretations on some topics. Nevertheless, other types represented here can be analyzed for whether they are (un)warranted, but they will not reveal such a high number of arguments with
the purpose to verify or refute some CT as in the case of disputable CTs. To be clear, this is only one important criterion for their study. Further criteria are the quality of the given arguments, existence of evidence and/or traces of conspiracy, and plausibility of possible alternative explanations opposed to CTs.

**Why the Deep State?**

As a disputable term and contested political phenomenon, the deep state has been used frequently in the last couple of years, especially, but not exclusively, in far-right circles. It has become a buzzword, meaning that there is ‘an architecture of government that operates outside the democratic system’. Its synonyms are ‘shadow government’ and ‘a state within a state’. This term was originally used in the Turkish political discourse, ‘coined by then Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit in 1974 … [referring to] authoritarian, criminal, and corrupt segments of the state that function in a democratic regime by exploiting and reproducing its deficiencies’ (Söyler, 2015, p.1). A maximalist definition would refer to an unelected, vast, informal network inside the government that ‘really runs the country’, and which undertakes series of conspiracies against the elected government. In the recent US example, where President Donald Trump accused previous president Barack Obama of ‘wiring’ the Trump Tower, it was defined by David Remnick as ‘a nexus of institutions – the intelligence agencies, the military, powerful financial interests, Silicon Valley, various federal bureaucracies – that … are conspiring to smear and stymie a President and bring him low.’

Ben Garrison depicted such a view in an illustrative way.

![Figure 2. The Shadow Government according to Ben Garrison.](image-url)
While Trump’s deep state theory is considered by Remnick as unwarranted, as well as an expression of conspiracy panic (Bratich, 2008), or a form of McCarthyism discourse, the Turkish example is usually described as a real secret organization of military and intelligence officers, judiciary and organized crime, responsible for several coups, with the purpose to protect the secular regime. Besides, competing deep state theories can be found in other countries, e.g. in my home country, Croatia, where the right-wing conceives it as a clandestine group, comprised of public figures, academic and business elites, installed during communism, which still runs the country. If we take into account that Socialist Yugoslavia dissolved twenty-eight years ago, most of the people who might still be in those positions are probably retired or even dead. But there is another local version of the deep state theory, explained as an ‘orchestrated chaotization of the state and society … [which] divides the state into a public and a backstage state’ (Čović, 2000, p.33), whose main goal was unlawful appropriation of goods and political control through the actions of parapolitical state structures, in the interest of specific groups. In this case, members of the deep state are high officials of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), led by the first Croatian president himself, whose office was the headquarters of the deep state. According to this theory, the parapolitical state structure was ‘conceived before the [Homeland] war, established during the war, and expanded after the war’ (ibid., p.35). Supposed main outcomes of its functioning were democratic involution, the failed attempt to divide the Bosnian state, together with Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, as well as criminal privatization of state companies built during the socialist period. The last two outcomes are also two very prominent conspiracy theories in the Croatian political discourse (Blanuša, 2013). Furthermore, it seems that all these examples show that the deep state refers to a sort of systemic, political arch-conspiracy, or the parapolitical structure organized for permanent conspiratorial enterprises against the public interest.

The central question of this article is how warranted/justifiable/correct are various conspiratorial descriptions of the deep state, as well as affairs attributed to it? Are they just interpretational rubbish, a sign of personal disturbance, a too simplified interpretation of complex political processes, or more or less accurate depictions of how (at least some) states are functioning? How shallow or deep is the deep state? And most importantly, what can all these interpretations tell us about the formation and quality of arguments of conspiratorial knowledge?

To answer these questions, I will first move from popular and/or media interpretations of the deep state to a review of several recent exemplary books, at least one from each of the following fields: investigative journalism, parapolitical studies, and the more conventional political science subfield of transitology. Although they are probably not a representative sample, they refer to numerous previous publications on the deep state and offer numerous cases (supported by documents, meticulous descriptions of deep-state conspiracies), as well as
various definitions of the deep state itself. Such literature review will reveal their different normative approaches, criteria of definition, and standards of corroboration of the deep state. On that basis, I will finally try to emphasize some epistemological risks of assuming the existence of the deep state, following up with how such studies can be useful for the research of CTs, especially for distinguishing between warranted and unwarranted CTs.

Investigative Journalism on the Deep State

The book Deep State: Inside the Government Secrecy Industry, written by Mark Ambinder and D.B. Grady (2013), deals with the historical trajectory of the US machinery of secrecy since 1947. It is peculiar in using the totalizing and vague definition of the deep state, which involves all state institutions of secrecy. These authors consider that the US deep state:

is not easily laid out on any organizational chart. It encompasses agencies you think you know about, like the CIA and the FBI, but also includes ones you likely do not, like the Defense Programs Activity Office, the Navy Systems Management Activity, the OSD’s Special Capabilities Office or Special Collection Service. With the increase in terrorist threats, it’s gotten harder to divide it into foreign and domestic operations. (Ibid., p.4)

Furthermore, the book functions as a eulogy to the US deep state, depicting it as something necessary and completely normal for a democratic state (at least, for the US). This is expressed through statements such as: ‘certain secrets are necessary to defend the Republic … in exchange for keeping us safe and acting in a way that preserves our shared values while advancing our interests’ (ibid., p.3), without questioning what those interests are. In that sense, NSA wiretapping after 9/11 is described only as controversial, but not as illegal. The authors also easily replace the word torture with ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ (p.39) and say that assassinations done by US agencies are ‘legal enough’ (p.114). For them, the endangerment of constitutional rights (e.g. right to trial) by expansion of drone wars is acceptable (p.123). Although there are some mild criticisms that the US state apparatus deserves a bad image because of ‘the real and terrible things [that] have been done in the name of national security’ (p.6), the already described general attitude is enriched by the pathetic quasi-patriotic stance of the authors, who didn’t have any kind of legal obligation to submit their manuscript to governmental scrutiny. Nevertheless, they felt ‘an ethical obligation as citizens to take extreme care when writing about sensitive subjects’ (p.XII). Concerned about the possibility of jeopardizing national security, they gave several potentially problematic chapters to former high officials of intelligence agencies for feedback. Furthermore, after receiving it, they were still concerned about how to accomplish a balance between national security, public benefit and importance of cases to illustrate the US
deep state. They also show how the deep state structure grew enormously from 1947 in the number of agencies, groups and people with security clearances. ‘In 2009, the Government Accountability Office reported a staggering 2.4 million people with some level of clearance’ (p.19). Along with that fact and technological development, the dynamics of collecting information as well as leaking secrets has grown exponentially. Because so much information is leaked to the public by way of traditional and social media, people can easily imagine their versions of the deep state and become more suspicious of official stories and institutions. What are the possible consequences of these processes in terms of dangers and opportunities for the democratic order this book does not try to answer; it only superficially advocates for more transparency.

**Parapolitics Studies**

In this much more critical and fertile field of study, one of the latest publications, *The Dual State: Parapolitics, Carl Schmitt and the National Security Complex*, edited by Eric Wilson (2012, republished by Routledge in 2016), is maybe the best collection of such researches and essays. Nevertheless, it also includes a larger tradition developed in social sciences. Generally speaking, parapolitics ‘as a field, studies the relationships between the public state and the political processes and arrangements outside and beyond conventional politics’ (Wilson, 2009, p.30; 2012, p.3). It criticizes conventional political science and tries to deconstruct the monist liberal notion of the state, ‘especially the disassociation between the legality and the legitimacy of the contemporary (neo-)liberal state’ (Wilson, 2012, p.1). The concept of the dual state involves a public state and a deep state, where the latter ‘emerges in a false-flag violence, is organized by the military and intelligence apparatus and involves their link to organized crime’ (Scott, 2008, p.238). Such a state can combine lawful and lawless procedures and actions to exert power and accomplish its goals. In that sense, to analyze the deep state means to criticize and widen the scope of conventional political science that usually considers it as unwarranted conspiracy theory (Tunander, 2009, p.68). The dual state is a sort of split political subject, but its public part is not at all self-sufficient in its functioning, nor independent from its deep counterpart, although it pretends as if the latter does not exist. As such, it dissolves distinctions between legal and illegal, public and private, open and covert, as well as rational and irrational (Wilson, 2012). Metaphorically speaking, described in such a way the deep state reminds of a political equivalent of the Freudian unconscious.

The author of the concept of dual state is probably German political scientist Ernst Fraenkel (1941). He used it to describe the basic principles and constitutional developments of the Third Reich, where the dual state replaced the legal state (*Rechtstaat*). According to Fraenkel’s interpretation, the dual state is comprised of a normative state (*Normenstaat*) and a ‘prerogative state’ (*Maßnahmenstaat*). The first one was applied to those citizens who were
considered by the Nazi regime as ‘regular’ Germans. The second one was the SS state, built exclusively for those citizens who were considered as enemies. It involved arbitrary application of legal sanctions together with brutal violence. What is more important is its organizational and leadership unity under the slogan ‘One Leader, One People, One Reich’ (Fraenkel, 1941, p.154). Fraenkel locates the historical origins of such duality in ‘the legal situation of the seventeenth century … which gradually attained success in Germany’ (ibid., p.157). In other words, its origins are in absolutism. In the historical trajectory, for example, the year of 1848 was, among other things, an attempt to resolve the conflict between the authoritarian police state of the Restoration and liberal individualistic legal order (p.167). The prerogatives of the Crown as the head of a police state remained unlimited in ‘the control of military and foreign affairs and the power to declare martial law independent of and separate from parliamentary constitutionalism and the Rule of Law’ (p.168). Later on, the Weimar Republic failed to diminish the influence of the proponents of the Machtstaat (power state), supported by the aristocracy, and Nazism consequently grew as an offspring of monarchical and bureaucratic absolutism, in the new form of dictatorial absolutism (p.169).

Another important author in this field is Peter Dale Scott, for whom the deep state is nothing but the ‘deep political system or process … which habitually resorts to decision-making and enforcement procedures outside as well as inside those publicly sanctioned by law and society’ (Scott, 1996, p.XI). Its actions are described as a deep politics, which includes covert activities, public deception and political instrumentalization of public agencies and parastructures in achieving extra-judicial ends, such as state or state-sponsored crimes and cooperation with organized crime. Deep politics is not constrained to internal affairs; it also has an international dimension, expressed in military interventions, Cold War operations, assassinations, kidnapping, invasions, occupations, etc.

These studies also involve critical readings of Hans Morgenthau, the founding father of the modern realist approach to international relations and his dealings with the dual state (1962), as well as Morgenthau’s predecessor Carl Schmitt and his concept of the sovereign. According to Schmitt (1986, p.5), a sovereign is whoever decides on the state of exception. Therefore, ‘the true sovereign does not reveal itself during the normal operations of governmental (or legal) administration, but in those moments when foundational decisions are made’ (Rasch, 2012, p.339). It is not law itself but the power agents behind the law that make decisions, openly or covertly. That moment is a sort of state of emergency and what defines it in the dual state is nothing but the parallel hierarchy of the deep state network. In that sense, deep state researchers are more prone ‘to replace Schmitt’s a priori reasoning (“the sovereign is he who decides”) to a rigorously a posteriori approach: who (or what) has succeeded in deciding the given situation before us?’ (Wilson, 2012, p.21), and to ask if
there is any abuse of power or criminal activities in these decisions. That logic makes them conspiracy theorists par excellence. Another question is how good their arguments are.

Furthermore, parapolitics scholars criticize the ways of articulating the concept of (inter)national security and contend that the state of exception is legitimized by securitization. It is ‘an act of labeling – whereby political authorities identify an existential threat to the state which, because of its extreme nature, justifies moving beyond conventional security measures within the public rule of law, thus permitting the execution of extra-legal emergence powers that are henceforth “above politics”’ (Weaver, 1995, p.23). Such naming enables the state authorities to resort to illegal means and violence to eliminate the threat. The deep state invades the public space through securitization of the political life (Tunander, 2012, p.175) and it is ultimately an anti-pluralist way to manipulate with citizens’ fears and subsequent conformism and homogenization, with the purpose to remove ‘an issue from the realm of public law, debate and choice’ (Ahmed, 2012, p.55). The next steps are involvement in criminal state practices, together with non-state actors, as well as growing militarization. What is also at stake here is to explore the political economy and socio-political relations of such a discourse. Its fundamental precondition is capitalism itself, through its ‘crisis-generating tendencies and self-stabilizing responses … within the nexus between the legal domain of public state power and the extra-legal domain of private capitalist enterprise’ (ibid., p.63). Such is the historical condition of the emergence of a new deep state apparatus that can enable political violence concealed from the public and/or legitimized by the urge to prevail the crisis, but ‘necessary to sustain and expand accumulation’ (ibid.). With capitalist globalization, deep politics became increasingly international, ‘involving forms of criminal political violence amounting to state terrorism’ (p.64). In that sense, to research parapolitical activities is nothing but:

the study of criminal sovereignty, of criminals behaving as sovereigns and sovereigns behaving as criminals in a systematic way. It was not just a topic but an analytical conclusion. On the one hand, it goes significantly beyond the proposition that relations between security and intelligence organisations, international criminal networks and quasi-states are occasional and incidental, the work of “rogue elements” and the like. On the other hand, it falls significantly short of grand conspiracy theory: it does not suggest that the world of visible, “normal” politics is an illusion or that it is entirely subordinated to “deep” politics. Rather, it proposes that the tripartite relationship between security and intelligence organisations, international criminal networks and quasi-states is systematic, extensive and influential. The task of parapolitics as a discipline is to identify the dynamics of that relationship and to delimit precisely the influence that it has, or does not have, on public politics. (Cribb, 2009, p.8)
Furthermore, this kind of research has brought numerous mostly nation-state or inter-state level case studies about the functioning of the deep state of, for example, the US, UK, Turkey, Greece, Italy, Sweden, France, Canada, Congo, Iran, Nicaragua, etc., just to mention those most investigated. They regularly involve wide international stay-behind networks, comprised of members of state agencies, military forces, corporations and organized crime, working through covert actions. The most well-known examples are NATO stay-behind armies, the ‘Gladio’ operation against West-European communist organizations during the Cold War, similar more recent operations in the Middle East, Africa and Asia regarding the securitization of Islam, state-sponsored terrorism, covert actions under a ‘strategy of tension’, unconventional warfare, etc. Their purpose was to “calibrate the level of violence” in such a way as to manipulate the socio-political orientation of host country governments and populations’ (Tunander, 2012, p.69).

Transitology
In this more conventional area of mainstream political science, the deep state topic is very rare. Except for several book chapters and a few dozen journal articles, the most respectable scientific monography in this area is about the Turkish deep state, recently written by Mehtap Söyler (2015). In this book, the author leans on previously described parapolitics studies by sharing the same interest and ‘holistic point of departure, which is dismissive of the deep state’s ontological reduction to an interest network inside the state’ (ibid., p.4), and contends that the deep state as a historically evolved structure is highly relevant for political science. Nevertheless, she departs from studies of parapolitics at least in three aspects. For Söyler, first, ‘any extra-legal means to enforce authority [of the security sector is not] a sufficient signifier of the deep state’ (p.5). In that sense parapolitics studies overgeneralize the presence of the deep state activities. Second, they apply ‘the deep state to all regimes without differentiating between … democracy and autocracy’ (ibid.). Contrary to that, Söyler assumes that the historical roots, institutions, functions and actors in authoritarian regimes, gray zones (e.g. tutelary and delegative democracies as forms of defective democratic regimes), and fully consolidated democratic regimes are profoundly different. By using the historical case study of the late Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish state, she focuses her research exactly on those gray zones. The third distinctive feature of her approach is that the deep state is not an indispensable component of any state, which is an idealistic normative wish, expressed in the idea that the full liberal-democratic consolidation requires the breakdown of the deep state as its first necessary cause (p.48). Nevertheless, this idea is acceptable in the relative form that under different circumstances the size and influence of the deep state can be increased or decreased. Söyler defines the deep state ‘as a mode of dual domination in [the] gray zones based on the interplay of formal and informal state institutions’ (p.7). Therefore, in defective democracies formal institutions
are just facades for disguising ruling informal institutions, while in an autocracy the deep state is on the surface and there is no disguising of illegitimate rule. In that sense, it is possible to trace ‘a regime change through state transformation’ (p.28). Therefore, researching features of the deep state should bring more clarity in distinguishing boundaries between democracy, autocracy, and gray zones.

Interaction between formal and informal institutions in the deep state produces perverse institutionalization which ‘creates pervasive undemocratic informal rules that disrupt and destroy the logic and function of constitutional institutions, regardless of their being inscribed as formal rules or not’ (p.44). It develops a peculiar repertoire such as special relationships between autocratic cliques (either from the political establishment or from the coercive state apparatus) and mafia, violent exertion of influence in the form of coup d’État threats or their realization, organized crime, assassinations, kidnapping etc., and material exchange in the form of corruption and various forms of illegal business (p.45). In terms of social arenas, it could involve military tutelage of the government, development of the military-industrial complex or control exerted by the executive branch over informal networks inside the security sector, as well as the legislative and judicial branches. It often includes politicization and/or militarization of civil society, development of crony capitalism and wide clientelistic networks among various social groups (p.48).

Söyler’s historical case study tracks the Turkish deep state and finds its roots in seventeenth-century Ottoman state-banditry relationships. State consolidation of the Ottoman Empire was characterized by patrimonial rule plus a brokerage style of centralization, which involved bargaining with social formations such as elites, peasants, and growing numbers of organized former mercenaries or bandit armies. The last group was increasingly used by the central state to prevent or repress other groups from rebellion (Barkey, 1994, pp.11-12). According to Söyler (2015, p.36), bandits were incorporated for this purpose into formal state institutions, and since then began to constitute an informal source of the Turkish deep state. This would become a recurring pattern, expressed as continuous presence of banditry in state affairs, and its essential role would be articulated in ‘war-making, state-making, and capital accumulation’ (ibid., p.80) as part of concerted efforts to save the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, such incorporation of banditry would continue in the Turkish Republic, in the form of cooperation of the state with mafia and extreme nationalists. A formal source of the Turkish deep state, according to Söyler, is the autonomy of the civil-military bureaucrats, who extra-legally took over the state apparatus and ‘led the revolution from above, which resulted in the breakdown of the Ottoman state’ (p.37).

Söyler’s analysis is concentrated on numerous critical junctures in Ottoman and Turkish history, which are conceptualized as ‘relatively brief period[s] of heightened contingency with institutional flux and structural fluidity that offer substantively heightened probability that agents’ choices close off alternatives and set institutions on path-dependent trajectories’ (Capoccia and Kelemen
criticized in Söyler, 2015, p.30). Those brief critical periods involve Ottoman state consolidation from 1590-1611 and 1623-1648, the Young Ottoman movement (1865-1876), the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878) that would instigate mass migrations, the Young Turk movement, the subsequent revolution, bureaucratic takeover and Balkan Wars (1908-1913), the Turkish Independence War (1919-1923), considered as a revolution from above. After the establishment of the republic and authoritarian single-party rule, the ideology of Kemalism had a profound influence on the legitimation of tutelary inclinations of the military toward the civil sector, but in that period ‘single-party rule did not require a dual form of domination or specific informal institutions for societal control’ (ibid., p.96). The critical juncture for further development of the deep state after the transition to tutelary democracy from 1945 to 1947 reinstalled informal institutions in the form of autocratic cliques, extrajudicial executions and organized crime (ibid.). With the international threat by the USSR and development of the Cold War, Turkey would join NATO in 1952. This alignment, mostly with the USA, would significantly influence its deep state formations, ‘especially emergence of the autocratic cliques’ (p.99), but also their collaboration with organized crime. Other critical points were the 1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997 coups d’état that would further strengthen the deep state, as well as fabricate the ‘modern bandits’ (p.108) from extreme right-wing organizations against communists, liberals, Kurds, and political Islam. On the other side, recurring military interventions and repression weakened the party system. The period from 1990 to 2000 is considered by Söyler as the transformation of the deep state into the state because the difference between an authoritarian regime and defective democracy collapsed (p.143) with increased political and military terror and corruption. Nevertheless, a critical juncture for the decline of the deep state appeared from 1999 to 2002, when Turkey’s candidacy for EU membership influenced its democratization. However, after several court cases which prosecuted high military officials charged with planning coups d’état, and a decline of public trust in the army (p.168), the AKP has restored the deep state in the last few years through its authoritarian policies in the context of delegative democracy. Now the executive branch, which violates the separation of powers, uses the security sector to control media and civil society, and abuses the law and police for imprisonment and firings of opponents, has become the centre of the deep state. Democratic oversight of such civilian rule is highly restricted. And this is the current political reality in Turkey. Thus, throughout the analyzed period of history ‘the deep state has been an integral part of the country’s nation-building project’ (Kaptan, 2016, p.150).

**How Useful Are Deep-State Studies for Conspiracy Theory Research?**

All deep-state studies analyzed above share one common feature that is potentially problematic for the research focused to differentiate between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories. That feature has already been mentioned
as a ‘holistic point of departure’ in treating the existence and structural form of the deep state. Such an approach, which automatically ignores or consciously refuses to consider possible contingency, fragmented agency and cooperation between state institutions and extra-state actors, risks something that can be called a *gestalt bias*: being prone to see the system and unity of actions and the deep-state organization, instead of existing cliques with only partial and limited scope of action. This kind of proclivity in assuming the existence of some particular deep state is completely opposite to the bias of reducing it to interest networks inside and across the state. Their activities can be correlated, but the tricky question is whether they are coordinated or in collusion. These two opposite biases are likely to influence any assessment of conspiracy theories as warranted or unwarranted. If we want to minimize both of those biases, more nuanced criteria should be developed for differentiation between warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories. Nonetheless, the knowledge produced by those scholars who believe in the existence of the deep state can be useful here. It can be used in a research program as presented in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Research program for the study of warranted and unwarranted conspiracy theories.

This program is applicable at the local and national levels, but it can also be applied at the international level for more global considerations of the deep state and their respective CTs. If we start from the left side of Figure 3, the first step would be to extract individual CTs constructed by deep-state scholars. The next
task is to estimate whether they have any public significance and role in a wider political and social context, as well as relevance for political behaviour. For that reason it is necessary to investigate how widespread they are among the public, by comparing them to same or similar popular conspiracy theories (PCTs). Further tasks would be to discern their similarities and differences, possible transformations of scholars’ CTs and simplifications in the public sphere, to track the process and dynamics of their dissemination, as well as the main agents of production of such conspiratorial discourse and its consumers, including media representation. Various types of media could function as an amplifier of CTs or even as relatively autonomous producers of deep-state-related PCTs, and contribute to their public perception as (un)warranted interpretations. Furthermore, the same analysis should discern various types of CTs in terms of their criticism of power relations, institutions and state structures, as well as identify cases where deep-state CTs are part of securitization discourse and state policies. An important question here is what strategies are used by different carriers of influence to present deep-state CTs as (un)warranted. Finally, the knowledge accumulated in this area, especially about the long-lasting CTs, should enable the study of histories of conspiratorial discourses and their role in the respective political culture. This task should be accomplished through a multi-method approach involving archival and discourse analysis, as well as interviews and surveys.

The next step would be to assess deep-state CTs by using knowledge of experts who are not ‘enchanted’ by this overarching concept and who differ in their general attitude toward CTs. For the sake of multiperspectivity, these experts should be from different disciplines, e.g. history, political science, psychology, sociology, criminology, etc. Their task would be to estimate whether a particular CT is warranted or unwarranted, to provide an argumentation and basis for such judgement in the form of documents or other types of evidence, as well as to try to give alternative explanations and to estimate their likelihood in comparison with the original CT. The purpose of this part of the research program is to get as many as possible different explanations, contestations, ambivalences and inferential judgements of the original CTs. This should enable comparison of the reasoning processes of these two groups of scholars in cases of opposite interpretations, but also in cases of converging interpretations of CTs. This should also provide an empirical basis for assessing the quality of judgements given by scholars who differ in their scepticism toward the existence of the deep state and respective CTs.

The final step would be to compare experts’ knowledge and popular interpretations in terms of quality of arguments and other features of reasoning processes, including the usage of evidence and information sources. In this phase of research it would be possible to list which CTs are considered as (un)warranted in a particular political community, as well as the whole spectrum of better or worse arguments for and against the validity of the respective CT. This should enable research of the individual differences of those who believe in (un)warranted CTs in terms of reasoning, and other relevant characteristics emphasized in previous re-
searches, such as personality traits, ideological proclivities, political attitudes and socio-demographic attributes. All of these findings, together with cross-national comparisons, should further provide a basis for discerning which aspects of conspiratorial thinking are more bound to socio-political and cultural contexts and which are more context-free or possibly universal. Especially the latter aspects of conspiratorial thinking are candidates for experimental research. In the long run, these various social-science approaches combined in this research program should enable us to build better criteria for differentiation between warranted and unwarranted conspiratorial scepticism. This venture is yet to be done!

NOTES

1 Another question is what people can do about that at all, but as we are trying to explain general approaches to the study of CTs, we don’t need to deal with this issue at this point.
2 The portions given to each type of CTs are just for illustration. There are no researches yet that can give the exact numbers on them, and they probably vary in time due to many circumstances.

REFERENCES


JUDICIAL POWER OR CONSPIRACY?

The Emergence of the Citizen-Investigator in the Context of a Politics Centred around the Rule of Law and the Fight against Corruption

The thesis of this article is that it is difficult to distinguish the logic of conspiracy in some of its manifestations from the logic of the judiciary. I will attempt to show that the difference between conspiracy and judicial power is a consequence of the positioning of the respective logic in locations that are discursively granted the right to evaluate something as true. Hence, my research perspective is close to that of Todor Hristov (2012) and Clare Birchall (2004; 2006). Undoubtedly, the discourse of judicial power is one of the leading political perspectives in Bulgaria nowadays since politics are centred around the rule of law and the fight against corruption. In order to unfold my main thesis, I attempt a reconstruction of the anticorruption discourse based on Ivan Krastev (2004) and Nadège Ragaru (2010). I demonstrate its development on a global scale and its entry into post-communist Bulgaria. What I find particularly interesting in Ragaru’s observation is that the anticorruption fight relies on civil society, and in that sense, constructs a ‘civil society’ which, within the framework of this judicial discourse, begins to duplicate the practices of the investigator.

