

Interview with Prof. Ruzha Smilova on Depoliticization, Populism, and Bulgaria

Acta Fakulty filozofické
Západočeské univerzity v Plzni /
West Bohemian Review of
Social Sciences & Humanities
2022, Vol. 14 (1), 68–74
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24132/actaff.2022.14.1.5>
<https://actaff.zcu.cz/>
ISSN 2336-6346



This paper is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Ruzha Smilova teaches history of political ideas and contemporary political theory at the Political Science Department of Sofia University, and is a programme director (political research) at the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia – one of the most influential independent think-tanks in Bulgaria and the wider Central and Eastern European region.

* * *

Přemysl Rosůlek: You have been focusing on current political theory issues, such as depoliticization, populism and anti-politics. Can you explain these phenomena and describe their linkage to contemporary CEE problems?

Ruzha Smilova: The rise and success of populism in CEE has preoccupied political analysts already at the time the countries in the region acceded to the EU and started backsliding on democratic norms and practices. A whole academic industry, which is studying populism both in the region and beyond, rapidly developed. Political theory is also contributing to the effort to understand populism by conceptualizing the diverse sources and manifestations of the populist phenomenon. As a researcher within the EU-funded project PaCE (Populism and Civic Engagement¹), I have studied the causal mechanisms that explain the rise and success of populist parties and movements in Europe.² Prominent among these is the reaction of voters to the shrinking policy space. This trend of turning liberal democracies into “democracy without choice” (Krastev 2002) has long been noted. In such a regime democratic say of the citizens becomes irrelevant: people may be able to change government but not its policies, as these have been outsourced to non-elected, democratically unaccountable bodies. It is this process of emptying democracy of its democratic content that is referred to as “depoliticization”.

Some identify the cartelisation of party systems in developed democracies as the primary source of depoliticization (Katz, Mair 1995). As a result of growing cartelization (but also due to other forms of outsourcing democratic decision-making), the perceptions of political inefficacy – that one can change the government but not its policies – become widespread. This alienates voters from mainstream parties, who offer the same policy menu despite nominal ideological differences in their platforms. A further major source of voter alienation from mainstream parties is the growing perception that elected governments are not sufficiently responsive, as they often respond not to their electorates but to other (external or internal) constraints and pressures – be these from international markets or national businesses, or even from media empires acting as “PR divisions of business groups” (Smilova 2014). Parties in government often fail to ensure the desired balance between responsible (acting responsibly in performing its governmental functions vis-à-

¹See <https://popandce.eu/>.

²For more details on these mechanisms, see the report https://popandce.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PaCE_D4.1_Causal-mechanisms-of-populism.pdf.

vis multiple constraints) and responsive (sensitive to the demands of the electorate) government, which is “a principal source of the democratic malaise that confronts many Western democracies today” (Mair 2009).

The growing sense of frustration prompted by the loss of democratic control spurs discontent with how democracy works. The trend towards emptying liberal democracy of its democratic content is reinforced by globalization, where the processes of outsourcing decision-making are accelerated and deepened. More and more, the decision-making power is transferred not only to non-responsive and non-directly accountable national bodies, but to trans-national bodies without any democratic legitimacy. This adds to the intensity of the citizen’s feelings of a loss of control, further enhanced by the processes of accelerating globalization becoming a major driver of populist support. The most general level of depoliticization – be it in the form of outsourcing decision-making to non-democratic bodies (state and non-state, national and supranational) or in the often related form of “there is no alternative” (TINA) politics – is at odds with the democratic credo. According to it, it is the sovereign – the plural citizens – who should decide, directly or through their representatives, all important political issues affecting their polity. The de facto depoliticization of vast areas of decision-making disempowers the citizens, leading to a growing sense of loss of control over their lives.

