

MAPPING POLITICAL POPULISM IN THE EUROPEAN POST-TRANSITIONAL PERIPHERY

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Abstract

This article comparatively analyzes the manifestations and various factors of political populism in the European post-transitional periphery. The main difficulty in mapping political populism in the European post-transitional periphery and defining populist parties most accurately is that, unlike most political forces in developed democracies, such parties do not belong to traditional parties. Moreover, their ideology combines the positions of both right and left parties, which makes it extremely difficult to place them on the classical right-left scale of the party spectrum. The political agenda of the populist parties of the European post-transition peripheral countries has a different content, but it usually comes down to updating issues that are hushed up by the political establishment: protecting national and cultural identity, taking tough measures aimed at combating corruption and crime, protecting traditional family values, and even harsh criticism of the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU and their institutions. A distinctive feature of the populist forces was also that in their majority they called for the protection of the rights and interests of ordinary people and the wider use of the instruments of direct democracy, and thus directly opposed one of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, taking into account the opinion of the minority.

The article analyzes the emergence of a populist environment, where the responsibility, trust and dignity of politicians are distorted, which in turn leads to a crisis of understanding and civiarchic culture. The influence of populist parties has grown and most European post-transitional peripheral countries have at least one successful populist party, and populists are among the most influential parties. It is noteworthy that civil society organizations have identified the activities of populist leaders and their parties as the main threat facing the Eastern Partnership countries. Using populist technologies, mainly in the context of an election campaign, leaders and their political groups seek to manipulate public opinion and change the alignment of political parties in the European post-transitional periphery.

Keywords: *European periphery, illiberal democracy, Eastern Partnership, Russian hegemony, European integration, Euro-Atlantic integration.*

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Introduction:

The successes of populist forces in the European peripheries of the post-Soviet states are predominantly local in nature, since this is mainly due to the weakness of political institutions, the multi-party system, civil society organizations (CSOs), social media, civic culture, etc. Illiberal democracy, consolidated authoritarian regimes, and populist electoral successes have given rise to a public discourse about the root causes of this phenomenon and the factors that explain differences in the level of popularity of populist leaders and groups in different political parties and movements that influence support for populists. With the development of democracy and CSOs in the European peripheral countries, public opinion acquires new opportunities and becomes a special tool for regulating political relations. The possibilities of its expression and transmission to the highest levels of power increase with the development of social networks and the media, which enhances its influence on the political sphere and stimulates the development of democracy.

The study of the history of populist political parties in the EaP countries and Russia will allow not only to analyze the various factors that influenced the electoral support of populists in each of the countries, but also to compare the impact of these factors in these states. The main difficulty in finding the most accurate definition of populist parties in European peripheral and post-peripheral countries is that, unlike most political forces in developed democratic systems of EU member states, such parties do not belong to European traditional party structures and ideologies. Moreover, their ideologies and values combine many contradictions and distorted positions inherent in both right-wing and left-wing parties, which makes it extremely difficult to group them on the classical scale of the party spectrum.

Within the framework of this chapter, the identifying the factors that influenced the electoral activity of populist parties in the European peripheral and post-peripheral countries is solved through a comparative study of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) mechanism. Multilevel cooperation within the framework of the EaP is carried out in the political, social and economic spheres, which determined the EU's relations with the countries of the European peripheral countries since 2008-2009. As part of the analysis of the EU Agreements with Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia, areas of relations will be identified and an assessment will be given, on the one hand, of the effectiveness of ongoing programs on the dynamics of statehood and the evolution of nation and state building, the quality of democracy, political parties, CSOs, social networks and movements, and on the other hand, at the level of populist rhetoric of political actors.

The Leap from Post-Soviet Sovereignty to a European Transit Periphery

The agenda of populist parties in the European peripheral and post-peripheral countries has a different content and boiled down to popularizing such issues that are hushed up by the political establishment: the protection of national, religious and cultural identity, the adoption of tough measures aimed at combating political corruption and crime, the protection of traditional family values, the maximum restriction of gender policy, the

tightening of the policy of LGTB groups, sharp criticism of public institutions. A distinctive feature of the populist forces was also that in their majority they called for the protection of the rights and interests of ordinary people and the wider use of the tools of direct democracy, and thus directly opposed one of the fundamental principles of Western liberal democracy, that is, taking into account the opinion of the minority (Arato and Cohen 2021; Arditì 2005).

The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were marked by significant structural changes in the system of international relations. The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and EaP was understood by the political elites of the countries of the post-Soviet countries as an opportunity to return to Europe from the post-totalitarian system, the center of which was Russia (Breyfogle, Schrader and Sunderland 2007). The enlargement of the EU in 2004 and in 2007 once again demonstrated the attractiveness of the political, social and economic model embodied by the European Community for the states of Central and Eastern Europe. The mechanisms of enlargement, neighborhood and partnership brought the EU geographically closer to Russia, which lays claim to its special role in the new world order. Between them are countries that have long been part of the Soviet Union and belong to Europe. In the conditions of difficult economic, political and social transformations in the post-Soviet countries, as well as their growing interaction with the EU, the European model is of interest to them (Berend 2020; Kim 2021). The common historical past is a factor both bringing together and repelling the European peripheral countries from Russia, and close economic ties with it in the conditions of the raw material nature of the Russian economy do not contribute to the successful social and economic transformation of the countries neighboring Russia.

