

WIM VAN MEURS

Radboud University Nijmegen

[w.v.meurs@let.ru.nl]

Peasant Parties in Eastern Europe and Their Populist Moment

Introduction: Approaches to Populism

In the study of populism as a political and societal phenomenon, historians tend to play second fiddle. The interdisciplinary field of populism studies encompasses political philosophers and sociologists, but political scientists set the tone. Typically, their comparative studies concern present-day populism in democratic systems, with a generic definition of the phenomenon as the stated key objective. In the communication between academic and public debates, the quest for a comprehensive definition is further complicated by the dual use of the term “populism” as both an analytical category and a discursive weapon. Political parties normally claim to be “popular” and it is their opponents who are being “populist” in their rhetoric and actions. Conversely, the parties accused of populism retort that the others are elitist, out of touch with the will of the common people and hence undemocratic.

Populism’s everyday pejorative connotations of manipulation, opportunism and political arson, nevertheless, echo in the academic use of the term. Even scholars who claim that despite all this, populism might act as a useful corrective mechanism within the democratic process, tend to label as “populist” only leaders and parties they dislike (Decker 2006). Nevertheless, the well-known definitions of contemporary populism by political scientists and philosophers such as Paul Taggart, Chantal Mouffe, Margaret Canovan and Ernesto Laclau feature more or less the same key elements: anti-elitism, the unity of the popular will, a political culture based on leadership and provocation as well as an agenda of socio-economic equality and justice (Taggart 2000; Canovan 2005; Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2005). Historians usually beg to differ with this political

science approach on two accounts. Firstly, in their mind the historical dimension reaches back further than the democratic deficit of the 1990s. Secondly, the simplicity of the populist-democratic dichotomy wrongly turns populism into an essential and eternal characteristic of some parties, while absolving other parties from any populist temptations (Van Meurs 2018).

Historians have grown more interested in the dynamics of populism (and democracy) over time, in different political contexts and historical eras. Political science studies are typically focused on the contemporary crisis of democracy since the nineties with its left- and right-wing extremist parties and the general call for referendums and more citizens' participation (Van Kessel 2015). The historical dimension in these numerous studies of today's populism is often limited to scant references to the exceptional populist rhetoric and discourses of totalitarian dictators such as Hitler, Stalin or Mussolini.

The most common representations of the historical *longue durée* concern the late-nineteenth-century People's Party in the US and the *narodniki* in czarist Russia (translated as "peopleism" or more commonly "populism" as "narod" meaning "people"). Thanks to the People's Party, colloquially known as the "populist party" at the time, even today the term "populism" has a much more positive connotation in the US than it has in Europe. Their defence of the interests of the common people against the political and business establishment lacked key characteristics such as a charismatic or authoritarian leadership and the assumption of the unity of the popular will (Goodwyn 1978). In the case of their contemporaries, the Russian *narodniki*, populist qualities were largely limited to the very name. The Petersburg establishment considered them terrorists and bomb throwers, whereas later communist historians scorned them for their anarchist, anti-Marxists teachings. These Russian urban intellectuals were determined to enlighten and mobilise the destitute peasant masses, recently freed from serfdom, to stand up for their interests. When the villagers proved to be unresponsive to the campaigns of the *Narodnaja volja* [People's will] and *Hoždenije v narod* [going to the people] movements, the populists became terrorists in the 1880s (Venturi 1983). However, comparing populism in a Russian political system, virtually without parliamentary representation and where any oppositional was likely to end up in Siberian exile, to a Western European polity with universal suffrage and ample political freedoms a hundred years later seems rather unproductive. Acknowledging the impossibility of a generic and ahistorical concept of populism, Laclau distinguishes around 1900 "agrarian" (i.e., American populists and Russian *narodniki*) from "political" populism a century later (Laclau 2005).

Hence, a realistic and productive comparison requires a context of universal suffrage and a reasonably free political system. Additionally, historians would prefer a more open and relational concept of populism in order to trace differences between polities and dynamics over time. The normative and binary definition implies that parties are either populists or democratic adversaries of populism. It also implies that parties or movements are *born* populist, are coherent in their populist views and are forever unable to shed their anti-establishment origins. To overcome these constraints, this paper appropriates Goodwyn's term of the "populist moment". In his forty years old study, this "moment" referred to farmers in the American South in the last quarter

of the nineteenth century who felt compelled to try and take their political fate in their own hands because of pressing socio-economic needs. Their sudden change of political tactics from loyalty to autonomous mobilisation is referred to as their “populist moment” (Goordwyn 1978).

In this chapter too, “populist moment” refers to a temporary phase of populist actions and claims from an otherwise mainstream political party. The corresponding definition of populism is a relative one and a performative one: *more* use of political *action* beyond the representative institutions and *forms* of action not used by *most* other political players in the same temporal and national context. The discursive claim to be the sole representative of unitary will of the people adds weight to the populism of a political player, but the other (action) dimension of effective mass mobilisation outside of the representative institutions should be taken into account too. Hence the American People’s Party was quite successful in mobilising its constituency, but it did so largely through parliamentary politics and quickly shed its origins as an extra-parliamentary protest movement. The *narodniki* were far less successful, but they used non-parliamentary strategies of mobilisation as no substantial democratic channels of representation existed.