One result of the deepening processes of depoliticization is the growing inequality of power between citizens and governing elites. This inequality opens an ever-growing gap between them, which is aptly exploited by populists of diverse ideological persuasions, who promise to restore “democracy” by taking power from the elites and giving it back to the people (Smilova 2017). Thus, a major source of the appeal of populists’ easy fixes to democracy’s problems is the anti-elitist rhetoric they use. It falls on fertile ground, as the governing elites have attracted much frustration – not only on account of their broken promises to deliver better-quality democracy, but also because of the condescending attitude that the more successful tend to display towards the less fortunate – an attitude that has aptly been called “meritocratic hubris” (Sandel 2020). Yet, instead of restoring the healthy balance at the heart of liberal democracy’s success – the balance between rights and the rule of law on the one hand and democracy on the other – what populists often deliver is “democracy without rights” (Mounk 2018).

Přemysl Rosůlek: In many Western European countries, populist radical right parties have emerged in previous decades and have become a norm in many cases. In Bulgaria, the advent and rise of ATAKA was a sign of radicalism but it has lost its appeal in the meanwhile. Does it mean that Bulgaria has turned away from radicalism and intolerance, or has it just moved to different parties?

Ruzha Smilova: The story of populism in Bulgaria does not start with ATAKA’s right-wing radicalism, but it started already with the Bulgarian political system being stormed by the ex-king of Bulgaria Simeon II, who in 2001 won 50 % of the seats in the Parliament (and formed a government) just a month after entering the electoral competition. His brand of populism was a considerably milder form of centrist politics that more closely resembled the centrist populism of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia than the radical right populism of Western European parties such as FPO, for example. Despite its mild character, it paved the way for a series of similar breakthroughs – often taking radical right shape as in the case of ATAKA’s rise in 2005. These breakthroughs continue to this day – let me remind you that in 2021 two preterm parliamentary elections in Bulgaria were won by newcomers. “There is such a people” (ITN) of the showman Slavi Trifonov won the July elections but after failing to form a government, the November 2021 elections were won by yet another newcomer – “We continue the change” (PP). One may dispute to what extent both 2021 newcomer parties are populist players, yet it is indisputable that they ran – and won – on an anti-establishment anti-corruption ticket, exploiting the same type of anti-elite sentiments

that have brought to power a series of populist players in Bulgaria since 2001. The Pandora's box was opened by the ex-king, and ATAKA only added ideological flavor, normalizing the radical right populist rhetoric, which has remained present in the Bulgarian public discourse ever since. ATAKA's illiberal policies appear recurrently in the programmes of other radical right nativist populists. Yet they have also made their way into the policy repertoire of mainstream parties such as the Bulgarian socialist party, whose leader Kornelia Ninova has opportunistically driven BSP to adopt socially conservative stances on important social issues, such as gender equality, migration, etc. (Smilova 2018).

Přemysl Rosůlek: Similarly, populism has emerged and become anchored in mainstream political parties. Likewise in Bulgaria, it can be considered a country with strong populist political figures regardless of their affiliation. Is this populism in any way different from mainstream populism in current Western politics?

Ruzha Smilova: Populism in CEE, including in Bulgaria, is not a fringe phenomenon, as it arguably still is in Western Europe (WE). Despite the notable increase in the influence of radical right parties in WE, no such party has ever won elections, nor has it formed government single-handedly – or as the major coalition partner. Within the PaCE project I already mentioned, we extensively studied what we there called “nativist” populism in WE (which roughly corresponds to radical right populism), and concluded that its influence is inflated (for more on this, see PaCE policy recommendations based on PaCE research findings). In CEE, on the other hand, we have populists not only repeatedly winning consecutive elections, but also forming governments, changing or adopting new constitutions, and generally entrenching themselves in power. The type of populism we see in CEE is thus much more consequential and raises much more concern, as it is as result of populists in power in several countries in the region that the quality of democracy there is in rapid decline, with Hungary and Poland arguably currently having a different, illiberal, type of democracy, if not altogether abandoning the democratic road.

Přemysl Rosůlek: The left-right division in Bulgaria was partly lost with the advent and rise of GERB. Nevertheless, does the foundation and success of PP change the populist political environment or not?