A new alignment of geopolitical forces in which the role of centers of gravity will be played not only by Western European countries, but also by peripheral countries and regions close to this center (Kinsella 2012; Klobucka 1997; Krekó 2021). In the context of the deepening process of globalization and Euro-Atlantic integration, the geopolitical aspirations of many developed modern states, to a certain extent, are intensifying. In this regard, some actors of international relations are purposefully expanding their influence on various states of the post-Soviet space, given their geopolitical and geostrategic significance. It is quite obvious that the post-Soviet sovereign states, regardless of their geographical location and level of development, always need external assistance and cooperation with other countries (Di Nucci 2021).

The transformation of the geopolitical and regional stability of the post-Soviet countries, the political delayed consequences of the collapse of the totalitarian political system of the Soviet Union are observed even 30 years later. For several decades, the post-Soviet sovereign states, in opposition to Russian hegemony, have tried to strengthen their bilateral relations with the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Turkey, and actively participate in the UN, NATO, OSCE, Council of Europe, EU and other international and regional organizations.

The hardest thing was and is for those states that took real steps towards the democratization of the political regime, European and Euro-Atlantic integration, thereby planning to become full members of the EU and NATO in the near future. Therefore, the European integration of the post-Soviet countries has become for the Russian political

elite as one of the indicators of the challenge of global political and economic processes. The aspirations of geopolitical actors and small states towards the EU led to the fact that European integration went far beyond Europe and gave rise to an integration core of different power, influencing not only the countries of the European periphery, but also North and Latin America, East and South Asia (Kim 2021).

The European trend requires a global understanding, which is impossible without a comparison of the integration cores and processes in order to identify their particular features and general patterns. Without a comparative study of such similarities and differences, it is impossible to evaluate the stability of the Newly Independent States (NIS) and the effectiveness of the regional order of the European periphery (Huber and Schimpf 2017). The integration and enlargement of the EU, as a result of which post-Soviet and post-communist countries entered the EU, brought its borders closer to the to the Russian Federation. The democratic dimension of the EU enlargement policy has determined the new priorities of the EU's Eastern policy in the form of a belt of neighborhood with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova¹.

The EU uses all the levers of soft power available to it to attract the six post-Soviet EaP countries into its sphere of influence and oust Russia from this region. Russia is trying to resist these EU efforts and, in opposition to the EaP program, is actively developing Eurasian integration projects. In 2014, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia signed Association Agreements (AA), as well as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with the EU².

The AA/DCFTA with the EU for Russia poses a threat to the interests of the Customs Union and the free trade area within the CIS, and warns of a possible change in the trade regime with the EU's peripheral countries. An essential part of the AA/DCFTA is the commitment to carry out political and economic reforms, in particular to increase the transparency of the economy, introduce a clear mechanism for holding competitions for government orders, take measures against monopoly and corruption in the economy, and approve European banking standards. The result of the transformations should be bringing the political and economic environment of the three states closer to European norms and eliminating the most obvious flaws in the existing political and economic

¹ Delegation of the EU to Georgia. 2021. "Georgia and the EU." Accessed July 10, 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/49070/georgia-and-eu_en; Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Moldova. 2021. "The Republic of Moldova and the EU." Accessed July 10, 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/moldova/1538/republic-moldova-and-eu_en; Delegation of the EU to Ukraine. 2021. "Ukraine and the EU." Accessed July 10, 2022. https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/1937/ukraine-and-eu_en.

² EUR-Lex. 2014a. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Ukraine, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union* L161/3: 3-2137. Accessed July 10, 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/295/oj; EUR-Lex. 2014b. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union* L261/1, 57: 4-742. Accessed July 10, 2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2014:261:FULL&from=EN>; EUR-Lex. 2014c. "Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Moldova, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union* L260/4: 4-738. Accessed July 10, 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/492/oj.

systems. Despite the fact that Armenia is the most important strategic ally of Russia. The development of close cooperation with Armenia is the most important priority of Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space, especially in light of the deterioration of relations with Georgia during the presidency of Mikhail Saakashvili and Ukraine since 2014. In 2017, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between Armenia and the EU was signed³. Although Armenia made its so-called 'integration turn' in favor of cooperation with Russia back in 2013, refusing to sign the AA with the EU, the further development of relations between the EU and Armenia deserves the closest attention from all interested parties, including Russia.

Given the complexity of sustainable European integration, frozen conflicts and conditions of neither war nor peace, the EU is also committed to promoting the peaceful resolution of ethno-political conflicts, in connection with which the commitment of the EU to support the efforts and approaches of the UN, OSCE, Council of Europe and NATO is confirmed. These mechanisms for delineating its preferred countries bring the EU's multilateral and bilateral relations with Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova to a new level, regulating dialogue in both political and economic spheres. The effective implementation of these agreements will bring tangible results to the citizens of the European periphery countries, contributing to the strengthening of democracy, political, economic and social stability through large-scale reforms (Lane 2012), and over time having a positive impact on the quality of life of citizens (Gabrisch, Orłowski and Pusch 2012).

