Neo-nationalist and populist discourses have reached the mainstream of thinking in Europe. They appeal to ever-widening sections of the populations of such diverse countries as the Netherlands, Italy and Denmark. Eastern Europe was not bypassed on this trend either. On this, as some tend to see an alternate terrain in Europe, however, the advent of populism resounds with certain irony, as nationalism, deemed the shadow-image of communism, was zealously resisted (with one noticeable exception in the former Yugoslav region) throughout the transformative era in the 1990s following the collapse of communism. Nevertheless, by the late 2000s “the specter of populism” as the Bulgarian political observer Ivan Krastev puts it (2007) has finally reached Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria. It is further intriguing how the timing of populism’s arrival in the east overlaps with these countries’ conclusive orientation towards membership in the EU, and the alleged successful completion of their respectful “transitions to capitalism”.

In this paper I map up the rise of populist talk in Bulgaria onto an emerging phenomenon of immigration to discuss the implications that these two phenomena have on local politics of difference, now unpacking within the processes of Europeanization. I furthermore interrogate the implications of Bulgarian populism for the EU’s expanding regime on immigration in which the country has emerged as a strategic eternal border zone of Europe.

The more conventional media-driven view tends to paint populisms in the east and the west as substantially different. I challenge and hopefully complicate this persuasion by suggesting that “populism” might reflect rather something of a more general outlook – uncomfortable as it may appear – engulfing societies in current liberal democracies overall, with the European east joining the west. In this, I do not assume either that democracies are everywhere the same, nor that local populisms are essentially identical. In fact, some view the term “populism” as somewhat misguided as it has been applied to depict political phenomena that differ significantly, such as for instance the style of governance of the late Hugo Chavez in Bolivia compared to Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. As Don Kalb reminds us: “Different locations, histories, and the proximity or distance of state elites to the sources of capital will make a difference for outcomes” (Kalb 2009, 207). Nevertheless, the term works when understood as a sign of the radical transformation of politics underway in many places around the world (Krastev 2007, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, Lukacs 2005). My intention is to unhinge, however, some of our more readily given perceptions, and while I will argue that on a structural level the east and the west have much more in common in the experience of populism than the mainstream narrative of the “populism’s advent” allows, I’m hoping to offer a picture, slightly more nuanced by highlighting an intersection of issues in Bulgaria focusing on popular disenfranchisement, transitional discourses, European integration and migration.
Tracking populism’s usage in Europe’s public discourse

I begin by first sketching how populism has been approached by political pundits and scholars alike, in Europe’s public forums and discussions. The most immediate response to populism almost univocally describes it as a sign of “democracy in crisis”. There is a wide consensus around this proposition. Declining voter turnout has been cited as the most ubiquitous effect of this “crisis”. And yet, this diagnosis in western media is certainly more readily prescribed first to the postsocialist European east echoing a long-standing orientalist accounts that not only assume essential difference between Europe and eastern Europe, but moreover frame that difference from western Europe as a distance from and a lack of Europeanness (i.e. democratic principles and tolerance, in particular) (Kuus 2004, 437; Buchowski 2006, Todorova 1997). There has been a tendency to read the region a-priory as a cauldron of ethnic nationalisms. On this ground, the current wave of populisms in the east, experienced since the early 2000s, appear somehow more “traditional,” and hence less “modern” or “democratic,” also because it has been often suppressive of internal minorities (Meseznikov, Gyarfasova and Smilov 2008). The east itself has been inclined to entertain similar orientalizing interpretations in a way of painting the further east and especially the Balkans (Buchovski 2006).

At the same time, Western populisms/nationalisms have been treated as something significantly more recent and symptomatic of forces more or less external to societies as a whole. Western populisms are overwhelmingly described as conflicts primarily about immigration that are instigated by far-right movements and accentuated by the “war on terror” in the post 9/11 political environment (Feldman 2012, Kabl 2009).

