Chapter 11: Populists in Government: The Case of IMRO-DPMNU's Rule in North Macedonia 2006-2016

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1. Introduction

Populism is becoming part of the political landscape in the Balkans and is also receiving attention in the academic discussion. In a region which has at times found itself embroiled in nationalist and ethnic conflicts, multiple decades of prolonged democratic transition have created fertile ground for the emergence of a new phenomenon: Populism among mainstream political parties. This is evident in the case of North Macedonia and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (IMRO-DPMNU), a mainstream party whose disgraced former leader, Nikola Gruevski, practiced an amalgam of populist and authoritarian politics for ten years when he served as the country's prime minister.

Despite the party's identity as a Christian Democratic Party, its membership to the European People's Party, and its prominent role in the national parliament since the country's independence in 1990, the IMRO-DPMNU and its leader, Nikola Gruevski, have largely relied on populist strategies to remain in power from 2006 to 2016. During his early years as Prime Minister, Gruevski portrayed himself as being similar, both in style and appearance, to 'the common man.' He cultivated an image of himself as a technocratic leader who was constantly working to uplift the country and engaging with 'the people.' To achieve this, he relied on highly efficient party organization, internal party discipline, and a unified group of high-ranking supporters. Both Gruevski and the IMRO-DPMNU enjoyed high ratings among voters for a number of years and managed to maintain a large multi-party coalition with their Albanian partner and a number of smaller political parties representing ethnic minorities in North Macedonia.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how Gruevski successfully exploited the structural conditions of a prolonged transition. An economically poor and ethnically divided country, characterized by an authoritarian political

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culture and engaged in disputes related to national identity with neighboring countries, North Macedonia saw Gruevski remain in power and win eight rounds of national and local elections in a row. During this time, the party sought to maintain its mainstream orientation by working with the EU in the accession process and participating in NATO activities toward future membership.

The first part of the chapter provides an overview of the context and historical development. The subsequent section presents different competing theories of populism and shows how they apply to the case of IMRO-DPM-NU. In this section on theory, I distinguish between centrist and radical populist parties (Stanley 2017), including specifics relevant to the region of the Balkans. I use this theory to analyze the North Macedonian case in order to uncover the main elements of the IMRO-DPMNU's populism project. In last remaining sections, I shift the attention to the structural conditions of North Macedonian society that facilitated the spread of populism. I present the main elements of the populist strategy, i.e., a construction of 'the people,' and the party apparatus on which the leader relied for logistical support, as well as the themes exploited and some of the policies implemented to support this populist project.

2. Politics in North Macedonia: political parties and ethnic dynamics during transition to democracy

One of the smallest countries in the Balkans, North Macedonia faced significant challenges in its transition to democracy. Although the country gained its independence peacefully in 1990 and was spared the bloodshed of the Yugoslav wars, it struggled to receive international recognition from its neighbors and was hindered by internal ethnic disputes and regional instability. Some notable challenges included the so-called 'name issue' with Greece. This dispute between the two countries concerned the name 'Macedonia' and ultimately led Greece to block North Macedonia's admission to the EU and NATO and even impose an economic embargo on the newly independent country. The second greatest challenge concerned the country's ethnic Albanian minority, which comprises approximately 25% of the country's population. In 2001 widespread discontent led to a small-scale armed conflict and introduced significant changes to the constitutional system by introducing elements of consociationalist power-sharing (Lijphart 1977).

Although North Macedonia is a multi-ethnic society, during the initial ten years of the country's post-transition, the country's politics was dominated by a relatively moderate discourse. The country's trajectory was unlike that of Serbia and Montenegro, where major authoritarian actors took the center stage throughout the 1990s (Laštro and Bieber 2021). In the parliamentary democracy of North Macedonia, the president's role is mostly symbolic, and their veto powers are limited. The country's party system is structured on ethnic grounds; the Albanian minority has several political parties; smaller ethnic minorities that comprise 5% or less of the total population have their own political parties. The latter usually enter into pre-electoral and governing coalitions with the ethnic North Macedonian parties. The Macedonian block consists of the center-right, Christian Democratic IMRO-DPMNU, which presents itself as the successor of a famous revolutionary organization that fought for Macedonian independence during the late nineteenth century, and the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDUM), whose members identify as reformed communists. Having competed for power since the 1990s, the IMRO-DPMNU and the SDUM usually form coalition governments with one of the several ethnic Albanian political parties.

Since the 1990s, the IMRO-DPMNU has elevated the 'Macedonian cause' in its ideological profile (Hristova 2011). During the 2001 ethnic conflict, the party's representatives held harder lines in the peace negotiations. Later on, there were public statements which rejected the peace agreement by some of the party's representatives. The IMRO-DPMNU opposed the decentralization reform of 2005, which was passed with the intention of integrating ethnic minorities into the majority population at a local level and enabling them to exercise certain collective rights. Despite the SDUM and the IMRO-DPMNU each belonging to different party families—the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats—ideological distinctions were not a prominent factor in national politics. Therefore, these were quite important lines of division between the SDUM and the IMRO-DPM-NU. While in office, both parties pursued neoliberal policies throughout the country's economic restructuring during the 1990s. Their ideological distinctions became more visible only after 2003, due the IMRO-DPMNU's positions on the liberalism-conservativism ideological axis, specifically on

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issues related to ensuring the right to abortion, protecting LGBTQ+ rights, and upholding traditional family values.[1]

The ideological profile of the ethnic Albanian political parties is almost exclusively concentrated on the advancement of the collective rights of Albanians in North Macedonia (Hristova 2011; Kadriu 2011). Throughout the 1990s, the most popular ethnic Albanian political parties were the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), which formed a coalition with the SDUM from 1992 to 1998, and the Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA), which formed a coalition with the IMRO-DPMNU from 1998 to 2001. After the 2001 conflict, a new political party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), developed from the paramilitary organization, the National Liberation Army (NLA). A number of other political parties representing the country's Albanian minority were also formed, but they were significantly less successful than the DUI, which, at the time of this article's writing, has been in the government for almost twenty years, since 2001—with the exception of the period during 2006–2008.