The situation is different for the two European peripheral countries, since Azerbaijan and Belarus are fundamentally different in their national models of European and Eurasian integration. If Azerbaijan distances itself from European and Eurasian integration, and seeks to pursue an independent policy in the post-Soviet space, aimed at developing regional relations with Turkey and sovereign interests. The EaP Platform on energy security is a key place in the cooperation between Azerbaijan and the EU, aimed at the joint development of economic strategy and other issues between the EU and its eastern neighbors. By this, Azerbaijan considers its importance for the energy security of the EU and its role in the Southern Gas Corridor, having signed contracts for the extraction and transportation of gas to European markets.

The growing geopolitical turbulence associated with the intensified confrontation between Russia and Western countries has created new circumstances that have significantly influenced the strategy of European integration of Belarus since 2014. Although a number of unifying organizations have been created in the post-Soviet space over the past few years under the hegemony of Russia, it is the Russian-Belarusian integration relations that have received the greatest development. For the political elite of Belarus, it has become important to implement strategic tasks within the framework of the Russian-Belarusian integration and the Union State of Belarus and Russia. Thus, the consolidated authoritarian regimes in Belarus and Azerbaijan, contrary to their

³ EUR-Lex. 2018. "Comprehensive and enhanced Partnership Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Armenia, of the other part." *Official Journal of the European Union* L 23, 26.1.2018: 4-466. Accessed August 8, 2022. http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2018/104/oj.

European integration obligations as European peripheral countries, made integration with Russia and Turkey their strategic orientation in their foreign policy.

Sources and dimension of political populism

In the conditions of erosion of liberalism and democracy in the post-Soviet countries, when political parties are in the making and do not represent a number of electoral groups, and their party programs practically copy each other, new political groups constantly appear that proclaim themselves the so-called true voice of the people. Some fertile soil is needed for populist leaders and groups to emerge. In the post-Soviet space, democratization is accompanied by strong populist elements, and that every time the government and parliament do not maintain a mechanism for dialogue with CSOs, when a structural contradiction forms in political discourse, populist elements are strengthened, ideologized combinations arise, and corresponding political actors (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Heinisch, Massetti, and Mazzoleni 2020). After a comparative analysis of the history of political populism in the European peripheral post-Soviet countries, three waves can be distinguished in its development, drawing a clear line between spontaneous nationwide movements and organizations of the late 1980s and early 1990s (the first wave), the so-called ‘privatization groups’ and new political parties liberal reforms that achieved limited success in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the countries of the South Caucasus in the 1990s (second wave), and the actual populist leaders and their parties that entered the political arena in the 2000s (third wave). This does not apply to the Baltic countries, since, unlike other post-Soviet states that later joined the CIS and retained their overall economic, social and political orientation towards Russia, the Baltic countries immediately declared their goal of integration into Western military, political and economic structures.

The entry of the Baltic States into the main Euro-Atlantic integration structures of the EU and NATO in 2004, that is, the implementation of the key foreign policy task for the previous decade, the symbol of which was the slogan ‘return to Europe’ (Graney 2019: 171-200). This put before the political elites and parliamentary parties the question of finding new goals in the field of European foreign policy, becoming the most important factor of legitimation in their domestic and foreign policies.

Due to the high geopoliticization of European integration, the tendency to perceive the activity of European peripheral countries through the prism of a balance of interests in areas subject to the influence of major players in world politics has intensified. Under these conditions, the paradigm in which small and medium-sized states are unable to influence the world order due to incomparable resource potential has undergone natural transformations. The European peripheral countries, having found themselves in the epicenter of geopolitical confrontation, began to take into account the nature and state of geopolitical processes more fully in order to protect national interests. It became possible to talk about the relevance of developing a geostrategy for European peripheral countries as an auxiliary tool in building foreign policy in the geopolitical environment (Gabrish, Orłowski and Toralf 2012).

Populism is a threat to the democratization of the political institutions, cultures, values and norms of the European peripheral countries, which become tools for populist leaders, groups and parties to limit or freeze liberal and democratic processes (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016; Heinisch, Massetti, and Mazzoleni 2020). One of the main challenges associated with political populism arises from attempts to define what is the people that populists claim to represent. As a result, some significant items were included in the party programs, and groups arose that were dissatisfied with such a universalist approach. It is they who become the target audience of populists in the post-Soviet space (Huber and Schimpf 2017).

Political populists actually express only the demands of narrow groups, although they represent them as the ‘whole people’. In this way they construct a single, homogeneous people with a single set of requirements. In order to construct it, it must be somehow marked, limited, and this is usually done through negative identification, that is, pointing out some vulnerable groups as destroyers of unity (strategy ‘we are not them’).

In fact, a comparative study of the phenomenon of the popularity of populist parties in post-Soviet countries is possible through the study of the institutional experience of the West European states of the party and electoral systems, the characteristics of the populist party itself and its leader, and the interaction of the populist party with other political forces. In this context, it is possible to identify features that examine populist groups and parties through the prism of the evolution of the multi-party system (Van Herpen 2021; Vorländer 2019). Since it is obvious that the key influence on voting for populist parties is provided by institutional factors, as well as the characteristics of the populist leader and group itself.