A Brief History of the Emergence and Globalization of the Anticorruption Discourse

Post-communist societies are simply obsessed with corruption. Corruption is the most powerful policy narrative in the time of transition. It explains why industries that were once the jewels of the communist economies have bankrupted. Corruption explains why poor are poor and why rich are rich. Blaming corruption for the post-communist citizen is the only way to express his disappointment with the present political elites, to mourn the death of his 1989 expectations for better life, and to reject any responsibility for his present well being. Talking about corruption is the way post-communist public talks about politics, economy, about past and future. (Krastev, 2004, p.44)
The key question in Ivan Krastev’s book *Shifting Obsessions: Three Essays on the Politics of Anticorruption* (2004) is how and why corruption has become the explanation of last resort for all political and economic processes in post-communist countries. The basic assumption is that there is no necessary link between the actual levels of corruption and public perceptions of corruption (shaped by the media). In this sense, the book is concerned with public perceptions and their effect on democracy in post-communist countries which, however, are examined from a somewhat different perspective, namely: What do citizens express through the discourse on corruption in the context of their social experience of post-communism? What social needs does the anticorruption rhetoric respond to? To answer this question, Krastev conducts an analysis along several lines. First, how can we explain the development of this discourse as a dominant one in the West and its entry/spread in the East? The answer aims to shed light on the story of how a social problem is constructed. Second, how is the need to combat corruption justified in political and economic terms? Third, why is post-communism claimed to be more corrupt than communism? What is this discourse saying?

According to Krastev, the story of the making of the global anticorruption consensus (in the 1980s and especially from the 1990s onwards) and its spread should be viewed in the context of globalization. To analyze this process, he focuses on the leading global players in the politics of anticorruption: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, Transparency International, and the leading multinational companies. In this connection, Krastev (2004, p.5) makes the following observations on how the relevant institutions became increasingly committed to combating corruption:

- In 1996 the World Bank revised its guidelines to state explicitly that corruption and fraud would be grounds for cancelling the contract if the borrower has not taken appropriate anticorruption action.
- In December 1997 the Council of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) signed an international convention that requires signatories to outlaw overseas bribery of foreign officials.
- In 1997 the IMF suspended a loan to Kenya because of bad governance concerns.

On the other hand, in the period between 1982 and 1987 the word ‘corruption’ appeared an average 229 times a year on the pages of *The Economist* and *Financial Times*. Its use grew progressively in the next few years. In the 1989–1992 period corruption appeared an average 502 times a year, in 1993 it was mentioned 1,076 times, in 1994 – 1,099 times, and in 1995 – 1,246 times.

According to Krastev, there are several general reasons why corruption became a global concern, part of which he analyzes in more detail:

- After the end of the Cold War, there was no reason any more for providing financial support to corrupt dictators, through which the World Bank and IMF sought to prevent the respective countries from being tempted by communism.
• The rise of the global market made corruption more visible, as international companies encountered obstacles in developing their business in countries where they had to pay bribes.

• The end of ideology after the Cold War was marked by a consensus that liberal democracy and market economy could no longer be contested. This led to ‘Americanization’ of European politics and a shift of focus onto the integrity and personality of people in politics, with politicians with high moral values and personal integrity being ‘sold as leaders’, instead of having a clash of ideologies and opposite visions of political systems of government. On the other hand, the rise of democracy in the former Eastern bloc meant that political parties had to make efforts to win public support and mobilize voters during elections. In this context, corruption became an important political instrument.

• Due to the emergence of new social inequalities in Eastern Europe as a result of the economic transformations, anticorruption became the rhetoric expressing the pain of the social restructurings.

• The rise of the new media, which sell through sensationalism, where corruption scandals sell well. In addition, part of the media turned to investigative journalism.

• The development of the NGO sector working on anticorruption campaigns and their spread.

• The rise of organized crime, which is associated with corruption.

Although the story of anticorruption campaigns tells that they came as a result of pressure ‘from below’, from the grassroots of civil society and more particularly from Transparency International, Krastev claims that the anticorruption consensus began as an instrument of a policy agreed by the World Bank and the US State Department. It was, above all, the US State Department which insisted on the introduction of this policy line. Secretary of State Warren Christopher and Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs Daniel Tarullo, who were part of the Clinton Administration at the time, evaluated the corruption phenomenon as negative. Their thesis was that corruption causes losses to American business due to the absence of a level playing field. Thus, the US exerted permanent pressure on the OECD countries, and especially on those in the European Union, to introduce anticorruption measures. The issue of the effects of financial deregulation and white-collar crime in Europe was raised in the Council of Europe. As a result, in 1997 the OECD adopted the Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions (a convention criminalizing overseas bribery). According to Krastev, this is the trade version of the discovery of corruption as a global policy issue.

However, besides the US State Department, which exerted pressure through the OECD, other players also played an important role on the global scene: multinational companies, the World Bank, Transparency International,
Multinational companies, which are often accused of corruption, began to turn into fighters against corruption. The opening up of Central and Eastern Europe to global markets and the need to attract foreign investments motivated businesses to engage in corruption in post-communist countries. The main problem is that knowing when, to whom and how to give a bribe requires local, ‘on-the-ground’ knowledge that is difficult to obtain. In this sense, it is claimed that local businesses are placed in a privileged position because they have such local knowledge; this is a sort of state protectionism at the expense of foreign investors, which runs counter to the logic of competition.

For their part, the World Bank and the IMF had several reasons to engage in anticorruption. Upon the conclusion of the Washington consensus, those institutions were also accused of maintaining corruption. That is why the US insisted on the introduction of good governance practices, including transparency. What played a key role, however, was the fact that the policies of the World Bank and the IMF, promoted after 1989, came under increasing criticism for their performance in Russia, and pressure from conservative circles in the US which insisted on minimizing their role. Thus, for the World Bank, fighting corruption became an opportunity to keep its political position. In this context of increasing criticism, as Nadège Ragaru (2010, pp.177-178) also notes, the Bank tried to distance itself from its rival, the IMF. In 1993 Peter Eigen, a former director of the Regional Mission for Eastern Africa of the World Bank, founded the non-governmental organization Transparency International, which played a key role in the globalization of anticorruption, which I will discuss below. The World Bank’s main claim was that the market cannot function well without serious institutional reforms within the state – transparency of institutions, raising public awareness, building institutional capacity. Hence, what was wrong wasn’t the policies promoted after the Washington consensus, but the institutional environment itself, which therefore had to be reformed. Krastev underlines that we should think of the World Bank’s commitment to combating corruption mostly as a move to provide a general explanation for the policy failures in Russia of the measures promoted by this international institution as necessary for the realization of the transition. But in order to make this possible, the problem was de-politicized:

It was not the wrong policies but the wrong priorities that were blamed for the policy failures. In the vocabulary of the Washington consensus the weak institutional environment was responsible for the failure of the initial reform package in places like Russia. Corruption served the role of a general explanation for a variety of policies failures in different environments. What constituted a common place between the different cases of failure was the existence of endemic corruption. Focus on corruption helped the Bank to explain its failures. … But in order to address corruption, the World Bank
needed to de-politicize it. “I visited a number of countries – recalled [the World Bank’s new president, James] Wolfensohn – and I decided that I would redefine the “C” word not as a political issue but as something social and economic.” The redefinition took place in 1996. Corruption was not about politics any more. (Krastev, 2004, p.21)

Here I will present the arguments of the World Bank and other authors, as summarized by Ivan Krastev and Georgy Ganev (2004), about the negative effects of corruption on the political and economic environment of countries. I will quote them verbatim because I think they represent coordinated arguments about the economic significance of the fight against corruption from the perspective of Krastev and Ganev. The World Bank defines corruption broadly as ‘abuse of public office for private gain’. The main claim is that anticorruption will increase economic growth, and hence revenues and the quality of public services. The idea is to introduce anticorruption as a priority in the context of the already established democracies in post-communist countries, as the political parties have a personal stake in being elected. Thus, according to Krastev and Ganev (ibid., pp.158-159), the World Bank and other researchers claim that:

First, corruption hurts economic growth. It does so by hurting investments and by distorting the allocation of resources toward inefficiency. Corruption means that the rules of economic activity are arbitrarily imposed, that property rights are insecure, and that the administrative capacity to provide services is low, which translates into a highly uncertain business environment (World Bank 1997: 18–20). Uncertainty raises the costs of private investment and hurts the growth of productive capacity. At the same time, corruption impedes the effectiveness of public investment (Tanzi and Davoodi 1998) – it leads to higher public investment outlays combined with lower productivity of these investments. Corruption also hurts prospects for foreign direct investment, especially in Bulgaria, which is poor in natural resources that could attract investors despite corruption (World Bank 2000: 23, note 2). On the other side, corruption decreases the efficiency of resource allocation by introducing severe distortions into the price system (Shleifer and Vishny 1993: 599–617) and also, by creating incentives for lower budget revenues and higher budget expenditures, creating an unsustainable fiscal position (Tanzi and Davoodi 1998; World Bank 2000: 21–2), which results in high inflation and again in lower effectiveness of the price system. The impact on the price system results in a misallocation of resources toward suboptimal uses. Ultimately, low investments and poor allocation of resources spell low growth in the long run.

Second, corruption not only hurts the long-term welfare of people, but it does so in an unfair way. The costs associated with corruption fall mostly on the weakest and most vulnerable groups in society. Corrupt societies experience more poverty and higher inequality than noncorrupt ones. This is due not only to lower growth, but to the fact that corrupt governments get
effectively financed through regressive, rather than progressive taxes, that they cannot effectively establish and maintain social safety nets, and that they divert resources away from investment in human and social capital, both of which are important for reducing poverty and inequality (Gupta et al. 2002; World Bank 2000: 20–1).

Third, corruption is a factor for the erosion of trust in institutions, and from there of the social fabric in general. Corruption leads to lower budget revenues and to higher but much less productive budget expenditures, which justifies people thinking that they are paying more for less. Moreover, it is mostly the poor and the disadvantaged who pay the bill, but get almost nothing from the services that they are in fact financing. Logically, this leads to a very low level of public trust in state organs and in political leaders, thus further reducing the capacity of the state to provide welfare enhancing services (Shleifer and Vishny 1993; Gupta et al. 2002; Tanzi and Davoodi 1998; Tanzi 1998; World Bank 2000: 21–2).

In order to launch anticorruption policies, however, it was necessary to invent the science of corruption, that is, a science analyzing the phenomenon. According to Krastev (2004, p.20), the ‘new anticorruption consensus brought into life the new anticorruption science. And the new anticorruption science manufactured the data that have justified the new anticorruption consensus.’ Initially, the most visible debate among anthropologists, who were particularly sensitive to the specificity of the different cultural contexts, was focused on the problem of definition. How is ‘corruption’ to be defined? Is it at all possible to define corruption unambiguously if we assume that it is a context-sensitive issue? According to Krastev (ibid., p.25),

Three basic approaches are competing in defining political corruption. The first defines it as an abuse of public office for private gains. The second defines corruption with respect to public interest and public opinion. And the third is a market-centered definition, where corruption is defined as market type of behavior outside of the realm of the market. … The definition debate was constantly coming back confronted with questions like: can we confine our research on corruption to the acts of misuse of public office that are criminalized by the law, or should we also include the acts of corruption that are still not criminalized. How should we treat the situation when certain acts are perceived as corrupt by the existing colonial legislation, but public opinion does not perceive them as corruption? And if we adopt public interest or public opinion centered definitions of corruption, how to define the public interest and who’s opinion is public opinion? Should we confine corruption to its monetary forms or should we include also the non-monetary forms of bribery? How private gain should be defined in the context of corruption research?

However, all those questions were connected rather to another research paradigm which perceives corruption practices as a cultural phenomenon. According to Krastev, the change of paradigm was brought about by three major
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‘discoveries’: that corruption is an institutional problem; that old knowledge on corruption is policy-irrelevant; that corruption could be quantified. Upon this turn, the economic discourse marginalized all other discourses. Its assumption is that the corruption act is a rational behaviour that takes place under certain incentives in a concrete institutional environment. Institutions corrupt people, but that is because people make wrong policy choices, implementing policies that sustain corruption. Hence, the institutional environment should be changed. That is why Krastev claims that this discourse is normative and de-contextualized, because it is based solely on universally accepted principles of good governance. Transparency International invented indices measuring corruption by country, thus ultimately de-contextualizing corruption practices and making them politically governable in a situation of globalization.

The Introduction of the Anticorruption Discourse in Post-Communist Bulgaria and Civil Society Engagement

In the 1980s, corruption was introduced as a public issue in the Soviet Union, too. The most notorious case involved corruption and abuse of power in the cotton sector in Uzbekistan. These public scandals apparently had wide repercussions in the other socialist countries as well. Krastev interprets this as an attempt to reorient state socialism towards rule of law in the context of perestroika. Rule of law was packaged in the motto of glasnost. He claims that corruption was intertwined with the widespread criticism of privileges and of the nomenklatura. In this respect, there is no disagreement between Krastev and Nadège Ragaru, who says in her analysis (2010, pp.175-176) that

Until 1997–1998, the issue of corruption enjoyed relative visibility in the public sphere in Bulgaria. Of course, even before the 1989 change of regime, the objection against the Bulgarian Communist Party General Secretary, Todor Zhivkov, and his close ones was expressed in terms of nepotism and of the use of public resources for private purposes. In November 1989 the semantics of corruption was partly mobilized also by the protesters who had come to Sofia to celebrate the fall of the dictator. That is when the ‘privileges’ enjoyed by the narrow circle of power-holders were denounced, along with the misuse of the funds (the people’s ‘stolen millions’) designed for financing the export of socialist revolution. But the disqualification of the former regime with the help of corruption practices was formulated in the moral categories of communism (hostility to parties and profiteering, fair valuation and division of labour). As for the words themselves, ‘koruptsiya’ [corruption] was used rarely, mostly in an academic context; the terms preferred in everyday speech were podkup [bribe], rushvet [kickback] or dalavera [scam, easy money through dishonest means]. Back then, however, none of those words was used in some comprehensive explanatory scheme for the social and political communist order. It is precisely at these three levels – moral terms, semantics
Krastev claims that the roots of post-communist societies’ obsession with anticorruption can probably be traced back to the 1980s, from where he attempts to derive a longer continuity between the communist and the post-communist experience, while Ragaru thinks that between 1989 and 1997 there was, rather, an absence of public interest in that issue, which did not constitute an interpretive framework for the political and economic restructurings of the transition. That is why she focuses on the 1997–2001 period. In this regard, I will first discuss Krastev’s answer to the question of why corruption in post-communist societies is widely perceived to be endemic, and then Ragaru’s answer to the same question.

Krastev’s thesis is that before 1989, the economy of state socialism had fused with social networks through which a specific form of exchange was conducted. In this regard, he refers primarily to Alena Ledeneva’s studies on the so-called ‘blat’ (called ‘connections’ in Bulgaria) in Soviet Russia (Ledeneva, 1998). Blat is ‘the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures’ (Krastev, 2004, p.60, quoting Ledeneva, 1998). It ‘was conditioned not only on the economy of shortages but also on the low costs of communications, coffee and the unrestricted availability of free time’ (Krastev, ibid., p.65). Blat was a typically communist phenomenon involving an exchange of favours, ‘a kind of barter based on personal relations’ which were non-monetarized even when some gifts or money were involved. According to Ledeneva’s research, the widespread practice of blat cannot be thought of as corruption in the Western sense of the word. Its specificity is in that because of the economy of shortages, almost everyone was compelled to use this social resource. Therefore everyone was dependent on everyone else, which reduced the importance of one’s social position, and this type of exchange was framed by the idea of social equality and humaneness. For example, the university professor depended on the grocer to obtain tomatoes, in return for which the professor helped prepare the grocer’s son for the university entrance examinations, but this was perceived as an exchange of favours, not as due economic reciprocity.

In most of the studies blat is analyzed as an **exchange of services and information**. Blat was the only channel for the unprivileged to obtain deficit goods. It was viewed as a form of protest against the verticality of the communist regime. But what is even more important is that blat was also an exchange of social statuses. In the economy of deficit the power status of the person was defined on one side by his position on the power vertical (being in or out the nomenclature) but on the other side by the access to deficit goods or information. Blat destroyed the dependence of consumption
on the place in hierarchy. On the queue for popular but deficit book, it is not the professor, or the senior official but the friend of the bookseller who usually won the bid. In its radical form blat has replaced the relations between public roles with relations between people. This redistribution of power sustained and subverted the system in the same time. It made life bearable but it undermined the power relations. Loyalty to one’s blat network was higher than loyalty to the state. Using the present jargon blat empowered the powerless. In the discourse of the majority of the people “connections” were unfair but they were the only way to “humanize” the bureaucratic nature of the regime. The word “bureaucracy” had a connotation more negative than connections. (Krastev, 2004, pp.64-65; emphasis added)

Hence, according to Krastev, ‘blat’ is a form of misuse of public position for private gains, but the characteristics of the exchange involved are completely different, being reminiscent of gift exchange. After 1989 ‘blat’ was replaced by ‘bribery’, transforming its essence in the context of the transition from the economy of shortages to a market economy. Anticorruption became the rhetoric expressing the mass disappearance of social resources from before 1989, which lost their value after the monetarization of blat relations in post-communist countries. The market deprived the empowered powerless of their power because they now had nothing to offer except their friendship, unlike others who managed to capitalize this resource. In this sense, anticorruption expresses the popular dissatisfaction with the new social restructurings in the context of the transition to a market economy, and hence, inequalities.

The most critical point of problematization of the new inequalities, though, is the issue of privatization, which is positioned on the boundary with socialist sensitivity regarding the connection between community service and property. Such criticism is directed primarily against the Privatization Agency. Thus, Krastev (2004, p.55, citing Polish Minister of Privatization Janusz Lewandowski) claims that there are three main public criticisms of post-communist privatization:

• The pricing of the ex-socialist property, whose prices differ dramatically in the eyes of the market and in the eyes of society. The complaint that the state is selling ‘cheap’ is indicative, according to a study of workers’ perception of privatization in a Polish food producing factory cited by Krastev, of the dissatisfaction of the workers, who interpret the low price set by the market or Western accounting as devaluing their lives and work under socialism, and therefore assume that this cannot be the real price.

• The second problem is the character of the buyers. Thus, the past of the new owners intrigued the public imagination much more than the future of the privatized enterprises.

• The third problem is that the very process of privatization was conceived by many as corruption per se. The absence of effective control on privatization practices acted as a catalyst in rising anticorruption and anti-elite sentiments.
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I will now turn to Ragaru’s analysis. As I already mentioned, she assumes that the anticorruption discourse was introduced in Bulgaria in 1997 by way of the international institutions – above all, the European Union, since Bulgaria was already a candidate member for EU accession at the time – and the international financial institutions which were especially significant because of the crisis in Bulgaria at the time. At the beginning of 1997, Bulgaria concluded a stand-by credit agreement with the IMF on USD 510 million (plus another USD 147 million under the Compensatory and Contingency Financing Facility). A currency board arrangement was introduced in the summer of 1997. Ragaru (2010, pp.133-171), however, does not interpret the introduction of the anticorruption discourse as the result of ‘pressure’, but attempts to trace its tactical adoption and use by Bulgaria’s political elites. On the other hand, in the rhetoric of those international players, precisely ‘civil society’ was the figure through which this policy had to be legitimated. This meant developing the NGO sector, sociological surveys, the media and their commitment to investigative journalism, or simply developing ‘citizens’ and encouraging them to report officials who had asked for a bribe. Polling agencies included a question about corruption in their questionnaires. Following the publication of such polls, the number of times the word ‘corruption’ was mentioned by Bulgarian media increased from 81 at the beginning of 1999 to 625 at the end of the year.

However, according to both Krastev and Ragaru, political elites played a particularly significant role in this regard. During the 1997 parliamentary election campaign, corruption was used most frequently in the vocabulary of the representatives of the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS), where corruption was directly associated with communism. As Ragaru (2010, pp.182-184) points out:

Corruption was interpreted in the following way: the criminalization of [Bulgaria’s] political sphere was due to the continuing influence of the representatives of the former communist nomenklatura in government, in the state apparatus and in the economy, and hence, to the delay of structural reforms. This also made the ‘plundering’ (a term often used by the SDS) of the country easy to explain: as in the past, ‘the communists’ had stolen the goods of the people. In the same way as they had destroyed the state between 1944 and 1989, they had infiltrated the new democratic institutions precisely so as to corrupt them more easily. The SDS press systematically described the financial scandals in which members of the so-called ‘circle of friends’ of the former prime minister [and BSP leader] Zhan Videnov were reportedly involved. … According to them [the SDS representatives], corruption was actually one of the faces of communism, as it were: treachery against the people whose will was distorted to the benefit of a handful of people; they apparently linked corruption with the secrecy imputed to the
former communists and the latter’s proclivity to engage in behind-the-scenes games. Thus, the denunciation of ‘economic crime’ and of ‘the crimes of communism’ began to feed off each other (both cases were about ‘crimes’). The appearance of corrupt actors and of criminals was associated, by the way, with the continuing relations of dependence between Bulgaria and its former ‘Big Brother’, Russia (non-transparent deals in the trade in natural gas were often mentioned). … The anticorruption fight and lustration policies (one of the SDS’s declared priorities that was popular among SDS activists) were the two sides of one and the same project.

By the time of the June 2001 parliamentary elections, however, things had taken an about-turn and now two other political forces centred their election campaigns on anticorruption: the BSP and the newly founded by the former king, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, National Movement Simeon II (NDSV). According to the BSP, however, it was not ‘the communists’ who had robbed the citizens of Bulgaria, it was the ‘restitutes’ – those who had restituted their private property and were close to the ruling SDS. In this way, the BSP was actually trying to present itself as anti-capitalist. The NDSV’s strategy proved to be the most-winning one, though. The leader of the new party, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, had enjoyed a good public reputation in general since the 1990s. Political analysts were unanimous that his main advantage was that he was a new figure in Bulgarian politics, who came from abroad and was therefore untarnished by what was widely perceived as corrupt power. Here, however, I would add one more hypothesis. His better positioning was probably due also to the idealization of the period before 1944, an idealization developed as an antipode to communism and the anti-communist rhetoric of the 1990s. What the NDSV promised was above all ‘a new morality in politics’ in line with the stable political and social order represented by the law. The personal moral integrity of politicians was supposed to limit corruption since a moral person could not possibly rob the people; thus, anticorruption became one of the NDSV’s top three priorities. This ultimately led to the new party’s surprise victory in the June 2001 elections.

Upon reading the different interpretations of corruption offered by the political rivals (the SDS, BSP and NDSV) in 1997 and 2001 (corruption as a product of the continuing communism, as a fruit of blind capitalism, or as a result of loss of values …), we cannot but notice the existence of shared discursive signposts beyond their ideological differences. Indeed, corruption gave all political actors the vocabulary by which they denounced the injustice of the selective access to wealth after 1989. According to the SDS, the former privileged members of the communist nomenklatura had a monopoly on this access, which was unfair to the ordinary citizens who had not compromised themselves by serving the old regime. The BSP leaders simply inverted this rhetoric: there was injustice, but it was wrought by ‘the restitutes’ (those who
had restituted their properties which had been confiscated by the communist regime) and by those close to the new ‘monopolist’ party. The NDSV joined in stigmatizing the new arrogant rich who were above the law. **There was also a second common topic which was related to the representation of parties as forces fragmenting the popular will: the BSP, SDS and NDSV condemned, in an identical way, partisan selfishness and the parties’ incapacity to think about the public interest.** (Ragaru, 2010, p.193; emphasis added)

By 2005 the BSP was already accusing, in its turn, the NDSV and Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha of lack of transparency in public procurement and of unlawful attempts to restitute the royal family’s properties. That year also saw the emergence of the far-right Ataka party led by Volen Siderov, who made the plundering of the state a key issue in his election campaign. Siderov and Ataka, however, equally blamed the corrupt political elites and the ‘privileged’ minorities, claiming that both the political elites and the minorities were robbing the Bulgarian people. According to Ragaru (2010, p.161), Boyko Borisov’s image was also framed by the anticorruption discourse:

Boyko Borisov is a former karate champion and bodyguard of the dictator Todor Zhivkov and of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. He appeared on the political scene when he was appointed chief secretary of the Interior Ministry in 2001. Thanks to this position, he became popular in the media and began talking about the inefficiency of the judicial system, the need of introducing law and order, and the corruption of the political elites. In October 2005 he was elected mayor of Sofia. At the time the [corruption] scandal around [Sofia’s heating utility firm] Toplofikatsiya broke out [in 2006], the founder of the GERB party [Boyko Borisov] was trying to build his image as a candidate for prime minister. To this end, he needed a source of legitimation – both in the country, and in the eyes of external observers.

Both Krastev and Ragaru see in the political elites’ playing upon the anticorruption rhetoric a potential for the rise of populism (or democratic illiberalism, in the words of Krastev), and that is what actually worries them with regard to liberal democracy.

Considering all of the above, I would propose a hypothesis which I think is important and merits more detailed study. It seems to me that there is a need to analyze the political debates on privatization (and its different forms) in Bulgaria in order to trace how the transformation of state-owned assets into private property was talked about and, in a sense, why those debates ultimately failed, considering that, in the eyes of the public, the transition from socialism to a market economy can be explained in short as ‘those guys robbed us’. How did privatization and the market economy clash with the need to be legitimated politically against the background of the widespread perception, constructed
by socialism, of a direct connection between work, state-owned property, and redistribution? By the way, this perception was probably also a ground for critique of state socialism from within.\textsuperscript{10} It is precisely the anticorruption discourse as an element of the discourse of judicial power that limits our possibility to address those questions as researchers because it is premised, as I have attempted to show, on the in-principle universal understanding of what is a good economy – namely, the market economy – an understanding which, furthermore, can be reproduced normatively also through a research perspective. In this sense, the question is not raised as to the need of democratic legitimation of the fight against corruption, a need probably encountered by the political elites, because the fight against corruption is assumed to be legitimate on principle. And another question I can only note here. It is curious to trace how political theory as a means for immediate reflection upon the social experience of the 1990s produced the discourse on ‘the oligarchy’ as a political problem, whereby ‘the oligarchy’ has ultimately turned into a self-evident explanation for the problems of Bulgaria’s current political governance. It is quite likely – and this is a hypothesis, too – that this process involved the introduction of interpretations based on elite theory in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{11}

The Intertwinement of Counter-Democracy with the Political Discourse of Judicial Power. The Rise of the People-as-Overseer and the People-as-Judge. The Conspiracy

When politics was understood to be in essence a clash of mutually exclusive systems based on the class struggle, personal misbehavior mattered less. The issue for critics of the status quo was not deviance but normality, so that denunciation of corruption was no substitute for a critique of the “system.” The issue was the “law of profit” in general, not the peculations of a few shady bankers. It was the norm itself that was deviant, not the transgression of the norm. The system with all its flaws was “the establishment,” as the phrase went. ... These habits began to change toward the end of the twentieth century. \textit{Ideological disenchantment led to a more individualized approach to political issues. Whether politicians could be trusted became a more urgent question. Scandal and, with it, the politics of denunciation thus occupied center stage.} (Rosanvallon, 2008, pp.46-47; emphasis added)

So far I have attempted to describe the emergence, globalization and localization of the anticorruption discourse in post-communist Bulgaria. \textbf{What I want to emphasize in relation to the topic of conspiracy is the subjectivation of particular actors through this discourse, and above all, the intertwinement of anticorruption with the figure of ‘civil society’}. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the perspective on the fight against corruption is mostly juridical, for corruption ought to be limited and punished by law, and that it is precisely this juridico-political perspective on power which is
duplicated by ‘civil society’. In this regard, my main thesis is that the topic of conspiracy is positioned precisely in the political rhetoric of judicial power, but there is a significant ‘difference’ which I will discuss below.