Such was the norm until 2016, when, due to the suspicion that the DUI was involved in corruption as the IMRO-DPMNU's coalition partner, new political parties began to appear and gain bigger shares of the vote in 2016 and 2020. This was the case with the Movement BESA, which split in 2018 into BESA and Alternative (Alternativa) (part of the SDUM-DUI government for one year 2022-2023) and the Alliance for Albanians, which joined the SDUM-DUI government in February 2023, after the Alternative party left. The DUI is currently experiencing an internal split for the first time in the form of an ongoing process involving a group of several mayors and other prominent figures within the party, who have threatened to form their own faction.

The first post-conflict government led by the SDUM and the newly formed DUI (2002–2006) implemented unpopular reforms for the ethnic Macedonian majority related to the peace accord, but they did not manage to improve the economic situation, which largely contributed to their 2006 electoral loss in the national elections. In 2006 the IMRO-DPMNU formed a coalition government with the second largest ethnic Albanian party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). This coalition did not survive more

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1 It should be mentioned that IMRO-DPMNU experienced several splits of the party membership, especially after 2003, when the party went through a process of internal restructuring. New political parties were formed around important individuals in the party, most noticeably the one of the former presidents Ljubco Georgievski- IMRO-People's Party. However, the electoral success of these parties was limited.

than two years, due to the parliamentary boycott of the DUI, based on the use of ethnic veto rights. After a new agreement on ethnic issues was reached through international mediation, early elections took place in 2008, whose results were similar to the previous one. The outcome forced the IM-RO-DPMNU to accept the reality of ethnic politics, and the party formed a coalition government with the DUI, the winning party of the Albanian block. This coalition was in office until the early 2016 elections.

This illustrates the complexity of the North Macedonian political scene. As a small country with a population of around two million and many small political parties, the electoral rules do not favor small political parties. The rules introduced in 2002 established a proportional model with six districts and a 5% electoral threshold, all but ensuring the dominance of the two largest political parties within the Macedonian bloc. These mainstream parties have remained dominant by absorbing the votes of the smaller political parties in pre-election coalitions. This makes it difficult for radical or populist actors to emerge outside the established parties. The only exception is the radical left-wing party Levica (The Left), which also strongly relies on right wing nationalist ideology.

3. Approaches to populism relevant for the case of North Macedonia

In the literature, there are numerous interpretations of what constitutes as populism. Several approaches have been used to analyze the phenomenon or normatively evaluate it. Among these approaches is the ideational approach, which interprets populism as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2007); other scholars have interpreted populism as a political discourse (Laclau 2005; Aslanidis 2016), as a kind of political strategy (Weyland 2001) and as a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014). The differences between these approaches can be attributed to the ways in which populism has been experienced in different historical, political, and social contexts (Heinisch et al. 2017: 22).

According to the ideational approach, an antagonistic relationship between 'the corrupted elite' and 'the pure people' lies at the heart of populism. This Manichean worldview allows populist actors to claim that they alone can correct the injustices carried out by the elites and ultimately realize 'the will' of 'the people' (Mudde 2007). If, however, we ask, for example, what this will entail, then populism becomes very ambivalent in

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its assertions. Mudde (2007) conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, one which is devoid of any ideological content that may characterize one's preferences for certain economic policies or social values. Hence, populism can be easily adjusted to fit any host ideology or social context, giving it the quality of being chameleon-like. In practice, populism found its hosts with ideologies ranging from the radical left to the radical and nationalist right.

Laclau's political philosophy characterizes populism as a kind of political logic. At the heart of this approach, there exists an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elites.' However, contrary to Mudde's interpretation of populism, 'the people' are not a homogeneous construct (as the ideational approach suggests). Rather, 'the people' are different societal groups which are connected by "chains of equivalence" due to their demands being unmet (Laclau 2005). This broader approach to populism means it can be applied to different social contexts. Recent approaches inspired by this tradition have introduced the usage of frames in the study of populism and rejected the ideational approach on the basis of the extreme absence of ideological content (Aslanidis 2016). In this context, frames can be used to determine the degree of populism on a continuum by analyzing empirical cases through discursive analysis of texts produced by populist actors. Katsambekis (2022: 59-60) has criticized the ideational approach on the grounds that the alleged homogeneity of 'the people' is not empirically observable in many recent cases, maintaining that the category of a 'morally pure' people is not only present in populism, but can be observed in other instances of political mobilization or ideology.

An innovative concept that connects the stylistic and discursive elements of populism with the strategic dimension is the idea of populism as performance. The approach to analyzing populism as a style renders the concept all but devoid of ideological content. Populism as a style or a performative technique can be frequently observed in today's era of mediatized politics (Moffit and Torney 2014). Weyland's (2001) approach to analyzing populism as a strategy describes a political practice predominately observed in Latin America. In a region where so-called cartel parties have introduced such forms during periods of modernization, these regimes have benefited from mass support, and most importantly, a strong leader. According to Weyland's definition, populism is "a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland 2001: 14).