In modern European peripheral political life, there is a common denominator, which is the populist core, consisting of antagonistic relations between the ‘good (clean) people’ and the ‘bad (corrupt) elite’. An aspect of populism is the opposition of ‘the people’ to the imaginary ‘other’. This ‘other’ may include individual representatives of power or the entire political elite, the top of a financial corporation or business, but also immigrants, economic refugees. Sometimes this ‘other’ turns out to be the starting point for the construction of ‘the people’: ‘the people’ is defined, first of all, through the denial of what it is not.

Playing on the opposition of ‘the people’ and ‘others’ is the foundation of European peripheral countries populism. In the ideological dimension, populism protects virtuous and equal people from various elites and dangerous ‘others’, who in turn can deprive (or try to deprive) a sovereign people of civilized and political development, political rights, values, voice.

The European peripheral countries populists embrace the ideas and mentality of the people, identifying themselves with them. Populist groups and leaders do not represent the interests of the people, but consider themselves an integral part of them, that is, they are the people. For their part, people welcome the populist leader as their own, but at the same time consider him better than themselves, and recognize that he is endowed with often allegedly charismatic qualities that give the right to rule (Stengel, MacDonald and Nabers 2019).

The strategic importance of populism in the European peripheral political process can be revealed through the concept of a ‘median voter’, that is, an average voter who does

not belong only to the right or left spectrum of political ideology, and the following statements are proved (Schwörer 2021). *First*, politics will be populist when the likelihood of a politician and leader being re-elected is high, since in this case both a moderate and a right-wing politician will try to shape the electorate by choosing a left-wing and conservative political course. *Secondly*, populist politics is also more likely when the politician and leader is truly a conservative, appealing to the already established traditions and values of the potential electorate. *Thirdly*, a politician and leader will use populism when there is a high probability that he is corrupt, for example, by the political elite. *Finally*, populist politics are most likely when there is a high polarization of society, which means a larger gap between the median voter point and the moderate politician on the one hand, and right-wing politics on the other. In other words, populist politics signals the choice of a strategy in which the candidate will build an election campaign in accordance with the interests of the median voter.

The instrumental nature of European peripheral populism causes an appeal to the values and traditions of the masses, language simplification, anti-elitist and people-centric demagoguery, that is, populism is one of the driving forces for the formation of electoral behavior of voters (Gregor 2021). Thus, populist rhetoric includes technological operations (language, image, events) to influence the electoral process. On the one hand, electoral behavior is a system of interrelated reactions, actions or inactions of citizens carried out in order to adapt to the conditions for holding political elections, on the other hand, electoral behavior is a set of objectively determined and subjectively motivated actions of voters who exercise their right to choose in electoral practice, their internal attitudes, their own understanding of the pre-election situation. The objective factors are age, social origin, status, education, domestic and foreign policy, and the subjective factors are the individual psychological qualities of the voter, his upbringing, culture, the impact of social networks and the media, the specifics of the influence of political groups and leaders. In this context, post-Soviet electoral preferences can be defined through the motivational component of the electorate, which consists of three elements: emotional, rational and evaluative. The emotional element is characterized by the voters' perception of the ways in which candidates behave and communicate. In turn, the rational component is based on the expectation of certain behavior from the candidate based on knowledge of the program and the strategy that he represents. As for the evaluative element, it includes the opinion of the electorate about the significant qualities of a political figure. In real political practice, the motivation for electoral choice is a combination of the above elements in various proportions.

Given the heterogeneity and discontinuity of the political space of the European peripheral countries, the use of populist approaches in modern transformational societies is impossible, because when studying electoral processes, one should take into account the specifics of the historical development of these countries, which is inextricably linked with ethnic, cultural and territorial communities that stand out for their individuality, having their own social, economic and cultural identity, regional identity. Electoral orientations are subjective-objective in nature, indicating that the political preferences of the population are objective and stable, while there is an impact on them from party candidates, groups and leaders (Kaltwasser and Zanotti 2021).

The discourse about the preferences of the European peripheral countries of the electorate, it is obvious that electoral behavior is based not only on the social and economic basis, but also on the value and cultural paradigm of transit communities. That is, the electoral preferences of the voters of these countries determine the cultural archetype that exists in the political practice of their state. Thus, in the electoral political space of the European peripheral countries, there are the following types of electoral behavior: patriarchal, traditional, clientele, protest and marginal. It should be noted that the electoral preferences of citizens of European peripheral countries are determined by a combination of objective and subjective factors with a predominance of the irrational principle. Through the articulation of populist rhetoric and demagoguery in their programs, the creation of a populist image and behavior, parties and politicians can manipulate political expectations, and subsequently electoral preferences, both at the national and regional levels.

The ruling party as a populist phenomenon

The modern understanding of the phenomenon of the ruling party, parliamentary parties and extra-parliamentary parties lies in the fact that the political party is seen not only as an institution of the political system of society, but also as an element of the social system and as a special kind of social organization community.