In fact, this intertwining, if I follow Pierre Rosanvallon (2008), is not novel. It seems that the political discourse of judicial power had found its way into the sphere of democracy in the classic sense of government by the people – and more specifically, into the figures of the people-as-overseer and the people-as-judge typologized by this discourse – already in the post-revolutionary period in France and England. According to Rosanvallon, the legitimacy of representative democracy originally marked a structural distrust that outlined three types of counter-democracy – the people as overseer, the people as veto-wielder, and the people as judge – which is designed to serve as a constant corrective of elected representatives so as to ensure that democracy is not limited solely to the ballot box. With regard to the topic I am interested in here, I think that the people as overseer and the people as judge, which are interconnected, merit special attention.

According to Rosanvallon, oversight as a civic practice comprises three elements: vigilance, denunciation, and evaluation. The oversight function of counter-democracy is to exercise control by permanent close scrutiny of political representatives. Once a violation is established, it is made public by way of investigative journalism, but also of tabloids which provoke pressure from public opinion, causing a scandal. The central demand is transparency, constant accountability through direct visibility and taking of personal responsibility; the effect is discussion and establishment of collective norms and values, and possible initiation of a judicial process upon suspicion of violation of the law. The insistence on the judicial process is characteristic of the people-as-judge.

Scandal thus became the only occasion for denunciation. Scandal, it has been observed, conferred a kind of “ultra-reality” on the facts. The denunciation of scandal always involved two dimensions: a nihilistic stigmatization of the authorities, which were always suspected of corruption, coupled with faith in the political virtues of transparency. … To denounce a scandal is first of all to “uncover” it, to make public what had been hidden. One goal is of course to put an end to a reprehensible situation, perhaps even to bring the culprits to justice. But that is not the only goal. To denounce is to reaffirm one’s faith in the possibility of using publicity to administer a direct corrective. From the editors of French revolutionary gazettes to the American muckrakers, a journalistic credo thus developed. The English terms “literature of exposé” and “exposé journalism” may give a better idea of the nature of the genre than the French “presse à scandales” or the English “scandal sheet,” with their pejorative and venal connotations. In the early 1900s, magazines like Cosmopolitan, McClure’s, and Everybody’s pilloried the “new czars” who helped themselves from the public treasury. These publications were not out solely to create a sensation and sell copies.
by exposing the peculations, large and small, of corrupt politicians. Their mission was also to preach, to redeem the world’s sins and convert the sinners. … [They] availed themselves of the language of Protestant moralism, larding their texts with words such as “shame,” “sin,” “guilt,” “salvation,” “damnation,” “pride,” and “soul.” (Rosanvallon, 2008, pp.42-44; emphasis added)

In those actions we cannot but notice a duplication of judicial power, and more specifically, practices characteristic of ‘the investigator’ which, however, are initiated by ‘the people’; with a view to the context in Bulgaria, I would say that they are initiated by the ‘anticorruption civil society’ against the political elites. Here I will refer to the anticorruption civil society as the citizen-investigator. Which are their main elements and how are they related to conspiracy theory?

• Those in power are always suspected of violating the law, that is, of immoral behaviour, which in this case is one and the same thing – an object-subject criminalized by presumption from the perspective of the citizen. In conspiracy theory, this constant suspicious attitude is often pathologized and referred to as ‘paranoia’ (Knight, 2003). Here I would add that the issue of ‘trust’ comes up and acquires political significance precisely in such a political discursive context.14

• Upon suspicion of a criminal act, an investigation is launched and evidence begins to be collected. As the act is criminal, it is assumed that it is kept secret by the perpetrator and possibly covered up so as to avoid detection. That is to say, the underlying assumption is that the perpetrator is aware that he or she has violated the law and therefore deems it necessary to conceal his or her offence – that is, that he or she recognizes, to one extent or another, the validity of the law but has taken rational action to arrange the circumstances so as to avoid denunciation. First, insofar as the investigation involves decoding a rational arrangement of circumstances, we could refer again to conspiracy theory and say that, from this perspective, the suspect is consciously directing the circumstances so as to shape the perceptions about it which, however, the citizen-investigator can decode. Considering this, here I would say that to my mind there is a problematic starting point that is often found in the analyses of conspiracy theory – namely, starting from the most general definition that conspiracy theories see a subject (or group of people) as covertly directing and governing society. In fact, the conclusion regarding ‘direction’ ought to be viewed above all not from the vantage point of the preliminary definition of conspiracy but from that of the practical logic set in motion by the citizen-investigator who, therefore, might see apparent ‘direction’ because he or she is trying to investigate the deliberately covered-up traces of a crime and to logically link up the different elements. Second, secrecy is
explicitly associated with something bad which the suspect recognizes as such because he or she deems it necessary to conceal it, therefore the suspect is a rational, autonomous actor. For this reason, the purpose of the investigation is to find an answer to the question: Who is the perpetrator? These two moments – conscious concealment and rational arrangement of the circumstances – are very important for the juridical discourse because they are part of the production of the criminal subject as rational so that he or she can ultimately be held accountable. In liberal law, only a rational crime is a crime that can be tried in a court of law. As Boltanski (2014, p.50) points out, these are the moments of ratio that are also to be observed in the detective novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: logical reflection, construction of the criminal subject as rational, moral judgement, and prosecution.

• On the other hand, the citizen-investigator is endowed with special qualities and competencies, since he or she can piece together the logical threads that will lead to the detection of the crime. Once the crime has been detected – which is a heroic act because it is claimed that the truth has been found out – the offenders are made public so that they may be brought to justice.

• Of course, this may lead to the initiation of legal proceedings, but if the offence is not prosecutable what follows is a public sensation or scandal, that is, moral condemnation. In those cases, as Rosanvallon claims, the denunciation often focuses on the individual’s private life, which acquires the character of a public ‘affair’ designed to sully the individual’s reputation which is a valuable form of symbolic capital in the political field. Hence, this practice relies on the boundary, which has originated historically, between private and public. I think that it can be found in the very way the subject is interpreted – as split between his or her private secrets and public representations, while the disclosure of those secrets shows his or her essential immorality precisely as an individual.15

In this sense, it is worth asking ourselves what is the difference between conspiracy and the political discourse of judicial power? My answer is that, metaphorically speaking, it is in the signature that can be given by the institution that has been granted the final right to evaluate something as true – the institutional positions of the judiciary, supported by investigative journalism, the media, and the NGO community. But the problem is that if those institutions in themselves are also suspected of criminality, then the civic practices of investigation are intensified probably even further – even though from the perspective of those institutions, they are disqualifyingly defined as a conspiracy – while the critical pathos remains that of moral condemnation.
NOTES

1 At the time of writing, Nikolay Yanev (2018) was working on his PhD dissertation at Sofia University’s Department of Sociology, entitled The Crime of the Empowered: Construction and Usages (Between Socialist Property and EU Financial Interests) (in Bulgarian), supervised by Professor Maya Grekova. Thanks to Yanev’s kind assistance, I had the opportunity to read his almost completed text. It suggests that the EU became seriously concerned about the issue of abuse of European funds from the mid-1980s onwards: ‘The expert conversation which shaped the terms had three points of heightened activity: 1) at the end of the 1980s (1987–1988), 2) in the mid-1990s (1995), and 3) at the end of the 1990s (1999). They mark periods of intensive institutional development. That is when the apparatus tasked with protecting the [EU] budget [from abuse] took shape. The new EU member countries like Bulgaria (since 2007), which had not been part of that process, had not experienced the evolution of those terms, were not familiar with the language, and had not regulated their national institutions, were in a curious position. From the moment of their accession, they became part of a complex supranational network of institutions, services and rules, to which they had to adapt their notion of crimes involving abuse of public resources’ (Yanev, 2018).

2 In the US context, it is difficult to separate the growing activity of American businesses on the issue of anticorruption from the policy of the US State Department.

3 One of the best-known cases is the publication of a series of articles entitled ‘Corruption Vested in Power’ (in Bulgarian) in the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) daily Rabotnichesko Delo in 1987. Their author, the journalist Georgi Tambuev, was subsequently fired and expelled from the party. In 1999 he was elected MP on the ticket of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, the renamed BKP). See Tambuev (1999).

4 The word ‘corruption’ was present in just one of the 237 slogans of the protesters in front of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral on 18 November 1989 (‘Enough of corruption! Take their millions away’), collected by Angel Petrov. At the counter-demonstration organized by the BKP on 13 December 1989, the word appeared in two slogans (out of a total 137). See Petrov (1994).

5 Referring to Venelin I. Ganev (2007), Ragaru (2010, pp.176-177) claims the following: ‘Taking advantage of the legal vacuum and of the state’s limited possibilities for exercising control after the fall of the regime, some members of the former economic nomenklatura, of the intelligence services, and of the sports circles (the so-called “wrestlers”) began to control the profit of state-owned enterprises or directly appropriated them (more or less illegally). The rapid development of the private banking sector, which was quite poorly controlled, fuelled a spiral of “loans between friends” that were never paid back. This led to the autumn 1996 crisis and to the bankruptcy of numerous banks. The conditions in which capitalism was built [in Bulgaria] were also influenced by the specific situation in the region: the UN embargo on Yugoslavia (imposed in May 1992), which fuelled cross-border smuggling involving corrupt customs officers, Interior Ministry officials, and even politicians. How, then, are we to ultimately understand the late appearance of “the social problem” of corruption?’

6 Bulgarian scholars have also developed a theory about this phenomenon and its transformation after 1989, through which both the post-communist restructurings and the narrative on the new inequalities are framed. In the 1980s, Petar Emil-Mitev introduced the term ‘second networks’ for this phenomenon, analyzed further by Andrei Raichev and Kancho Stoichev (2008) in collaboration with Deyan Deyanov. ‘The liquidation of the NEP (New Economic Policy) in the late 1920s eliminated the elements of duality with respect to property: the State-Party took full and complete control over property. This was the end of the exchange of things for things as a dominant social relation. The substitution of exchange relations by mostly power relations created a shortage, which, moreover, was twofold – a shortage of things and a shortage of power. The first is described classically by the Hungarian economist János Kornai in his seminal Economics of Shortage. The second, the shortage of power, is discussed comparatively rarely by researchers; arguably the most cogent study on the subject is that presented by the Bulgarian scholar Deyan Deyanov in the 1980s. Deyanov depicts the Soviet system as a state that was centripetal “for life”. Given this permanent need of centralization in Stalinist society, the higher up you were in the hierarchy, the more you felt you lacked enough power. The person who felt he lacked enough power most was, paradoxical as it might sound, Stalin. This is what a system that constantly pumps power functions upwards inevitably leads to. ... In a sense, the shortage of power was the “obverse” of the shortage of commodities, it was its shadow, consequence, and condition of possibility. For there wasn’t a single issue that was resolved “naturally”, spontaneously. Whether a hospital was to be built, whether barber’s shops were to be erected (and where), whether there would be cherries next year – all those and millions of other issues were in essence political, power-related in this kind of society. They depended on the decisions of different factors.
in the socialist hierarchy and boiled down to a struggle for resources. Government ministries, factories, municipalities, regions were involved in this struggle. ... Everyone was involved, including the ordinary people, the citizens. And this struggle, undoubtedly, was the main manifestation of subjectness of these citizens who constantly inhabited the boundaries of two shortages: of commodities and of power. “Second networks” emerged precisely on the boundary of these two shortages – of power and of commodities. Similarly to what the outstanding French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss says about primitive society – that it is a set of rules about the exchange of women – society (not the state!) under socialism is a set of rules about the exchange of things and power (statuses/accesses)” (Raichev and Stoychev, 2008, pp.35-36).

In this connection, see also Chalakov et al. (2008).

7 Encouraging citizens to report cases of corruption is a central legal issue that has been widely discussed in Bulgaria. During the 43rd National Assembly (27 October 2014 – 26 January 2017), Meglena Kuneva, leader of the Bulgaria for Citizens Movement, a member of the Reformist Bloc coalition, worked on a bill on prevention of corruption among senior public officials (known as the Kuneva Bill). Here I would like to remind the reader that the Reformist Bloc (RB), which emerged from the summer 2013 protests, succeeded in winning seats in the 43rd National Assembly and joined the second government of Boyko Borisov as junior coalition partner. Undoubtedly, the RB capitalized the most on the summer 2013 protests and it insists on its connection with the latter (see, for example, the 2016 presidential campaign video of Traycho Traykov, the RB candidate). In September 2015 the National Assembly returned the Kuneva Bill for revision, but the revised version also suffered the same fate. The bill was not put to the vote again because meanwhile the government resigned. On the legal issue of allowing citizens to report corruption anonymously, see the discussion on Bulgarian National Television’s discussion show ‘Referendum’ of 4 May 2016, titled ‘Will the proposed anticorruption bill help?’ (in Bulgarian), available at https://www.bnt.bg/bg/a/shite-pomogne-li-predlaganiyat-antikoruptzionen-zakon (accessed 1 September 2017). The legal case is the following: it is good to allow citizens to report corruption anonymously in order to protect them from retaliation but, on the other hand, this could lead to false reporting without any possibility of holding the false reporter legally accountable.

8 It is noteworthy, however, that the issue of moral integrity in politics was used against all political adversaries of the SDS (for example, the Bulgarian Business Bloc, BBB). During the election campaign the SDS-affiliated daily Demokratiya, for instance, ‘disclosed’ that Gancho Daskalov, former municipal councillor from the BBB in Veliko Tarnovo and manager of a company in the airlines industry, had embezzled public funds. He had used part of them to build himself a house, generously giving the rest to the BBB election campaign manager Hristo Ivanov. See Demokratiya of 25 February 1997, p.3.

9 For an analysis of how this type of rhetoric intertwines anti-elite sentiments with criticism of minority rights, see Iakimova (2016).

10 In this regard, see Milla Mineva’s analysis (2016) which demonstrates how consumption became a subject of politico-economic critique under socialism.

11 Reading Petya Kabakchieva’s PhD dissertation (1999) from this perspective was especially interesting for me.

12 I owe this observation in part to Luc Boltanski (2014) who, in his book Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Society, traces the emergence of the detective story and the spy novel in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries respectively, through which he analyzes mysteries and conspiracies.

13 Here I will only note the people as veto-wielder, which has deterrent functions and is founded on negative expression of concrete demands, for example, through street demonstrations against the adoption of a law. The people’s veto power can also be thought of from a parliamentary perspective, where the opposition becomes an important corrective of government.

14 Regrettably, in this article I cannot dwell on the issue of trust, which is also a focus of my research. In my PhD dissertation I attempted to trace, from a micro-perspective, how trust functions in the vocabulary of the core members of the activist group Protest Network, which emerged in the context of the anti-government protests in Bulgaria in the summer of 2013, through an analysis of in-depth interviews I conducted in March and April 2014.

15 In another article (Vajsova, 2015), I attempted to show how ‘self-disclosure’ is a power technique that is based on the power-produced subject by his or her identification and exclusion as abnormal through the newly emerged form of governmentality in the context of development of a liberal political regime and capitalist economy. Exclusion, through which the excluded is produced, however, delineates also a discursive regime on the boundary of language, which marks the possibility of speaking about something,
the circumstances around which this is done, and, generally, the definition of speech as corresponding to the referentiality of reality, because the articulation is disqualified on the basis of the boundary that has emerged between reason/madness – speech/silence. Hence, what has been reduced to silence, producing subject identification through negative stigmatization, marks the impossibility to speak for oneself, which was accumulated by doctors in psychiatry of the nineteenth century and by psychoanalysts as a right to speak on behalf of their patients, who speak up precisely because of the peculiar circumstances, the role played out by the doctor, and the process of interpreting and understanding ‘what is said’. The concept of the homogenizing internalization of the norm which produces the subject as a type that corresponds or not to the understandings of normality/reality, allows psychiatry to codify and qualify. In the context of those disciplines, self-disclosure as a technique inherited from the ecclesiastical practices of confession, presupposes precisely something that figures as repressed (albeit unconsciously in this case) in the subject, something that has been displaced because of the subject’s definition as abnormal and, what’s more, through the subject’s self-identification as essentially abnormal on principle. This is a technique that substantializes a persisting identity so that the latter can be ultimately normalized again. By the way, here it is important to recall that psychiatry, as Foucault’s analyses demonstrate, is interwoven precisely with judicial power.

REFERENCES


Studies on conspiracy theories are usually concerned with the reasons for their popularity. But they should look, rather, for their roots. Conspiracy theories are rooted in everyday knowledge that things are not the way they should be, that something is wrong, that enough is enough, that things can be different. In the pleasure of seeing something others cannot see even though it’s right before their eyes. Maybe even in anxiety, discontent, distrust, suffering, in the suspicion that the reality of reality is uncertain (Boltanski, 2012, p.15), in the need to map an ever more complex world (Jameson, 1988, p.360), in the compulsion to keep performing a strange private ritual that allays the fear of the powerful impersonal mechanisms of late capitalism (Adorno, 1994, pp.95-96, 154), in the wish to reassure ourselves by opposing a loathsome Other who threatens our enjoyment (Žižek, 1997).

It is precisely thanks to those roots that conspiracy theories, apparently, can sprout everywhere, even where enlightened citizens keep asking ‘who’ is actually pulling the strings and insist they are being told the truth only if they are told about the backroom workings of politics. It is precisely because they do not address the roots of conspiracy theories that the attempts to counter them, undertaken by an aristocratic minority – maybe aristocrats of the spirit – achieve nothing more than a sublime enjoyment combining horror at a monstrous ignorance with admiration of the power of one’s own reason.

If studies on conspiracy theories focus on causal chains, ignoring their roots which, in themselves, don’t produce anything but which are very productive once they develop in suitable soil, they will be nothing more than an academic cabinet of curiosities. Since I disagree with this approach, here I will try to trace some of the roots of the conspiracy theory that the world is enslaved by bankers through consumer crediting.
1. Debt and Debts

In the second quarter of the twentieth century, the issue of whether offering mass consumer credit is economically rational was still controversial (Calder, 2009, p.20). This would mean investing significant capital in consumption, which is unproductive and only reproduces life. Such capital does not promise a return on investments. What’s more, it carries a significant risk of default, of being wasted.

The proponents of mass consumer credit, however, insisted that its economic rationality would be compensated for by its power rationality (Calder, 2009, p.153; Marron, 2009, pp.105-106).¹ For consumer credit can make governable the lives even of those who cannot govern their own behaviour (Lazzarato, 2011, p.126).

First, a pedagogical apparatus that teaches capitalism is built into consumer credit (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p.180; Krastev, 2015).

The borrower is obliged to pay back more. But this means that the borrower is obliged to have more, to convert their surplus, to transform it into capital. For capital is precisely value that becomes more value.

But what if the borrower doesn’t have capital, if they aren’t an entrepreneur?

Still, the borrower is an entrepreneur of the self, they have at least the capital of their own life. They can convert their vital forces into labour-power and increase its value by working, producing or knowing more. They can save more by reducing their living costs, living with less or living less. They can extract more value from the social networks they mobilize when they need support.

Second, a mechanism that teaches discipline is built into consumer credit. The time of the credit is usually divided into periods, each one of which ends with a small test (Foucault, 1977, pp.164-165). If the borrower cannot cope with it, if they fail to pay the amount due, they are not relieved of their debt. On the contrary, their debt increases, therefore it is to be expected that they will try to do what is necessary to succeed. But what do they actually have to do? They have to work more, to save more, to transfer a larger share of their debt to those who support them. What they have to do spills over into what they do and what they make the others do. The rhythm of the due instalments breaks up their everyday life into moments of doing what they must do, of indulging in the modest luxuries they can afford, and of carelessly spending more than they can afford, teaching them to restrain their desires through prudent thrift in order to avoid greater privation.

Third, consumer credit sets in motion an apparatus of security that functions both at the level of population and at the individual level (Foucault, 2007, p.25).

For the borrower commits themselves to an uncertain future. What if they fall ill, if they lose their job, if their employer hasn’t paid their social security contributions, if their savings are eaten away by inflation, if the value of their
property is undermined by deflation, if the interest on their credit is increased because of economic insecurity? Furthermore: How much would they lose if they stop paying off their debt? How much more would they owe? What could be taken away from them? What would be the cost of a bankruptcy? How would they live without income? Without a home?

The debtor is compelled to calculate risks, to balance them against the expected benefits, to diversify their assets, to optimize their chances, not to make haphazard choices, not to rely on chance or good luck, to act as an apparatus of security.

Fourth, consumer credit is connected with statistical mechanisms that make possible the individualization of debtors by analytical identification (Foucault, 2007, pp.226-227).

Once the credited physical persons or legal entities become many, they merge into a population characterized by characteristics such as level of indebtedness or share of non-performing loans. Just like mortality or morbidity rates, those characteristics are not individual, they cannot be assigned to a particular individual. Despite this, however, they allow a borrower to be described on the basis of the relevant population – for example, by calculating the risk of default on due payments, or by classifying the borrower by a particular type of credit history, or by measuring the deviation of their behaviour from the normal by statistical instruments.

Fifth, consumer credit creates an economy characterized by a specific regime of circulation of merits and faults (Foucault, 2007, p.229) or assets and liabilities.

Consumer credit is not a liability for the creditor; it is, rather, commercial money whose value is secured by future payment (Marx, 2012, p.89). This future payment carries a risk which is manageable. For example, this risk can be insured, distributed, combined in a portfolio with other risks that balance each other out. Hence, if the payment on which the value of the credit depends is deferred indefinitely, the risk management mechanisms will allow the creditor to transfer part of the losses to the insurers, shareholders, and/or the other assets in the portfolio. The liability will be more superficial, but it will spread far beyond its point of origin and if it becomes large-scale enough, it will turn into a liability for the biggest insurance mechanism – the state (Ewald, 1991, pp.197-210), which, in its turn, will activate its main redistribution mechanism, taxes, in order to transfer the liability to the population. Then the creditor’s losses will turn out to be secured more fully and effectively than they could be by an insurer or a risk market. If the liability is big enough, if it is too big to be a loss, it will circulate from the debtor to the creditor and on to security apparatuses such the market, insurers or the state, remaining at once an asset for the creditor and a liability for an entire population.

Sixth, consumer credit sets in motion mechanisms of truth which enable a significantly expanded formalization of desire (Foucault, 2007, pp.224, 226-229).
Individual interests cannot be predicted. That is why classical liberalism presupposed that the truth about individual interests becomes evident on the market. But the market used to show only the truth of solvent desire. Consumer credit allowed it to encompass also desires that are not economically rational – for example, buying something you cannot afford, choosing to buy something because of the pleasure of buying it, having something because you want it. Now all those unreasonable, inefficient, excessive desires can be articulated as a desire for credit, they can be abstracted from their objects and converted into quantities that can be measured and compared, calculated as risks, managed as capital (Lazzarato, 2011, p.45). In the era of Late Antiquity, the Church tried to exercise pastoral power by linking it to the desire for salvation as a general logic of desire, as a plane of formalization onto which every secular desire can be projected (Foucault, 2007, pp.172-174, 224). Of course, consumer credit is not salvation, it is the very opposite of salvation. But in its capacity as a plane of formalization, it has a similar function.

To summarize, consumer credit is a relay combining mechanisms of security, disciplinary power, biopower, pastoral power, adjusting them to the rationality of late capitalism. It makes borrowers governable with irresistible efficiency.

Nietzsche (2003, pp.39-45, 60-61) says that credit makes it possible to measure and compare the value of different lives, having in mind the incommensurable value of the lives of the debtor and of the creditor. Consumer credit makes it possible to measure and compare the value of the lives of debtors. Consumer credit, however, distinguishes not lives without value but lives with negative value, loss-making lives, lives of losers whose value is owed to others.

If the lives with negative value were distinguished by a state apparatus, the latter would have been oppressive. But isn’t that exactly what credit rating does? Doesn’t it stratify lives in accordance with the risk that they might turn out to be loss-making? Doesn’t it prescribe debtors trajectories whose gravity seems as difficult to overcome as at least that of the Earth?

Yet even if it may have become a fateful statistical mechanism, a mechanism of statisticizing fate, credit rating is not an oppressor. How can we resist it, how can we be free from it?

2. Debt and Responsibility
Here are two lives on credit:

I am 23 years old. I am a female (not that it should make a difference, but apparently in our society it does…). From the day I moved out of my parent’s house, I’ve supported myself 100%, not because they don’t love me but because they can’t support my dreams financially. For over two years I schlepped 2-for-1’s and shots to pay for my rent, a used car, and tuition at a
community college. Now I’m attending the University of MN and I depleted all of my savings just so I wouldn’t have to take out a loan this semester. I’m trying to get by debt free and it seems near impossible. I’m majoring in journalism, a profession I consider a civic duty. I know my salary will never break 5 figures and I’m OK with that because I’ve learned to live within my means. (We are the 99 percent, 2013)

I’m 21 with $7,000 in medical debt, $30,000 in student loans. My mom liquidated her 401K (all $2,000 of it) to help pay for my college education. I am her only option for a retirement plan. I grew up watching my single mother cry and worry about whether me and my two siblings would have food or be homeless. This is not the “American dream” we were promised. (We are the 99 percent, 2011).

Such a life is not even a life in poverty. Those women do not simply have nothing, they have less than nothing. What’s more, thanks to the wonderful charity of the credit that allows them to live without being able to pay the cost of their lives, they are deprived even of privation.

The consumer credit apparatus, though, is capable of extracting value and truth even from a life with less than nothing (Lazzarato, 2011, p.116). The mechanisms of risk management related to consumer credit will redistribute the unpaid debts between private and public insurers and convert them into securities with tempting rates of return so as to prevent them from turning into a liability for creditors, to prevent a waste of capital.

The mechanisms of formalizing desire will teach debtors that what they actually have to strive for is more credit. The mechanisms of analytical individualization will prescribe them a trajectory of growing indebtedness, an increasing price of credit reflecting the increased risk of insolvency, poverty, illness, unemployment, premature death.

The pedagogical mechanism will instruct debtors that they should have worked more, saved more, learned more, that they now have to do this at any cost if they want to escape from the gravity of their probable trajectory. The disciplinary mechanism will ask them to subject their lives to a rational rhythm, to develop efficient habits that will balance the inertia of the lack of order that led to their present situation. The mechanism of security will urge them to calculate more carefully the risks they are exposed to, to rely less on chance, not to surrender to their fate.

The coordinated operation of those mechanisms will produce the truth that since they had the chance to receive capital in the form of consumer credit but didn’t take advantage of it, since they didn’t invest it sensibly, since they weren’t good entrepreneurs of the self, they are responsible. It is precisely this truth that the term and concept of ‘responsibilization’ tries to capture (Foucault, 1978, p.124; 2003, pp.241-243, 254-255).