Scholars have also used gradational approaches and point to the ambivalent nature of populist claims and actions, in order to broaden the scope of narrow definitions and allow for comparative analysis (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017). Accordingly, "populism should be understood as making inherently ambivalent claims diffused by individual and collective actors designed to challenge the status-quo in favor of people's empowerment and of elite change" (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017: 110). Purpose ambivalence—presenting two mutually contradictory positions or shifting the argument depending on political arena in which it is articulated—is a frequent tactic used by populists. Taggart (2002) referred in this context to the chameleon-like qualities of populism.

The theoretical distinction between centrist and radical populist parties in the literature on political parties can be used to analyze the North Macedonian case (Stanley 2017; Smilov and Smilova in this volume). Here, it is helpful to consider Stanley's (2017) approach to distinguishing between politically moderate populist actors—who criticize liberal institutions and ideology—and radical populist actors—whose rhetoric and programs are characterized by xenophobia and extreme nationalism. This distinction was introduced in the analysis of the populist parties emerging from the post-communist Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that joined the EU during the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds. Although these political actors are populist both in terms of their rhetoric and their programs, at the same time, their views on European integration are closely aligned with the stances of the moderate or mainstream political actors of their respective countries (Stanley 2017). This type of political competition, which can be observed in the newer EU member states, differs significantly from the classic ideological positions of populist actors in Western Europe, many of whom hold openly anti-EU and anti-immigration views. Populism in the CEE region has also been seen as a response to the process of transition and globalization (Stanley 2017). Scholars have also sought to explain the success of 'ethno-populism' in the Central European countries which have fared better economically and were exposed to less problematic transitions to democracy throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Vachudova 2020). According to Vachudova (2020: 334), ethno-populism in these countries is a "strategy for winning votes and taking control of the polity." Other scholars have attributed the spread of populism to the high levels of corruption in the post-communist countries (Smilov and Smilova in this volume).

Regardless of the social context, it seems that populism is a response to the crisis of legitimacy of political institutions and actors (Heinisch et al.

2017: 21) and this is quite obviously the case in the Balkans, where there exists a widespread perception of governments engaging in corruption, which has seriously eroded trust in institutions (Kapidžić 2020). Authoritarian and clientelist practices are largely exploited by ruling parties (Bieber 2018; Kapidžić 2020; Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Populist actors in the Balkans have also seized on the cause of nation-building and national identity (Dzankic and Soel 2017). This is evidently the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. In addition, various economic and political problems, frequent political crises, and the authoritarian political culture have provided ample opportunities for populist actors to emerge. Why populism is present among the mainstream political parties in the Balkans is a valid theoretical question.

To this end, the approach to defining populism as a 'thin-centered ideology' can be applied to the case of North Macedonia, as the main elements of this approach can be clearly observed in the activities of the IMRO-DPMNU. As will be shown in later sections, 'the people' occupied the center of the IMRO-DPMNU's populism project. The party's agenda has included waging a fight against the communist elites in political, academic, and professional spheres. However, several years before adopting this strategy, the IMRO-DPMNU attempted to rebrand itself as a modern, pro-European center-right conservative political party. In doing so, the IMRO-DPMNU originally sought to distance itself from the radical and nationalist profile it had maintained throughout the 1990s. The IMRO-DPMNU has also had a somewhat good position to criticize the elites who guided the country's transition, since prior to 2006, it spent only three years in government, from 1998 to 2001.

Elements of the other approaches can also be traced, such as the ambition to economically reform and improve the country, which was an important component of the Gruevski's program. Big infrastructural projects, mainly construction of roads and highways, were framed as modernization efforts to finally (re)build the country. This is a prominent element of the Weyland's (2001) description of populism derived from Latin American tradition and politics. However, the fact that the leader was coming from an established political party and had access to organizational structure and clientelist network limits the applicability of this approach to the IMRO-DPMNU's case (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Of course, the social context in which this approach was originally developed was completely different than the one in 1960s Latin America.

The element of ambivalence is also present, especially when defining 'the people.' A more detailed discussion of 'the people' will be later presented. In North Macedonia, where authoritarian policies were implemented by a mainstream political party whose strategic political orientation has always been acquiring EU and NATO membership, this ambivalence has manifested not only in the party's rhetoric, but in other areas as well. For example, the standards for membership to the EU and NATO conflicted with some of the actions Gruevski had carried out, i.e., exhibiting hostility against the NGO sector and certain interest groups. As will be shown, although the party's tax policy was of right prominence, some economic and social policies addressing part of the population had leftist characteristics, such as the increase of social transfers.

The use of the discursive approach is certainly promising in the analysis of the employed frames of the populist actor in North Macedonia. However, the empirical consequences, the success and the longevity of the populist project needs some explanatory factors which discursive approaches themselves cannot provide. The following analysis includes a presentation of the demand factors for the emergence of populism in North Macedonia.

4. Structural conditions and demand for populism in North Macedonia

Structural conditions in North Macedonia, similar to the neighboring Balkan countries, were quite favorable for populist politics to emerge. The North Macedonian economic transition produced a small number of winners and a large number of losers. The country has demonstrated a weak economic performance through its low GDP grow rates, comparatively low levels of foreign direct investments, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and rising levels of income inequality. According to the World Bank data, North Macedonia in 2010 had the highest value of the GINI index in the region: 43.3. Increasing by 28.1% since 1998, this value represented the highest increase throughout the region during this time period. The percentage of people living below poverty line in North Macedonia increased from 21% in 1998 to 31% in 2010 (Tevdovski 2015). Citizens perceived the problems of unemployment, poverty, and corruption as more pressing than the ethnic relations (UNDP 2010).