In the life of post-Soviet society, regardless of the type of social structure and political system, the party in power plays an important role and parliamentary parties play a partial role. Even in post-Soviet countries where coalition governments have been formed and where there are several political parties in the parliament, nevertheless they are not able to influence the activities of the ruling party and the executive branch (Gräbner and Hafele 2020).

It is obvious that even in the post-Soviet ruling parties and parliamentary parties there are many shortcomings and inconsistencies between the mechanisms for updating the leadership of these parties with democratic principles, the non-transparent distribution of powers between the levels of organizational management in the party, the collective and its structure, the inconsistency of a particular party system with the social and cultural conditions of communities and middle layers. There is a lot of manipulation and shadow mechanism in the system of party bodies, principles of organization and activities that negatively affect the formation and competence of leading party bodies, as well as the procedures for nominating candidates for elected public office, party membership, etc.

The ruling party, firmly entrenched in the modern post-Soviet political system, is not the key means of aggregation, articulation and representation of the interests of citizens in power structures, both on a national scale and in the regional, and even in the local segment of politics. The post-Soviet ruling parties, by their nature, perform unique functions of controlling state power from CSOs, ensuring the representation of the interests of their interests, and not public groups, limiting the mechanism of political responsibility and accountability of the authorities, recruiting the political elite and institutions of political mobilization, structuring the political space according to their

own considerations (Csehi 2021; Ghaplanyan 2018; Payaslian 2011). With the change in the functions of the ruling parties and organizations controlled by them, they are transformed according to their group capabilities, which directly depend on the type of political regime. The projection of the political reality in which the ruling parties function is associated with the embodiment of the respective capabilities of the leaders and groups of these organizations, primarily in terms of maintaining their position in public power from the influence of opposition forces and CSOs (Carrion 2022; Glenn 2019).

Post-Soviet ruling parties of this or that type and subtype arise under certain conditions. The conditions for the formation of a moderately dominant subtype of the ruling party arose in Russia after the elections to the State Duma of the Russian Federation on December 19, 1999, and have changed since the coming to power of Vladimir Putin. In the Russian party-political system, a peculiar subtype of the ruling party in power was regularly reproduced based on the results of the presidential elections of 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012 and 2018, as well as the State Duma elections of 2003, 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2021.

When studying the populist typology of the ruling parties, as well as when comparing the political and party systems of the post-Soviet and modern periods, it becomes obvious that, for example, Russia is characterized by a Russian-centric populist type of ruling parties. It is noteworthy that the main mechanisms of Russian-centric populist activity are aimed not only at the internal, but at the external political spheres. For the ruling United Russia party, the slogans ‘Russian Abroad’ and ‘Compatriot Abroad’ have become a new populist element in the successful development of the Russian World in order to preserve the Russian geopolitical and cultural space due to many factors, including public diplomacy or hard-soft power.

At present, the United Russia party clearly dominates in comparison with other parties, but only President Putin has a special place in the political system of Russia, and his position has been shifted to the top of the power pyramid. In this type of political system, President Putin, with the help of the so-called ‘populist Iron Curtain’ party United Russia, controls the branches of public power, in contrast to the post-Soviet type of party-political system in which the ruling party occupies a central position and directly controls all political institutions.

The functioning of the modern ruling party United Russia, in comparison with other parties of the State Duma, is based on softer populist methods of leadership, stimulating the activity and promotion of initiatives by pro-government federal and regional CSOs. Common to the post-Soviet and modern types of Russian ruling parties is their reliance on the President of Russia, and not on public power, and only through the consent of the President of Russia they gain access to the use of state resources and other advantages arising from their position in Russian society.

The level of interaction of the parent state with the diaspora of Russian peripheral countries of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, with the countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Baltics, is largely an indicator of its and their stability and development. The issues of Russia’s ‘violent and threatening cooperation’ with foreign compatriots in Russian peripheral countries have become part of populist rhetoric and are often heard in the speeches of President Putin, members of the government and top officials of the state. In these populist introductions and strategies of Russia’s foreign

policy, taking into account the Soviet past and post-Soviet heritage, very often citizens and territories of the NIS, Russia considers its periphery (backyard), and people as permanently residing abroad, that is, compatriots, thereby considering their demographic resource of Russia, which for a long time remained without attention (Pejović and Nikolovski 2022; Gamkrelidze 2019; Gamkrelidze 2022).

According to the Russian ruling elite, the effective use of the potential of the Russian World will gradually lead to the strengthening of Russia's influence on the Eurasian integration of the NIS⁴, highlighting their Euro-Atlantic integration and other international processes, fighting against the so-called 'Russophobia' (Luostarinen 1989; Lieven 2000; Diesen 2022), thereby preserving the civilizational and cultural identity of the Russian ethnos (HURI 2021).

The processes of institutionalization of new Russian political parties led to populist activation after the legal reforms of 2011-2012. Since the underrepresentation of some public groups in the Russian political process, the political alienation of some segments of Russian society, such as CSOs receiving grants from Western European countries (foreign agents) and opposition leaders and movements (de la Torre 2021; Fieschi 2019). All this makes the issue of further reforming the Russian system of restrictions on political competition very topical. As a result, there is a need to study not only the historical and political and legal foundations of party activity, but also contemporary problems and contradictions observed in the framework of the institutionalization of Russian parties in conditions of limited electoral competition.