What these diverging discourses of eastern and western populisms then tend to convey are not only significant inconsistencies in the meanings of the term “populism,” but also limited understanding of who the populists really are (the far-right” in the west, vs “everyone” in the east) and what does that populism indeed represent?

Furthermore, a recurrent assumption is made that populism is “dangerous”: it is about nationalist aspirations that are riven with disturbing dualities and hatred of imagined enemies. Such angst appears especially perilous in a region like the Balkans, where nationalism presumably falls on a more intimate turf laid out in the area’s thorny ethnic history of conflict and confrontation. Such entrenched views of the Balkans’ ethnic exceptionalism in particular, are evident even in the writings of local scholars. For instance, one Bulgarian social historian, expressing a relatively accepted view, has argued that the currency of populist ideology in his country is reinforced in the region’s historical “propensity to egalitarianism” (Znpolski). As a deeply rooted trace, this egalitarian ethos is found unsettling not so much because adverse to capitalist society, but in the way it roots down to the regions’ Ottoman past. In the Bulgarian popular imagination the Ottoman past has become a shortcut assertion to explain a whole set of unwelcomed social habits that are also deemed “pre-modern”, and which include among other things docility towards authority, patrimonial relationships, or the above-mentioned egalitarian outlook on power. The example illuminates how the populism’s “dangers” partially stem also from its kinship with nationalism.

Populism is too readily conflated often also with neo-nationalism and as such has given credence to views that link it with neo-Nazism and racism. But are these thee distinct historically localized phenomena indeed identical? Populism habitually evokes nationalist sentiments, yet it represents one very specific manifestation of nationalism that seems to obscure the role of the
intellectual elites in the making of the nations, something the nationalisms of the 19th century have been particularly assertive of. As a type of discourse that seeks to mobilize in the name of the rights of the popular majorities “populism” seems rather culture-blind: certainly more so than nationalism. Yet, in any event the concern here with this parallel to nationalism, lays in the epistemic and symbolic dimensions of the populist discourse itself, and the cultural fundamentalist claims that are foregrounding many of the versions of populism we witness in the east and the west alike. More particularly, just like nationalism, populist rhetoric is framed around reified notions of “culture,” “the people” and “the nation” the demands of which acquire new primacy in the messy landscape of global politics (Stolke 1999:27). In that, political populism structures around a reductionist vernacular that condenses complex political hurdles to trivialized solutions aiming at the gut feelings of people. In the cautionary note of the late Ralf Dahrendorf, populism offers “a demagogic substitute for real arguments” in which the role of the media in manipulating public opinion is critical. “Populism is simple, democracy is complex: that is ultimately perhaps the most important difference between the two ways of relating to the people,1 concludes Dahrendorf. It is in this way that populism aggravates the legitimacy crisis that is at the heart of the modern nation-states.

For political analysts more specifically, populism’s most disruptive work accounts for its deleterious effects on procedural democracy and liberal processes overall. The likes of Robert Fico (in Slovakia) or the Kaczynski brothers (in Poland) and Volen Siderov (in Bulgaria) have brought to the political scene in Eastern Europe charismatic opportunists far outside of the established liberal constituency of the political bloc that institutionalized the “capitalist transitions” in the last two decades since the fall of the communist regimes. These self-pronounced leaders have achieved nearly an instant political success, otherwise with limited resources beyond the promissory rhetoric of “better life for all”. We are also reminded here, however, that in the “old” eastern tradition of “corruption” and “state-plundering”, these figures, while staking altruistic disinterestedness, have been primarily also invested in their own political and economic advancement. This small fact, some western observed have argued in hope, is precisely what would tilt public sentiments ultimately against them.

Liberal pundits in the east similarly have often sided with their western counterparts in reading the growing populist movements in their countries as “irrational and anti-intellectual”, as “an obsession with conspiracy and anti-Semitism”; and as a fierce (and in many ways surprising) rejection of pluralism, democracy and liberalism (Krastev 2007:58).