Arguably, for the interwar period, the above open and relational definition of populism appears to include, albeit for different reasons, most mainstream parties and revolutionary outliers too. Apart from representing their constituencies in parliament, mainstream socialist, Christian and liberal parties were connected with an array of extra-parliamentary organisations, ranging from trade unions to sports and leisure or social security. These organisations, however, were complementary and not intended to facilitate regime change or a fundamental change of the rules of the parliamentary game. Fascist and communist revolutionaries, conversely, were excluded from the political system. Their claim to represent “the people” (be it the working class or the nation) was confrontational, its objective was regime change. Once in power, “populism” became quite meaningless, in absence of competition. A “populist moment” presupposes a party that purposively chose to temporarily ignore the conventions of parliamentary representation in order to change the rules of the game and return to normalcy next. The return signalled their fundamental dislike of the communists’ or fascists’ revolutionary strategies (Mazower 1998; Maier 1988).

As a multi-case pilot of this dynamic concept of populism and of its “populist moment”, this contribution looks at peasant parties in interwar Eastern Europe. In almost all East European countries a century ago, peasant parties could expect to prosper under universal suffrage (typically introduced at the end of the First World War) and become major players in parliament (if not the majoritarian party). Hence, for each of these parties “going populist”, and opting for extra-parliamentary action and mobilisation, was a conscious strategic choice which was not without risks. The study looks at three parties and the moments they crossed the parliamentary-populist divide (as well as their motives for doing so). This shift may occur in terms of discourse and rhetoric or in terms of forms and *loci* of political action. The three case studies will demonstrate that a discursive shift might occur without new forms of action and *vice versa*. Generally speaking, the case studies demonstrate that populism is not an inherent trait of a party or movement by identifying their “populist moments”.

Strictly speaking, under universal suffrage in the agrarian newly-independent states of Eastern Europe after the First World War, each and every political party had to be a “peasant party” in one way or another. Yet, even among denominational peasant parties and parties with a predominantly rural constituency in general, all ideologies were represented: conservatism, nationalism, fascism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism, communism as well as the more specific agrarianism or peasantry (Fischer-Galati 1967; Harre 2010; Trencsényi 2014). The present study has selected the largest denominational peasant party in each country. Each of these parties was a catch-all main-stream party, ideologically located at the crossroads of liberalism, socialism, anarchism and peasantry, with all the corresponding intra-party factionalism and strife. The selected parties are the Romanian National Peasant Party (PNȚ), the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS) and the Polish People’s Party (PSL-Piast). These were centrist parties (except for the BZNS) that preferred parliamentarism over revolution.

1. A Belated “Populist Moment”: Iuliu Maniu in Romania

The Romanian state created in 1918 was the result of much good fortune during the global military confrontation. Romania entered the war in 1916 on the side of the Entente and the Russian Revolution in 1917 forced its Eastern neighbour to sign a humiliating peace treaty. Eventually, Romania ended up acquiring all the territories it had claimed since the nineteenth century from its Hungarian, Austrian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Russian neighbours. Of its three main provinces, Moldavia and Walachia had long been part of the Ottoman Empire and their agricultural structure was characterised by large-landownership, a destitute population of landless villagers or smallholders and a low degree of rural modernisation. The largest pre-war peasant uprising in the East European region (outside of Russia) occurred in Moldavia in 1907 (Eidelberg 1978). The market rationalisation and increased exploitation of the large estates had similar dire consequences for the peasant population in the north-eastern part of Moldavia, a former Russian territory. Conversely, in the third province, the former Habsburg territory of Transylvania, even the smallholders were relatively well-off; estates were smaller and agricultural modernisation more gradual. The main grudge of the peasant party here was that the landowners (and the societal elites in general) were German or Hungarian, whereas the rural masses were Romanian; ethnic and socio-political cleavages coincided.

After the World War I, the merger of the regional peasant parties with their disparate traditions and local rural structures into one centralised national party began. The Transylvanian peasant party led by Iuliu Maniu had largely fulfilled its political agenda, once the land reform had ousted the non-Romanian landowners and once national unification of all Romanian territories had been accomplished. Its political competition with its main rival, the National-Liberal Party, mainly concerned access to power. Both parties agreed on most other political issues, safeguarding Romania’s sovereign statehood and the miraculously achieved maximum territorial extension was their shared priority. The peasant organisations in Moldavia and Walachia were traditionally far more radical in socio-economic terms. They had achieved a unified

state half a century earlier, but the situation of the common villagers had not improved despite land reforms and political promises.

Next to structural rural and agricultural realities, ideologies and political traditions played a major role in shaping the outlook of peasant parties in the various parts of the future greater Romanian state. In Transylvania, a relatively generous census system of suffrage had pre-existed for several decades. Considering the numeric predominance of the rural Romanian population, a further extension of suffrage was expected to increase the parliamentary influence of the Romanian parties. Apart from the ethnic dichotomy, the Romanian peasant leaders shared the relatively optimistic views of their colleagues from Vienna and Budapest on incremental modernisation of agriculture and a corresponding amelioration of village prosperity. Both political and socio-economic emancipation could allegedly be achieved *within* the system. Conversely, in the eastern provinces the political and economic dominance of the liberals and their entourage was oppressive.