Inefficient state institutions, widespread corruption, problems with media and judiciary independence, and the rule of law in general were all mentioned in various international reports and in academic research about

the country (Gjuzelov and Hadjievska 2020). Political parties maintained clientelist relations and displayed a lack of political will to overcome these democratic deficits (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). Instead, the parties became the main actors of the repeated political crises which were resolved through international mediation or "leaders' meetings" (Krasniqi et al. 2019). Currently, trust in the country's institutions is low. Quite tellingly, North Macedonian citizens trust international institutions (EU and NATO) more than they trust their own national institutions. Whereas the public's trust in the country's army and police force is similar to how much they trust the EU and NATO, the public's trust in the government, the parliament, the judiciary, and especially political parties, represents the lowest among all institutions (IRI 2017).

Most research on political culture in North Macedonia has found that authoritarian values and conservative attitudes among the country's population were widespread. The same applies to leftist values in relation to the state's role in the economy (Simoska et al. 2001; Hristova 2011, OSI and ISPJR 2010; Maricikj and Petkovski 2014). In a study conducted in 2010, 50.7% of the respondents thought that "too much democracy is a bad thing." In a similar line of reasoning, 40% agreed with the statement that "political leaders should be listen to, obeyed, and respect," and 68% agreed that "the most important thing is that the state is led by one man with authority" (Simoska 2010, 19-36). Seventy-one percent of citizens in the European Values Survey of 2008 think that is very good or fairly good "To have a strong leader who won't be preoccupied with the parliament and elections" (Maricikj and Petkovski 2014: 12).

Around 70% of North Macedonian citizens, regardless of their political party affiliation, share leftist economic and social values. In other words, the voters of the main political parties, namely the SDUM, the IMRO-DPMNU, the DUI and the DPA, have demonstrated that they believe that social differences between citizens should be as small as possible, that the role of the state in the economy should be bigger, and that the state should provide more and better social services (Hristova 2011: 192-197).[2] Conservative values are widespread. This is especially the case concerning negative attitudes toward sexual minorities, demands for higher punishment

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2 However, the main differentiation among the loyal voters of these parties is the attitudes toward the communist past. The supporters of IMRO-DPMNU are much more critical toward communist past than the supporters of SDUM; also, supporters of DUI have more favorable attitudes toward the communist past than those of DPA.

for criminal behavior, support for traditionalism, and support for strong leaders (Hristova 2011: 197-200). These trends also reflect the attitudes of the youth population (Topuzovska et. al 2013, 2019). These findings were confirmed recently by European Social Survey data.

5. IMRO-DPMNU as a populist actor

5.1 *Why did IMRO-DPMNU adopt a populist strategy?*

As mentioned in previous sections, when forming a government coalition in 2006, the IMRO-DPMNU immediately tried to break from the previously established rule by forming a coalition with the DUI, the winning party of the Albanian political block. This was because the DIU was the main actor in the ethnic conflict. Instead, the IMRO-DPMNU entered into a coalition with the DPA, in a move that reaffirmed their alliance, which dates back to 1998–2001. This decision led to a political crisis, one which was ultimately resolved through international intermediation, informal (ethnic) agreements, and early parliamentary elections in 2008, after which the IMRO-DPMNU included the DUI in government. In 2006 initial steps toward the so-called 'antiquization' were taken through the decision to rename Skopje International Airport as Alexander the Great. In 2008, after Greece vetoed the accession of the country to NATO and negotiations involving the name issue were unsuccessful, the IMRO-DPMNU decided to double down on this strategy. So, although the position of the IMRO-DPMNU on issues related to national identity was always present, after the veto for the NATO membership in 2008, the party made a significant turn. From this point on, the signs of the party's ambition to gain control of the key sectors of society began to appear.

In the following chapters, the elements of IMRO-DPMNU's populist strategy will be explored in detail. This was indeed an ambitious political undertaking: a grand (populist) project with several important components that spanned an entire decade. How this was carried out will be shown through the description of: the construction of the leader, the analysis of the definition of 'the people,' the populist themes that were exploited, and the social policies that were undertaken in order to target specific portions of society who were more likely to become supporters of the regime.

5.2 *Constructing the populist leader*

Since the party entered into parliament in 2006, Nikola Gruevski, the former leader of the IMRO-DPMNU, practiced a new policy making style. Initially, Gruevski's leadership approach resembled a technocratic style of governance. Later on, his style of governance began to acquire more characteristics of authoritarianism. As the party's president, Gruevski introduced a rebranding of the party's program, which he used as an agenda setting and propaganda tool. The IMRO-DPMNU's program highlighted the party's aims and policy positions in a highly detailed manner, serving as a kind of a check list for political action at the micro level. The 2006 election program, which was titled, "Revival in 100 Steps," contained no less than 110 pages (A4 print format). The program focused primarily on the economy, including a large list of planned projects, which ranged from the reconstruction of local roads to the overhaul of public administration.

The 2006 program represented a turning point in North Macedonian politics. Up until this point, the programs of political parties usually contained neutral language and introduced very few specific policies. The success of this new approach was reaffirmed by the results of the 2008 early elections. Leading up to election day, the new program was widely distributed among citizens. The program contained no less than 190 pages, which included a report on the realization of the 2006 program. Free copies were easily accessible, and the program was promoted on TV commercials. The IMRO-DPMNU's electoral victory in 2008 demonstrated the success of this new approach and the 'politics of hard work.' Therefore, it is unsurprising that the party's program for the 2011 early elections contained 280 pages, the 2014 program 380 pages, and the 2016 program 516 pages. The purpose of this propaganda tool was not only to inform the citizens and enable democratic participation, but it was also intended to support the myth of the superiority of the IMRO-DPMNU's party organization under Gruevski.