Ruzha Smilova: It was part of the rhetoric of the leader of NDSV – the ex-tzar of Bulgaria Simeon II – to blur the distinction between left and right. In his electoral promise to solve all the main problems of the country in eight hundred days, he did not refer to either right or left policies. Instead, he put the blame for the difficult economic situation and the prolonged transition of Bulgaria on the partisan ideological divisions between the ex-communist BSP and the pro-reform Union of Democratic Forces, which characterized the hyper-politicized political landscape in Bulgaria during the 1990s. From the start, GERB positioned itself ideologically as right of the center rather than as centrist (it is no accident that GERB became part of the European People's Party, in distinction from NDSV, which was part of ALDE). Though, it is true that in its three terms in office since 2009, GERB has often been less ideologically purist and has adopted centrist and often openly left-wing populist policies, trying to placate any social discontent that threatened its survival in power.

“We continue the change” (PP) – the newcomer party that won the November 2021 pre-term elections and formed a government with three coalition partners. The member parties of the coalition government lead by PP have very diverse ideological profiles – from the right of the center stances of DSB (DSB is one of the constituent members of “Democratic Bulgaria”, the other being the liberal-leaning, more centrist “Yes Bulgaria”), through the ideologically incoherent profile of the populist “There is Such a People!”, to the ideologically left (albeit socially conservative) BSP.

PP itself only recently registered as a party (it ran in the elections using the registration of two small, older parties) and it is yet not entirely clear what is its ideological profile. Given that it has to balance a very difficult coalition (because of the diverse ideological positions of the constituent parties), and given that it has to govern during exceptional time (with cascading crises), it is unlikely it will be given a chance to implement any ideologically-driven policies. Rather, it can at best master the art of extinguishing fires rather than rule in a textbook-style ideological fashion.

Přemysl Rosůlek: In general, corruption index rated by TI is quite high in Bulgaria. Similarly, the freedom of the press published by the RSF ranks Bulgaria as one of the worst CEE countries. Then, there is a problem with oligarchy. How do you perceive the future of transition towards the Western standards in Bulgaria and where do you personally see the greatest obstacles for Bulgaria becoming a standard democratic country? Anti-corruption has become a credo of several political parties in Bulgaria. Is this the case? And do they (e.g., PP, ITN) mean their appeal to this problem?

Ruzha Smilova: The current government, led by PP, was formed with the explicit pledge to dismantle the “Borissov mode” of governing the country, which in the majority’s view is closely associated with the lamentable characteristics you mention above. This was also the drive behind the months-long anti-government protests in 2020. Yet the three consecutive elections in 2021, though clearly showing the willingness of the electorate to break with this mode of governing the country, did not yield parliaments with an ideologically coherent majority to decisively break with it. Currently, the PP government is fighting an uphill battle to survive, with the war in Ukraine and the pro-Russia sentiments of BSP making it particularly difficult to predict how long it will last. It is already clear, however, that the promised thoroughgoing reforms – in the spheres of judiciary and more generally in the rule of law – are unlikely to be implemented in the full measure necessary to succeed.

Přemysl Rosůlek: In relation to North Macedonia, Bulgaria has been blocking the beginning of pre-accession talks due to disputes over shared or joint history. As far as I know, Macedonians are very proud of their own history while majoritarian Bulgarian discourse considers Macedonian identity “constructed” (artificial?) and accuses North Macedonia of “stealing” their history. How do you perceive this issue? And what sort of solution would you suggest for the relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia?

Ruzha Smilova: At the start, it should be mentioned that Bulgaria was the first state to officially recognize Macedonia when it declared its independence from Yugoslavia. And it was a long-standing commitment of a series of Bulgarian governments to support Macedonia’s EU integration – a stance that was shared by as many as 80 % of Bulgarians as late as 2018. One of the priorities of the Bulgarian Presidency of the Council of the EU was precisely the support for the EU integration of Western Balkans, with the overwhelming majority of Bulgarians supporting the fast EU accession of North Macedonia in particular as part of the Bulgarian national interest. Things changed drastically during the late days of the third Borissov government, which was a coalition government. The radical right-wing nationalists from the United Patriots (itself a coalition of the nationalist VMRO, NFSB and ATAKA) played a crucial role in key decisions – such as blocking the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on combating domestic and gender-based violence (known as the Istanbul convention). For details on what happened and how it happened, see Smilova (2018, 2020). The same successful scenario of shifting the public mood with coordinated political and media-supported campaign was repeated in 2020 – after raising the alarm that North Macedonia is allegedly not fulfilling its duties under the 2017 “good neighbourliness” treaty between the two countries, GERB government vetoed the start of the

EU accession negotiation talks with North Macedonia. As in 2020 Borissov's government was constantly under attack, GERB thought it opportune to adopt the nationalist, VMRO-inspired rhetoric, and adopted anti-Macedonian position, reversing its long-standing commitment to the EU integration of the region, with North Macedonia EU accession being one of its key foreign policy priorities.