Responsibilization adds the burden of guilt to that of poverty. If the burden
proves to be impossible to bear for the debtors, it will probably be medicalized. ‘You aren’t oppressed, you are depressed,’ psychologists will claim. ‘Think positive,’ therapists will tell them. A legion of secular pastors teaching others how to live well will try to persuade them that their suffering is due to a biochemical imbalance, to dysfunctional habits, to uncleansed karma, advising them how to learn from negative experience, to see opportunities in the crisis, to keep trying.

But even if they internalize all this as the truth about themselves, even if they are successfully subjectivated as responsible and guilty entrepreneurs of the self, the debtors know something more – that it shouldn’t be this way. It’s not that the wrong thing happened to them, that it happens to others, too, or that it happens regularly. They know that this is wrong on principle.

In fact, that is exactly why they have published their stories on a website that inscribes them, along with hundreds of other stories, into the following framework:

We are the 99 percent. We are getting kicked out of our homes. We are forced to choose between groceries and rent. We are denied quality medical care. We are suffering from environmental pollution. We are working long hours for little pay and no rights, if we’re working at all. We are getting nothing while the other 1 percent is getting everything. We are the 99 percent. (We are the 99 percent, 2013)

The knowledge that this is wrong on principle doesn’t have the force of truth because it contradicts the truths that we must repay our debts, abide by contracts, estimate risks, assume responsibility for our choices interwoven in the economic, legal and social order of late capitalism.

From the point of view of the existing order, it is a lack of knowledge of the truth, maybe even an inability or unwillingness to know the truth, revealing an individual or social pathology, obsessive-compulsive disorder, paranoid style, or simply paranoia. Or a consequence of the secret war that a perfidious enemy is conducting in people’s minds.

The knowledge that this is wrong on principle is excluded from the existing order. It conflicts with the latter’s truths and can acquire the force of truth only at the cost of a crisis. It is weak, uncertain, non-autonomous, negative knowledge. It is rebellious knowledge in the sense of Michel Foucault (1997b, p.18).

Under the influence of cultural studies, it is often assumed that hegemony is a code that seems natural and is therefore applied by everyone who understands naturally, that it is as popular as common sense. No, hegemony is a regime of truth whose force has grown to the point where any knowledge that is in conflict with it is rebellious.
3. Rebellious Knowledge

Although it doesn’t have the force of truth, rebellious knowledge can have the force of right. But since it is excluded from the existing order, it would be a right against the latter.

A right against the existing order arises when the existing order justifies the power of an oppressor who suppresses rights, takes away freedoms, refuses to recognize that everyone deserves equal respect and equal treatment.

The creditor is not an oppressor, though. The creditor has the right to receive what is owed to them and it is unthinkable that we should have the right not to repay them just as it is unthinkable that we should have the right to steal. Admittedly, if we fail to repay our debt, it would appear that the creditor is obliging us to do what we cannot do. But even if in that case we have a right against our debt, this would mean that we have a right to fail that is stronger than the right to property.

How is a right to fail possible?

This right seems to me to be key to #Occupy. It attracts users who share their stories of failure on the website, informs the discussions of the General Assembly, and can be made out even in the only official document of the movement, the Declaration of the Occupation of New York City (2011):

We come to you at a time when corporations, which place profit over people, self-interest over justice, and oppression over equality, run our governments. We have peaceably assembled here, as is our right, to let these facts be known.

- They have taken our houses through an illegal foreclosure process, despite not having the original mortgage…
- They have held students hostage with tens of thousands of dollars of debt on education, which is itself a human right.

But in this Declaration of the General Assembly of #Occupy Wall Street the right to fail is formulated as a right not against concrete corporations but against a corporate capitalism that subjugates us not by threatening us with violence but by teaching us that since what we want has a cost, we may have it only if we win it in competition with others, that it is precisely competition which shows what we can and what we deserve, that if we are losing that is because others can and deserve more, that we still always have the chance to win if we give more of ourselves in competition with the others.

The Declaration of #Occupy Wall Street tries to elaborate a right against oppression whose key mechanism is responsibilization. Could the power exercised by a pedagogical apparatus possibly be constrained by a right? Isn’t this actually a right not to learn, a right to ignorance, a right to stupidity?
4. Everyday Right

In one of his lecture courses at the Collège de France, Michel Foucault (1997b, pp.52-56) analyzes the premodern discourse of race war. This discourse represents what would later be called ‘society’ as a war between an oppressive minority and an oppressed majority. Victory in any war must be preserved after the last battle is over, therefore the victors imposed an order that justified the subjugation of the oppressed majority. But this order was in fact a continuation of the war, it was founded on violence and therefore could not have the force of right. Since justifying such an order meant giving it additional force, additional forcefulness, the discourse of race war tried to contest it through narratives about the majority’s incessant resistance showing the violent nature of this order, and about a golden age showing that things could be different.

Foucault (1997b, pp.80-84) says that the discourse of race war was reworked and converted into the modern concepts of biological racism and revolution. But here is a later, reworked version of this discourse.

Peter Merola studied percussions at the Mannes Conservatory of Music in New York City. What could a percussionist expect of the future except for a future as a percussionist? Instead, he made a performance piece, then went on to make films and founded a social movement (Riversong, 2011).

The films denounce an oppressive minority made up of the Church, bankers, and the government. This minority subjugates the majority through the mechanism of credit, which may also take the form of a creed. The rejection of the existing order, which justifies coercion by creditors, is recognized not in the secret resistance of the people but in natural and social crises whose common characteristic is their natural origin. Here the golden age is seen as yet to come. The crises are systematic because they are due to the system, the films tell us. To stop them we must stop the system. But the system is driven by the mechanism of credit, which operates with money. We can stop the crises and block their mechanism if we eliminate money. Is that possible? Of course it is, if everyone receives according to their needs. But how is it possible to distribute resources according to needs, considering that most people want more than they need? By means of a powerful computer. Of course.

Is that true? Peter Merola’s performance piece enjoyed unexpected success and the subsequent film was watched by more than two million users. In fact, it was the first of a series of three films watched by more than three million users.2 This might not be any proof, but it is an everyday plebiscite. An extraordinary number of strangers has given it a right.

This right does not entail a correlative duty the way, for example, the right to freedom of speech binds the authorities not to prevent me from expressing my opinion. It is not a freedom which does not allow opposite rights the way, for example, my freedom of choice excludes as wrongful the claims of others that I am obliged to make a particular choice. Neither is it a power to impose the same duties on others as those of the authorities, nor an immunity that does
not allow the authorities to impose duties on me.3

In fact, the right given to the film by users is not a legal right, because it cannot be possessed (Donnelly, 2003, pp.7-13). It is, rather, an everyday right.

In our everyday lives we often give others a right. Yet this is not simply because we are following rules or telling the truth. Let us imagine, for instance, that someone says something is wrong. To give them the right to say so, I don’t have to investigate how things are. If I object, I wouldn’t have broken a rule. Theirrightness doesn’t entail anything more than my accepting that things are as they say because they say so. What’s more, not because I think or know so too, but only insofar as I don’t treat what they have said as wrongful. Here rules matter only if the conversation does not proceed properly (Koev, 2017, p.109). The question of truth arises only when it has become unsolvable, in order to activate the weak sovereign power of performative truth-telling (Vatsov, 2016, p.94).

Of course, Peter Merola’s rightness is not negotiated, as in everyday conversations, because users can speak only the primitive language of ‘like’ and ‘dislike’, or the broken, de-indexicalized language of online comments. But when they like or dislike, when they share, download, comment, they show an interest. The platform adds up their interests in a sum total of general interest, abstracted from the content of users’ private interests. Since its sum total is calculated in an automatic, infallible, unbiased and incontestable manner, the platform assigns it the value of a truth. It produces a general will.

The general will is not what everyone wants, or should want. It is not the sum of private interests but the result of a process of summation where opposite interests neutralize each other (Rousseau, 2016); it is more a product of vectors than a sum of independent quantities. Nowadays this process of registering and summing private interests is conducted automatically by search engines, web 2.0 platforms, social networks. Nowadays the general will is embodied in big data (Azuma, 2014).

Peter Merola’s right stems from the fact that he is a representative of a technologized general will. By liking, sharing, downloading, commenting, millions of users have actually voted for him and the power of his voice has grown by millions of times – he now speaks in the voice of millions. Peter Merola has become Peter Joseph, founder and leader of the social movement Zeitgeist.

How can such a right be contested without calling democracy into question?

The general will gave birth to popular sovereignty (Huet, 1997, pp.69-70). Without the right of a people to decide for itself when forming a general will, popular sovereignty would be nothing more than a façade. Without popular sovereignty, democracy would be nothing more than a façade.

Can we claim that the general will of users has nothing to do with popular sovereignty because they are not a people?

Is it actually true that only the populations linked to a particular territory
by the mechanism of citizenship constitute a people? Is it actually true that a 
people can decide for itself only in a field predetermined by the state and only 
if it follows a pre-established procedure? Does the people indeed have the right 
to a voice only when it votes?

Or should we claim like some popular Bulgarian writers that democracy 
and liberalism have parted ways and that we must opt for liberalism, for a tyran-
nical liberalism?

5. Right to Fail

Mick is 21 years old, from a small town in the Chicago-land suburbs, he 
has finished the local high school and is now in college, he likes gardening, cars 
and racing. Here is how he explains why he supports the Zeitgeist Movement:

Many, many people have seen the Zeitgeist movie on (social video network). 
They’ve downloaded it. At a lot of events, all around the world we actually 
give out the DVDs free to people. The most recent (movie) Zeitgeist: Moving 
Forward is probably the best documentary that has come out within the past 
few decades. … The monetary paradigm is basically the foundational structure 
of our civilization as we know it right now. … This monetary paradigm as 
we know it, as unfortunate as it is, is collapsing as we speak. Now the reason 
why I say this is because this is obviously apparent any where you look if you 
take the time to look around the world today. … Monetary structures do not 
last because they have some very fundamental flaws that do not allow them 
to exist longer than a certain period. … They’re just unsustainable overall. 
As far as the monetary structure goes, the capitalist system that we have now, 
when we talk about representing the 99%, we talk about representing the vast 
majority of people who this system does not sustain; (the people) this system 
does not want to sustain. This system is basically set up to sustain 1% or less 
of the population, which in this system is the extremely wealthy class and 
people who just have money, like the owners of banks and stuff like that. 
(Faye, 2011, pp.11-13)

To explain why he supports Peter Joseph’s movement, Mick has simpli-
ified and generalized his theory. He has reworked it into phrases such as ‘look 
around the world today’, ‘as far as the monetary system goes’, ‘does not sustain 
us’, ‘we’re finally waking up’, ‘the system will collapse’.

Such phrases represent a scene: someone opens their eyes, sees the pend-
ing collapse of the world, declares they are dissatisfied. This scene, however, is 
formal because it doesn’t have any concrete content. To be filled with concrete 
content, someone must perform it in a concrete situation. In this sense it is, 
rather, a script.

Yet we understand the meaning of this script even when it isn’t performed. 
Not because it is founded on conventions at that. In the final analysis, what is 
the conventional procedure for saying ‘look around the world’, which are the
appropriate circumstances and persons (Austin, 1962, p.13)? Since this cannot be said incorrectly, incompletely, by an inappropriate person, it is not a performative act.

Even if we assume that ‘look around the world’ refers to the conventions of directives, its combination with ‘we’re finally waking up’, ‘does not sustain us’, ‘the system will collapse’ requires, rather, an improvisation with conventions which will make it possible to articulate an affect, maybe anxiety, hope, the delight at an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge, or all of that at once.

What’s more, here the affect is not simply articulated, it is addressed at the other person, it is targeted at the other, so as to provoke a particular perlocutionary effect – to make the other respond, to exercise on the other the weak power that we can identify most easily in situations where we have nothing to say yet we still must say something, when we are expected to respond and cannot fail to respond because even if we remain silent we are still responding to the other’s expectation by a silent ‘no’.

I propose that we call ‘passives’ phrases which express an affect so as to make someone else respond, referring to a script characterized by incompletely defined indexicality and, in this sense, being practically formalized, unlike the passionate utterances analyzed by Stanley Cavell (2006, pp.180-182). It seems to me that such phrases play a key role in the dramatics of discourse (Foucault, 1997a, p.68).

Theories such as that of Peter Joseph have the force of passives, of passionate phrases. Apparently Mick himself has joined the movement in response to a passive:

*Zeitgeist: Moving Forward* is probably the best documentary that has come out within the past few decades. Basically, it explains the social paradigm we all live in. We’re finally waking up to the idea that this system will collapse.

(Faye, 2011, p.13)

The meaning of a passionate phrase does not consist in what it says or does with words, but in what it makes the other do, in the scene it provokes, in the script it enacts. But to have meaning, it should make the other respond.

The other should not be able to avoid responding to the phrase by saying that the matter in question doesn’t concern them, that they aren’t obliged to respond, or that they cannot respond here and now. That is precisely what is achieved by combining passionate phrases with the disjunction ‘us’ or ‘them’, the people or the sociologically inconceivable class of the super-rich who simply own the money, the stratification of those whose needs are not sustained or those whose needs are sustained by the system, the 99 percent or the 1 percent. The other is faced with a choice and whatever they choose, they cannot fail to respond. Even if they were to object that such a disjunction is unfounded, naïve, silly, they would have responded by disagreeing, by taking an opposite posi-
tion. What’s more, their position would be weak because, being a response to Nick’s passionate phrases, it would also mean that it considers its needs to be sustained and identifies itself with a class it cannot belong to precisely because the latter is sociologically inconceivable, it is the class of the 1 percent.

Does this disjunction actually portray a hated, rejected, persecuted person? Does it point to the super-rich bankers, and hence, to one of the most disturbing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories?

This might be possible if the ‘us’/‘them’ division is abstracted from the pragmatics and dramatics of speech and substantiated as a representation of a social, ethnic, or religious group. Here, however, its meaning follows from its function.

Bankers and the super-rich function as the face of money. None of the people with whom the son of an ordinary veteran from a small town in Illinois is likely to talk with would recognize themselves in this face. But since they do not recognize themselves in the latter, they would recognize in money the alien face of an order that governs their own lives:

The main idea is that the social system we (all people) exist in now is not necessarily a democracy, it’s not necessarily socialism or communism; and this goes for any other country in the world. It’s not so much any of that, but that we all exist in a monetary paradigm. The monetary paradigm is basically the foundational structure of our civilization as we know it right now. The monetary structure is used by any society that chooses to use money in exchange for services, goods, products, etc. … Some people call it specifically capitalism, some people call it neo-capitalism, that (term) is more modernized, but it all describes a monetary system. (Faye, 2011, p.11)

Unlike the face of the super-rich, however, that of bankers is overdetermined because one can recognize in it also consumer credit – the point at which money turns into destructive power:

And even if they [food, healthcare, education, etc.] are provided for us the one thing that we cannot escape from in this system is the monetary debt. Debt is the foundation of this entire society. In this society money is debt and debt is money. There’s no two ways around it. … Well the money itself was created out of debt in the first place. And that’s a very, very fundamental flaw within the system. A lot of people say that factories or banking is the problem. The Federal Reserve of the United States is also a problem and the fact that they print money out of nothing. … We’re at the point where our entire country is not able to sustain anymore. We’re going to war to steal resources, I mean, you hear people talking about World War Three! If it happens it’s just going to be a grab for resources. (Faye, 2011, pp.12-14)

Incidentally, is presenting a war as a grab for resources a conspiracy theo-
ry? Or does it become a conspiracy theory only when the victors claim that the war was defensive, fair, or even humanitarian?

The everyday theory Mick has developed from the concept of the Zeitgeist Movement, however, is structured so as to shift the arguments about the destructive power of consumer credit from the global plane to the plane of ordinary life:

The Resource Based Economic Model [is] based on the idea that we have certain human needs to fulfill. If these needs are not met than [sic] it leads to deprivation, mental health issues, heart issues, and issues in general. It also leads to problems with inferiority, the class system, structural racism, which are all foundations of the society as well. (Faye, 2011, p.13)

This everyday theory calls on the others to recognize the roots of their suffering in an order that does not meet their needs, crushes their desires, hurts their lives. Here bankers are articulated as the alien, disembodied, unearthly face of this order, the face of an oppressive system.7

Hence, bankers function as the central relay of a mechanism of negative interpellation. For if we accept that interpellation is an appeal in whose immaterial object we recognize ourselves as subjects (Althusser, 1972, p.174), here we are called upon to recognize ourselves in the oppressive face of consumer credit – what’s more, not as individuals but as units from a multitude, perhaps from a people.

Recognizing the face of the oppressor doesn’t free one from oppression, though. On the contrary, it makes oppression reflexive and therefore doubles oppression.8 This oppressive effect should be avoided by combining the mechanism of negative interpellation with a positive mechanism:

The Zeitgeist Movement is a social awareness movement to educate the public towards the idea of moving towards a research [sic, i.e. resource] based economy. … We need a system that sustains all people on this planet. The resource based economic model, after years of researching it myself is how I arrived at this conclusion. It is the decision I arrived at. This is the thing that makes most sense. It (the Resource Based Economic Model) is not based on scientific evidence or any one person’s opinion, but is based on empirical data and objectivity. It’s based on the natural laws of the universe, things that no human is exempt from. It’s based on the idea that we have certain human needs to fulfill. (Faye, 2011, pp.11-13)

Moving towards a resource based economy is not a program because even Peter Joseph does not claim he knows how this can be achieved. Yet neither is the resource based economy a utopia because he prescribes it as a solution, as a possible and necessary solution. This fictional economy is nothing more than a way to deny that ‘things cannot be otherwise than they are’, a way to say that
things can be different. The resource based economy is a mechanism of hope.

The discursive apparatus made up of passionate phrases, negative interpela-
tion, and hope might seem a strange, dubious bricolage. Yet it is capable of
producing rights which the engineers of thought would consider impossible.

As already noted, consumer credit obliges me to have more, and if I don’t,
my debt burden is compounded by the burden of guilt. I should have saved
more, achieved more, done more to change things. But the discursive apparatu-
of the everyday theory pieced together by Mick tries to present all personal
failures as suffering whose root cause is consumer credit. Hence, it articulates a
right stronger than the duty imposed on me by the creditor to change things. For
it is inhumane to claim that I am obliged not to suffer, and since credit makes
me suffer, since I am suffering not simply because of my incompetence, impru-
dence or indolence, then only an inhumane creditor would claim that I should
have done more to change things.

Mick is so carried away with the power of this discursive apparatus that he
apparently tries to apply it wherever the root cause of a failure, of a duty to have
achieved more, of a demand that ‘things should have been different’, can be
traced back to suffering caused by others where a depression can be presented
as oppression that is to be opposed by a right:

The girl you just called fat… She’s on diet pills. The girl you just called ugly…
She spends hours putting makeup on hoping people will like her. The boy you
just tripped… He’s abused enough at home. See that man with the ugly scars…
He fought for his country. The 14 year old girl with a kid, that you just called
a slut… she got raped. That guy you just made fun of crying… His mother is
dying. Put this as your status if you’re against bullying. I bet 95% of you won’t
re-post, but I’m sure the people with a heart and a backbone will.9

Here the discursive apparatus of everyday right is employed to critique vi-
olence based on inequalities that are too everyday, situated, local to be thought
as social inequalities. This critique reveals, below the surface of failures, a suf-
fering that is not born within the losers but from the pressure they are subject-
ed to, from the force exercised upon them. A personal suffering that does not
originate from the depths of a lonely, rejected, individual body but from clashes
between bodies.

Of course, suffering does not relieve me of the duty to repay my credit. But
it relieves me of the duty to have changed things, it immunizes me against the
additional burden of responsibility for my failure,10 it articulates a local right to
fail that cannot be normalized as a rule but nevertheless seems to be inscribed
in the field of law as an exception inaugurated in times of crisis (Agamben,
1998, p.15).11

Understood as a right to fail, suffering has become the last point of sover-
eignty available to the debtor.
Six years later, Mick has borrowed four loans, his family’s monthly income is approximately USD 1,100 per member, he has married and has a child, but his credit rating is poor because he doesn’t have a permanent job and has dropped out of college. So he cannot rely on a new loan of over USD 9,000, and any unforeseen significant expense – for example, on healthcare or education – would put him at risk of bankruptcy. Could suffering be his last liberty?

6. Conspiracy Theory
In the autumn of 2011, Mick joined #Occupy Chicago:

I’ve been waiting for this movement to happen for a while. It’s because I’ve known something like this was going to happen. This was inevitable. (Faye, 2011, p.11)

Other members of the Zeitgeist Movement joined the Occupy protests in New York, Los Angeles, Vancouver, Atlanta, Venice, Glasgow, Copenhagen, and elsewhere. They tried to use #Occupy’s discursive apparatus to produce not rights but prescriptions:

Neither socialism or capitalism is the answer. This a false paradigm that is completely decoupled from the natural world. Corruption, corporate greed, high taxes, debt, etc. are not the problems – these are SYMPTOMS, rooted in an inherently flawed social system: the monetary economic system at large … To understand the real solution, rather than ask “Do we have the money?”, we need to ask “Do we have the resources?”. And we have the food to feed everyone on Earth … the only thing stopping us is the monetary economic system … Therefore, we need a system that’s actually BASED on efficient / sustainable resource management. (Mcberko, 2011)

Before, the members of the Zeitgeist Movement assembled Peter Joseph’s theories with passionate phrases, negative interpellation, and mechanisms of hope in order to justify claims that things shouldn’t be the way they are. Now, they sought to justify claims about the way things should be. But as soon as they tried to readjust their discursive apparatuses so as to produce positive norms instead of critique, their apparatuses broke down.

The first to become useless was the mechanism of hope.

On 16 October 2011 Peter Joseph (2011) posted a video address to #Occupy and the world, widely promoted and disseminated by the members of the Zeitgeist Movement (Kevinsutavee, 2011; Kman, 2011; Quantumystic, 2011; Zeitgeistsjn, 2011). At the beginning of his address, Peter Joseph spoke about non-violence, the mob mentality, Gustave Le Bon, and some supporters posted appeals on the #Occupy Forum urging users to hear what he said after the fourth minute – that the regional Occupy movements should unify into a global entity that would decide whether to strive for reform or for revolution, and if it
opted for revolution, it should create a parallel global government. The present system will inevitably fail, Peter Joseph predicted, going on to say that ‘the tipping point will come once the public begins to see the merit of the new social proposal, hence recognizing the governing entity itself and eventually giving it priority over the prior political establishment.’

On 22 October 2011 Peter Joseph presented his theory at a discussion at the headquarters of #Occupy Wall Street (TZMlectures, 2011). He spoke for a long time against the background of passionate images before the silent audience. Then the audience spoke up, but apparently about something else. Most of the participants in the discussion tried to modify his messages so as to redirect them towards their own ends – for example, a culture of sharing, a revolution in consciousness, a global party. Someone asked how a resource based economy is possible and Peter Joseph replied that it is not a program but a goal, that the first step should be the creation of a parallel global government that would educate people and demand action from national governments. But now this answer seemed insufficient, so he kept elaborating on it until the moderator politely asked him to keep his answers shorter. At the height of the discussion, a woman dressed in leather stepped up to the mike. She said that most people aren’t aware of the true meaning of the symbol of the Black Panthers, the raised fist – it symbolizes the power of unity. That’s it, she said curtly and stepped back to enthusiastic applause from the audience.

In the next months, Peter Joseph took part in discussions with #Occupy Los Angeles and #Occupy Venice. They proceeded in a similar fashion: his passionate utterances were blocked by the silence of the audience, the force of interpellation spilled into diverging flows of appeals, the mechanism of hope operated in idle mode under pressure from the recurrent questions of ‘how’, seeking not so much to receive an answer as to say there’s no way.

Second, the Zeitgeist Movement’s discursive apparatus broke down because it blocked the mechanism of negative interpellation.

On 19 September 2011, the participants in the General Assembly at #Occupy Wall Street broke up for half an hour into small groups to discuss and propose goals and principles of the movement. The groups came up with a list of diverse demands ranging from building a revolutionary culture to building good manners (General Assembly, 2011). The supporters of the Zeitgeist Movement defended demands which apparently enjoyed significant popularity – recognizing money as the cause of the flaws in the system, treating debt as a form of bondage, bringing banks under public control. On the basis of the discussion, a working group was established, but its meetings took the form of a series of declarations of demands which the moderators failed to sum up or limit. By mid-November 2011, the creation of 25 million jobs through a massive public works and public service program had emerged as a main demand. But at the meeting at which this demand had to be finally approved, the participants argued about whether to set concrete targets for job creation, proposed
shortening the workweek, creating a political party, investing in science and technology, nationalizing the banking system, establishing a worldwide Occupy movement. One of the new members of the working group, Elk, declared that all those issues would take care of themselves if the core issue was solved: getting money out of politics. The moderators of the group insisted that his demand was untimely because it was new, that new demands were to be discussed at the end of the meeting, that now they had to discuss the main demand. But until that point the discussion had been around new demands anyway, so Elk tried to strengthen his demand by combining it with negative interpellation. In fact, policy decisions are not made by the government but by people with money and power in a way to support people with money, he said.

But once the mechanism of negative interpellation is used in a polemic, it begins to function as a weapon, and in order to defend their demands, the other participants in the meeting countered it. They asked Elk who were the people with money and power that he had in mind, how did he know that, how would he deal with them. Elk replied that he had in mind the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, that he knew through his own research that in order to deal with them we need to change the system so that it will sustain our needs. He was backed up by one of the old members of the working group, who mentioned a systematic looting of society, cases set up for martial law, wire fences facing in to keep people in, not facing out to keep people out. This is a conspiracy theory, someone objected. But this concept also functions as a weapon and now Elk was compelled to defend himself:

The problem with conspiracy theories is that they are not just theories. These things are true. They are conspiracy facts. That is something that the general public doesn’t know much more about. There needs to be education. I think this movement is about everyone taking personal responsibility for choices that we have made. Therefore we all need to education ourselves. So we understand that these aren’t conspiracy theories. When you look at Building 7 and see what architects and engineers say, there’s no question that the government had something to do with 9/11. If we’re asking people who have a lot of money to take personal responsibility, we have to take personal responsibility, then we need to as well. (Demands, 2011e)

In a short while the time allocated for the meeting of the working group was running out, they had to leave the room, so the moderator announced that they needed to move to one-minute speaking. Elk took the floor and said that he wanted money out of politics.14 Nobody objected anymore. But is that the demand Elk had formulated at the beginning of the meeting? Many of the members of the working group could recognize in it their own demands for reform or revolution. But in that case, are their demands conspiracy theories?