One oddity of the post-war Romanian political system was the King's prerogative to replace the prime-minister whenever he saw fit. Next, the new government was expected to call for elections and always won the elections by a large margin, even if their opponents – before falling out of grace with the King – had won the previous elections (Dogan 1953; Maner 1997). The regional peasant parties in the eastern provinces, moreover, were dominated by ideologues who had spent their formative years in Russia; without any form of representative government or political freedoms. Their trains of thought (and action) were inspired by the Russian *narodniki* and by Marxism. Eventually, Maniu and his moderates from Transylvania gained the upper hand in the PNȚ. Marxists and anarchists such as Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and Constantin Stere retreated from the limelight or left the party altogether (Kitch 1975; Ornea 1989; Kitch 1977; Shafir 1984). The party was co-opted into the political establishment of the new state. In the party discourse and in its lower echelons, class struggle persisted as a world view, alternative to the leadership's belief in a unified (national) peasantry, encompassing both landless villagers, tenants and wealthy landowners (Savu 1976).

The political discourse of the party could hardly be labelled as “populist”: The peasant party claimed to represent the landless villagers as well as the new smallholders, prosperous tenants and rich owners of many acres of agricultural land, too. The image of idealised peasants being the true sons of the nation, toiling the (ancestral) land, being unpretentious and sage was part of the omnipresent national discourse, not specific to the peasant party. The element of emancipation and liberation of the one true people from economic exploitation and political manipulation is obviously missing from the PNȚ discourse, except for old-school radicals on the leftist margins of the party (Müller 2001; Harre 2009).

The liberal party and its leader Ion I. C. Brătianu managed to establish their political dominance under the new rules of universal suffrage introduced after the war. The second Brătianu government (1922-1926) was the first after the war to serve a full term¹. The PNL used the sympathy of the King to bend the electoral law in its

¹ Romania had witnessed no less than eight governments from 1918 until 1922 alone.

favour (in addition to the usual rigging of the actual elections and passing out favours during the campaign). In order to guarantee stable majority, the PNL initiated a law (inspired by Mussolini's electoral law) that gave a bonus of 50 per cent of the seats in parliament to the party with the largest number of votes in the elections. Thus, a 40 per cent plurality of votes was turned into a 70 per cent absolute majority of seats (Van Meurs 2013b). In Parliament, the leaders of the PNȚ and other parties protested vehemently in 1926. The PNL majority voted in favour and the King signed it into law. In retrospect, this would have been the occasion for the PNȚ to distance itself from the corrupt political system and take to the streets with their mass of rural voters. The historical fact is: they did not. The political process continued as before (Maner 1997; Scurtu 1994).

In 1928, when the PNȚ finally came to power for the next five years (with as many different governments and prime-ministers), they nevertheless failed to revoke the liberals' electoral law. Having gained the trust and even some sympathy from the King, they were asked to build a government and won the typical landslide in the subsequent elections. The electoral alliance led by the PNȚ won 348 out of 387 seats in parliament (324 for the PNȚ alone) – thanks to the 1926 law. Hence, as long as they considered themselves to profit from the crooked electoral system, the peasant leaders kept silent. And even when they were not, their protests remained within the boundaries of the system and its conventions. Eventually, in 1937 both the PNL (36.5 per cent) and the PNȚ (20.7 per cent) fell short of the 40 per cent threshold for the bonus seats. The result was a total breakdown of electoral democracy, although the fascist *Totul pentru Țară* party had won only 15.8 per cent of the vote.

The peasants' belated populist moment came in 1928. Having completed their multi-party, multi-regional merger and having side-lined or ousted the ideological hardliners within the party, the PNȚ took the lead. The liberals had won another major victory (318 out of 387 seats) in the Chamber of Deputies in the summer of 1927. Suddenly, the PNȚ leadership was ready to confront their political opponents (and the police), sending their followers to the streets in the capital city and major towns: demonstrations, strikes and mass meetings occurred throughout the country. Eventually, the King gave in and asked PNȚ leader Maniu to build a government (Hitchins 2004). At closer inspection, however, these actions, no matter how bold and new, would not qualify as populist in terms of the second dimension of the mobilising concepts and rhetoric. The rhetoric remained traditional-parliamentarian and as soon as the leadership had gained the avidly awaited position of power, they returned to Bucharest and political office within the system, leaving the villagers behind (Scurtu 1994).

At a much later stage, the peasant party of Maniu potentially had a second populist moment. The modest parliamentary discourse remained unchanged, but in 1937 the party leadership contemplated an electoral pact with the fascist party of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu. This party, called the Iron Guard, and its electoral front-organisation *Totul pentru Țară* had been populist both in rhetoric and action from the start (around 1930). Arguably, the reason why the state apparatus reacted with excessive repression and violence was the very fact that the fascists not only did reasonably well in the elections, but also purposively engaged with the (rural) populace outside

of the parliamentary institutions. Fascists held village gatherings rife with religious symbolism and rituals, helping the peasants harvesting or drilling wells. The state authorities and police did not want any of that. Many fascists were arrested, tortured or shot, although fascist terrorists killed several high-ranking politicians and police officers too. The fierce repression, however, predated the turn for the Iron Guard from “populist” mass party to terrorist vanguard. The incomplete pact between the PNT and their direct competitor for rural votes signified the despair of the established parties *within* the system rather than genuine like-mindedness in discourse or action. One year later, the king installed a royal dictatorship and banned all parties, starting his own populist program of mass mobilisation without representative institutions (Haynes 2007; Van Meurs 2010).