Lifting the veto has been the major point of contention within the current PP government, with PP and DB being in support, while BSP and ITN adopting the language of "conditionality" – with a long list of vague and constantly changing demands to be met by North Macedonia before lifting the veto. The President of the Republic Mr. Radev has also chosen to use the N. Macedonian card to attack PP and the PM Kyril Petkov for his declared commitment to seek ways to bring the positions of the two countries closer in order to start the EU accession process. In addition to the tensions in the governing coalition due to the BSP's stance on the war in Ukraine ("No arms to be sent to Ukraine!"), the veto on N. Macedonia will be the survival test of this government. As things currently stand, the chances of a breakthrough on this issue in the very near future are not very high.

Přemysl Rosůlek: In this regard, Bulgaria is known for its huge progress in accepting Turkish and Pomak minorities. On the other hand, there are still tensions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in relation to Macedonian minority in Bulgaria. What do you think about the issue?

Ruzha Smilova: The Bulgarian constitution does not use the term "ethnic minorities" and even explicitly prohibits forming parties on an ethnic basis. Nominally, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) – the party representing the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria – is not an ethnic party and this was the reason why the Constitutional Court, in one of its landmark early decisions, ruled it was not anti-constitutional.

In the case of the registration of the Macedonian minority ethnic party "OMO-Ilinden", however, the Bulgarian Constitutional Court ruled negatively – a decision that brought several ECHR judgments against Bulgaria. It is unlikely Bulgaria will change its position on the issue, given the constitutional provision against ethnic parties. However, this is not a major issue of contention between the two countries. North Macedonia does not insist on recognizing Macedonian ethnic minority in Bulgaria and this is clearly stated in several official positions of Skopje.

Rather, the issue is whether Bulgaria demands, as a condition before the veto is lifted, that N. Macedonia recognizes the status of the local Bulgarians as a "nation-forming" ethnic minority. Although, on several occasions, the official Bulgarian position was that a change in the N. Macedonian Constitution to recognize such a status to the Bulgarian ethnic minority is a precondition for lifting the veto, there is no consensus in the Parliament – or in society – that this is indeed a strict requirement. This is certainly not the position of the nationalists from VMRO, who insist that there is no genuine Macedonian nation, as Macedonians for them are just Bulgarians who only forgot their true identity. For them, the Bulgarians in N. Macedonia should not be given a special minority status, as Bulgarians are the true majority there (even if they do not realize it themselves).

Přemysl Rosůlek: In relation to Russia, Bulgaria was for a long time considered a Russian ally due to friendly historical relationship. Moreover, Bulgaria is strongly dependent on Russian fossil energy. Despite this fact, the Bulgarian political elites are very anti-Putin in contemporary period. Can you explain this?

Ruzha Smilova: Russophile sentiments are widespread in the country, although the majority supported in the past and still supports the country's EU and NATO commitments. A series of

BG governments since 2001 have tried to strike a balance between its EU and NATO obligations and the Russophile general sentiments by sometimes adopting ambiguous positions that have prompted some analysts to depict Bulgaria as Putin's "Trojan horse" within the EU (although, to be fair, there is quite a competition for this "badge of honor" among several EU member states). This became particularly visible during the Skripal affair. After the British services linked the poisoning of Skripal to Russia's FSB, the official BG position was: "we will wait for clear evidence before condemning Russia" – a position that fully coincided with that of the Russian state. Later on, it transpired that there had also been an attempt to poison a Bulgarian businessman involved in the legal arms trade, and that the perpetrators were the suspects in the poisoning of Skripal – and although the Bulgarian services had all this information, no action was undertaken to stop Russia's FSB activities in Bulgaria.