The problem of a comparative study of post-Soviet populism is the contradiction between the priorities of domestic and foreign policy declared at the conceptual level, as well as the executive foreign policy practice of Russia since 2000. The activation of the ENP since 2003 and the EaP since 2009, with the development of the Euro-Atlantic integration processes of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, special attention in the fundamental foreign policy strategies and national security doctrines of Russia has traditionally been paid to hard-soft power in relations with Ukraine, Moldova, the countries of the South Caucasus and the Baltics, taking into account even the internal political agenda of these countries. Since 2003, the so-called populist problems of the European peripheral countries have been the subject of the ruling United Russia party and other parliamentary parties (the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)). The traditionally populist issues of the European peripheral countries are also discussed in President Putin's programmatic pre-election articles.

Three spheres (military-strategic, political and cultural-ideological) are closely linked with the problem of populism and mythologization of the past and, as a result, the ideologization of the present by the ruling party United Russia, the LDPR and the CPRF. A wide range of problems complicating relations in these areas is largely associated with the negative image of Russia in the mass consciousness of the societies of the European peripheral countries. In an attempt to increase the dependence of the post-Soviet countries on Russia, President Putin and the ruling United Russia party formulated for themselves a populist discourse around answers to the following questions about the role

⁴ Kremlin.ru. 2021. "Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"." Accessed August 8, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

of Russia in the transforming system of international relations: 1) Is Russia the periphery of Europe or the center of Eurasia?, 2) How is Russia fighting for the periphery of Europe or Eurasia?, 3) Why does the European post-transitional periphery need a new strategy?, 4) How sovereign are the peripheries of Europe?.

In fact, since 2003, after the elections to the State Duma, when the country's parliament included United Russia as the ruling party, the CPRF and the LDPR, Russian-centric populism at the state level has become ideology and began to legally limit electoral competition, carrying the threat of the usurpation of political power, the destruction of the opposition, the lack of civil dialogue in the search for solutions to social problems. The accumulation of social contradictions and the underrepresentation of public interests in the political system can lead to destabilization, the emergence of non-systemic parties and movements, and the radicalization of the opposition. Creating opportunities and conditions for the institutionalization of political parties, on the contrary, helps to stabilize the political process, to include all social forces in a constructive political dialogue (Manucci 2022).

In many ways, Russian populist rhetoric persists in the political discourse of Belarus, hiding contradictions regarding the perception of consolidated authoritarianism, the state system and the style of political leadership of President Alexander Lukashenko. The geopolitical position of Belarus, the closest political, economic, social and cultural ties with Russia, the presence of a long and open border between the two states serve as the foundation for various integration projects between Russia and Belarus. The populist agenda of the Belarusian political elite includes the formation of the strategic vector of Belarus' foreign policy, the mechanisms of its maneuvering between the EU and Russia, China and neighboring countries. The phenomenon of political leadership of President Lukashenko, which largely influences the formation of both domestic and foreign policy of the state, also deserves a separate analysis. This is important for clarifying the specifics of the correlation of internal problems in the political and economic development of Belarus with its populist foreign policy strategy. To predict the model of interaction between Russia and Belarus, even in the short term, it is possible to reconstruct in detail the political populist experience of the Belarusian elites, the resources and potential of their influence in world politics and at the regional level. In addition, populist rhetoric is part of the public speeches of President Lukashenko and other senior officials of the Republic of Belarus and the Union State of Russia-Belarus, related to Belarusian foreign policy.

Since 2013, when Belarus, under the influence of Russia, did not sign an association agreement with the EU, it began a new stage of populist rhetoric against the EaP and European integration. Anti-Western propaganda and anti-European populism became part of the election campaign of President Lukashenko in the Presidential elections of 2015 and 2020, as well as in the Parliamentary elections of 2016 and 2019 among non-partisan candidates for deputies. And since 2021, President Lukashenko has suspended Belarus' participation in the EU's EaP initiative in response to EU sanctions.

The Constitution, introduced by President Lukashenko as a mechanism for an illegal republican referendum, grants the president huge powers under populist considerations and turns the principle of separation of powers into a fiction. But the president's populist actions to usurp power limit even the checks and balances that the Constitution provides.