Getting money out of politics would soon become one of #Occupy’s most
popular demands. Representatives of the working group would announce it to the media, which would broadcast and disseminate it in diverse messages.\textsuperscript{15} The moderators of the General Assembly would accuse them of violating the Occupy Movement’s principle of autonomy, hinting at the influence of Zeitgeist. Part of the working group would leave the Occupy protest in New York and register as a non-governmental organization in Kentucky; at the beginning of 2012, it would publish the 99\% Declaration, including some of the Zeitgeist Movement’s demands, and try to organize – unsuccessfully – a Global General Assembly.

Third, the Zeitgeist Movement’s discursive apparatus broke down because passionate utterances acquired a destructive intensity.

The discussions on the forum often turned into a duel whose only rule was ‘an unceasing obligation to respond and respond in spades’ (Baudrillard, 1990, p.82). By mid-October 2011, Marchelo had already started several topics on the Zeitgeist Movement on the \#Occupy Forum, which received almost no responses. He now asked users to vote on whether the two movements should unite to create a Parallel Government.\textsuperscript{16} A user replied that they didn’t want to be ruled by a supercomputer, but Marchelo responded with a joke. Another user, who pointed out that the measures advocated by the Zeitgeist Movement are communism, was advised to see the FAQ section on the website of the Venus Project (Venus, 2017). But then the questions started pouring in. Could a computer calculate the interests of billions? Wouldn’t the system programmers become the new minority master class? How would finite resources, like prime real estate and original works of art, be handled? If the idea of a resource based economy is not communism, why is it purely normative like communism and libertarianism? If it isn’t purely normative, shouldn’t it be first applied on a smaller scale and then, if it causes widespread problems, would its advocates blame the problems on the failure to implement it in full, or would they admit they were wrong? Marchelo couldn’t give straight answers, especially to the question about the distribution of finite resources, but then rbe joined in the discussion once again. The system programmers would not become the new minority master class, because if the system sustains the needs of everyone\textsuperscript{17} there wouldn’t be any finite resources, houses with a good view wouldn’t make a difference, there would be no need to decide who is to be deprived at the expense of someone else. As for the original works of art, this problem could be resolved with the advance of nanotechnology. The Zeitgeist program cannot be tested on a small scale because realizing its full potential would require redistributing all global resources. If it creates problems, they ought to be analyzed carefully in order to see whether they are due to its incomplete realization or to the program itself.\textsuperscript{18} Still, Zeitgeist ‘is a thin disguise for communism’, TechJunkie concluded at the end of the discussion.

On another day the discussion\textsuperscript{19} became so heated that the very question of who had the right to speak was placed at stake in the duel between the us-
ers of the #Occupy Forum. If the Zeitgeist program cannot be realized without expropriating all resources, then it is communism, TechJunkie insisted again, even if it is technologists rather than bureaucrats who end up in control. He was once again advised to see the FAQ section of the Venus Project website, but he now claimed that the answers there showed precisely that the resource based economy is communism. No it isn’t, he was told several times. On the contrary, it is, he kept insisting until one of the supporters of the Zeitgeist Movement told him that they would stop arguing with him until he realized his ignorance. ‘I’ll keep pointing out that “resource-based economy” means “communism” unless you can give me a good reason to stop,’ he replied. After being advised once again to check out the FAQ section, he replied that the Zeitgeist concept of the technological societies of the future in which jobs would become obsolete was nothing more than an excuse for not getting a jobs. So let’s occupy the excuses too, TechJunkie urged users. Zeitgeist is an evil cult organized as ‘Godbot fascism’, a user nicknamed Gawdoofruth added. Several days later, TechJunkie (2011) would start a topic on the forum claiming that the Zeitgeist people were using false accounts to vote up their popularity, JohnBassist (2011) would start a topic claiming that Gawdoofruth was a religious nut from the Tea Party, while kingscrossection would declare that the wind of change they were talking about was ‘just a rancid fart from the billionaires of the country’ (Silverspider10, 2011).

The intensity of the passionate utterances had grown so much that instead of making the others respond, it turned their responses into a question about what made them speak the way they did. Such a question, however, already presupposes that the others are not speaking normally, it presupposes an abnormality. Of course, this is not the legal abnormality of a criminal who has violated the legal norms. Nor is it the disciplinary abnormality of a student, soldier, prisoner, or worker who deviates from the prescribed norms. It is more closer to the psychotic abnormality of those families which try to break free from the social order in order to turn into islands of an order they have invented themselves, into islands from another social world (Donzelot, 1979, p.227). The abnormal subject of a social psychosis.

Yet if the discursive apparatus of the Zeitgeist Movement has broken down, it can no longer produce right. Hence, the rebellious knowledge that things are wrong can no longer be justified. Since, furthermore, it cannot be proven or guaranteed by the authority of its origin, it becomes something which actually cannot be known.

On the other hand, though, it is not merely lack of knowledge. If anyone continues to insist now that things are wrong, they wouldn’t merely not know how things are. They wouldn’t know that they don’t know, they wouldn’t want to know, they would stubbornly claim to have an impossible knowledge, and even if they are subjected to the disciplinary mechanisms that teach us what we must know in order to be efficient, or the mechanisms of security that teach us
to calculate the risks of an uncertain future, those mechanisms would probably achieve nothing. Such a person would be not ignorant but incorrigible (Foucault, 2003, p. 325).

One can easily recognize in the face of this incorrigible subject the black hole of a danger. After the horrendous rape in the #Occupy Glasgow camp, one of the participants in the movement warned about another, no less, according to her, danger: its tolerance towards the Zeitgeist Movement, an anti-globalization conspiracy cult whose ideas parallel a strain of thought on the extreme right (Coatesy, 2011). This warning reflects the position of the Scottish Socialist Party’s Youth group (SSY, 2010), which, in its turn, reflects the warnings of experts reflecting the concern of researchers who study vast sets of impossible knowledge in an attempt to discover in them the mechanism of a self-immunization of reason that undermines the social order from within.20

Ultimately, the rebellious knowledge that something is wrong has turned into impossible knowledge of an incorrigibly abnormal subject, creating a danger from which society must be defended. Now Zeitgeist has become nothing more than a conspiracy theory.

NOTES

1 See also Deleuze and Guattari (1983, p.104; 1987, pp.113, 217, 226).
2 This is a simplified account of the history of the Zeitgeist Movement. Credit is represented as a problem already in the first film, but the second focuses on the destruction of the environment, and only the third one on the solution, which Peter Joseph finds in the Venus Project of Jacque Fresco, an architect and visionary.
3 Here I have in mind the classification of the types of rights in Hohfeld (1913, pp.552-553).
4 Here I refer to the concept of ‘the people’ reconstructed by Momchil Hristov (2012) on the basis of texts by the later Foucault.
5 Here I refer to the concepts of de-indexicalization developed by Koev (2017) and Vatsov (2016), and the theory of modalization elaborated by Tenev (2017).
6 I owe the idea of calling such phrases ‘passives’ to Zhana Tsoneva. Their description here uses and reworks the concept of discursive figure of the later Roland Barthes (1990, pp.1-9). And another note: it seems to me that the phrase ‘this is true’, analyzed in detail and in depth by Dimitar Vatsov (2016, pp.94, 114), is rather a passive than a performative.
7 Here I would like to refer the reader to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987, p.115) concept of faciality.
8 Insofar as those who are successfully interpellated by this negative mechanism are not only oppressed but also see themselves as such.
9 I prefer not to publish a link to Nick’s Facebook profile where I found this status posted on 2 November 2011, about a month after the interview I analyze here.
10 Here I have in mind the concept of immunity as a special type of right, developed by Wesley Hohfeld (1913, p.532).
11 Here I would like to refer the reader to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998, pp.15-29) concept of sovereign power.
12 Data as of 30 December 2017, from cubib.com, a website compiling publicly accessible personal information for the needs of potential creditors and other interested persons.
13 The following discussion is reconstructed from the minutes of the 15 November 2011 meeting of the working group on demands (Demands, 2011e).
14 Of course, the demand about getting money out of politics wasn’t invented by Elk. It can be recognized already in the principle that money is the root of all evil, formulated by one of the groups during the first
discussion on demands at the General Assembly (2011) at #Occupy Wall Street. It was the main demand of one of the moderators of the working group on demands, Ben (Demands, 2011a). It was proposed in the working group on demands for the first time on 1 November 2011, but its discussion was postponed for procedural and strategic considerations (Demands, 2011b). Until mid-November 2011, another two unsuccessful attempts were made to discuss it (Demands, 2011c, 2011d).

15 See, e.g., Kain (2011).
16 The following discussion is summarized from Marchelo (2011).
17 Here is the official version of this argument: ‘80% of the US workforce is in the service sector today, and 75% of the global workforce can be replaced by mechanization tomorrow. A Resource-Based Economy accepts the efficiency of mechanization and accepts it for what it offers, because it’s irresponsible not to. The Resource-Based Economy city will be one big machine. While people will be needed to oversee the machine and respond to problems, that number will diminish over time to perhaps 3% of the city’s population’ (Riversong, 2011).
18 Since the arguments posted on a discussion forum are usually incomplete and fragmentary, here is their version as presented on the official website of the Zeitgeist Movement: ‘Rational Consensus is not to be confused with the historically failed traditional Mob Rule Democratic Process of one person – one vote. TZM does not condone total, open mob rule democracy as it is based on the faulty assumption that each participating party is educated enough to make the most intellectually appropriate, unbiased decision. Proper Decision Making has nothing to do with the interests of a group of people, nor the interests of a single person. Proper Decision Making is a purely technical process of logical assessment of a given set of variables and hence can only be based on upon tangible, technical referents – not abject, unsupported mass value opinion, which is what the pure democratic theory erroneously assumes holds integrity. In other words, each argument of a given member must be logically supported by an external referent/set of external referents – clearly reasoned in communication to support the conclusion given. The manifestation of this reasoning could be called a Case. If the argument cannot be quantified in some manner – it isn’t valid as an argument’ (Riversong, 2011).
19 Summarized from Arjang1a (2011).
20 For an analysis of the Zeitgeist films as a conspiracy theory, see Barkun (2013, p.178, n.5). For an analysis of the articulation of conspiracy theories as knowledge of an abnormal subject, see Boltanski (2011, pp.189, 196) and Fenster (2008).

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JohnBassist (2011) I’m a religious nut from the tea party that has copied many people’s names to discredit them and create confusion on this forum. I am mentally impaired and have a child like need for attention, good or bad. AKA gawdoftruth AKA puff6269 & any number of you. *Occupy Forum* (1 December). Available at: http://occupywallst.org/forum/im-a-religious-nut-from-the-tea-party-that-has-cop/ [Accessed 12 April 2018].


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DEVENIR COMPLOTISTE:
TRAJECTOIRES DE RADICALISATION
ET DE PROFESSIONNALISATION
DE DEUX GROUPES
DE CITOYEN(NE)S ENQUÊTEUR(RICE)S

Tous les jours, en particulier à la suite de la série d’attentats qui secoue l’Europe, les média et les pouvoirs publics n’ont de cesse traitent de radicalisation. Que ce soit à propos de conversions d'adolescents à l'activisme djihadiste (Bonelli, 2015, p. 1, 14) ou du développement des théories du complot, ces phénomènes sont appréhendés, y compris dans leurs traduction en termes de politiques publiques au prisme de déviances psychopathologiques ou de maladies du corps social. Or, il apparaît qu'appréhender cette notion du point de vue de la science politique est bien plus complexe (Giry, 2017). En effet, loin de ces grandes explications d'un «pourquoi» monocausal et quasi catharsistique en termes de mots valises tels que crise économique, crise des valeurs ou d'autres «ras-le-bol» encore, il nous faut nous attacher à décrire minutieusement le «comment». Poursuivant cette méthode chère à Howard Becker (2002, p. 352), nous allons alors décrire des carrières de radicalisation aux travers de trajectoires personnelles et collectives «sous la forme d'une arborescence dans laquelle les possibilités d’émergence de certains phénomènes dépendent de la situation immédiatement antérieure» (Collovald et Gaïti, 2006, p. 32; Crettiez et al., 2017). Tout se passe alors comme s'il se produisait une série de «choix sous-contrainte» (Goffman, 1968, p. 452) effectués in situ par les acteurs, c'est-à-dire au moment même où les faits historiques ou sociaux se produisent et agissent sur eux (Browning, 2004, p. 340). A partir de données écologiques, c'est cette méthode processuelle que nous allons appliquer pour analyser l’apparition, la structuration et la spécialisation de deux communautés de citoyens enquêteurs (Olmsted, 2011), les «warrenologistes» de l'assassinat de Kennedy et les Truthers du 11 Septembre, c'est-à-dire envisager une approche «par le bas» du conspirationnisme. Cependant rapprocher ces des groupes complotistes nécessite une précision. Si les attaques terroristes de 2001 «ont provoqué chez les Américains un traumatisme collectif inconnu depuis l'assassinat de John F.
Kennedy, près de quarante ans auparavant. Il y avait néanmoins une différence importante: l'assassinat de Kennedy avait créé une sous-culture conspirationniste à partir de presque rien tandis que le 11 Septembre s'est déroulé dans une atmosphère conspirationniste déjà bien développée» (Barkun, 2013, p. 169). Alors que l'assassinat de JFK en 1963 ouvrait en quelque sorte le cycle moderne et mondialisé du conspirationniste avec l'avènement d'une communauté de «warrenologistes» amateurs et professionnels, les attentats de 2001 viennent se greffer sur ce passif: il existait déjà une culture moderne et structurée du conspirationnisme avec ses codes, ses symboles, ses normes et ses représentations.

Dès lors, pour rendre compte de ces trajectoires collectives et individuelles, nous opterons pour un vocable emprunté à Max Weber à propos de la professionnalisation de la vie politique, puisque nous réinvestirons les termes de «dilettante» et de «professionnel» tout en gardant à l'esprit qu'il s'agit d'idéaux-typiques et de rôles sociopolitiques qui s’interpénètrent largement. Pour le sociologue Allemand, «il y a deux façons de faire de la politique. Ou bien on vit „pour“ la politique, ou bien on vit „de“ la politique […] celui qui vit „pour“ la politique fait d'elle, dans le sens le plus profond du terme, le „but de sa vie“ […] parce que cette activité lui permet de trouver son équilibre interne et d'exprimer sa valeur personnelle en se mettant au service d'une „cause“ qui donne un sens à sa vie» (Weber, 1971, p. 111). La distinction fondamentale établie par Weber entre le dilettante et le professionnel est avant tout d'ordre économique. En effet, si le premier vit pour la politique, le second vit de la politique, c'est-à-dire qu'il en retire sa rémunération principale tandis que le premier n'en tire aucun gain, sinon symbolique, ou bien une indemnité dont il n'est pas tributaire pour vivre. Le dilettante vit la politique comme une passion ou un hobby. Le professionnel va, en revanche, acquérir des capitaux et des savoirs-faire politiques spécifiques, comment faire campagne, organiser une réunion publique, rédiger une profession de foi ou encore présenter un programme aux électeurs. Dans le cadre du phénomène conspirationniste, hormis l'existence de logiques notabliaires stricto sensu, un mouvement identique, une homologie structurale, est observable au niveau des citoyens enquêteurs. De dilettantes pour qui l'assassinat de Kennedy ou les attentats du 11 Septembre deviennent la cause autour de laquelle s'articulent leurs vies au point d'y consacrer tout leur temps libre et toute leur énergie, on assiste à un mouvement de professionnalisation qui passe par l'organisation de réseaux, une production littéraire d'envergure ou bien l'acquisition de compétences et de savoirs-faire spécifiques dans des domaines de pointe comme l'analyse photographique, la médecine-légale ou encore le génie civil. Même, enquêter sur l'assassinat de Kennedy ou les attaques du 11 Septembre devient pour un certain nombre d'entre eux leur source principale de revenus (Goldberg, 2001, p. 130).

I. L'avènement des citoyen(ne)s enquêteur(rice)s «dilettantes»: le complot par le bas

Après l'assassinat de JFK à Dallas en novembre 1963, Penn Jones devient
célèbre dans la communauté des sceptiques grâce à ses révélations dans la revue de gauche radicale Ramparts (Jones, 1967 p. 37) où il révélait une liste exclusive de 13 témoins directs ou indirects de la mort de JFK qui à leur tour auraient été réduits au silence par quelques officines gouvernementales sous couvert d'accidents divers: crises cardiaques, accidents de voiture, ou bien encore une balle perdue à la chasse. De ce point de vue, il est indispensable de noter que les premières théories du complot et rumeurs autour de la mort de JFK viennent de la gauche radicale toujours suspecte à l'endroit d'un pouvoir accusé de mener une politique liberticide voire même fascisante (Barkun, 2013, pp. 72-76). Plus encore, Penn Jones à l'instar de nombreux autres «sceptiques» parmi lesquels Sylvia Meagher, Harrold Weisberg, John H. Faulk, Bud Fensterwald ou Linus Pauling «étaient des victimes directes du maccarthysme» (Olmsted, 2009, p. 131) ce qui les conduisit tous à envisager une grande conspiration menée par le gouvernement. En outre, ils trouvaient dans cette thèse une sorte de revanche personnelle. Ironie du sort, accusés dans les années 1950 de participer d'une conspiration communiste dépourvue de tous fondements, ils étaient à présent sur le point de mettre à nu, du moins en étaient-ils persuadés, un complot véritable impliquant les plus hautes instances de l’État. Quant à Shirley Martin, une femme au foyer de l'Oklahoma, elle décidait comme sur un coup de tête de tout laisser tomber afin de consacrer son existence à enquêter sur l'assassinat de JFK. Bien que le Rapport Warren ne soit pas encore établi, elle était intimement persuadée que «le gouvernement (lui) mentait» (Chanley, 2002, p. 472) et qu'il appartenait donc aux gens ordinaires de découvrir la vérité sur les événements de Dealey Plaza. Avec Harold Weisberg, un agriculteur du Maryland, Sylvia Meagher, une analyste à l'OMS, Lilian Castellano, une libraire, Penn Jones et Maggie Field, elle aussi femme au foyer, Shirley Martin allait donner naissance au phénomène des citoyens enquêteurs. Aussi, si les leaders conspirationnistes, c'est-à-dire les véritables théoriciens du complot global, sont – presque – toujours de sexe masculin, il faut immédiatement noter que nombreux citoyens enquêteurs sont en réalité des citoyennes enquêtrices. Par exemple, la diligence des investigations sur les attentats du 11 Septembre par le président Bush fut largement la conséquence de l'action des quatre Jersey Girls ou Jersey Widows (veuves du New Jersey), Patty Casazza, Lorie Van Auken, Mindy Kleinberg et surtout Kristen Breitweiser qui se posait en véritable porte-parole des familles des victimes. Ainsi, elles «débutèrent une fervente campagne de lobbying à Capitol Hill. En tant que mères seules de jeunes enfants leurs nouveaux rôles publics ne furent pas faciles. Entre les encouragements lors des matchs de foot, l'aide aux devoirs, elles pratiquaient le lobbying, témoignaient et se démenaient entre le New Jersey et Washington» (Olmsted, 2009, p. 214). Dès lors ces mères de familles s'attirèrent la sympathie d'une grande partie de l’opinion compatiscente envers elles et égal au drame personnel qu'elles avaient subi. Il faut d'ailleurs noter que c'est là une différence majeure entre ces deux générations de citoyennes enquêtrices. Alors que la seconde avait un intérêt légitime à agir,
elles étaient directement touchées par les attentats du 11 Septembre, les «warrenlogistes», elles, s'inscrivaient dès l'origine dans un mouvement beaucoup plus politique qu'émotionnel ou compassionnel bien que résultant d'une même volonté de découvrir ce qu'il s'était vraiment passé (Goldberg, 2001, p. 115): «nous ne sommes pas seules […], il y a des milliers de petites gens comme vous et moi qui attendent tous la vérité». Or, cette démarche de vérité pour les deux groupes de citoyens enquêteurs signifie adhérer immédiatement à la thèse de vérités dissimulées, c'est-à-dire d'une conspiration. En effet, tous étaient certains que le gouvernement leur cachait quelque chose, que les événements ne s'étaient pas déroulés comme «on» les leur présentait. A titre d'exemple, lorsque Lee Harvey Oswald fut inculpé du meurtre du Président Kennedy, Sylvia Meagher (1967, p. xxi) se déclara persuadée «qu'ils allaient faire porter le chapeau à un communiste».

En conséquence, face à ce qu'ils perçevaient comme les embûches gouvernementales et les mensonges de l'Administration, les citoyens enquêteurs se donnèrent alors pour mission de concurrencer l'État, les institutions politiques et judiciaires dans la manifestation d'une vérité que ces derniers seraient non seulement incapables, mais aussi et surtout non disposés, à établir. Nous assistons alors un «nivellement épistémologique», à la remise en question de l'expertise étatique, de sa légitimité même puisque de simples citoyens, sans compétences particulières, seraient plus à même que des experts, des scientifiques ou des magistrats de découvrir ce qu'il s'est réellement passé. Plus encore qu'un simple nivellement des savoirs profanes et savants, nous assistons avec le phénomène des citoyens enquêteurs à l'affirmation, dans le débat public, d'une préséance d'un «savoir des gens», c'est-à-dire «la réapparition du savoir d'en dessous, de ces savoirs non-qualifiés, de ces savoirs mêmes disqualifiés : celui du psychiatrisé, celui du malade, celui de l'infirmier, celui du médecin, mais parallèle et marginal par rapport au savoir médical […] et qui n'est pas du tout un savoir commun, mais, au contraire, un savoir particulier, un savoir local, un savoir différentiel, incapable d'unanimité» (Foucault, 2001, p. 164). Ainsi, les citoyens enquêteurs vont se mettre à penser leurs pratiques à la manière de chercheurs qui vivent des expériences et qui se posent la question du sens de ce qu'ils font, vivent et subissent. Tous ces types de savoirs sont reliés par l'affirmation que la vie en tant qu'expérience est une source de savoirs valables, que l'on peut produire des savoirs en pensant et en réalisant des expériences dans les situations vécues. Tous ces éléments offrent au «savoir des gens» un caractère multiple, car il est issu de rencontres imprévues donnant lieu à des expériences singulières. De ce point de vue, vivre l'assassinat de Kennedy ou le 11 Septembre en tant qu'expérience singulière, permet de produire du discours, un savoir et une réflexion singulière sur ces événements singuliers transformant le citoyen en enquêteur de sa propre expérience singulière qui le place alors en porte-à-faux nécessaire avec l'enquête officielle réalisée par des individus extérieurs à sa propre expérience singulière.
Or, cet antagonisme entre l'enquête citoyenne et l'enquête officielle s'éclaire plus explicitement encore par un détournement vers le champ littéraire. En effet, une véritable homologie semble se dessiner entre deux figures du polar, le policier et le détective, et les positions des enquêtes officielles et citoyennes, dans la manière dont l'énigme est élucidée. Tout d'abord, comme dans les romans policiers nous sommes en présence d'un gigantesque crime odieux, perpétré par un grand criminel capable d'une organisation aussi minutieuse que secrète dans la préparation et l'exécution de son forfait. Rien à voir avec le criminel ordinaire qui transgresse ouvertement les normes et qui, en conséquence, est presque aussitôt mis hors d'état de nuire par n'importe quel gardien de la paix anonyme au coin de la rue. Qu'il s'agisse d'assassins reconnus ou de présumés comploteurs, nous sommes en présence dans le cadre de l'assassinat de JFK et des attentats de 2001 de supercriminels capables d'anticiper les moindres faits et gestes de la police. Grâce à leurs capacités intellectuelles supérieures mises au service du mal, les criminels de polar sont ainsi capables de prévoir un plan parfaitement huilé devant se dérouler à la lettre. Face à ce génie criminel, l'enquêteur, soit pour en empêcher la commission, soit pour élucider le forfait doit à son tour être doté de capacités hors normes qui s'affranchissent des règles de droit et des procédures de l'information judiciaire, pour mettre fin à la subversion et au désordre. Il s'agit d'une situation d'exception où les médiations ordinaires n'ont plus cours. À ce stade, on assiste alors au «dédoublement» de l'enquêteur. À côté du policier, représentant de l'État, vient se placer un autre personnage, le détective, qui ne possède aucun mandat officiel et sur qui repose pourtant l'essentiel de l'enquête» (Boltanski, 2012, p. 58). Dans le champ conspirationniste, la figure du policier renvoie à celle de l'enquête officielle tandis que celle du détective s'incarne dans les citoyens enquêteurs. En tant qu'agent de l'État, le policier «incarne la conduite officielle de l'enquête, l'investigation publique et étatique» (Kalifa, 2004, p. 17), il est un être humain ordinaire qui ne dispose de ce supplément d'âme et des capacités spéciales qu'ont les détectives. Le policier incarne littéralement la domination rationnelle-légale de l'État tandis que le détective tire sa légitimité de son charisme, de son équation personnelle. En conséquence, le policier «figure froide et implacable» (Kalifa, 2004, p. 19) est limité dans son enquête aux choses évidentes du monde sensible, il est incapable de déjouer toute la perfidie du grand criminel et de son génie malfaisant. Sa compétence est alors limitée aux enquêtes de routine, aux crimes et délits ordinaires. À l'inverse, le détective, grâce à ses capacités intellectuelles et réflexives supérieures, est en mesure de voir plus loin, de mettre à nu les rouages les plus complexes et les mieux dissimulés du crime quasi-parfait et extraordinaire. Il prend en charge «l'enquête interdite» (Kalifa, 2004, p. 20), il creuse les failles, plonge dans les interstices et découvre les moindres détails dissonants. Rien ne résiste à l'œil aiguisé du fin limier. L'enquête officielle, le policier et in fine l'État, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir, est alors incapable de rivaliser avec lui et de démasquer la conspiration derrière les événements. Seuls des
citoyens enquêteurs, des détectives indépendants des pouvoirs publics, libres penseurs et supérieurement dotés intellectuellement sont à même de révéler le complot au grand jour. Par sa médiation, le détective «peut en ce sens apparaître comme l’incarnation par excellence de l’enquête, ainsi mise à la portée de tout le corps social» (Kalifa, 2004, p. 20). Il incarne l’enquête à l’état brut, débarrassée des contingences de la procédure et des règles officielles, voire même des limites déontologiques et de la pesanteur de la machine administrative. Il est un homme d’action et de terrain et non, comme le policier, un être astreint à un travail de bureau et de paperasserie. Immédiatement, le détective incarne «la quintessence de l’enquête: une pratique à la fois exploratoire et matérielle (observer, constater, réunir les indices et les preuves), intellectuelle et interprétative, régulatrice et thérapeutique» (Kalifa, 2004, p. 20). Le détective ou le citoyen enquêteur est en quelque sorte investi d’une mission, quasiment mystique: découvrir une vérité dissimulée qu’il doit au corps social et que personne d’autre que lui n’est en mesure de découvrir, surtout pas le policier, surtout pas l’État.