Rhetoric which stressed the value of 'hard work' was crucial to maintaining Gruevski's public image as an extremely hard-working politician. He continued to cultivate this image of himself the entire time the IMRO-DPMNU remained in power. He referred to his program and the projects it contained on every possible occasion, especially during speeches at various events. He cultivated an image of himself that indicated he was fully in control of all measures taken and personally supervised their implementation. At the same time, he would also frequently blame the opposition for

not having a program, and in fact, for never having one. He frequently suggested that the opposition had done nothing to solve the problems of the people and society. In addition to the broadcasting of public meetings, he would ask ministers or other responsible officials to report about the progress of certain projects in front of cameras. These conversations were carried out during his frequent field visits around the country. The officials would report to him in such a way that demonstrated a high level of respect. Occasionally, they would also offer gentle critique of the work they had carried out, for example, by suggesting that additional things had to be done, which was immediately accepted by the responsible person in question. These scenes typically took place in the presence of citizens and were later widely broadcasted on national media. This PR strategy was aimed to show that 'real' leaders, like Gruevski, are personally engaged in with the rest of society. It had been frequently suggested that he was responsible to the people at all times, and he was in fact the representative of the general will and exercising power in the name of the people. On these occasions, Gruevski was dressed rather informally, and sometimes even bizarrely, in his attempts to signal that he was one of the 'ordinary' people.

This PR strategy was supported by a highly developed network of party officials and personnel on both the central and local level. Over the course of more than a decade, his power within the party was indisputable and remained unchallenged. High party officials, which included his close relatives—his cousin was appointed head of the intelligence agency—were active in daily political activities, and always made sure to sufficiently praise his leadership. This logistical support was instrumental to expanding and maintaining control over the established networks of clientelism, a typical feature of North Macedonian politics since the 1990s. For more than two decades, representatives in public office used public resources to finance party supporters and attract new supporters, especially when electoral campaigns were taking place (Cvetičanin et al. 2023). In a country where at times 30% of the population was unemployed, receiving employment in public administration is often viewed as a reward for party activists. As such, it was strategically wielded as one of the most powerful instruments to remain in power. Several news scandals revealed that the conditions of employment in the public sector or similar benefits included naming ten to fifteen people who would cast their votes to the IMRO-DPMNU. It is a well-known fact that relations to political elites are important for doing business in North Macedonia. Investigative journalists have discovered

business deals and firms with the high level of political party leadership among both the IMRO-DPMNE and the DUI. Some of these allegations are cases that have been brought to court by the Special Public Prosecutor's office, an institution that was created in 2015 to investigate the criminal behavior that came to light through a wiretapped conversation between the IMRO-DPMNU officials.

A well-developed network of journalists, political analysts, and public and private media personnel were closely involved with the ruling parties of Gruevski's coalition. Most members of the national media, including members of the public broadcasting service, were under control of the IMRO-DPMNU by 2011. The wiretapped conversations, which were published by the SDUM in 2015 and turned into large scale scandal, demonstrated the close ties between the IMRO-DPMNE officials, the party's PR officers, and the owners and editors of at least two of the largest national TV stations. In this conversation, which was revealed to the public, the former gave explicit directions to the latter. For several years, these national media giants would report on governmental activities in public without criticism. Nikola Gruevski, the ministers, and other high-rank party representatives refused to take part in any political debates with their political opponents. In doing so, they prevented any public political debate from taking place in front of a wide audience, which had been an established practice since the 1990s. Instead, Gruevski would usually show up at some of the government-controlled media for an interview, during which he could speak without any interruptions and receive praises by the show's host. As a result, any space for the opposition continued to shrink more and more over the years.

Moreover, in 2011, the police arrested the owner, the executive editors, staff, and even some of the family members of those who ran the country's biggest private TV station, A1, one of the few remaining media institutions to critically report on the government's activities and routinely receive high audience ratings. The charges were serious, among them was tax evasion in connection with the other businesses that the owner possessed. The public's impression was that this action was first and foremost political revanchism. By 2011, media freedoms had been significantly suppressed, a trend which was reflected by the country's lower ratings in relevant international reports dealing with media freedoms.

In combination with specific policies and populist myths, this strategy was highly successful in creating the impression that the IMRO-DPMNU was working hard to solve the country's economic problems. This impression resulted in high levels of trust in Gruevski and victory in three rounds

of early parliamentary elections (2008, 2011, and 2014). In the 2016 early elections, which were scheduled to take place after the wiretapping scandal, the IMRO-DPMNU gained even more votes than the SDUM. The party won large victories in the 2009 and 2013 local elections. Additionally, the winning candidate of the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections was the IMRO-DPMNU's candidate.

Table 11.1 Votes by parties/coalitions at parliamentary elections in North Macedonia (2006–2016) (number of votes and percentage of total votes)

	Parliamentary elections 2006	Parliamentary elections 2008	Parliamentary elections 2011	Parliamentary elections 2014	Parliamentary elections 2016
IMRO-DPMNU and coalition	**32.50%** 304. 572	**48.78%** 481. 501	**38.98%** 438.138	**42.98%** 481.615	**38.14%** 454.577
SDUM and coalition	**23.31%** 218. 463	**23.64%** 233. 284	**32.78%** 368.496	**25.34%** 283.955	**36.66%** 436.981
DUI	**12.12%** 113. 522	**12.82%** 126.522	**10.24%** 115.092	**13.71%** 153.646	**7.28%** 86.796
DPA	**7.50%** 70. 261	**8.26%** 81. 557	**5.90%**	**5.92%** 66.393	**2.60%** 30.964
New Social Democratic party (NSDP)	**6.04%** 56. 624			/	/
IMRO-People's Party	**5.85%** 57.077				
National Democratic Revival (NDR)			**2.67%** 29.996		
Movement BESA	/	/	/	/	**4.86%** 57.868
Alliance of Albanians				/	**2.95%** 35.121