2. Without a “Populist Moment”: Wincenty Witos in Poland

The beginnings of the peasant movement in Poland were quite similar to those in Romania. Here too, after the war a new state was created out of territories that had belonged to three empires: Prussia to the west, the Habsburg Empire (Galicia) to the south and Russia to the east. Large estates and a corresponding backward agriculture and harsh living conditions in the villages existed in the Russian territories. The Prussian lands had their estates too, but agriculture had gradually been modernised to a substantial degree during the nineteenth century. In Galicia, a reasonable mix of larger estates and small farmers existed, with some modernisation and technical improvements. As factors determining the character and outlook of peasant parties, ideas and institutional traditions were as important as socio-economic circumstances (Leblang 1977). In that respect, the same lesson from Romania applies to Poland.

Prussia had known universal suffrage since the late nineteenth century and even though the powers of parliament were strictly limited, the contrast with Russia where serfdom was abolished in 1861 only and local parliaments (*zemstvo*) introduced the same year, could not have been sharper. Galicia sent its representatives, peasant leaders among them, to the *Reichsrat* [Imperial Council] in Vienna and by the end of the century, the local peasant activists had become accepted members of the *Landtag* [State Diet] in Lviv. Unlike their fellow countrymen under Russian rule, they had a reasonable political influence and, more importantly, expectations of further improvement over time (Himka 1988). Thus, the Polish representatives in Berlin and Vienna were likely to accept the political outlook and the legitimacy of the established institutions (Pajakowski 2007; Brock 1951). Conversely, for peasant leaders in the Russian territories, including the kingdom of Poland or Congress Poland (an autonomous Polish state in personal union with the Russian Empire), no meaningful venues of political representation existed. Their only option was revolution, as they were driven underground by the repressive czarist regime. They sympathised with the Marxist and anarchist ideas readily available in the Russian underground and exile (Doliesen 1995). The local priests, scribes, teachers, enlightened land-owners and physicians, who constituted the rural elite in all parts of pre-1918 Poland, defended the cause of the emancipation of the peasantry through the regional and central channels of political representation in the Austrian and Prussian case but radicalised in the Russian case.

The main difference between the Romanian and the Polish peasant movements consisted in the Poles' failure to copy the 1926 merger (at least until the creation of the People's Party (PL) in 1931). Although the history of Polish peasantism is also rife with split-offs, mergers, factional strife and the like, three sizable parties continued to exist until Marshall Piłsudski's 1926 coup. The PSL-Piast led by Wincenty Witos (three times prime minister of Poland between 1918 and 1926) gathered votes from all three historical parts of the Second Polish Republic and from all groups in rural society, Witos himself being native from Galicia and a former member of the *Reichsrat*. PSL-Piast became a mainstream party claiming to represent landless workers, tenants as subsistence farmers as well as well-off landowners. Unlike in the case of the Romanian PNȚ, its left flank was vulnerable. Communists and socialists were barely visible in the countryside in Romania and the peasant party was at least in name united there. PSL-Piast had to contend with two rivals on the left. The PSL-Lewica was short-lived and had little electoral success, but the PSL-Wyzwolenie was a significant rival. This radical party with a strong basis in the former Russian territories won votes among poor peasants and landless workers all over Poland. Socialists and communists, moreover, were active in the villages. Tomasz Dąbal, for instance, had been a communist involved in the famous but ill-fated 1918 mass uprising of peasants that led to the token Republic of Tarnobrzeg. After it had been squashed by the Polish authorities, he fled to Moscow to become a key figure in the Krestintern (Cimek 1993; Van Meurs 2017). The activities and mobilisation by Dąbal and others made the PSL-Piast much more anxious of leftist competition than the PNȚ-leadership had ever been. Consequently, the pressure to join forces with the political establishment and abide by the political rules of the Second Polish Republic increased.

The parties to the left of the PSL-Piast used populist slogans suggesting that they were the only true representatives of the "people" in a social rather than an ethnic sense. They also resorted to strikes, demonstrations and (sometimes violent) mass gatherings to state their case. Eventually, PSL-Wyzwolenie (temporarily) supported the 1926 coup by a leader (Piłsudski) who also claimed to represent the common people against the political establishment (Doliesen 1995). As a mainstream party with credible and substantial rivals on its left flank, the PSL-Piast and Witos himself could not make a populist claim to represent the true people, as their constituency was much broader in socio-economic terms. Hence, the leftist rivals compelled them to play by the rules of the Second Republic. In the Polish case, the internal conflicts over the concept of the people of the Romanian and Bulgarian peasant parties, were solved by creating several PSL parties, each with a regional core and a corresponding understanding of "the people".