Dès lors, les détectives vont alors poser une question qui, a priori, semble de bon sens dans le cadre d’une procédure judiciaire: *Cui bono?* A qui profite le crime? Cependant, envisager les choses sous cet angle pose deux difficultés. D’abord, ceci implique qu’il y ait une intention cachée de l’auteur, un mobile pour agir et donc, comme postulat ontologique, admet l’idée même de conspiration comme nécessaire. Dans ce type de raisonnement, toute idée de contingence ou même de plausibilité de la version officielle est écartée a priori. En conséquence, deuxièmement, ce raisonnement repose sur un biais analytique, celui d’une approche consequentialiste des événements, c’est-à-dire une lecture, une interprétation et une (re)construction a posteriori des faits et non une recherche des causes indépendantes ou autonomes à l’origine de l’acte.

Telle fut la démarche intellectuelle, ainsi déconstruite, qui présida à l’avènement d’une prise de conscience supérieure des citoyens enquêteurs. En effet, tout se passe comme si des événements extraordinaires tels que l’assassinat de Kennedy ou les attentats du 11 Septembre joueraient comme des «fenêtres d’opportunité» (Kingdon, 2010, p. 304) permettant à des acteurs individuels d’accéder à un niveau supérieur de vérité, de prendre conscience de la marche dissimulée du monde, et qui bouleverseraient à jamais leurs représentations et leurs perceptions sociales (Olmsted, 2009, p. 131). Or, c’est sur la base de ces prises de positions individuelles, de micro-mobilisations nées telles des processus émergents, que pas à pas s’institutionnalise progressivement une communauté de citoyens enquêteurs structurée autour d’une cause avec ses propres règles, codes et perceptions, y compris symboliques (Dubuisson-Quellier et Barrier, 2007, pp. 209-237). D’une somme d’actions individuelles concordantes mais non-coordonnées tendant vers un même but politiquement déterminé, les acteurs vont alors mobiliser le capital social (Lazega, 2006, pp. 211-225) et les ressources politiques à leur disposition pour donner naissance à une véritable
mobilisation collective, c'est-à-dire à l'avènement d'un groupe social structuré «assembl(é) et investit […] dans la poursuite de buts propres» (Oberschall cité in Neveu, 2009, p. 500). Cette dynamique d’interaction sociale pousse alors à l'autonomisation du champ conspirationniste, à la constitution de réseaux structurés et à la professionnalisation de citoyens enquêteurs.

II. Des citoyens enquêteurs professionnels et spécialisés: la division du travail conspirationniste

En Octobre 1965, le premier groupe de dix „warrenologistes“ se rassembla à Manhattan dans l’appartement de Sylvia Meagher qui en savait plus à propos de l'assassinat de Kennedy que personne d'autre dans le monde selon ses amis sceptiques. Les critiques de la côte Est se mirent à correspondre avec leurs homologues de tout le pays dans un langage spécialisé grandissant: il y avait „LHO“ (Oswald), la „TSBD“ (Texas School Books Depository), et des références fréquentes à „l'image 313“ et „CE 133-B“ qui codaient les images du film de Zapruder et les pièces de la Commission Warren pour ses membres. Mais, par-dessus tout, tous étaient persuadés que le monde avait changé le „11/22/63“ (Olmsted, 2009, p. 131)

En réponse, les critiques ont livré leurs propres investigations, loin des “chamailleries” (argle-bargle) des experts gouvernementaux. Ils prirent des photographies de leurs fils posant avec des armes dans leurs jardins pour prouver leur théorie que la fameuse photo d’Oswald avec la Mannlicher-Carcano avait été trafiquée ; ils apprirent à utiliser des outils spécialisés pour mesurer des angles depuis le 6e étage du dépôt jusqu’à la voiture du Président ; ils étudièrent le film de Zapruder jusqu’à avoir mémorisé les 400 images étranges et leurs numéros associés. (Olmsted, 2009, p. 135)

Ainsi, Edward Epstein qui se spécialisa dans la thèse de l’autopsie falsifiée était juriste de formation et il ne disposait donc d’aucun diplôme en médecine, encore moins de compétences en matière de médecine légale. Il n’empêche, du point de vue des détectives, tous les documents issus de la version officielle ne sont qu’artifices, mensonges et dissimulations: «les rapports d’autopsie, les preuves balistiques et les relevés photographiques qui confirment la thèse du tueur isolé deviennent, en eux-mêmes, des preuves supplémentaires du complot» (Goldberg, 2001, p. 130). Epstein, membre junior de la Commission Warren, fut alors le seul des premiers warrenologistes à avoir eu accès aux 26 volumes complémentaires du rapport public. Critiquant les méthodes et les conclusions de l’enquête officielle, il soutint qu’à l’intérieur même de la commission, le scénario de la balle unique qui a finalement été retenu fut l’objet de débats houleux. Mais surtout, les travaux d’Epstein se concentraient sur le rapport d’autopsie du Président Kennedy qui, selon lui, aurait rendu nécessaire la présence de plusieurs tireurs à Dealey Plaza le 22 Novembre 1963. En effet, pour lui, il existait, premièrement, des contradictions manifestes entre le rapport d’enquête du FBI établi juste après les faits et le croquis d’autopsie réalisé à Washington, en violation des lois du Texas, quant à la localisation des blessures sur le corps du Président défunt. Deuxièmement, les blessures à la gorge et à la nuque proviendraient de deux balles différentes, tirées d’angles opposés ce qui rendrait alors nécessaire la présence d’au moins deux tireurs. Sur la pièce numéro 397, le croquis du procès-verbal d’autopsie, la localisation des blessures du président est en effet très peu claire, les points d’impact y ont été matérialisés sans grande précision qui, en règle générale, n’est d’ailleurs pas requise. Il s’agit de pointer une zone approximative. Mais dans le cas de Kennedy, ceci prend une tournure toute particulière puisque dans ces approximations va se glisser le doute et derrière lui la thèorie du complot. Alors que, selon le médecin légiste en charge de l’autopsie, les différences morphologiques au niveau des épaules entre la planche de croquis et le corps du Président expliquent la différence de hauteur de l’impact, arrière du cou à gauche au-dessus de l’omoplate sur JFK et un peu plus en dessous sur le dessin (Michel, 1968, p. 42), Epstein et d’autres y virent la preuve que deux balles étaient à l’origine des deux blessures.
et non la «balle magique» comme l’affirmait la version officielle. Plus encore, selon eux, la blessure à la gorge présenterait toutes les caractéristiques d’une blessure d’entrée et non de sortie. Aussi, dans la précipitation et la panique, il apparaît que les constations médicales opérées à Dallas et celles de l’autopsie pratiquée à Washington présentaient des dissonances dans lesquelles, écartant systématiquement la possibilité d’erreurs, de maladresses consécutives au choc ou à l’émotion, les warrenoligistes crurent tenir la preuve irréfutable du complot. Alors que Kennedy était à peine déclaré mort et son corps immédiatement rapatrié vers Washington, le docteur Perry qui avait tenté les opérations de la dernière chance à Dallas déclara que la blessure à la gorge ressemblait à une blessure d’entrée tandis que le rapport d’autopsie affirmera, grâce à des examens aux rayons X, le contraire, ouvrant la porte à la thèse d’un maquillage du corps. Plus encore, le caractère indubitablement bâclé de l’autopsie présidentielle alimente les théories et fantasmes conspirationnistes d’une dissimulation opérée par l’Administration Johnson nouvellement en place. Pourtant, si volonté de dissimulation il y a eu, elle provient bien plutôt du clan Kennedy (Olmsted, 2009, p. 129) qui exigé qu’une autopsie «qui aurait dû durer trois jours soit pratiquée en 3 heures» (Perry, 2003, p. 387) afin de garder le secret sur les addictions et les pathologies de JFK, la maladie d’Addison en particulier. Ainsi, contrairement à ce qui se déroule en temps normal, le médecin légiste n’a pas pu établir autrement que par rayons X le cheminement de la balle à l’intérieur du corps du Président, il n’a pas été autorisé à lui raser la tête pour pratiquer un examen approfondi de la boîte crânienne, cerveau y compris, il n’a pas pu examiner les organes internes de JFK et, enfin, il n’a appris que le lendemain que la blessure à la gorge avait été agrandie chirurgicalement au Parkland Hospital de Dallas dans le cadre d’une trachéotomie (Perry, 2003, p. 386). En d’autres termes, il n’était pas au courant qu’une blessure préexistait à l’intervention des médecins texans et n’a donc pas pu pratiquer d’examens à même de déterminer de manière définitive s’il s’agissait d’une blessure d’entrée ou de sortie. Le corps de JFK ayant déjà été mis en bière, il était alors trop tard pour une nouvelle autopsie que la famille ne désirait d’ailleurs pour rien au monde. Aussi, c’est sûr la base de faits troublants, d’incohérences et de manquement qui ne peuvent avoir pour origine des erreurs humaines mais bien une volonté délibérée de dissimulation, que les théories du complot vont prendre corps.

Quant aux Truthers, un tournant fut marqué en 2006, c’est-à-dire après la publication des deux rapports d’enquêtes officiels, par le développement d’une organisation structurée, le 9/11 Truth Movement,11 ainsi que de nombreux sites web spécialisés dans la dénonciation du complot.12 Voulues par les citoyennes enquêtrices, les Jersey Girls, ces investigations, au même titre que celles sur la mort de Kennedy ont eu un effet paradoxal. Alors qu’elles étaient censées porter un coup d’arrêt aux rumeurs et aux thèses conspirationnistes, elles n’ont fait que les renforcer. Si Patty Casazza, Lorie Van Auken et Mindy Kleinberg se sont ralliées à la position MIHOP,13 Kristen Breitweiser quant à elle s’est spé-


Nombreux partisans de la thèse conspirationniste n’ont pas confiance dans les médias et les investigations gouvernementales mais ils piochent dans ces mêmes sources pour promouvoir leurs positions extrêmes : les avions détournés n’étaient pas des avions de ligne mais des appareils militaires, des missiles ou des drones téléguidés ; le World Trade Center a été démoli de manière contrôlée ; les défenses anti-aériennes américaines sont délibérément restées non-activées. (Dunbar and Reagan, 2011, p. xx)

Sur le plan technique, la contestation des conclusions de l’enquête officielle par les associations de citoyens enquêteurs comme *ReOpen 9/11* porte donc sur plusieurs aspects : la nature même des avions, l’effondrement des WTC1 et 2, celui de la tour 7 et les attentats contre le Pentagone et, enfin, sur les événements à bord du vol 93. Cependant, avant de détailler l’aspect «démolition contrôlée», une remarque se doit d’être formulée : les membres du *9/11 Truth Movement* prétendent ne jamais proposer un scénario alternatif complet. Pour les militants francophones, les raisons sont exposées comme suit:

Après plusieurs années d’étude et de réflexion collective, nous sommes parvenus à la conclusion que la version officielle […] est en totale contradiction avec les faits et les très nombreux témoignages.

[…] En revanche, nous ne pouvons-nous substituer à la Justice, d’où la nécessité d’une nouvelle enquête avec pouvoir d’assignation. Même s’il peut être tentant pour beaucoup de nos membres et sympathisants d’élaborer sa propre version des attentats du 11-Septembre, il faut réfréner cette envie, et
ce pour au moins 3 raisons:

- Trop peu de documents et d’éléments irréfutables sont à la disposition du grand public pour avoir une vision exacte de ce qui s’est passé. Seule une commission d’enquête internationale pouvant assigner à comparaître et exiger l’accès aux preuves classées secret-défense pourra faire la lumière sur les événements du 11 Septembre.
- Définir notre version des faits nous poserait comme experts. Or, nous demandons justement une expertise indépendante!
- Il serait illogique d’exiger une nouvelle enquête en ayant préalablement désigné les coupables ou responsables.
- Pour toutes ces raisons, nous nous bornons à exposer l’inexactitude de la version officielle du 11 Septembre en lui opposant les faits qui l’invalident avec un souci constant d’objectivité et sans parti pris a priori.18

Au-delà de la simple et vaine répétition du discours des acteurs, refuser de proposer un scénario alternatif présente pour le mouvement bien des avantages. D’abord, il est plus aisé et confortable de critiquer que de proposer, d’autant plus lorsque l’on ne dispose d’aucune compétence particulière dans le domaine où l’on émet des réserves, le génie civil en l’espèce. Du reste, il apparaît que cette incompétence est clairement revendiquée par les citoyens enquêteurs pour qui la parole des experts, les savoirs et les capitaux spécifiques s’effacent au profit de la parole profane et du «savoir des gens». Non seulement il y a un nivellement des savoirs, mais plus encore il y a un renversement du paradigme de la légitimité et de la compétence. Ensuite, ceci permet de maintenir dans un ensemble unique des individus aux thèses incompatibles, les MIHOP et les LIHOP au premier chef. Troisièmement, il est rendu possible une fuite en avant perpétuelle et un changement de pied incessant à chaque fois qu’un de leurs arguments est infirmé. Par exemple, la thèse selon laquelle les pirates ne seraient pas morts le 11 septembre mais qu’ils couleraient des jours heureux, chez eux, en Arabie Saoudite est aujourd’hui totalement invalidée ; même les Truthers les plus radicaux en conviennent, ceci ne les empêche pourtant pas de déplacer le questionnement: depuis sont-ils réellement morts, on passe à comment sont-ils réellement morts? Quatrièmement, refuser la proposition d’un scénario alternatif global permet aussi d’éviter que celui-ci ne soit invalidé définitivement par des contre-arguments techniques et/ou scientifiques. Cinquièmement, il s’agit d’une stratégie d’évitement du mouvement. En prétendant ne poser que des questions, ceci permet aux Truthers de ne pas énoncer explicitement une théorie du complot à proprement parler, de rester dans une sorte de flou ou de zone grise pratique et ainsi de refuser le label conspirationniste, c’est-à-dire une étiquette qui fait sens dans les champs politique et social en exprimant «une position dans le champ des prises de position et une position dans le champ de production idéologique» (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78) permettant à tous et à chacun de les situer comme tels dans ces champs. Nous ne sommes pas conspiration-
nistes, disent-ils, nous posons des questions, nous sommes des critiques ou des sceptiques, faut-il tout croire naïvement comme un peuple de moutons, de *shepples*. Enfin, sixièmement, et malgré leurs dénégations, il est au moins une théorie alternative soutenue par les *Truthers* de *ReOpen 9/11*, c’est celle de la démolition contrôlée des tours jumelles et de la WTC7.

Les Twin Towers ne se sont pas effondrées parce qu’elles avaient été mal construites à cause de la corruption, de l’incompétence, du non-respect des normes par la Port Authority, et parce qu’elles ont été frappées par de grands avions remplis de kérosène. Non, disent les conspirationnistes, elles sont tombées parce qu’une quantité extraordinaire d’agents à la solde de Dick Cheney y avait méthodiquement placé des charges explosives les jours précédents. Ce fut une conspiration impliquant des milliers de personnes, lesquelles ont toutes tenu leur langue depuis ce jour. (Cockburn, 2012, p. 65)

Le premier argument employé par les citoyens enquêteurs de *ReOpen 9/11* est celui de la comparaison. Évoquant les incendies de gratte-ciel à New York en 1970, à Los Angeles en 1988, ou encore à Caracas et Madrid en 2004 qui n’ont pas engendré l’effondrement de structures faites d’acier et de béton, similaires à celles du World Trade Center, ils affirment donc que le feu n’a pas pu être responsable de l’effondrement des trois tours en 2001. Or, le NIST ne dit pas autre chose, le feu seul n’aurait pas détruit le WTC ; comme dans les exemples avancés, s’il n’avait pas été heurté par avion, il serait resté debout.20 Plus encore, les membres de *ReOpen* soutiennent que l’effondrement des bâtiments s’est fait à la verticale et sans résistance structurelle à la gravité, comme une démolition contrôlée, même si admettent-ils, ce dynamitage est d’un type particulier. En effet, en règle générale, les charges explosives sont placées sur les étages inférieurs du bâtiment puis les explosions s’enchaînent du bas vers le haut afin de réduire la résistance de la structure à la gravité et produire ainsi un effet d’empilement démultiplicateur de force. L’action de la gravité et le poids de la structure conduisent alors à l’écroulement. Dans le cadre du 11 Septembre, explique le *Journal of 9/11 Studies*, «la démolition a été faite de haut en bas afin de créer l’illusion que l’effondrement a été causé par les impacts et les incendies dans les sections supérieures» (Legge, 2006, p. 5). Autrement dit, il fallait que le gouvernement sache précisément le point d’impact des avions pour que le déclenchement des charges semble crédible, la conspiration devait donc être minutieusement organisée. On notera ici le double décalage de perception typique des adeptes du complot. D’abord, d’un côté les comploteurs sont de «grands incapables», ils ne parviennent pas à dissimuler leurs méfaits; de l’autre, ils sont de véritables génies du mal, à même d’orchestrer de main de maître, dans les moindres détails et sans aucune anicroche, des plans d’une envergure gigantesque. Ensuite, comme dans le cadre de l’assassinat de Kennedy, la conspiration pour être menée à bien a dû nécessiter un nombre incroyable
d’agents partageant le secret sans qu’aucun ne le trahisse jamais. Le contraste est ici une nouvelle fois saisissant, si ce n’est même touchant, entre une Administration capable de maintenir un contrôle social et une pression si forte que des milliers individus gardent le silence et la facilité avec laquelle de simples citoyens sont à même de démasquer le complot.

Pour autant, si la chute des tours 1 et 2 ressemble à une démolition contrôlée c’est que des similitudes existent réellement mais qui n’accréditent en rien la thèse du complot gouvernemental. En effet, avec l’effondrement des planchers, la fragilisation des structures et pylônes en acier due aux poches de chaleur pointées par le NIST, le poids des étages supérieurs, comme dans le cadre d’une démolition contrôlée, ont engendré l’effondrement (Muzeau, 2011, p. 39). L’un des plus fervents partisans de la thèse de la démolition contrôlée est Richard Gage, un architecte américain qui a lancé une pétition recueillant pas moins de 1 700 signatures d’ingénieurs et architectes contestant les conclusions du NIST.21 Cependant, l’immense majorité d’entre eux n’a reçu aucune formation en calcul de structure et beaucoup ne sont rien de plus que de simples architectes d’intérieur; leur compétence au regard des experts du NIST est dès lors largement amoindrie (Muzeau, 2011, p. 40). Néanmoins, Gage entend démontrer la thèse de la démolition contrôlée à l’aide de boîtes en carton. Selon lui, elles montreraient l’impossibilité des vitesses d’écroulement de la version officielle, faisant fi par-là de toutes les normes nécessaires et considérations élémentaires à la réalisation de modélisation ; nous sommes là en présence d’une alter-science caractéristique de la cryptologique conspirationniste.22 Enfin une autre figure proéminente du 9/11 Truth Movement, Eric Hufschmid, qui ne dispose lui non plus d’aucune compétence en génie civil, tente de prouver la thèse de la démolition contrôlée, orchestrée selon lui par les groupes américanisationistes,23 par la fumée et les débris projetés lors de l’effondrement des tours jumelles.24 Or, eu égard au gigantisme des structures, une démolition contrôlée aurait nécessité une charge explosive si importante que les débris auraient été projetés à des kilomètres à la ronde et non à quelques centaines de mètres.

Quant à la tour 7, qu’aucun avion n’a percutée, elle aussi aurait subi une démolition contrôlée afin de détruire des éléments compromettants à l’intérieur du bâtiment qui abritait entre autres choses des bureaux de la CIA et des services secrets. Dix raisons sont ainsi avancées:25 1) le début soudain de l’effondrement à la base, 2) l’effondrement symétrique tout droit dans les fondations, 3) la projection de charges explosives aux étages supérieurs, 4) la vitesse de la chute libre, 5) l’énorme nuage de béton, 6) le périmètre d’éjection des débris, 7) la structure d’acier découpée en éléments transportables, 8) l’effondrement total, 9) les sons et les flashes d’explosifs perçus et 10) la présence d’acier fondu et de thermite dans les débris, un explosif très puissant. Si dans les faits l’effondrement de la tour 7 gravement endommagée par les débris projetés par de la tour 1 s’est effondrée en raison des dégâts subis par la structure et
l’exposition prolongée aux incendies, certains Truthers vont jusqu’à invoquer le présence d’explosifs nanothermites dans les ruines de la Tour 7. Or, à cet aspect, les Truthers y sont particulièrement attachés dans la mesure où, dans le fatras de leur pléthorique production, il a réussi à se frayer un chemin, en une occurrence, jusqu’à une revue académique avec comité de lecture. Il ne s’agit plus d’un article publié dans un e-journal ouvertement conspirationniste mais d’un véritable désenclavement grâce à une revue légitime au sein du champ universitaire, The Open Journal of Chemical Physics (Harrit et al., 2009). Selon cet article, des fragments (chips) de débris étaient recouverts d’une fine couche de couleur rouge (red chips), composée de carbone, d’oxygène, de silicium, de calcium et d’aluminium, plaquée sur une couche sombre plus épaisse (gray chips) composée de fer et d’oxygène. Or, une analyse rigoureuse des données thermiques et stoïchiométriques des chips montre qu’il est impossible de conclure scientifiquement à la présence d’explosifs de type thermite dans les ruines du World Trade Center. Plus encore, divers docteurs en chimie et professeurs d’Université, ainsi que l’ancienne rédactrice en chef de la revue, démissionnaire à la suite de cette publication, ont clairement souligné l’absence de scientificité de l’article, son caractère partial et militant. Il n’empêche, malgré tous ces éléments, cet article paru dans une revue avec comité de lecture reste le fleuron de l’argumentaire des militants du 9/11 Truth Movement qui, une fois n’est pas coutume, trouvent un attrait tout particulier pour un support officiel et légitime extérieur à leurs propres réseaux de diffusion.

World Trade Center à New York seraient le fait du complexe militaro-industriel américain afin de justifier une guerre contre l’Irak et l’imposition d’un Nouvel Ordre Mondial. Cette technique permet alors aux citoyens cyber-enquêteurs de décontextualiser, et en même temps de «re-contextualiser», des images afin de leur donner une nouvelle unité de sens, ouvertement militante et subjective, en opérant des variations et un épuisement des contenus originels. En ce sens, on peut, alors, plaider en faveur d’un usage tactique de l’internet dans la mesure où les adeptes des théories du complot se réapproprient de manière subversive, pour mieux les dévoyer, les codes et les représentations de ce média afin de diffusen, à l’échelle planétaire, de manière facilement réceptive pour l’utilisateur, leurs messages conspirationnistes.


Loose Change, dont la première version fut présentée en 2005, est un documentaire internet réalisé par Dylan Avery avec un budget de 6 000 dollars qui devint en quelque sorte le premier e-blockbuster de l’histoire. Il accrédite diverses thèses, parfois contradictoires, autour des attentats du 11 Septembre mais il penche clairement en faveur de la thèse MIHOP de la démolition contrôlée et du missile sur le Pentagone. L’impact du film fut considérable à tel point que, selon le magazine américain Vanity Fair, il s’agissait même en Mai 2006 de la vidéo la plus prisée sur Google Video avec plus de 10 millions de vues (Sales, 2006). En septembre 2009 est sortie la quatrième version augmentée du documentaire, intitulée Loose Change: An American Coup qui continue d’exploiter la thèse initiale d’un inside job. En effet, grâce à son succès planétaire, Loose Change, s’est modernisé, les graphismes ont été retravaillés, les effets sonores améliorés et le film a été augmenté des nouvelles découvertes et théories des Truthers afin de suivre les évolutions du mouvement conspiracyniste autour du 11 septembre.

Zeitgeist,31 pour sa part, ne se limite pas aux attentats de 2001. Réalisé en 2007 par Peter Joseph, un pseudonyme certainement (Barkun, 2013, p. 177), sous licence libre, le documentaire composé de trois parties tend à réinscrire les événements dans le cadre d’un méta-récit conspiracyniste. La première partie présente la religion catholique comme une véritable imposture et un instrument d’asservissement des peuples au service des puissants. Au mieux, elle ne serait qu’une simple copie des croyances païennes et égyptiennes antiques. La
deuxième partie reprend à son compte les principales théories MIHOP autour des attaques du 11 Septembre 2001 exposées plus haut. Enfin, la troisième partie tend à faire le lien entre le complot religieux antique et le 11 Septembre en développant la thèse d’une conspiration universelle dans le temps et l’espace dont l’objectif, en particulier grâce au cartel international des banques, serait de réduire l’immense majorité des êtres humains à un rang d’esclave au service d’une minorité oligarchique omnipotente.

Enfin dernière caractéristique, le champ conspirationniste, au même titre que n’importe quel autre champ, est à la fois un champ de force et un champ de luttes où les individus cherchent perpétuellement à améliorer ou, au minimum, à conserver leurs positions. En d’autres termes, les acteurs sociaux opérant au sein d’un champ sont en concurrence permanente pour y conquérir des gains et des parts de marché ; ce qui n’est pas sans incidence sur leurs prises de positions au sein de ce champ. Ainsi, les dominants, dans notre cas les warrenologistes éminents comme Epstein, vont devoir faire face à des prétendants qui entendent à leur tour accéder aux positions de domination et jouir d’un réel prestige, synonyme de gains symboliques et pécuniaires, dans le champ conspirationniste. Pour ce faire, une véritable compétition va alors s’engager, un champ de luttes, entre différents citoyens enquêteurs qui pousse à une fuite en avant vers des révélations toujours plus sensationnelles les unes que les autres. L’esprit d’échange des premiers moments, en 1965 lorsque qu’un réseau national de warrenologistes fut fondé dans l’appartement de Sylvia Meagher, laissait progressivement la place à une compétition individuelle pour accéder non seulement aux positions dominantes dans le champ conspirationniste mais aussi pour conquérir les lucratives parts de marché dans les champs littéraire et économique. Nous assistons alors à l’avènement de véritables professionnels du conspirationniste au strict sens wébérien du terme dans la mesure où le complot et son industrie devinrent leur source première de revenus. La mort de JFK se transforma alors en un véritable business générant de gigantesques profits et nécessitant constamment de nouvelles informations grandioses pour maintenir le public en haleine (Goldberg, 2001, p. 130). Ainsi, si on se limite aux révélations subséquentes à l’autopsie du Président, dans une interview, Jim Jenkins qui y avait participé (Law, 2004) développait l’idée que le cerveau de Kennedy avait été substitué afin de maquiller sa mort. La balle ayant véritablement tué le président venant de l’avant, il fallut remplacer au préalable le cerveau de JFK pour rendre possible, compte tenu des blessures, la thèse du tireur unique depuis le 6e étage de la TSBD (Smith, 2013, p. 244). David Lifton allait même bien plus loin dans un ouvrage qui devint rapidement le best seller du mois du New York Times avec plus de 100 000 copies vendues (Lifton, 1992 [1981]). La version collector, avec vidéo et exemplaire dédicacé, représentait également une source juteuse de profits (Goldberg, 2001, p. 131). Selon Lifton, dès que le cadavre présidentiel quitta le sol de Dallas, le corps de JFK fut immédiatement retiré du cercueil. Placé dans un vulgaire sac mortuaire, la dépouille fut...
conduite dans le plus grand secret à l’hôpital militaire Walter Reed où elle fut mutilée et modifiée par les conspirateurs afin d’accréditer la thèse du tireur unique. Ce fut également à ce moment-là que le cerveau de JFK aurait été extrait et remplacé par un autre. Le cerveau authentique serait alors conservé quelque part à l’abri par les comploteurs.