More recently, however, several scholars have begun raising a different set of questions in relation to the populism’s enigmatic appeal. Jacques Rupnik among them, has questioned in the case of east central Europe whether the “Euro consensus” itself – the fact that the idea of joining the EU has been embraced univocally by both the political Left and the Right – has not contributed to what he sees as an “emptying out” of politics in the east, inviting the spirit of the new concern for the “people”. This is a critical posture that also acknowledges the wider power imbalances in the relationship between the European east and the west. He also suggests that while “dangerous,” populists in the west have been significantly constrained by the EU authoritative discourse, which we should not expect anything less from the east either. In that he stresses, we should then posit eastern populism on the same continuum with populism in the west (Rupnik 2007).

Echoing a similar concern Ivan Krastev, a prominent political voice in Bulgaria and in the liberal circles in the east, elaborates by suggesting that rather than a critical gesture against the top-down imposition of the European project per se, or worse – a retrograde view of the repressed from the margins – support for populism in the east in its narrowly political sense unearths a popular rejection of ruling elites and elite (liberal) ideology overall that in the post-cold war era has become self-referential, self-aggrandizing universalism. What is at stake in this rejection further is a response to the displacement of alternate forms of political practice in favor of liberal models of representation and participation. It also signals the erosion of Euro-solidarities and what he inquisitively, yet without further clarification mentions as the “muddling of peoples’ perception of their societies” overall (Krastev 2007, 2012). Stretching this notion further, populism in the East seems to gesture towards a new critical appraisal of the path of the “transitional” developments in Eastern Europe more generally, and from there also of globalization and neoliberalism overall.

**Anthropologies of fear and the nation**

It is on these two notions – untangling populism as a “revolt against elites” but also as a referent to broader transnational and European dynamics – that I hinge my own analysis on Bulgarian populism and populist responses to the phenomenon of immigration today. It further seems to me we ought to differentiate between populism as a political platform (i.e. political populism) and populism we might say “of the ground” as the common sense of injustice and disenfranchisement with which people frame their desires for moral revival that characterizes so many different societies around the world today. There is the raising of the question of the “people” here as well – interrogating changing forms of solidarity and the life of the commons.

My understandings are further enthused by the writings of Jean and John Comaroffs, two anthropologists whose analysis of current political developments in Africa shed an insightful light on the broader meaning and presence of “populism” in the world at large.

In their symptomology populist politics, which they see as prevalent in Africa, Europe and Asia (Ali 2002) as in North America (Licasc…), relates to a widely overarching political processes linked to the shifting parameters of globalization in then last two decades (Comaroffs 2012, See also Kalb 2009, 207). Their considerations resonate with Krastev’s appeal, to take seriously the elusiveness of the term and to dig dipper into its various meanings and the hybrid and volatile forms it takes as a way of understanding “the radical transformation of politics underway in many places around the world.”

Populism takes various forms in different parts of the world – some have been anchored in leftist ideologies, others – squarely on the right – which has much to do with they way it roots in particular local political histories and circumstances. Nevertheless, all of these different inflections reveal striking *structural similarities*. There is the persistent sense, felt in many parts around the world today, they argue, of insecurity related to processes of neoliberal globalization (Ibid.).

The most common response to these kinds of popular sentiments of fear were registered by some anthropologists as yearly as in the 1990s, invoking such notions as “cultural racism,” and trying to grasp the pronounced desire in many parts of Western Europe to close the ranks of one’s own community and defend against the “others” spreading idioms of deep cultural difference and using nationalistic, xenophobic or racist notions (Stolke, Fasin). Arjun Appadurai
has emphasized the critical place of fear, insecurity and anger in generating the popular receptiveness for ideologies of ethnic or religious neonationalism (cited in Kalb 2009).