So, I would say that even though nominally the political elites in Bulgaria are pro-EU and pro-NATO, when it comes to curbing Russian influence – be it economic, cultural or political – they are less eager to act. There is also a trend towards strengthening the representation of Russophile sentiments in the Parliament, with the party "Vazrazhdane" (Revival), which is openly pro-Putin, currently scoring third or second in recent polls. There is a new party formed by the former PM of the caretaker government (appointed by President Radev) Mr. Yanev, which also declares it will run on a pro-Russia ticket. The President of the Republic Mr. Radev also takes ambiguous positions on Russia and has even declared that Crimea is Russian (a flop during his re-election campaign in October 2021, which discredited his declared pro-EU and pro-NATO stance) – which should not be surprising given his long-standing position against EU sanctions on Russia for annexing Crimea.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has provoked negative reactions and was condemned by the majority of Bulgarians during the early days of the war. Even Putin's approval rating among Bulgarians, traditionally high, dramatically dropped in the immediate aftermath of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Yet there is a visible shift in public sympathies – while initially there was a strong support for Ukrainian refugees, with volunteers stepping in to help accommodate their needs, as the state was slow and lacked the necessary capacity. There are stronger voices now – not only in society but even from the government – that the Ukrainian refugees are too demanding and should know their rightful place better. Military support (sending arms and ammunition) for Ukraine has also never been the view of the majority.

Přemysl Rosůlek: And last question – for the Czech Republic, Bulgaria is a far distant country and perhaps the only association with it is related to the Black Sea and the summer bathing season and to a lesser extent to the mountains there. Newly, the image of Bulgaria is connected to Bulgarian workers in Czech factories. Nothing more in fact. However, on the contrary, Bulgarians are very well aware of Czech politics, society and the Czech culture and are very knowledgeable about Czech realities. What is the current development regarding this issue?

Ruzha Smilova: I am afraid that the current lack of interest is mutual – Bulgarians know very little about the current state of the Czechs – of their economy, society, politics and the country. All that is known is that Czechia is doing better in terms of economy – and in fact is catching up with the EU, which is not the case for Bulgaria. Luckily, there are the EU Erasmus+ student exchange programs that allow students from both countries to spend a semester in the other. We need much more commitment on the part of the states, however, to encourage more people from both countries to travel, study, and maybe even do business together.

Přemysl Rosůlek: Thank you for your time. It was a pleasure for me.

Ruzha Smilova: The pleasure was mine!

Bibliography

- Katz, R. S., P. Mair. 1995. "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party." *Party Politics* 1 (1): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068895001001001>.
- Krastev, I. 2002. "The Balkans: Democracy without Choices." *Journal of Democracy* 13 (3): 39–53, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0046>.
- Mair, P. 2009. "Representative versus Responsible Government." *MPIfG Working Paper 09/8*.
- Mounk, Y. 2018. *The People vs. Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674984776>.
- Sandel, M. J. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Penguin UK.
- Smilova, R. 2014. "The Media in Bulgaria: Business Enterprises or PR Divisions of Business Groups?" Pp 175–187 in E. Psychogiopoulou (ed.). *Media Policies Revisited*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137337849_13.
- Smilova, R. 2017. "Populizam i ot Dalechavane na meritokratichnite eliti v liberalnite demokratsii." *Politicheski izsledvanija* 1–2: 26–41.
- Smilova, R. 2018. "Promoting 'Gender Ideology': Constitutional Court of Bulgaria Declares Istanbul Convention Unconstitutional." [online] *Oxford Human Rights Hub*, 22 August 2018 [retrieved 9. 6. 2022], <https://ohrh.law.ox.ac.uk/promoting-gender-ideology-constitutional-court-of-bulgaria-declares-istanbul-convention-unconstitutional/>.
- Smilova, R. 2020. "The Ideological Turn in Bulgarian Constitutional Discourse: The Rise against 'Genders.'" Pp 177–198 in A. Sajó, R. Uitz (eds.). *Critical Essays on Human Rights Criticism*. The Hague: Eleven Publishing International.

Přemysl Rosůlek
University of West Bohemia
rosulek@kap.zcu.cz