En conclusion, nous sommes bel et bien en présence d’une dynamique d’action collective. Depuis un élément extraordinaire compris comme une fenêtre d’opportunité, nous assistons à des prises de conscience individuelles et à des micromobilisations œuvres de citoyens enquêteurs diètantes. Pas à pas se dessinent à des carrières individuelles et collectives de radicalisation autour d’une cause commune, politiquement définie, qui passe par l’institutionnalisation d’un champ conspirationniste relativement autonome où se retrouvent en concurrence, non seulement, de citoyens enquêteurs professionnels dotés de capitaux et de ressources spécifiques, mais aussi d’authentiques théoriciens du complot global et universel: les leaders conspirationnistes.

NOTES


2 D’ailleurs, comme dans le cadre de la professionnalisation de la politique, l’avènement d’un nouvel idéal-type d’homme politique, le professionnel, n’est pas synonyme de disparition complète des diètantes. A cet égard, les observations et les réserves d’Eric Phélippeau (1999) quant à la fin des notables et l’avènement des professionnels sont tout à fait recevables dans le cadre du phénomène conspirationniste. Cependant, il faut noter que les premier(ère)s «warrenologistes» jouissent d’un véritable prestige au sein de la communauté des conspirationnistes.

3 Ceci leur vaut d’être confrontées à des basses attaques masculinistes non seulement de la part de leurs détracteurs mais aussi au sein même du champ conspirationniste. Tout se passe comme si le genre féminin était dépourvu de toute légitimité à agir. En effet, le réductionnisme essentialiste des citoyennes enquêtrices à leur condition sexuée va ainsi donner lieu à un portrait désobligeant de «bonnes femmes» quasi-hystériques et désœuvrées cherchant à donner à leurs «pauvres» et «misérables» vies, désespérément vides, un but ou un semblant de sens palliatif à celui de faire le ménage ou de changer les couches de leurs enfants. Ainsi, les citoyennes enquêtrices originales furent raillées avec dédain et condescendance comme «des femmes au foyer super-enquêtrices» par Lewis et Schiller qui établissaient même un distinguo entre les scavengers et les critics, c’est-à-dire entre celles qu’ils considéraient comme des «piailleuses» et ceux qu’ils percevaient comme des «critiques» légitimes. Quant aux Jersey Girls, elles aussi se trouvèrent accusées d’être au centre d’un «feuilleton», sous-entendu qu’elles se prenaient pour des héroïnes de séries télévisées, sorte de Desperate Housewives incarnées dans le monde réel. (Lewis et Schiller, 1967, p. 70; Rich, 2004). Rich dresse un inventaire des propos désobligeants tenus envers les Jersey Girls dans les Talk-Shows conservateurs de Rush Limbaugh et Bill O’Reilly en particulier.


6 La sociologue américaine Anita Waters parle d’«ethnosociologie», c’est-à-dire «des théories que les gens ordinaires utilisent pour expliquer des phénomènes (sociaux). Tandis qu’il a peu de chemists ou de physiciens amateurs dans nos sociétés qui conduisent des taxis ou un élévateur, ou qui présentent une émission de radio, on peut remarquer qu’il existe de très, très, nombreux sociologues amateurs. Ces indi-
vidus ont des idées pour expliquer pourquoi le taux de divorce est aussi élevé, pourquoi les enfants quittent l’École, pourquoi les riches sont riches et les pauvres sont pauvres, et, par-dessus tout, pourquoi les blancs ont autant alors que les noirs ont si peu. Ces explications ou théories de ces gens ordinaires, tenues pour faire sens de leurs réalités sociales, sont ce que j’appelle ethnosociologies» (Waters, 1997, p. 114).

Dans ces développements nous suivons l’analyse de Luc Boltanski quant aux figures du policier et du détective dans le genre romanesque tout en les reliant, par homologie, aux deux postures que nous avons identifiées et qui vont bien au-delà du champ conspirationniste: l’enquête officielle et le citoyen enquêteur (Boltanski, 2012, pp. 56-60).


Parmi lesquels: 911truth.org, 911nwo.info, 911dust.org, 911proof.org, truthmove.org ou bien encore, la liste n’est pas exhaustive, 911courage.org.

«Les théoriciens antigouvernementaux du complot se divisent en deux catégories majeures : ceux qui croient que l’Administration Bush connaissait à l’avance les attaques mais a décidé de ne pas les empêcher, et ceux qui pensent que le gouvernement américain a mené lui-même les attaques» (Olmsted, 2009, p. 221). D’un côté nous retrouvons alors les LIHOP (Let It Happen On Purpose), c’est-à-dire les défenseurs de la thèse selon laquelle le gouvernement savait mais a laissé faire, de l’autre les MIHOP (Made It Happen On Purpose), c’est-à-dire ceux qui envisagent que le gouvernement américain a lui-même perpétré les attaques de 2001. Cependant, malgré leurs différences, ces théories ont en commun d’opter pour une approche conséquentialiste des faits, c’est-à-dire qu’ils prêtent des intentions secrètes au gouvernement au regard des réponses ultérieures qu’il a apporté aux faits. En d’autre mots il y a un renversement total de la dialectique cause/conséquence.


Le rapport conclut que l’effondrement des tours 1 et 2 du World Trade Center est dû «à une combinaison de dégâts matériels causés par les crashs des avions et l’exposition prolongée au feu». (Dunbar and Reagan, 2011, p. 29).


C’est-à-dire la combustion totale d’un mélange d’éléments en raison de proportions bien déterminées; si le ratio n’est pas bien déterminé, la combustion n’est que partielle. A contrario, si la combustion n’est pas totale ceci signifie que le mélange réactif n’est pas optimal. Dans le cas d’espèce, en cas de présence de
nanothermites dans les débris, les expériences de combustions menées en laboratoire sur les chips auraient dû aboutir à une combustion totale. Or, elle n’est que partielle ce qui invalide leur présence.

Par exemple Emeric Steng docteur en Chimie ou le Professeur Philippe Gillard de l’Université d’Orléans.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTUk1Ict7oY.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7E3olbO0AWE.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghh2G7adN8E.

Le terme allemand Zeitgeist peut se traduire par l’esprit du temps. Dans la philosophie germanique il est notamment utilisé par Hegel ou Heidegger et renvoie à conception du monde à une période déterminée de l’évolution culturelle, sociale et politique. En ce sens, il est opposé au terme de Volksgeist, esprit du peuple, intemporel et universel utilisé par Fichte ou Herder. Le concept est également à opposer à l’universalisme hégélien du Weltgeist, c’est-à-dire l’esprit de l’humanité dans sa réalisation historique.

**BIBLIGRAPHIE**


Julien Giry: Devenir complotiste

In the fog of the so-called ‘new Cold War’ one can be forgiven if one is often confused about what exactly is meant by ‘Russian influence’. There has been so much hyperbole that most media analyses fail to address numerous questions that have arisen. Dimiter Bechev’s new book, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, is the first comprehensive in-depth study of this complex phenomenon in the geopolitically strategic region of the Balkans, broadly taken as stretching from Slovenia to Cyprus and from Romania to Turkey. Among these multiple countries there are EU and non-EU member states, some of which have joined NATO while others are officially neutral.

As the introduction explains, the book addresses two sets of questions. Firstly, it ventures into what is driving Russia’s policies in the region and looks into the strategic goals and objectives of the Kremlin’s policymakers both before and after Putin came to power seventeen years ago. Secondly, it explores the attitudes and responses of the countries in the region to Moscow’s policies. The book’s main argument is that for all the fanfare of ‘cultural and historical links’ between Russia and the Balkans, today’s relations are primarily based on material interests and pragmatism often fuelled by opportunism from both sides. Russia can act as a counter-weight to the West and makes its influence felt in the region, while local leaders use Russia as a hedge in their dealings with the West.

The book is thematically structured in two parts. The first part is devoted to exploring Russia’s relations with the countries in the region as case studies. It spans a historical timeframe of roughly the last quarter century since the demise of state socialism and the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The book’s first chapter provides a discussion of Russia’s role during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It tells the tales of Russia’s diplomatic ambitions, which aimed to propel Moscow to a position of equal standing with the West. The latter ultimately ended in disappointment in part because Russia was not able to wield...
sufficient military might – it had to accept the West’s ‘escalation dominance’ – to add to its diplomatic strategy. Subsequently, the second chapter looks at Russia’s policy and relations with the post-Yugoslav successor states since 2000, the year which saw both Vladimir Putin become president in Russia and Slobodan Milošević ousted in Serbia. It shows how Moscow under Putin managed to turn its energy politics into a useful and powerful asset and to carve itself a niche of influence in the region. While initially the Kremlin accepted the dominance of the European Union and the United States in the Western Balkans, since the Ukraine crisis of 2014 it has sought to assert itself and challenge the West in ‘its backyard’.

Chapter three discusses the two former Soviet satellite states, Romania and Bulgaria. It is in effect somewhat of a ‘myth buster’. While Romania was often seen as more anti-Russian and had direct competing and conflicting interests with Moscow in the neighbouring Republic of Moldova, Bulgaria was traditionally seen as probably the most pro-Russian country in the region. However, Bechev qualifies both clichés, pointing out that Russia still retains leverage over Romania whereas in Bulgaria the supposed Russophile attitudes have wielded disappointing results such as the failure to follow through on big energy projects like South Stream. Despite being the countries in the region that had the strongest ties to Russia owing to the Soviet bloc legacy, both have moved steadily away from Moscow’s orbit, joining both NATO and the EU in the 2000s.

The fourth chapter turns to Greece and Cyprus. Though not aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and Greece even being a NATO member, both countries’ elites – regardless of their ideological outlooks – have found good ties with Russia to be advantageous. However, this relationship has often failed to produce the expected favourable results. For Greece, Russia has not proven to be the great balancer in its tensions with Turkey while Moscow does not seem too keen to engage itself in tinkering out a final settlement for the division of Cyprus. Although Russia did initially offer a helping hand to Cyprus, the Kremlin has ultimately not come forth with financial aid to provide relief in the wake of the eurozone crisis for either of the two countries. Nevertheless, though expectations in Athens and Nicosia may have been realistically lowered, Bechev underlines that both countries remain on friendly terms with Russia and constitute the core of the pro-Russian camp in the EU.

The fifth and final chapter of the first part discusses Russia’s relations with Turkey, a topic that in itself could possibly warrant a separate book. It is one of the most enlightening chapters in the book, as Bechev debunks much of the alarmism in the media that has engulfed most of the reporting on the two countries’ relations. The chapter explains the admittedly difficult relationship between Ankara and Moscow over the past decades, but convincingly argues how successive Turkish and Russian leaders managed to navigate this minefield and maintain a modus vivendi that still holds until today. The close relationship with Turkey is, according to Bechev, probably the most successful achievement of Russian policy in the region.

The second part of the book is concerned with the areas of Russian influence in Southeast Europe. Bechev
Tom Junes: Russian Influence in the Balkans

identifies three such areas – military capabilities, energy politics, and soft power – to which he devotes a chapter each. Regarding the military aspect, dealt with in chapter six, it should be noted that Russia is neither a declining regional power nor the geopolitical threat some commentators make it out to be. While ultimately no match for NATO, Russia's coercive capabilities are increasing. Its intelligence network is present throughout the region, as shown by the events in Montenegro (though as Bechev stresses, many questions regarding the alleged coup attempt still remain unanswered).

There is enough reason to believe that Russia will seek to strengthen its position in the future. Moscow has indeed drawn lessons from the wars of the 1990s in the Western Balkans, where NATO managed to sideline Russia due to its escalation dominance. At present, in the Black Sea area, Russia wields this kind of escalation dominance in Ukraine, which makes the Kremlin an unavoidable key player in resolving the conflict in Donbas. Moscow can thus use its military power in the region as political leverage and has not hesitated to do so even beyond its traditional sphere of influence as in Syria.

More than its military capabilities, as becomes clear in the eighth chapter, it is the politics of Gazprom and Lukoil that gives Moscow its clout in the region. Russia is in fact 'Russia Inc.' Enabled by a culture of corruption, national energy companies in the Balkans serve as cash cows offering lucrative spoils to both Russian and local actors. Co-optation of local elites works better than military coercion or subversion. Oil and gas remain key assets at Moscow's disposal, as Russia remains the dominant energy player in the region even though consecutive EU policies and regulations have provided checks on how Moscow can wield that power.

Another potent asset that Russia can wield is soft power, which is the subject of the ninth and final chapter. Public diplomacy, cultural institutions, the Orthodox Church, print and online media as well as variegated local networks of political actors (ranging from radical fringe groups to moderately pro-Russian mainstream political parties) can wield influence. It is also easier and more cost-effective than bribing governments through energy contracts or resorting to military action. The chapter does not gauge the actual impact of this array of soft power tools, but it does offer sobering counter-examples, such as the much easier penetration by Al Jazeera Balkans (which broadcasts in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian from Sarajevo since 2011 and is owned by the Qatari government) compared to any attempted Russian television setup.

In the Balkans, sympathies for Russia tend to be high and durable (owing, among other things, to Cold War legacies), though no country has turned decisively to a more pro-Russian position. Bechev points to numerous polls and surveys showing that favourable opinions of Putin or Russia are on the rise, but still Western-centric attitudes are more entrenched and Western popular culture and lifestyle serve as the main reference point for the overall majority of people in the region. But Bechev's book drives an important point home regarding Russia's soft power. While Moscow can shape discourse, it cannot directly impact political events through its soft power. The Kremlin acts as a spoiler, but it has so far not been able to prevent any coun-
try in the region from joining the EU or NATO, let alone leave them.

What stands out is that ‘Russian influence’ in the Balkans, a region both geographically and historically relatively close to Russia, is characterized by a non-ideological, interests-first approach. Often the ‘historical’ or ‘stereotypical’ characterizations in the media are off the mark. The book ventures into historical contexts and provides perhaps surprising conclusions. In doing so, it debunks certain myths: Serbian Russophiles have little real knowledge of Russia; Bulgaria is in fact a failed ‘Trojan Horse’; Greece’s sympathy for Russia is based on not more than abstract emotions; and Russian-Turkish relations have always been complicated but seem not to lead to outright confrontation – a ‘marriage of convenience’ only recently taken to new heights.

Most significantly, as Bechev demonstrates, Balkan leaders use Russia as much as Russia uses them. Serbia’s leaders over the years tried rapprochement with Russia in a quest to gain support to resolve the Kosovo conundrum, but Russia accepted Kosovo’s independence by instrumentalizing it as a precedent concerning Transnistria, Abkhazia and Ossetia instead. Russia’s dealings in the Balkans often end with mutual disappointments. The South Stream pipeline debacle left all sides involved with a headache. Nevertheless, the Balkans represent an area of Russian influence through which the Kremlin can play its cards skilfully to counter the West in a game of geopolitical rivalry. At times, authoritarian Balkan politicians have exploited this, causing anxiety among EU and NATO officials who then legitimated the former by countering Russia. Since Moscow perceives the West as interfering in its backyard in the post-Soviet space, in the Balkans it can readily show that it too can interfere in the West’s backyard.

Bechev addresses questions relating to Russian policies from today’s point of view and frames them within a medium-range historical perspective, mainly covering the period since the break-up of the Soviet Union. While history matters, the book sheds light on how ‘Russian influence’ is not just the result of the Kremlin’s policy aims based on strategic interests, but in fact stems from a dynamic of reciprocity between local actors and Moscow. It really does take two to tango. However, opportunistic considerations are never far away. Today’s pro-Russian Balkan politicians, like Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska, Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia or Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, were regarded as pro-Western in a not-so-distant past. The outcome of this dance of shadows in the Balkans generally leaves both sides dissatisfied.

Bechev’s book illustrates what Russian influence is about but also what it is not about. It crucially underlines what most of the media discourse doesn’t. Despite some of its soft power rhetoric (which appeals even to conservatives in the West), Russia is not out to destroy the West and replace it with a new political order or ‘empire’ in the Balkans. Russia preys on weaknesses such as pervasive corruption to serve its interests. While the Kremlin aims to undercut institutions and undermine the rules set by the West, Bechev concludes, this is not a new Cold War.

The book’s conclusions are also helpful to further understanding of the situation in neighbouring regions in Europe (Central Europe, Southern
Europe, the Middle East) and even beyond. From this perspective, however, it could have benefited from some deeper exploration of the historical perspective. There is no discussion of the post-war Yalta geopolitical order or its confirmation through the Helsinki process, which inevitably crumbled in the wake of the demise of state socialism and the break-up of the Soviet Union. This is an unfortunate omission since it is exactly the outcome of the post-1991 order in Europe that Putin’s Russia seems to be challenging today. In this sense, the book would have benefited from a chapter outlining where and how the Balkans – and the relative position of the various countries in the region – fit within Russia’s overall foreign policy and geopolitical outlook.

This is ultimately just a minor point of criticism that does not in any way diminish the merits of the book. *Rival Power* has received praise from a diverse group of specialists in the field and should rightfully be included in academic reading lists. I would echo this praise and add to it. Thanks to its eminently readable prose, the sharp and detailed analysis of sometimes complicated topics like energy and pipeline politics is easy to follow and understandable for non-specialists. *Rival Power* is a must-read for anybody interested in the relations between Russia and the Balkan countries or wishing to comprehend what ‘Russian influence’ means today.
Hristo P. Todorov

MODERNITY AND THE MATHEMATICAL

A Review of Stefan Popov’s

*Descartes and the Mathematization of the World*


In 2015 we saw the publication of Stefan Popov’s *Obiectum Purum: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of René Descartes* (in Bulgarian). Over its almost three hundred pages, the book presents a meticulous and encompassing look at the philosophy of René Descartes, organized around an original and courageous central thesis. The established interpretation of Descartes’ philosophy sees in it a classic form of dualism. By affirming the independence and self-sufficiency of the knowing subject as a self-positied substance, so the common interpretation goes, Descartes laid the foundations of modern philosophy as we know it. Contrary to this traditional reading, Stefan Popov uses ample evidence to argue that Descartes managed to become the founder of modern philosophy because he discovered the phenomenon of the pure object and objectness, while defining a particular method for their understanding. Precisely this mode of thinking based on the idea of the pure object has shaped thinking in our modern epoch.

Two years later, Stefan Popov published a much shorter book titled *Descartes and the Mathematization of the World* (2017; in Bulgarian), in which he develops a new version of his earlier interpretation. The publication of this short book is justified. Most importantly, it offers a different approach – instead of presenting a rigorous and detailed analysis of Descartes’ works (mainly *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*), the book undertakes the reconstruction of the intellectual process itself, while foregrounding its typological characteristics. Secondly, freed from the inevitable and multidirectional moves of interpretative thinking, the argumentation here is direct, subject to fewer conditions, and hence, clearer and more accessible.

Stefan Popov’s interpretation is built around the following basic propositions. First, objectness is a phenomenon that has become the defining characteristic of modernity as an intellectual epoch. Second, objectness was discovered by René Descartes...
and constitutes an organizing principle in his philosophy. It determines all the basic Cartesian concepts, such as the mind, Nature, the ‘I’, God, innate ideas, doubt, the method, etc. Third, mathematics is neither an instrument nor a science; it is a condition for the possibility of the identity of the object and the knowledge of objects. Fourth, the intellectual act of laying the mathematical foundations of objectness, and thus of modernity itself as an epoch of thought, is entirely creative. It cannot be inferred from conditions or observable processes.

In his earlier book, *Objec tum Pura rum: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of René Descartes*, Stefan Popov makes considerable efforts to prevent the reader from the misconception that they are reading the usual historical philosophical study. Typically, such studies date, collate and compare sources, analyze etymologies and contexts, search for precedents and parallels, and construct influences in terms of ideas. Stefan Popov insists that his investigation focuses on the very building of an ideal-type intellectual formation. By contrast, in *Descartes and the Mathematization of the World*, given the book’s predominantly logical rather than interpretative approach, the danger of such a misconception is negligible. However, in this shorter work as well, the author places special emphasis on clarifying the use of the word epoch. The term epoch implies discreteness – hence, it signifies a unique occurrence that cannot be repeated.

How should we understand objectness then? In order to answer this question, Popov often refers to the famous example of the wax candle in Descartes. Objectness is that which guarantees the self-identity of the thing through all possible changes in its states and qualities given in experience. This guarantee of the identity of the thing is intellectual in character, it is a concept. The concept is the condition that maintains the identity of the wax; or, in other words, a thing is identical to itself only if the experience of it is continuous. But if the identity of the object to itself depends on conceptual conditions, the idea of Descartes’ dualism can no longer hold. The correlation between the subjective and the objective poles thus formed becomes the core of a phenomenological kind of thinking. It supports the author’s argument that Descartes is the founder of the phenomenological tradition in philosophy.

The rejection of the traditional interpretation of Cartesian philosophy as a form of dualism would lack persuasiveness if it failed to provide an adequate account of the figure of God. Stefan Popov supplies such an interpretation: he views God as the bearer of infinity as the condition for thinking of the object. But although a necessary condition, infinity is still only one of the conditions for the knowledge of objects. The other, equally necessary condition is the experience of the senses. Insofar as we are talking about human knowledge, this knowledge is finite, and the bearer of its finitude are the senses. By necessity, they are discrete and precisely their discreteness gives rise to doubt. Doubt, according to Popov, has the character of a spontaneously occurring event.

What are the goals and possibilities of knowing the world in light of the idea of objectness? The Cartesian project for *mathesis universalis*, for universal mathematics, undoubtedly forms the thematic focus of Popov’s
study. Mathesis universalis is called upon to provide a complete and truthful knowledge of nature. Descartes considers universal mathematics to be the basis of all sciences, but also, something more than all sciences. Its task is to create the common framework for scientific thinking and together with it, the conditions for its application. There is only one such common framework, and it is this understanding that has given rise to the inspiring modern philosophical idea of the unity of science.

Descartes and the Mathematization of the World, to a much higher degree than Popov’s earlier study, is a book about the typological characteristics of modernity, rather than an investigation of the peculiarities of Cartesian philosophy. In a more forceful way, Popov insists on the idea that from a typological point of view, the epoch of modernity is a singular, non-repeatable phenomenon. It must be emphasized, however, that this is true only if we consider it as an ideal-type construction. As readers we should not imagine that its uniqueness is anything more than an effect of the typological approach. If we imagine even for a moment that we have before us a ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ picture of modernity such as it is ‘in itself’, we risk giving in to powerful irrational suggestions. The latter we find, for instance, in Heidegger’s notions that ‘the end of metaphysics’ or ‘the age of the world picture’ has arrived. Stefan Popov is fully aware of the danger and expressly states that the picture of Descartes’ philosophy and the epoch of modernity he presents is not the only possible one, and it is valid only insofar as we accept certain methodological assumptions.

In his new book, Stefan Popov presents an original, professionally conducted philosophical investigation on a par with contemporary discussions of Descartes worldwide. His main theses are formulated clearly and unambiguously. His argumentation is complex, multifaceted and logically consistent. Especially praiseworthy is his almost ascetic terminological rigour. Given these qualities, the investigation will probably be of particular interest to readers with a considerable background in philosophy. This, however, should in no way be a deterrent to any potential reader out there: regardless of their background, anyone interested in serious intellectual adventures will find the book rewarding.

REFERENCES

ABSTRACTS

Mark Galeotti

(Mis)Understanding Russia’s Two ‘Hybrid Wars’

Formulations such as ‘hybrid war’ that have been used to try and explain Russia’s political campaign against the West have political utility but little scholarly relevance. Apart from the fact that the Russians themselves see gibridnaya voina as a Western approach used against them and their allies, the term also conflates two distinct, even if overlapping Russian concepts. To the military, such non-kinetic means as subversion, hacking, disinformation and sabotage are instruments with which to prepare the battlefield, as in Crimea. However, to the national security establishment, they are an alternative to direct military operations, and it is this kind of ‘political war’ that is being waged on the West. Understanding this distinction is crucial for a proper appreciation of the nature of the challenge and the most effective means with which to resist it.

Keywords: Russia, hybrid war, political war, subversion, disinformation.

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Andrei P. Tsygankov

American Russophobia in the Age of Liberal Decline

This paper addresses the US media perception of the Russia-threat following the election of Donald Trump as the United States’ President. Trump’s election revealed a major value divide within the American society. The Russia issue became central in the new internal divide between the Trump administration and the liberal establishment. To the latter the Russia story was more about Trump than Russia. If the two countries are to move beyond viewing each other as potential enemies, they must find a way to reframe their values in non-confrontational terms.

Keywords: Russophobia, American media, Russia, Donald Trump, liberal establishment.

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**Stephen Kotkin**

**What Everyone Needs to Know about Russia under Putin**

Russia is in the news nowadays on a daily basis. The Western media is portraying Putin’s Russia as an existential threat and for many commentators the Cold War seems to be back. This has been emphasized again and again ever since reports of Russian collusion in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States have surfaced. Yet, much of the media coverage lacks any in-depth discussion about the reality of Putin’s Russia. But when it comes to Russia, history matters, geopolitics matter. The United States and Russia have conflicting interests in foreign policy and misunderstanding Russian behavior often make matters worse. Based on an analysis of Russian history as well as its more recent domestic and foreign policies, this article reflects on how the United States could formulate an adequate response to Russia’s new-found daring on the international stage.

**Keywords:** Russia, Putin, United States, foreign policy, Trump.

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Propaganda in Bulgaria: Made in Russia or Home-grown?

This paper discusses the main tenets of how Bulgaria was represented in what can be coined as ‘Russian propaganda’ and how the dynamics of this process functioned in the period from 2013 to 2016. First, it will provide a discussion outlining the general framework and illustrate some discourses that appeared in Russian media outlets concerning Bulgaria. Secondly, it will focus on how Russian propaganda operated in relation to Bulgaria’s presidential elections in the autumn of 2016. The latter case study is important as an empirical study since the ultimate winner of the election, Rumen Radev, was largely portrayed in both international and domestic media as being a ‘pro-Russian’ candidate. Such media portrayals of the Bulgarian presidential elections can be seen as consistent with similar depictions of other electoral contests in Europe and the United States over the past years in which Russian propaganda, social media trolls and bots, fake news have supposedly come to play a role in promoting politicians or political parties that are perceived to be ‘pro-Russian’. This paper will qualify such simplistic dichotomies and attempt to bring some nuance to the question of what constitutes ‘Russian propaganda’. In contrast to widespread assumptions following the logic of the so-called ‘information’ or ‘hybrid’ war, it argues that what is generally regarded as ‘Russian propaganda’ in Bulgaria tends to be a ‘home-grown’ phenomenon rather than a foreign-directed or steered influence.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Russian propaganda, Russia, Rumen Radev, hybrid war, Russian influence.