Parliament is not an independent institution of power and is completely subordinate to the president, while the constitutional majority of deputies are non-partisan. Local power belongs to the presidential vertical, appointed by the head of state. The main part of the populist rhetoric of President Lukashenko is Soviet nostalgia, about which he frankly expressed regret about the destruction of the USSR and restored its most significant elements (an administrative pyramid with strict hierarchical subordination, personnel policy, attitude to law, the role of the KGB, etc.). Such a model of government is based not even on the Constitution officially proclaimed by him, not on laws providing for the separation of powers, guarantees of human rights, the presence of opposition, independent media, but on the unlimited power of the executive branch of the state. By refusing to carry out reforms, the authorities deliberately conserve the old social model of society. The majority of the population is united in the former structures, which, in a somewhat modified form, continue to play the role of a totalitarian framework. For example, labor collectives, as before, perform not only socio-economic, but also political functions. The conscious politicization of the former semi-totalitarian structures is taking place in parallel with the restriction and neutralization of political and public functions that appeared during the years of reforms of non-state organizations. Lukashenko began to interpret the development of CSOs and civil initiatives as anarchy and anarchy, and any criticism of CSOs is viewed as hostile, destabilizing actions. The current ruling team is creating a populist model of a kind of authoritarian corporatism, a controlled market and a controlled democracy. To maintain communication between the government and society, political representation is replaced by functional representation. Politics is reduced to the interaction between the executive branch and a limited circle of influential corporate unions. In exchange for obedience and agreement to play according to the rules approved by government agencies, these corporate organizations are artificially granted a monopoly to represent the interests of the relevant segments of the population, sectors of the economy, etc. Moreover, these corporate unions are put in such a position that they do not so much represent the interests of the relevant segments of society in relations with the state, but rather carry out public policy in these segments, layers, industries (Federation of Trade Unions of Belarus, Republican Public Association "Belaya Rus").

The deep crisis in Russian-American and Russian-European relations that erupted in 2014 as a result of the change of power and the armed conflict in Ukraine had a significant impact on the foreign policy of Belarus. Its president, long and not unreasonably dissatisfied with the state of relations with Russia, saw in the current situation an opportunity to unfreeze relations with the West and extract political and financial dividends from a surge of tension in Europe. Belarus has not recognized Russian sovereignty over Crimea, but has taken an anti-Ukrainian stance on the conflict in Donbass. Of course, Russia and Belarus still remain allies, held together by multi-level interdependence and the structures of the Union State, the CSTO and the EAEU, and the dynamics of bilateral relations have resembled pendulum swings before, although not of such a wide amplitude.

Conclusion and discussion

The comparative study confirmed the hypothesis that the agenda of populism in the countries of the European transitional periphery is a consequence of Russia's direct and indirect interference in domestic political life, trying to divide societies into pro-Russian and pro-Western parts.

The European neoliberal tradition is based on the thesis of the interdependence of countries and their political parties and CSOs and the resulting possibility of their rational choice in favor of long-term peace for the European peripheral countries. The EU succeeds in influencing the political processes in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia through the formation in these European transitional peripheral countries of the norms of democratic governance, the growth of the welfare of citizens, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the European values of human rights. Mainly, the conducted analysis testifies to the limitations of such an impact of the European transitional peripheral countries, taking into account the frozen conflicts, military security factors, the Second Karabakh War in 2020, the risks of annexation of the territory and military intervention in Ukraine since 2014.

The EU mechanisms for cooperation and communication among political parties and CSOs of the European transitional peripheral countries were supposed to create opportunities for reviewing national interests and borrowing the practices of successful state-building and nation-building. Strategies of the ideological influence of Russia's foreign policy on the European transitional peripheral countries, including hard-soft power, carry the risk of monopolization and restrictions from the Euro-Atlantic integration processes, imposing the ideas of the Russian political elite on the norms of the world order by one or another actor, thereby imposing them from above on the so-called 'countries-partners' or 'allied countries' in the absence of a discussion of possible alternatives. The CIS, the CSTO, the Customs Union, the Common Economic Space and the Eurasian Economic Union are Russia's peculiar so-called 'integration trap' and 'security trap', which President Putin, the ruling United Russia party, the LDPR, the CPRF and other Russian actors use to deter post-Soviet countries from Euro-Atlantic integration processes. The populist rhetoric of the Russian political elite, who call their integration initiatives in the Eurasian space of epochal significance, a fundamentally new level of integration, fully preserving sovereignty while ensuring national security, closer and more harmonious economic cooperation, etc.

Russia, destabilizing the European transitional peripheral countries and regions, determines its own external and internal political vector of development precisely with the help of hard power. It is no coincidence that conflicts have sharply escalated in different regions of the European transitional peripheral countries, military clashes and war have occurred, and new risks of war are still emerging (the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the Russian peacekeeping forces in Transnistria, an active military conflict and the threat of war in Ukraine since 2014, Second Karabakh War 2020, the Russian peacekeeping forces in Nagorno-Karabakh). Therefore, for the political elite, political parties and CSOs of these countries, the question arose of the need to maintain stability and preserve peace through joint efforts to develop experience in coordinated actions. It is no coincidence that in the conditions of neither war nor peace, as well as the

securitization of the political agenda among the political parties of these countries, populist rhetoric refers specifically to pro-Russian and Russophobic issues. This stage is rather difficult, but extremely dynamic, creating new opportunities, new risks and new trajectories for the development of the ruling party, the multi-party system and CSOs in these countries, including Russia's populist agenda. To identify these new risks, opportunities and development options is the subject of political discourse among the political elites of the European transitional peripheral countries.

The change in the populist agenda in the field of national security of these countries lies in the increasing importance of social and economic threats. These include the lack of vital resources (primarily food, water and energy); demographic problems; global poverty; unemployment, as well as the low level of education and health care; environmental and epidemiological problems; climate change. To a large extent, the emergence of these threats is the result of ineffective counteraction to military-political challenges and the expansion of the populist agenda of these countries.