3. A "Populist Moment" of Sorts: Aleksandar Stamboliyski in Bulgaria

The early (pre-1900) history of the Bulgarian peasant party was remarkably similar to the uniform blueprint for most of Eastern Europe. The state's increasing involvement in the social and economic life of the villagers created a first generation of modest intellectuals who took notice of the plight of the peasantry: priests, trained farmers,

teachers and municipal officials. In the Bulgarian state created in 1878, political corruption and structural economic problems combined with the frustration over the uncomplete abolition of serfdom stirred unrest in the countryside (Bell 1975).

From a comparative perspective, more than a handful of reasons existed for Bulgaria for *not* becoming the radical maverick among Eastern European peasant parties and, eventually, the only peasantist regime in Europe ever. For one, the relative reasonable plot size and the absence of large landholders' estates resulted in a rural situation that contrasted favourably to the one in neighbouring Romania (Moldavia and Wallachia in particular), despite the frustrations and hardship of the 1890s. Despite the linguistic and cultural proximity, the geographical distance to the agrarian anarchists in Russia (*narodniki*, Social-Revolutionaries) hampered the transfer of radical ideas and ideologues to Bulgaria. There are few counterparts to the Romanian hardliners Stere and Dobrogeanu-Gherea in the Bulgarian agrarian movement, Spiro Gulabchev among them (Dimou 2009; Bell 1975). Additionally, the first Bulgarian constitution (1879) had introduced universal suffrage (even though in practice the electoral weight of the peasantry – 80 per cent of the population – may have been similar to Romania's census system due to additional restrictions and modifications of the law).

These electoral, socio-economic and ideological arguments explain the moderation of the peasant movement in Bulgaria until the first decade of the twentieth century. The rise of Aleksandar Stamboliyski through the party ranks, however, completely change the outlook, discourse and strategy of the BZNS. His consolidation and centralisation of what used to be a motley crew of ideologues and practitioners quickly resulted in electoral successes. These results in turn strengthened his authority among the rank and file of the party. In a country where, quite atypically, the socialists and even the communists ("broad" and "narrow" socialists respectively in the political terminology of Sofia) competed with the BZNS in the countryside for the support and votes of the peasant masses, the agrarian party needed a clear and appealing profile. Arguably, before the war their competitors were both on their left and on their right in the political spectrum. Correspondingly, Stamboliyski's ideological ideas and political strategy shifted to the left, the more he realised that a radical outlook generated support. In the last pre-war elections, his party won more than 20 percent of the vote and almost a quarter of the seats in parliament (1913), second only to the liberals' electoral alliance.

World War I, however, was the decisive factor in the success and profile of the Agrarian Union in the vestiges of Bulgarian politics. Whereas the Great War had marked the apex of national (re)unification for Poland and Romania, for Bulgaria it signified the ruin of all national dreams, the loss of various territories and the bankruptcy of the (liberal) political establishment. The post-war political vacuum created new, unexpected opportunities for the BZNS and the broad and narrow socialists. Hence, party competition took place in the countryside and on the left half of the political spectrum. In 1919, communists and agrarians agreed on a coalition government, having won a landslide together in the parliamentary elections. The BZNS's 27.3 percent and the communists' 18.5 percent of the vote gave them 77 and 47 out of the 236 seats. In Stamboliyski's mind, however, the communists were rivals rather than allies and new elections in the next year gave his party a 38.6 percent plurality and enough seats to govern without coalition partner (Bell 1977). Due to

the desperate situation of most of the Bulgarian peasantry, their votes were easy to come by for any party offering radical solutions (be they socialist, communist or peasantist). The broad support for the BZNS in the countryside was more structural than Stamboliyski's extremist rule suggests (Jackson 1966; Crampton 2009).

Before the war, under Stamboliyski's guidance, the BZNS did not change its strategy much in terms of political action within and outside of parliament, but the party fundamentally changed its discourse and representative claim. The contrast between urban and rural combined with the superiority of the peasant and the countryside became the backbone of Stamboliyski's thinking. So much so that once he became Prime Minister, he allegedly moved his office to the outskirts of Sofia to be able to see the fields rather than the squalor and decadence of the city. In essence, to the new Bulgarian prime-minister, the peasant was not a citizen and voter like any other with a claim to determine politics based on sheer numbers. The peasant's close relation to the soil, his natural wisdom and honesty made him superior in a moral and political sense to others. Consequently, Bulgaria ought to become quite literally a "peasants' republic". Policies and socio-economic realities had to be changed radically and forcefully in their favour (Bell 1977: 55-84).

After the war, the political vacuum to the right of the BZNS created a window of opportunity to suit the action to the word. From 1920 onward, Stamboliyski installed an increasingly undemocratic regime based on terror and violence, imposing radical reforms of land ownership. The regime quickly antagonised not only the political and economic establishment, but also ever-larger parts of the tenants who had been relatively well-off before the agrarianists came to power and were therefore under general suspicion (Rankoff 1977; Bell 1977; Oren 1973).