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In this paper, after presenting the main tenets of her theoretical approach, Chantal Mouffe shows how this approach is particularly suited to grasp the nature of the populist moment that characterizes our present conjuncture and of how to answer the challenge that it represents.

She argues that to give account of the ineradicability of antagonism and of the hegemonic nature of politics, the agonistic approach should be able to address the question: How could a democratic order acknowledge and manage the existence of conflicts that did not have a rational solution? And what is the specific role of political passions in these conflicts?

By ‘passions’ she designates a certain type of common affects that are mobilized in the political domain in the formation of the we/they forms of identification and points out that for Freud, affects are the qualitative expression of the quantity of libidinal energy of the instincts. This libidinal energy is malleable and can be oriented in multiple directions, producing different affects. To explicit this point, Mouffe brings in insights from Spinoza’s conception of affects, namely his distinction between affection (affectio) and affect (affectus). Like Freud, Spinoza believes that it is desire that moves human beings to act and he notes that what makes them act in one direction rather than in another are the affects. An affection, for him, is a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body. When affected by something exterior, the ‘conatus’ will experience affects that will move it to desire something and to act accordingly. Mouffe finds this dynamics of affectio/affectus helpful to envisage the process of production of common affects and proposes to employ this dynamics to examine the modes of construction of political identities, seeing ‘affections’ as the space where the discursive and the affective are articulated in specific practices.

Both left and right populisms nowadays are affected by the recent condition of post-politics: by the long-lived hegemony of neo-liberalism that has blurred the left/right political frontier, triggered a process of pauperization and precariousness and declared popular sovereignty obsolete, substituting it by the diktat of ‘experts’ under the smokescreen of ‘rational consensus’. In such a context, various populist movements have emerged, rejecting post-politics and post-democracy. They claim to give back to the people the voice that has been confiscated by the elites. Even right-wing populist movements are the expression of legitimate democratic aspirations which unfortunately are expressed in a nationalistic and xenophobic vocabulary. But the ‘people’ as a political category can be constructed in very different ways. The strategy to combat right-wing populism should consist in promoting a progressive populist movement, a left-wing populism that through the construction of another people will mobilize common affects towards a defence of equality and social justice. Because, as Spinoza was keen to stress, an affect can only be displaced by an opposed affect, stronger than the one to be repressed.
Mouffe argues that in recreating political frontiers, the ‘populist moment’ we are witnessing in Europe points to a ‘return of the political’: a return that may open the way for authoritarian solutions – through regimes that weaken liberal-democratic institutions – but which can also lead to a reaffirmation and deepening of democratic values.

**Keywords:** agonistics, post-politics, left and right populisms, political passions and affects, the return of the political, the future of democracy.


**Dimitar Vatsov**

**Logics of Propaganda**

**Part One. Populism and Propaganda:**

**Dangerous Liaisons and Family Resemblances**

On the basis of empirical data from the collective study on *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Print Media: 2013 – 2016* and reframing a cluster of already existing post-Wittgensteinian theoretical approaches, this text aims to outline the logics of propaganda on two levels, describing, in Part One, some more general typological features of the propaganda uses of language (i.e. propaganda’s ‘general’ practical logics) and, in Part Two, the particular conspiratorial grammar and typical vocabulary of the recent populist, anti-liberal and national-sovereignist propaganda (from Putin through Orbán to Trump), i.e. its specific practical logics.

Here, in Part One, based on a comparison with the scientific and everyday-life modes of speech, some more general features of the propaganda uses of language (common both to commercial advertising and to political propaganda) are outlined:

- We can speak of propaganda if there is strategic dissemination and repetition of stereotypified messages (clichés); the strategic goal of such repetitive dissemination is to transform those clichés into meta-clichés: into a depth
grammar that frames articulations for a multitude of individuals. In this aspect propaganda resembles education but it also differs from scientifically informed education by other features:

• Propaganda works in a regime of totalization of discourse, where the specific modalities of the separate messages lose their significance: the peculiar task of propaganda is to create an overgeneralized discursive horizon that enables the fusion of modalities and hence a free play of associations between messages. Being overgeneralized, propaganda discourses resemble scientific discourses and differ from everyday-life discourses; being freed from any strict sense (from any strict modalization), propaganda differs from science and resembles ordinary bullshitting (in Harry Frankfurt’s sense). Propaganda usually does not lie about the facts but it lies through modal extensions (or modal reductions) of the meanings of selected facts.

• Propaganda works in a regime of metonymy: it layers utterances upon one another in such a way that the modal differences between them disappear and, instead, a metonymical chain appears: ultimately, it looks as if every utterance substitutes the other, as if their meanings are the same. This metonymical propaganda operation is conditioned by the overgeneralized and fused discursive horizon but it also produces this very horizon: there is a circular productive relationship between them. Through metonymy, propaganda simulates coherence but such coherence is false because every modal concordance between the terms and the utterances is disrupted in advance.

Beyond the ‘general’ logics of propaganda, another distinction has been made: between populist uses of language and propaganda uses that are parasitic in relation to populism and operate with the opposition between ‘we, the people’ and ‘they, the elites’. We agree with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that in the spontaneous populist movements ‘the people’ comes into being as an empty signifier springing from metaphors and catachreses. The practical unfolding of the relevant discourse, however – with everyday-life metonymies from below or with strategic propaganda metonymies from above – inevitably fills the empty signifiers of populism with one or other specific meaning and transforms them into half-empty signifiers. In a specific populist-propaganda operation, such half-empty signifiers (as ‘the people’ and ‘its enemies’) are totalized and used as propaganda epithets: as devices for discursive terror.

**Keywords:** propaganda, logics, grammar, clichés, metonymy, modalization, generalization, empty signifiers, propaganda epithets.

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Boyan Znepolski

Ideological Dimensions of Anti-Democratic Propaganda
in Bulgarian Media

This paper aims to study five ideological dimensions of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgarian media that articulate in a variety of perspectives the same general talking points: ‘The decline of Europe’, ‘The rise of Russia’, ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’, ‘The US/NATO as global hegemon/puppet-master’. Its task is to check the ‘elasticity’ of Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda, to see how, and to what extent, the general talking points can be rearranged and extended in different ideological directions so as to encompass different social stereotypes and discontents and package them around three basic oppositions: nationalism versus liberalism, the people versus the elites, Russia versus the West. The paper also attempts to clarify what are the political implications and what is the future of the world that the ideological variations of the main propaganda talking points presuppose and suggest.

Keywords: anti-democratic propaganda, liberalism, anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism, nationalism, sovereignism, elites, the people, Russia, Europe, the EU, the US, NATO.

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**Albena Hranova**

**Bulgarian Anti-Democratic Propaganda: Talking Points, Styles and Audiences**

This paper is part of the research project on *Anti-Liberal Discourses and Propaganda Messages in Bulgarian Media: Dissemination and Social Perception* in the period between 2013 and 2016. It presents a case study focusing on differences in styles and public discourses with reference to their audiences in the advancing process of disseminating three main talking points of present-day Bulgarian anti-democratic propaganda: 1. ‘Bulgaria’s venal elites’; 2. ‘The decline of the West/Europe’; and 3. ‘The rise of Russia’.

The case study focuses on two types of public propaganda speakers – ‘people’s tribunes’ (Alexander Simov, Kevork Kevorkyan), and ‘thinkers’ targeting a more sophisticated and almost academic audience (Dr Nikolay Mihaylov, Prof. Ivo Hristov). The analysis frames their political viewpoints: Simov’s Stalinist attitude, with discursive formulations coming from the 1950s; Kevorkyan’s thoroughly xenophobic and nationalistic attitude; Mihaylov’s and Hristov’s claims regarding the ‘artificial’ character of the Modern Era and liberalism, as opposed to the ‘natural’ character of Russian authoritarianism. The paper also pays attention to the different rhetorical devices of their propaganda style: the special use of catachresis as a total trope of the discourse, which conflates all possible talking and focal points, plots and themes into one and the same political message whose rhetorical and topical ingredients seem to collapse into a consequent synonymy (Alexander Simov); the use of ‘manifesto-like’ or ‘slogan-like’ short paragraphs and meaningful artificial capital letters of nouns and verbs in Kevorkyan’s sentences; the special use of prestigious quotes (most often mistaken and mistreated) in Dr Nikolay Mihaylov’s and Prof. Ivo Hristov’s discourses, etc.

**Keywords:** anti-democratic, anti-liberal propaganda, propaganda styles, Russia, Bulgarian media.

Martin Kanoushev

The Social (In)Commensurability between Totalitarian and Anti-Democratic Propaganda

This paper is devoted to a particularly important scientific problem: it is a sociological attempt to conceptualize the social continuity and social incommensurability between propaganda as a classic instrument of power used by totalitarian regimes and propaganda as an immanent functional moment of the postcommunist public sphere. Hence its central task is to trace those focal points of significant difference/repetition at which their discursive (non) coincidences converge and diverge, and which constitute the unified, complete and indivisible ideological agenda of anti-democratic propaganda. Although the latter does not have an organizing potential, innovative methods of government and an alternative political model, it intensely accumulates power by discrediting civil society and creating a cynical social macro-environment – a key prerequisite for ‘modulating’ public opinion with the aim of reconsidering Bulgaria’s membership in the EU and NATO.

Keywords: terror, propaganda, indoctrination, demagoguery, ideology, totalitarian movements, totalitarian regime, neoliberal order, democratic values, anti-democratic discourse.

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Abstracts

Dimitar Vatsov

Logics of Propaganda
Part Two. The Conspiratorial Logic of Populist Propaganda

Within the framework of the more general logics of propaganda outlined in Part One, Part Two of this study aims to shed light on the recently growing populist-propaganda front. In contrast to many researchers who speak of a ‘populist wave’ recently spreading almost across the world (from Putin to Trump and back), on the level of discourses we prefer to call this phenomenon ‘populist-propaganda front’. This newly coined term presupposes that the dispersed popular discontents have, to a great extent, already been captured and packaged in a new propaganda regime. Gradually after 2000, the new populist-propaganda package (basic grammar and vocabulary) was produced by Russian media, but Russia does not determine all of its uses; it can be and is used in anti-Russian rhetoric as well. This package – national-sovereignist and conservative in its own terms – does not serve the interests of the local people but is utilized by different local politico-economic actors (oligarchs): it is a circulating resource for state capture. The particular practical logic of this populist propaganda is outlined here on the basis of the empirical study on Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. News Websites and Printed Media: 2013 – 2016.

First, the populist-propaganda logics are based entirely on a conspiratorial grammar. The narrative figure of conspiracy, after a morphological analysis following Vladimir Propp, can be logically represented as a multiple relation with three logical positions: 1. Conspirator (Puppet-master, Villain) – 2. Help- ers (Puppets) – 3. Victim (potential Hero). Populist propaganda totalizes this elementary conspiratorial grammar: everything in the (political and economic) world is a conspiracy. The scene of the conspiracy is the globe. Hence the position of the ‘Conspirator’ is translated into a geopolitical position: the usual suspect – the global Villain – is ‘the West’ (or the USA, NATO, Brussels, Soros, capitalism, liberalism, multiculturalism, etc., all of them metonymically substituted on demand).

Second, by totalizing conspiracy, populist propaganda totalizes cynicism: its first message is that everyone is pursuing their own self-interest. Every other normative and political standard (presumably invoked to limit selfish self-interests – human rights, the rule of law, the separation of powers, etc.) is discredited in advance as an ideological smokescreen hiding the conspiracy.

Third, the only legitimate interest is the people’s interest. But here a set of propaganda operations with the meaning of ‘the people’ takes place: 1. Using the Left repertoire of discrediting Western liberal capitalism, propaganda omits the inclusive Left meanings of ‘the people’ and substitutes them with exclusive ‘Right meanings’ (it is strategically targeted at the local majority represented in an ethnically-nationalist holistic mode); 2. The people’s interest and the people’s sovereignty are also strategically substituted by the state’s sovereignty (in geopolitical étatist terms); 3. But the state’s sovereignty understood as the
existence of strong and mutually independent institutions is also strategically replaced by the ‘personal sovereignty’ of one strong and charismatic political leader. On the Bulgarian media scene, Putin and Orbán are usually cast in the role of real sovereign leaders countering the conspiracy of the West.

In conclusion, contemporary populist propaganda is racist (excludes on a racial basis), isolationist (excludes international normative regulations and control), and authoritarian (on the internal level, it excludes the institutional separation of powers and blocks civic resistances). It is not only a Russian weapon but also an effective local device for state capture for every oligarch fighting against all forms of public control (internal and external) and utilizing the state as a tool for securing economic advantages.

**Keywords:** logics, grammar, populist propaganda, conspiracy, state capture.

**Dimitar Vatsov** – see above.

**Milena Iakimova, Dimitar Vatsov**

**Co-opting Discontent: Bulgarian Populism, Local Interests and Russian Propaganda**

Russian propaganda co-opts Western grassroots criticism of liberalism and globalization, recasting both left and right populism in nationalist terms. Vice versa, local actors borrow the Russian propaganda package and use it for their populist purposes. This is the general finding of an analysis of Bulgarian media discourse in 2013–2016, which proceeded in three steps: semantic analysis of the vocabulary of anti-liberal and anti-democratic propaganda and extraction of specific keywords and catch phrases; frequency analysis of the uses of these words and phrases in 3,080 online media outlets for the four-year period under study; content analysis of a sample of 3,305 publications from eight typologically different media outlets.

The analysis identified four simplistic and interrelated anti-liberal and anti-democratic theses:

1. The US and NATO are a global hegemon/puppet-master which is pulling the strings both of Brussels and of national governments; 2. Europe is dying because of its cultural decline (‘liberasty’) under the blows of the migrant invasion unleashed by the US, and because of the lame-duck, puppet European bureaucracy (‘Eurocracy’). In the final analysis, Europe is dying because it is united: the EU is a construction which serves the interests of the US and of global corporations, and it is an enemy of the European peoples; 3. Russia is rising. Although it is a victim of Western aggression, Russia is a guardian of its age-old sovereignty and of traditional values, and it is actually the true saviour of Europe; 4. Bulgaria’s liberal elites are venal: civic movements, human rights organizations, independent media outlets, pro-Western politicians and parties are represented as an indistinguishable whole, and all of them are ‘foreign agents’ – puppets of foreign interests.
The populist-propaganda discursive front developing in the Bulgarian public sphere since 2013 is distinctly ‘pro-Russian’, although the data show that it is not always directly inspired by Russia. The content analysis identified three different rationales for using those clichés.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian media, Russian propaganda, populism, oligarchic uses, hate speech, sovereignism.

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**Dimitar Vatsov** – see above.

**Boryana Dimitrova**

**Influence of Anti-Democratic Propaganda on Bulgarian Public Opinion: Between the Psychological Pressure and the Political Choices**

This paper analyzes the results of a nationally representative survey on the influence of anti-democratic propaganda on Bulgarian public opinion. Three topics are discussed in detail. First, the levels of public support for basic democratic values, and of public trust in institutions, key foreign countries and world leaders; second, the level of penetration of the most widespread propaganda messages in public attitudes and in specific socio-demographic and electoral groups, and the role of fake news; third, the ability of these messages to influence the direction and character of Bulgarian citizens’ key political choices. Based on the analysis of the results, two main theses are argued. First, the more overtly geopolitically oriented the messages are, the more they polarize society; the explicitly geopolitical propaganda theses are winning supporters but, at the same time, the respective counter-theses are also gaining traction. Conversely, the more covertly politically and psychologically oriented the messages are, the more they feed on and intensify people’s fears and disappointments, and win supporters without resistance. But, second, however widespread the propaganda messages are in Bulgarian media, for the time being they have not managed to change the key geopolitical pro-European and pro-liberal choices of the
Bulgarians – until and as long as they do not offer an acceptable alternative to this choice.

Keywords: democratic values, propaganda messages, fake news, public opinion, political choice, geopolitical orientation.

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Deyan Kiuranov

Bulgarians and Russians Today: A Mismatch of Two Complexes

This is the story of the modification of a hypothesis about the attitudes of Bulgarians towards Russians as a result of an empirical survey. The main tenet is that both groups regard one another through two different complexes. The adequacy of the notion of complex (used in the sense of Charcot rather than of Freud) in this context is explained. The Bulgarian complex is vassality: Bulgaria is/should be a vassal to suzerain Russia, therefore expecting protection for services rendered. The Russian complex is imperialism: Bulgaria is/should be a colony of Russia, therefore Russia is under no obligation to Bulgaria regardless of circumstances. As in reality Bulgaria is a member of the EU and NATO, these complexes create misunderstandings that complicate further a relationship that objectively is already complex enough.

Keywords: Russians – Bulgarians, social attitudes, complexes, imperialism, vassality.

Deyan Kiuranov holds a PhD in Philosophy from Sofia University. Co-founder of the Ecoglasnost movement and the Union of Democratic Forces, he quit politics in 1990. Since then, he has worked in various NGOs and think tanks, and is a co-founder of the Centre for Liberal Strategies.

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Abstracts

**Milena Iakimova**

**Populist Propaganda in a Context of Social Solitude**

This paper draws on thirteen semi-structured interviews with journalists from Bulgarian print media and news websites to outline their perceptions of their professional world. The interviews were conducted between March and June 2016, within the framework of the study on anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria.

Without exaggeration, both the analysis of media and the interviews with journalists have shown the disintegration of the field of journalism as a differentiated field in Bulgaria. What is this due to? Our interviewees explained it with the commercialization and shift in focus from winning trust to securing higher ratings – the media have come to be understood as entertainment and journalism is trying to adjust to this ‘commercial’ requirement. But this is not the main (or at least not the sufficient) reason. The market, in turn, is changing under pressure from free online media, the reorientation of television towards new formats (of entertainment), and the subsequent fragmentation of audiences. What differentiates print media and news websites, however, is the drastic merger of entertainment and direct politics through omerta on certain topics and persons, through advertorials that are not properly (if at all) indicated as such, and all of this – in the absence of information about who owns the media. Our interviewees share a common practical dilemma: you either do journalism, or work for a media corporation. If one wants to do proper journalism, one has to shy away from the topics of the day and withdraw to the safer territories of marginal topics.

*Keywords:* media, journalism, tabloidization, propaganda.

Milena Iakimova – see above.

**Konstantin Pavlov**

**Analysis of the Online Media Reactions to the Government’s Annual National Security Report for 2016**

This paper analyzes the media and political reactions in Bulgarian online media to the Government’s 2016 Annual Report on the State of National Security of the Republic of Bulgaria, subsequently approved by Parliament, in the period from 1 September to 30 November 2017. References to the Report were subjected to content analysis according to the timeline of the reactions and the intensity of their occurrence, according to the different categories of institutional and non-institutional speakers, as well as according to the basic messages they were carrying. The findings show a strong disproportion in the representation of different opinions and the lack of public debate on the subject. From the very beginning of the researched period, there was a visible disparity between the dynamic of reactions to the Report and their media coverage. Media attention was almost exclusively focused on the passages in the Report describing the role of Russia for Bulgaria’s national security, which were the most debated
political issue on this topic. It is highly likely that the next national security topic that will get extensive coverage will revolve around the state of security in the Black Sea.

Keywords: content analysis, online media, national security, Bulgaria, propaganda.

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Alejandro Romero Reche

The Conspiracy Theory of Ignorance in the Classical Sociology of Knowledge

Before Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge and Marx’s theory of ideology, there was an Enlightened proto-sociology of error and prejudice which, in its emphasis on deliberate priestly deception, provides one of the main examples of ‘the conspiracy theory of ignorance’ as conceptualized by Popper. This paper follows the development of the sociology of knowledge from that starting point, in order to examine how authors like Marx, Lukács, Mannheim and others have theorized an almost perfect, self-working machinery of ideological reproduction which can be used in conspiracy theories simply by reinstating intentionality in the creation and management of such device.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, sociology of knowledge, ideology, false consciousness, social theory.

Alejandro Romero Reche is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Granada (Spain). He teaches Contemporary Social Theory, Philosophy of the Social Sciences and Electoral Analysis. He has published several articles and book chapters on the sociologies of knowledge, humour, and leisure. As a comic writer, he won the Injuve award for a short story that was later developed as the graphic novel La canción de los gusanos (Song of the Worms), and his work has been featured in most of the satirical magazines in Spain (El Jueves, El Churro Ilustrado, Mister K, etc.). His current research interests include humour and satire in conspiracy theories, the authoritarian uses of humour, and new approaches to conspiratorial thought from the sociology of knowledge. In 2017,
he taught a course on ‘Political Humour in Contemporary Europe’ at Sciences Po Lyon (France). Some of his publications include: *El Humor en la Sociología Posmoderna: una Perspectiva desde la Sociología del Conocimiento* (2010); *La canción de los gusanos* (2010).

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**Nebojša Blanuša**

**The Deep State between the (Un)Warranted Conspiracy Theory and Structural Element of Political Regimes?**

This paper tries to address a more general issue of conspiracy theories as knowledge, its (mis)treatments, selective and biased use, as well as specific features and outcomes of different epistemic approaches to conspiracy theories important for further clarification of this field of research. Following that, the author tries to explain why the ‘deep state’ is a good candidate for such a research of conspiratorial knowledge as a field of contesting interpretations. Conceptually speaking, the ‘deep state’ is considered as a sort of systemic, political arch-conspiracy, or the parapolitical structure organized for permanent conspiratorial enterprises. In that sense, it functions as a metaphorical umbrella for state conspiracies and includes many contested singular conspiracy theories. Furthermore, it will be shown, through the analysis of the current scholarly literature on the ‘deep state’, how the knowledge produced by those scholars who believe in its existence can be contested and compared with (non) conspiratorial public interpretations, and other experts’ arguments who are not ‘enchanted’ by this concept. The purpose of such research would be to explore differences in argumentation, providing a basis for evidence-building and alternative explanations between these various groups of social agents. Based on this information, further more rigorous social science research should enable us to build the criteria for differentiation between warranted and unwarranted conspiratorial scepticism.

**Keywords:** deep state, conspiracy theory, parapolitics, transitology, knowledge.

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spurious theories as collective narratives regarding cultural traumas provoked by crises and wars. Another project he is involved in is Team Populism, a network of international scholars dealing with various aspects of populism, especially anti-elitist conspiracy theories. He is the author of *Conspiracy Theories and Croatian Political Reality 1980-2007* (2011; in Croatian) and co-editor of *EU, Europe Unfinished: Mediating Europe and the Balkans in a Time of Crisis* (2016). He has published several articles on the role of conspiracy theories as political vehicles for othering, as well as vernacular epistemology with various political consequences.

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**Lea Vajssova**

**Judicial Power or Conspiracy?**

**The Emergence of the Citizen-Investigator in the Context of a Politics Centred around the Rule of Law and the Fight against Corruption**

The thesis of this article is that it is difficult to distinguish the logic of conspiracy in some of its manifestations from the logic of the judiciary. The author attempts to show that the difference between conspiracy and judicial power is a consequence of the positioning of the respective logic in locations that are discursively granted the right to evaluate something as true. Undoubtedly, the discourse of judicial power is one of the leading political perspectives in Bulgaria nowadays since politics are centred around the rule of law and the fight against corruption. In order to unfold her main thesis, the author attempts a reconstruction of the anticorruption discourse based on the works of Ivan Krastev and Nadège Ragaru. She demonstrates its development on a global scale and its entry in post-communist Bulgaria. What she finds particularly interesting in Ragaru’s observation is that the anticorruption fight relies on civil society, and in that sense, constructs a ‘civil society’ which, within the framework of this judicial discourse, begins to duplicate the practices of the investigator.

**Keywords:** transition, post-communist Bulgaria, judicial power, rule of law, anticorruption discourse, subjectivity, civil society, conspiracy, Boltanski, sociology of secrecy.

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Conspiracy and Vulnerability: #Occupy, Zeitgeist, and the Legitimation of Rebellious Knowledge

In the autumn of 2011, one of the working groups of #Occupy Wall Street discussed the idea of endorsing the concepts of the Zeitgeist films as an official ideology of the movement. The idea was ultimately dismissed, but since the Zeitgeist films were heavily influenced by Alex Jones, in order to do so the working group needed to develop a dividing line between conspiracy theories and the rebellious knowledge about the injustice of the 1%, which had inspired #Occupy. As the dividing line was to be drawn in discussion, which foreclosed any argument founded on authority, in fact any argument that implied asymmetrical distribution of knowledge, the theories of conspiracy theories turned out to be useless. Therefore the working group developed a concept of conspiracy theory suitable for its practical purposes, and shaped by what the participants perceived as strategic vulnerabilities. Their concept claimed that a conspiracy theory was any theory that can be accused of being one, and as this concept could be extended to any theory of injustice, the working group ultimately decided to recommend that #Occupy should not have any ideology. Later, the lack of ideology was widely criticized as a crucial vulnerability of the movement. Of course, this paper would not attribute this vulnerability to the rejection of the Zeitgeist films. Yet I will claim that the discussion of the films exemplifies a risk brought about by the concept of conspiracy theory, the risk of making any dissent vulnerable to accusations of irrationality.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, credit, right, responsibilization, knowledge.

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Julien Giry

Become a Full-Time Conspiracy Theorist:
Radicalization and Professionalization Trajectories of Two Citizen Sleuths Groups

Starting from an empirical and interactionist approach of both individual and collective trajectories of radicalization and professionalization of two citizen sleuths groups, the JFK’s assassination ‘warrenologists’ and the 9/11 ‘Truthers’, this paper (in French) aims to study grassroots conspiracism. Faced with such a violent and unexpected event, windows of opportunity open and conspiracy theories flourish. From a Weberian perspective, we are gradually assisting to the transition from amateur conspiracy theorists who investigate the tragic event they underwent as a kind of ‘hobby’ to professional ones who live for and from conspiracism. Yet, from individual awareness to micro-mobilizations, a collective action dynamic takes shape. Step by step, carriers of radicalization develop with the emergence of a collective politically determined cause which contributes to the institutionalization of a relatively autonomous social field with its specific capital and resources. Since then, professional citizen sleuths have engaged in a competitive process and a social division of conspiracist labour has arisen. Specialized and self-proclaimed experts, without any legitimate competence or skills, are emerging in various fields such as forensic medicine, structural engineering or ballistic analysis. And, with the contemporary rise of the internet, this cyber echo-chamber gives an opportunity for some social actors to acquire genuine prestige, social and political recognition, and a dominating position in the conspiracist field and even beyond. Finally, professional conspiracy theorists become ‘rival-associates’: each one tries to improve his/her own position in the field but also, through heteronomy effects, in the economic and many other fields, where conspiracy theories and conspiracy merchandising generate highly lucrative incomes.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, citizen sleuths, radicalization and professionalization carriers, institutionalization of a social field, rival-associates, heteronomy effects.

Since 2009, Julien Giry has been working on conspiracy theories mainly
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