A survey from October 2011 demonstrated that 49.6% of respondents— a large amount by North Macedonian standards—were satisfied with Gruevski's first one hundred days in office. The survey also showed that 47.2%

of respondents believed that the government would fulfil its electoral promises, and 45.8% of respondents characterized the government as being reform-oriented. Gruevski ranked as the country's most trusted politician (23.9%). The next politician on the list had three times less support; B. Crvenkovski (SDUM) amounted to 8.1%, followed by the Albanian leaders, A. Ahmeti of the DUI (7.4%) and M. Tachi of the DPA (3.4%) (Makedonska Nacija 2011)

Gruevski's ratings remained consistently high, even after the wiretapping scandal, up until the formation of the new government in May 2017 and prior to the incident in the parliament of April 27, 2017, in which IMRO-DPMNU supporters entered the parliament building by force and attacked the opposing MPs. A poll from September 2017 indicated that levels of public trust in Gruevski had lessened significantly compared to March of that same year; still, 30% of people indicated in the September poll that they held a very favorable or somewhat favorable opinion of Gruevski (IRI 2017)

5.3 *Constructing 'the people'*

A crucial element of Gruevski's strategy was his construction of 'the people.' Petkovski (2016) showed that Gruevski's usage of the expression 'the people' was done intentionally. During formal addresses, in front of an international audience, or in his capacity as prime minister, Gruevski would use both the terms 'citizens' and 'the people.' On other occasions, such as during party rallies or crisis situations, he would exclusively use 'the people.' In moments when he faced critique from EU officials or EU progress reports, he would frequently state that 'the people' had demonstrated their will during the last parliamentary elections, or he would point to the current political ratings as proof that 'the people' supported his course of action. Gruevski repeatedly used 'the people' to justify his actions and policies. This was his response to the scandal of December 2012, when members of the opposition and some journalists were removed from the parliament.[3] It was also his response to the first large scale student protests toward the end

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3 In this case, as Petkovski has illustrated, in one of his speeches, the people were assigned a position to decide over legal dispute as to whether the actions taken by the president of the parliament and the security of the building were legal, even though this was a special task assigned to a committee formed to examine the scandal (Petkovski, 2016).

of 2014, to being shown the wiretapped conversations in February 2015, and to the massive protests in 2015 and 2016.

Gruevski's construction of 'the people,' although rarely explicitly in line with the purpose of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2005), was predominantly used in a nativist sense. Initially, this was not done to demarcate his enemies. Gruevski invoked 'the people' because of the strong ethnic cleavage in North Macedonian politics. In terms of who controls certain ministries and institutions, local self-government units, as well as public resources, political spheres of influence are clearly divided among coalition partners according to ethnicity. Members of the electorate rarely vote across ethnic lines. As such, Gruevski received limited support from ethnic Albanian citizens. However, when it came to socio-economic issues, it seems that Gruevski's construction of 'the people' applied to all citizens of North Macedonia, regardless of ethnicity. This seems to be the case, especially when one considers Gruevski's decision to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008, his decision to adopt a law on the usage of the languages spoken by at least 20% of the population (Albanian language), his appointment of the first defense minister of Albanian origin (a former NLA commander), and his decision to form a government coalition with the DUI between 2008 and 2016. These actions and policies demonstrate that, for a period of time, Gruevski's had managed to overcome the IMRO-DPMNU's prejudices from the past.

Things began to change once there was a limited pool of topics which could be exploited for an election campaign. This was obviously the case after the wiretapping scandal erupted in 2015, which indicated that the government was not working only for 'the people,' but had instead resorted to undemocratic practices. As a result of this scandal, the narrative of Gruevski and the IMRO-DPMNU as saviors of a North Macedonian state belonging only to ethnic Macedonians became relevant once again. The 2016 elections campaign exploited the ethnic fears of Macedonians concerning the federalization of the state. Gruevski claimed that the SDUM's leader, Zoran Zaev, had made a pact with Albanian political parties in a so-called 'Tirana deal,' brokered with the help of politicians from Albania for the federalization of the North Macedonian state and recognition of the Albanian language as a second official language in the country, only to seize power. The IMRO-DPMNU intentionally spread disinformation that ethnic Macedonians would have to pay large sums of money if they didn't speak Albanian. This kind of paranoia primarily spread on the government-controlled media and also social media and throughout small towns in

the country's eastern region, where the population is predominantly ethnic Macedonian.

This permanent state of crisis fueled the proliferation of propaganda. The propaganda machinery which supported Gruevski managed to keep his ratings high. The IMRO-DPMNU even won the largest share of votes in the early 2016 elections that took place in December. However, since the IMRO-DPMNU election campaign was fundamentally anti-Albanian, it proved rather difficult for the party to form a government with the DUI. This contentious situation lasted for two months. While the mandate to form a government was given to the SDUM's leader, Gruevski and supporters of the IMRO-DPMNU organized protests, where they engaged in hate speech. In several interviews, Gruevski claimed that he might not be able 'to control the anger of the people.' This statement can be interpreted as tacit approval of the protesters and encouragement for them to express their anger. As the formation of the new government and the end of his government was approaching fast, Gruevski announced in an interview that 'the people' should take matters into their own hands. He stated that it was not enough for them "only to sit in front of the TVs in their slippers" (Sitel TV 2017). This eventually happened on 27 April 2017, the day of the constitutive session of the new parliament, which would oversee the appointment of the country's first Albanian speaker and a new government. In terrifying scenes broadcasted on television, crowds of protesters entered the parliament, and the opposition leader and other MPs were attacked and beaten. Extensive pressure campaign on behalf of the international community and large-scale protests helped end his rule.