Thus, the BZNS implemented the populist discourse of the tenths in the twenties. According to the ideological discourse of agrarian populism, a unity of the "true" people or nation was presupposed, combined with a vitriolic anti-urban anti-elitism. The injustice of the political and socio-economic inequality was the core message of the party. This form of populist rhetoric implied that the peasants were not equal but superior and held a claim to political power that cancelled out all other (democratic) claims. This line of reasoning was not unique to the Bulgarian peasant party, but in other peasant parties such radical ideas were championed by marginal figures and never reached beyond the stage of daydreaming. What made the Bulgarian case unique, is the implementation of peasants' ideology by the Stamboliyski regime from 1920 until 1923. Albeit in two stages, in the Bulgarian case a genuine "populist moment" occurred in both dimensions.

Conclusion

Populism is conceptualised here as a two-dimensional field of action and discourse. The three case studies of East European peasant parties with a high potential, if not propensity, for populism reveal interesting dynamics. In this field, the expression "populist moment" may refer to a shift either towards populist action (i.e. outside of the accepted political repertoire of parliamentary politics) or towards populist discourse (i.e. the claim to be the sole representative of the entire or the "true" people).

Interestingly, two out of three peasant parties (the Polish PSL being the exception) witnessed a “populist moment”. In the Romanian case, a brief moment of populist action was not accompanied by a corresponding shift towards a populist rhetoric. Having achieved its parliamentary objective – changing not the formal rules of the games, but at least the outcome – the PNȚ returned to the fold. The Bulgarian case demonstrates how a party with non-populist origins may transform into a populist party in discourse and in action. In the Bulgarian case, the shift toward populism in both dimensions did not occur simultaneously.

Ideologically and discursively, each peasant party was a heterogeneous amalgamate of anarchist, Marxist, socialist and liberal (and sometimes even conservative or nationalist) ideas. Most of the leaders of the established interwar parties were firmly committed to parliamentary democracy. Some Marxist revolutionaries in the margins framed the peasants’ struggle as class struggle and remained committed to a socialist revolution by workers and the “toilers of the land”. Marginalized in a similar way, anarchist and social-revolutionary thinkers in the peasant parties detested both communist revolutionary modernisation and capitalist modes of liberal democracy. Resorting to extra-parliamentary mass mobilisation and other, sometimes violent, forms of political action was quite rare in these parties and always limited in time – a genuine moment of populist action. Similarly, populist discourses demonstrated more continuity and persistence, but always on the margins of the party once universal suffrage had been introduced.

The Romanian party PNȚ is a perfect case in point. The party itself was a fusion of several regional peasant parties. The variation in regional historical tradition and in ideological outlook combined with the substantial socio-economic disparities between the regions resulted in a heterogeneous national peasant party. With the completion of the problematic merger (with a corresponding number of split-offs) in 1926, the radical factions were effectively marginalised in what had become an established “bourgeois” party, always second to the liberals in national elections. In 1928, after the party had left out several earlier occasions and good reasons to take a more militant and “populist” stance, its leaders mobilised the peasantry. A series of protests, strikes and demonstrations induced the king to nominate PNȚ leader Iuliu Maniu as Prime Minister, resulting in seven PNȚ governments in five years. After these rather unsuccessful years in power, the peasant party never acted out in a populist manner again as its “pact” with the fascists of the Iron Guard in 1937 was more of a conspiracy than an act of popular mobilisation.

The Polish peasant party bore an important similarity with its Romanian counterpart. The PSL was a merger of regional parties from Prussian, Austrian and Russian territories with widely different political contexts and agricultural histories. Again, radicals and mavericks quickly left the party, creating their own hapless political clubs, or soldiered on in the margins. In the independent reunited Polish state, however, the party fell apart in a conservative party (PSL-Piast) and two radical alternatives (PSL-Lewica and PSL-Wyzwolenie). PSL-Piast participated in several governments and had several Prime Ministers in its ranks prior to the 1926 coup by Marshal Józef Piłsudski. The PSL-Piast in the interwar period had no “populist moment” to speak of. It had its share of power prior to the coup, became an accepted

and contented political power sharer. Piłsudski's nationalist agenda thereafter eclipsed any populist temptations by the peasant party.

The Bulgarian BZNS and its wayward leader Aleksandar Stamboliyski constituted an extreme case in more than one respect. It too had grown out of a nondescript leftist club around the turn of the century to become the only peasantist one-party regime ever in Europe (1920-1923), after Bulgaria's defeat in the Second Balkan War and World War I. The Bulgarian Agrarian National Union's (BZNS) discourse shaped by Stamboliyski had been radical and populist since the eve of the war. Unlike the other peasant parties, the Bulgarians claimed to be the sole representatives of the poor peasants, who were the only true citizens and nationals. While their Croatian and Polish counterparts had been to a large extent an urban party with a much wider constituency, Stamboliyski's anti-urban discourse was unknown among other parties, except for some marginal figures in the Romanian party (and more akin to the Romanian fascists). Despite the continuity of a populist discourse, during his increasingly radical and repressive regime, Stamboliyski believed in ruling for the peasants, but not in being ruled by them. Imposing political measures that were considered to correspond to the true interests of the peasantry did not require mass mobilisation, as the BZNS held all political and military means of power projection for these three years.