Another Russian populist rhetoric in relation to confronting a wide range of threats and challenges in the field of national security of these countries by the Euro-Atlantic community is the so-called 'Collective West'. With the exception of Russia, China and India, most of the leading countries of the world are part of the Euro-Atlantic community (Collective West), which not only has enormous economic potential and political influence, but has also achieved a significant advantage in the field of military security since the early 1990s over most countries in the world. In this context, the formation of the Russian world in the context of Euro-Atlantic integration and globalization is of particular importance, in the light of the strengthening of the Russian positions of supranational organizations, the development of ideas and concepts of the future world order in the post-Soviet space.

At this stage, for the European transitional peripheral countries, populist rhetoric is the Russian world, the core of which is Russia, thus trying to unite (by force and hard power) compatriots of the post-Soviet countries and the Russian abroad living around its political center. If for the Duma political parties and the elite, the Russian world as a cultural and civilizational phenomenon united on the basis of the Russianness of its members and their self-identification with Russia, knowledge of the Russian language, belonging to Russian culture and a special type of mentality, then for the political elite and parliamentary parties and CSOs of the European transitional peripheral countries, this is a threat and a challenge to the loss of sovereignty, and only for the pro-Russian leaders and groups of these countries is the populist agenda. Paradoxically, in fact, the rallying of compatriots means the forced consolidation of representatives of the diaspora of European transitional peripheral countries, interference in the internal affairs of these countries, creating a transcontinental entity. In this regard, the populist side of the idea of the Russian world lies in the fact that it is not promoting the unity of Russians or Russian-speaking citizens of other countries with common roots, culture and strengthening ties with their historical homeland, preserving their civilizational identity, but on the contrary, this is an occasion to create real threats and geopolitical difficulties for these countries.

The political parties of the European transitional peripheral countries are in development and shifts are taking place, which can lead to the strengthening of the party

oligarchy, personalized politics, and ultimately to the establishment of authoritarianism in the party leadership. Along with the phenomenon of personalization of politics, the phenomenon of personalization of the voter also arose. The behavior of the voter, under the influence of a number of mechanisms, has led personalized parties to great electoral success. The populist party landscape in these countries is a two-pronged process: domestication of parties by business and, at the same time, domestication of business by parties. In this regard, despite the fact that these countries have ruling parties, however, they have not yet become the dominant party. The outcome of this process depends on the ability to find a balance point between politics and business, between electoral and personalized parties, between political leaders and groups. The evolution since 2014 of the multi-party systems of Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia shows that there has been a crisis of stability in Euro-Atlantic integration. The parties of the European transitional peripheral countries are facing not only new political and communication technologies, but also growing populism and disillusionment in their societies, widespread criticism of their structures and the processes taking place in them, which is accompanied by the loss of many party members and electorates. Meanwhile, the stability of the transitional democracies of the European transitional peripheral countries directly depends on the quality of the work of the ruling and parliamentary parties. In the course of political dialogue and partnership with CSOs and intra-party discussions, they reduce the level of populist rhetoric and broadcast the political positions, wishes and needs of their members and voters, realizing the function of articulating social interests. The electoral programs of the ruling and parliamentary parties of these countries represent strict political rationality, the most important political tool that gives voters the opportunity to make an informed choice, and gives the parties themselves special responsibility for their declarations. Each of them outlines the vision of key points, five of which are related to domestic politics: culture and education; proper social policy (including labor policy and employment, family, pension policy and health care); integration policy; national security policy; tax and financial policy.

The ruling and parliamentary parties of the European transitional peripheral countries, in search of a further balanced path for the development of their countries, under the influence of the Russian threat and national security, initiated the polarization of society into supporters and opponents of its political and cultural modernization. And this, in turn, initiates the emergence and success of populist new and small parties, which, under certain circumstances, can become full-fledged political players. This is important for understanding the possibilities of further transformations of the party system of these countries and their way out of the crisis of stability, the trap of security and integration, accompanied by a tendency to blur the center and the emergence of new effective parties. In addition to the general requirements for the ruling and parliamentary party activities, populist contradictions and inconsistencies between state requirements and party capabilities are natural. So, there are three groups of populist defects of the ruling and parliamentary parties of the European transitional peripheral countries: 1) institutional contradictions that arise in intra-party relations; 2) systemic collisions, in which there is a conflict between parties and authorized executive bodies, as well as with institutions responsible for organizing the electoral process; 3) defects in state foreign policy, when contradictions are observed at the strategic level between public authorities and parties.

In general, issues of national security and the growing confrontation of Russia undoubtedly have a populist and destabilizing effect on the party system of the European transitional peripheral countries. The reasons for this process include: an excessive emphasis on exclusivity and no alternative to guarantees of Russia's security and liberal values as a platform for the country's political life. These accents have dominated and continue to dominate both the domestic and foreign policies of these countries; the growth of nationalism, the mood of political nativism; a split within the centrist and center-left parties; the success of populism as a response to voter sentiment; euroscepticism, Russophobia and criticism of the elites; the outflow of members from parties, the arrival of new and young politicians; security issues; social tension.

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