6. Populist themes

6.1 Fight against the lazy and corrupt (communist) elites

As previously mentioned, the revival project which led to Gruevski's initial electoral victory in 2006 was largely founded on comparisons between Gruevski and the 'lazy and corrupt elites.' The elites in question had purported ties to leaders of the communist party or had participated in the privatization process which caused the population to become impoverished in the 1990s. This was one of the most important topics during the early years of Gruevski's rule. B. Crvenkovski, the president of the SDUM throughout the 1990s as well the 2000s, who was a key figure of

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that party, was particularly targeted. He was mentioned on a daily basis on various occasions. Throughout the 2011 election campaign, Crvenkovski's name and photograph were used in negative propaganda to remind the voters of the bad times the country had faced under his leadership during the 1990s. Since most of the active NGOs were critical toward Gruevski's rule and were ideologically rather liberal, they also became targets of his propaganda. Civil society activists were labeled as traitors for being too close to SDUM. George Soros and the Open Society Foundation were also central targets of Gruevski's propaganda.

This sort of propaganda escalated when the first massive protests took place against the IMRO-DPMNU in 2014 and continued to play out over the next two years. In a three-part magazine interview, Gruevski presented a-tailored PR story to explain how Soros and the NGOs he financed were systematically working to obstruct his government. In the interview, he also claimed that these NGOs have presented Soros with an inaccurate image of North Macedonia, and if he himself would personally visit the country and stay for two weeks, then he would support Gruevski's policies. He also mentioned that young people have been brainwashed at various indoctrination sessions organized by NGOs. (Netpress 2017)

6.2 *IMRO-DPMU as a protector of national identity – the use of history*

The topic of national identity was comprised of several related subthemes. These topics included the Albanian minority and the reinforcement of certain elements of Macedonian national identity through the country's ancient past and the orthodox religion. Discussions of these topics were accompanied by conservative policies in order to maintain 'the longevity' of the nation. Such policies included financial incentives for couples to have a third child, anti-abortion laws, and anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. As previously mentioned, the IMRO-DPMNU has traditionally promoted itself as a protector of the position of the ethnic Macedonian majority in the country. This topic was almost absent after the government with the DUI was formed in 2008, but it became dominant once again during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

The reliance on historical narratives connected to the ancient period was not a novel strategy when the IMRO-DPMNU introduced its populist project. When the party was founded in 1990, the IMRO-DPMNU

portrayed the country as descendent of Ancient Macedonian kingdom and promoted the view that Macedonians living in neighboring countries should be united.[4] However, this time, unlike in Socialist Yugoslavia, the political elites could not count on the protection of a much larger state with a good international position. The main objections related to the use of ancient narrative came from Greece, which considered itself as the sole descendent of the history of the Macedonian kingdom. Great historical topics were at the very core of the nation-building process of what is now North Macedonia. Bulgaria also questioned the Macedonian identity by refusing to acknowledge the existence of Macedonian language and Macedonian people (Maleska 2003; Marinov 2010). However, references to the ancient past throughout the 1990s remained on the margins and were performed by certain right-wing individuals with a particular interest in history (Leitner-Stojanov 2020; Vangeli 2011).

When the IMRO-DPMNU took office in 2006, this myth was reintroduced on an unprecedented scale. Among the earliest signs of this process, what was later named "antiquization," was the renaming of Skopje airport into 'Alexander the Great' in 2006. The main highway in the country was also renamed 'Alexander the Great' in 2008, and the national stadium in Skopje was renamed 'Philip II.' These decisions were met with confusion and protest by the left-wing politicians and intellectuals who considered these decisions as part of a dangerous strategy that would ultimately undermine the country's position in international relations. Greece possibly perceived these steps as provocation and vetoed Macedonian accession to NATO in 2008.

However, after 2008, this narrative was implemented even more decisively. It was set forth by public intellectuals and through cultural practices, and it was undoubtedly state-sponsored. In the initial years of antiquization, intensive public debates between intellectuals supporting the project and their opponents took place mainly through the media (Leitner- Stojanov 2020). Intervention into the cultural and identity practices was done in a number of spheres using several channels of communication. One of the main proponents of antiquization was the archaeologist Pasko Kuzman, who served as the Director of Cultural Heritage Protection Office. He

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4 In the official historiography during communism, the relationship of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia to the ancient kingdom of Macedonia was not central, but neither was it suppressed. Essentially, Socialist Macedonia had an exceptional opportunity to integrate the ancient origin in its official historical narrative, without this being perceived as a threat to Yugoslav identity (Marinov, 2010; Vangeli, 2011).

received more funds for carrying out research and public financing from the Ministry of Culture for cultural projects related to the protection of the ancient past. The financing of national research projects gave exclusive priority to ancient historical topics. The updated 2008 edition of the History of Macedonian people, published by the Institute of National History, devoted several chapters to the period of Ancient Macedonia.

The popularization of antiquization was supported by the media, including the national broadcasting service. In television programs and talk shows broadcasted by national and local media, intellectuals explained the ancient origin of ethnic Macedonians and the role of 'our' ancient Macedonian kingdom. Television campaigns used to promote tourism were designed around ancient themes. National holidays' celebrations included aesthetics not previously seen. For example, in the celebration of the important uprising of the historical IMRO, the most important symbol of the IMRO-DPMNU, the traditional fighters from that time were replaced with ancient warriors of Alexander the Great (Vangeli 2011). Within several years, this kind of cultural production permeated public discourse, and antiquization became a strong dividing factor among the public.