In sum, the case studies of peasant parties in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria have been used to try out three approaches to the elusive phenomenon of populism. Firstly, analysing populism through interwar East European peasant parties adds a *historical* dimension, whereas most populism studies focus on the recent decades of a national and European democratic deficit. From the perspective of current populism, add-on references to historical cases (American and Russian late-nineteenth-century populists) are nominal or focus exclusively on their ideological claims. Secondly, therefore, the case studies analyse both political rhetoric *and* political action outside of the representative institutions. Finally, the concept of a "populist moment" hypothesizes populism as a *temporary* state of affairs rather than as an essentialist and permanent characteristic of a party or movement.

The historical context of the case studies reveals that socio-economic realities of the peasants represented by these parties is but one explanatory factor. Populist rhetoric and the claim to a more than equal representation of the peasantry as the true "people" to the exclusion of all others (e.g. bourgeois, city-dwellers, industrial workers) is connected to the respective national history of political ideas (and transnational transfers) rather than to objective realities. Key to explaining populist moments, however, is the party-political landscape at a specific moment in time. Quite surprisingly, some parties with a consistent populist rhetoric (Bulgaria) never resorted to populist action, whereas others (Romania) had their moment of populism without a significant shift in rhetoric. The third case (Poland) adds even more variation to the field: neither rhetoric nor action. This exercise has not made populism less illusive, but at least the concept has been applied to historical cases in a meaningful way.

Bibliographic References

- Bell John Douglas, *Peasants in Power. Alexander Stamboliski and the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, 1899-1923*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Bell John Douglas, "The Genesis of Agrarianism in Bulgaria", *Balkan Studies*, 1975, vol. 16, n° 2, pp. 73-92.
- Biondich Mark, *Stjepan Radić, the Croat Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904-1928*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Brock Peter, "Boleslaw Wyslouch: Founder of the Polish Peasant Party", *Slavonic and East European Review*, 1951, n° 30, pp. 139-163.
- Brucciani Giacomo, "Man, Society, and History in Alexander Stambolijski's Political Philosophy", *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 2004, n° 32, pp. 161-186.
- Canovan Margaret, *The People*, Cambridge: Polity, 2005.
- Cimek Henryk, *Tomasz Dąbal: 1890-1937*, Warsaw: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1993.
- Crampton Richard J., *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Crampton Richard J., *Aleksandŭr Stambolijski*, London: Haus Publishing, 2009.
- Decker Frank, "Die populistische Herausforderung. Theoretische und ländervergleichende Perspektiven", in Decker D. (ed.), *Populismus in Europa*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2006, pp. 9-32.
- Dimou Augusta, *Entangled Paths towards Modernity: Contextualizing Socialism and Nationalism in the Balkans*, Budapest/New York: Central European University Press, 2009.
- Djokić Dejan, *Elusive Compromise. A History of Interwar Yugoslavia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Dogan Mattei, "L'origine sociale du personnel parlementaire", *Revue de l'Institut de Sociologie*, 1953, n° 26, pp. 1-23.
- Doliesen Gerhard, *Die polnische Bauernpartei 'Wyzwolenie' in den Jahren 1918-1926*, Marburg/Lahn: Verlag Herder-Institut, 1995.
- Eidelberg Philip Gabriel, *The Great Rumanian Peasant Revolt of 1907*, Leiden: Brill, 1974.
- Fischer-Galati Stephan, "Peasantism in Interwar Eastern Europe", *Balkan Studies*, 1967, vol. 8, n° 1, pp. 103-114.
- Giurescu Dinu C., *Illustrierte Geschichte des rumänischen Volkes*, Bucharest: Editura Sport-Turism, 1982.
- Gollwitzer Heinz (ed.), *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart; New York: Fischer, 1977.
- Goodwyn Lawrence, *The Populist Moment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Harre Angela, *Wege in die Moderne. Entwicklungsstrategien rumänischer Ökonomen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2009.
- Harre Angela, "Demokratische Alternativen und autoritäre Verführungen. Der ostmitteleuropäische Agrarismus im Wechselspiel zwischen Ideologie und Politik", in Helga Schultz and Angela Harre (eds), *Bauerngesellschaften auf dem Weg in die Moderne*, Göttingen: Otto Harrassowitz, 2010, pp. 25-40.
- Haynes Rebecca Ann, "Reluctant Allies? Iuliu Maniu and Corneliu Zelea Codreanu against King Carol II of Romania", *Slavonic and East European Review*, 2007, vol. 85, n° 1, pp. 105-134.
- Himka John-Paul, *Galician Villagers and the Ukrainian National Movement in the Nineteenth Century*, London-New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Hitchins Keith, *România, 1866-1947*, Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004.
- Jackson George D. Jr., *Comintern and Peasant in East Europe, 1919-1930*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.