Without doubt, the pillar of antiquization became one of the most important elements of Gruevski's populist project. One the most visible and ambitious undertakings of antiquization was the famous Skopje 2014 project. The project started in 2010 and included an architectural redesign of the city center; new buildings or new facades of old buildings were constructed in a neo-classical style; a large number of statutes of historical figures were erected; a small square was named after the ancient town of Pela. This neoclassical architecture was never typical for Skopje's architecture, a city which had been rebuilt in a socialist realist style after the earthquake of 1963. The crown jewel of this project was the erection of statutes of Philip II and Alexander the Great in the central square of Skopje in 2011. The statue was twenty-eight meters tall and named Warrior on a Horse.

On rare occasions, Gruevski was the one who promoted this unprecedented transformation of the central square of Skopje. This was only in his later years in office when he was trying to defend the project from the accusations about its costs. The official focus of the government was on EU integration and economic development. Gruevski's purported agenda remained the battle with the old, communist corrupt elites, and continuously work hard to improve the living conditions of 'his people.' This position was hardly sustainable, as the cultural interventions became more

and more intensive and provoked growing opposition from domestic and international actors.

7. Social benefits for 'the people' and policies of punishment for 'the elites'

While in power, Gruevski designed and implemented a significant number of policies that targeted specific segments of the population. What is important in the context of populism is that most of them were actually of leftist prominence. The salaries of the public administration were increased by 5–10% periodically, with an aggregate increase of 35%. Social transfers for the poor and unemployed were increased by more than 70%. The lowest pensions for senior citizens were increased by more than 60%. These kinds of policies were previously either non-existent, or not sufficiently visible among the public, and certainly were not of such dimensions. In addition to these changes, a whole new financial line of subsidies for agricultural producers was implemented. This decision turned out to be among the most successful measures the IMRO-DPMNU government took to ensure the votes of the agricultural producers (Cvetičanin et al. 2023; Ordanovski 2011). Many additional benefits for retired people, such as free public transport and free thermal tourism ensured that Gruevski was highly popular among seniors, despite the fact that this group is traditionally seen as tending to vote left because of their connection to communism.

In his defense of 'the people,' Gruevski engaged in conflict with various professional and expert organizations, as well as with the academic elites. For example, in 2012, there were protests of medical doctors, because of crucial changes in the medical system, which included calculating doctors' salaries for working overtime without prior consultation. Despite the public objections of architects' organization, the IMRO-DPMNU proceeded forward with the implementation of the project Skopje 2014. His fight against academic institutions was obvious due to the multiple attempts to interfere with the autonomy of the universities, which provoked organized reaction of the higher education professors (Fakulteti.mk 2015). In the media, Gruevski personally named professors close to the opposition whom he thought failed to publish sufficiently. Those who dared to criticize government policies in public were attacked by a well-prepared PR strategy. At the same time, Gruevski became famous for not accepting critique and never faltering from its positions. These practices were tailored to undermine and suppress autonomous associations, a development which is associated

with authoritarianism and illiberal democracy. However, the PR team of the party framed them in populist discourse, constructing an image of a leader who could represent the people and fight against the corrupt elites.

Simultaneously, Gruevski allied himself with other types of interest groups, who would support his economic policies and control any potential opposition. For example, while maintaining rather distant relations with the biggest and older chamber of commerce, his government became close to the younger, second largest chamber of commerce, whose membership panel consisted of small and medium sized enterprises. Unusual for a center-right party, Gruevski also managed to become allies with the country's trade unions. The largest trade union, as well as a number of smaller umbrella trade unions, were heavily criticized by leftist organizations for being under significant influence of Gruevski.[5]

The Macedonian Orthodox Church has also proven itself to be close ally of the party. For example, in 2009 when the first protests of architecture students against Gruevski's project to redesign the central square by building a church took place, the church was unofficially involved in the organization of counter protests, which saw a huge crowd of religious people, some of whom physically attacked the students. Ultimately, the large-scale student protests, the groups of university professors who opposed the educational reforms which had been carried out without consultation of the relevant associations, the wiretapping scandal, and the 2015–2016 protests which came as a reaction to the scandal, were instrumental in removing Gruevski from power.

8. Conclusion

This article presented the strategic use of populism by the IMRO-DPMNU, one of the largest mainstream political parties in North Macedonia since the country's independence in 1990. Despite being pro-EU, the party under Gruevski's leadership largely relied on populist practices, including the construction of a personalistic leader, in order to remain in power. This was accompanied by firm party control over the media, the judiciary, the economy, civil society, and other pillars of liberal democracy. These

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5 A bizarre case was the example of protests by high school teachers and their union in 2015, who were opposed publicly at a press conference by the trade union of Firefighters (!), a branch trade union which belonged to the same umbrella trade union with the aforementioned high school teachers trade union, but was close to Gruevski.

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developments have led to the characterization of Gruevski's regime as authoritarian/hybrid regime (Bieber 2018; Kapidžić 2020). Populism was an important instrument to support these authoritarian practices and to ensure continuous electoral support. This grand political project relied on a specific mix of populism, authoritarianism, and ethno-nationalism.

 Populist themes were used interchangeably in accordance with current needs and included a number of topics. These topics included saving 'the ordinary people' from 'the lazy and corrupt political elite,' protecting Macedonian ethnic interests from the country's large Albanian minority, attacking the opposition and 'traitor' NGOs, and constructing a novel Macedonian identity rooted in the ancient kingdom of Alexander the Great. The reliance on historical narratives and cultural practices to reinforce the ancient identity represented a political myth that traced the origin of the modern Macedonian nation to ancient times. In fact, this narrative emerged as a response to neighboring countries contesting some of the important identity markers of ethnic Macedonians. At the same time, it was a tool which served to mobilize the public, encourage them to vote, and participate in protests in support of the creators of the project.

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