- Kitch Michael, "Constantin Dobrogeanu-Ghere and Rumanian Marxism", *Slavonic and East European Review*, 1977, n° 55, pp. 65-89.
- Kitch Michael, "Constantin Stere and Rumanian Populism", *Slavonic and East European Review*, 1975, n° 53, pp. 248-271.
- Laclau Ernesto, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005.
- Leblang Stanislaw, "Polnische Bauernparteien", in Heinz Gollwitzer (ed.), *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart-New York: Fischer, 1977, pp. 271-322.
- Maier Charles S., *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.
- Maner Hans-Christian, *Parlamentarismus in Rumänien (1930-1940): Demokratie im autoritären Umfeld*, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1997.
- Mazower Mark, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Mouffe Chantal, *On the Political*, London: McGraw Hill Professional, 2005.
- Müller Dietmar, *Agrarpopulismus in Rumänien. Programmatik und Regierungspraxis der Bauernpartei und der Nationalbäuerlichen Partei Rumäniens in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, Bonn: Gardez!, 2001.
- Oren Nissan, *Revolution Administered: Agrarianism and Communism in Bulgaria*, Washington DC: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973.
- Ornea Zigu, *Viața lui C. Stere*, Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1989, vol. 2.
- Pajakowski Philip, "History, the Peasantry, and the Polish Nation in the Thought of Michal Bobrzyński", *Nationalities Papers*, 2007, n° 26, pp. 249-264.
- Rankoff Iwan, "Bauerndemokratie in Bulgarien", in Heinz Gollwitzer (ed.), *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart-New York: Fischer, 1977, pp. 466-506.
- Savu Alexandru Gh., *Sistemul partidelor politice din România, 1919-1940*, Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1976.
- Scurtu Ioan, *Istoria Partidului Țărănesc*, Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1994.
- Shafir Michael, "'Romania's Marx' and the National Question: Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea", *History of Political Thought*, 1984, vol. 5, pp. 295-314.
- Taggart Paul A., *Populism*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000.
- Trencsényi Balázs, "Transcending Modernity: Agrarian Populist Visions of Collective Regeneration in Interwar East Central Europe", in Diana Mishkova, Balázs Trencsényi and Marja Jalava (eds), *Regimes of Historicity in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890-1945*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 119-145.
- Van Kessel Stijn, *Populist Parties in Europe. Agents of Discontent?*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Van Meurs Wim, "Demokratie oder Sozialismus? Bauernparteien in Südosteuropa um die Jahrhundertwende als Träger der Demokratisierung. Eine Skizze", *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 2013a, vol. 53, pp. 93-112.
- Van Meurs Wim, "Subversive Movements in the Political Arena", in Wim Van Meurs and Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (eds), *Ottomans into Europeans*, London: Hurst, 2010, pp. 75-110.
- Van Meurs Wim, "The Burden of Universal Suffrage and Parliamentary Democracy in (Southeastern) Europe", in Sabine Rutar (ed.), *Beyond the Balkans. Towards an Inclusive History of the Southeastern Europe*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2013b, pp. 161-180.
- Van Meurs Wim, "The Red Peasant International", in Liesbeth van de Grint and Amalia Ribi Forclaz (eds), *Governing the Rural in Interwar Europe*, London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 259-279.
- Van Meurs Wim, Morozova Olga, "Populism in Ukraine's Revolutions", in Sheyla Moroni and Chiara Chini (eds), *Populism. A Historiographic Category*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018, pp. 151-162.
- Venturi Franco, *Roots of Revolution. A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Wim van MEURS

Radboud University, Nijmegen

Peasant Parties in Eastern Europe and Their Populist Moment

This article examines the actions and discourses of the main peasant parties and movements in Romania, Poland and Bulgaria during the inter-war period. Ideologically and discursively, peasant parties were a heterogeneous amalgamate of anarchist, Marxist, socialist and liberal (and sometimes even conservative or nationalist) ideas. In defining the populism as a repertoire of actions and/or discourses, rather than the unchanging essence of a party, it shows that the three agrarian parties have known a “populist moment”, i.e. temporarily taking recourse to claims of representing “the people” and extra-parliamentary action. While the Bulgarian peasant party never resorted to populist actions, the Romanian agrarian party had its moment of populism without a significant shift in rhetoric and the Polish peasant party never resorted to populism neither in either rhetoric or actions.

Keywords: democracy, populism, Eastern Europe, inter-war period, peasant parties.

Partis paysans en Europe de l'Est et leur « moment populiste »

Cet article étudie les actions et les discours des principaux partis et mouvements paysans en Roumanie, en Pologne et en Bulgarie dans l'entre-deux-guerres. Idéologiquement et discursivement, ces partis constituaient un amalgame hétérogène d'idées anarchistes, marxistes, socialistes et libérales et parfois même conservatrices ou nationalistes. En définissant le populisme comme un répertoire d'actions et / ou de discours plutôt que comme une essence immuable d'un parti, il montre que les trois partis agraires ont connu un « moment populiste », c'est-à-dire qu'ils ont temporairement prétendu représenter le « peuple » et ont entrepris des actions extraparlémentaires. Alors que le parti paysan bulgare n'a jamais eu recours à des actions populistes, le parti agraire roumain a connu son moment populiste sans modifier de manière significative sa rhétorique et le parti paysan polonais n'a jamais eu recours au populisme ni dans sa rhétorique ni dans ses actions.

Mots-clés : démocratie, populisme, Europe centrale et orientale, entre-deux-guerres, partis paysans.