In light of this body of work how can then we begin to explain the surge of neonationalisms in the capitalist societies of the latest stage of globalization? Jonathan Friedman have suggested taking seriously the global systemic perspective emerging beyond the objectified knowledge that comes out of people’s own interpretations on life, which has been customarily the focus of inquiry for anthropologists. He stresses the importance of “seeing” the more central structural forces and social processes undergirding the global system itself that condition our experiences associated with transnational processes. Responses of culturalist exclusivity and what we might call general “indigenization” of public discourse have something to do with global structural processes, he has coined in the notion of “double polarizations” (Friedman 652). Social transformations unhinged by globalization fuse in two distinct and crucial processes: one general outcome of which has been the deepening social and cultural divides that distinguish our societies of today. We observe almost universally the dissipation of the working classes into “common folk” and the transformation of the lowest tiers of societies further into classes dangereuses (654). A parallel process at the upper echelons of society has transformed our former national elites into new cosmopolitan/ transnational class that has forsaken the project of the nation as a community of fate². It is this structural condition of double polarization (i.e an increased polarization between classes locked onto a transformation of the identities of the classes involved) that feeds popular politics of fear. Picking up on this proposition Don Kalb has further argued that any explanation of the search of new nationalism in Europe (and beyond) must be placed against the combined background, on the one hand, of the crisis facing popular sovereignty, and on the other, of labor (Kalb 2009:208).

In my interpretation of the politics of fear in Bulgaria I highlight in addition the central place of the discourse of Europe and wider processes of Europeanization as further conditioning people’s understanding of their fate under the transitional transformations of market capitalism. “Europeanization” which has been originally imagined as a project of harmonization of political and economic spaces, actualizes in contradictory processes that are different for the core of Europe and the fringe, occupied by smaller stated like Bulgaria. New processes of differentiation have occurred among European states and within the European populations. These processes involve the (re)construction of difference not only between new and old citizen members (i.e. the second order citizenry of the East) of the EU, but also involve nativist politics of differentiation between migrant and non-migrant population within nations and different claims of citizenship and belonging that are made on the basis of length of residency but also nativity, ethnicity, cultural competency, and civic engagement (as society cuts further social divides) (Scuzzarello 2013, 95, Richardson 2013, 4).

“State of misery”: politics of fear in Bulgaria
To set the context I begin with one textual occasion, which sheds light on what we might think of the wider “structure of feelings,” which frames Bulgarians’ orientation in the world today at this critical junction of our “global modernity”.

In late November 2011, the Bulgarian web was literally barraged with an ambiguous interview

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² Bauman was the first to notice these developments, describing the new elites as “modern day absentee landlords” (Bauman 1998). Similarly, Ivan Krastev has coined the term “runaway elites”.


from the Dutch Premier Mark Rutte conceivably given to the National Bulgarian radio. The document was raising a real tumult as an avalanche of commentaries trailed each new reposting. In no time the text winded its way through the blogosphere and the social networking sites, to a widely popular off-beat TV channel (SKAT) and few of the major national newspapers: the discussion echoing over a month.

On the surface the interview stacked aptly with current news in Sofia. The Dutch PM, who was indeed planning a trip to Bulgaria in October, was forced to cancel his visit last minute on a request of the Bulgarian government. Some Western publications suggested Mr. Rutte was rather displeased by the riposte of his Eastern European colleagues since the visit was meant to clear up the thickening clouds around a matter of critical concern for Bulgaria – the joining of the Schengen agreement and the Dutch’s decisive resistance to which, reflecting a broader opinion in Brussels. In the eyes of the rule-setters and Dutch officials Bulgaria required “more progress” in key areas like the “fight with corruption and organized crime”, while Bulgarians insisted they “have followed all formalities” and have been now unfairly reproached on the grounds of added conditionality.

Interestingly, the refusal to join Schengen seemed to have struck a different cord with the Bulgarian citizenry overall. Despite the blow on Schengen and the deepening crisis in the EU, on which the country is heavily dependent for foreign investment, trade and remittances, Europe continues to win plaudits by Bulgarians, especially when it face-slaps Bulgaria’s own politicians. (Betchev 2013) In an overwhelming consent the EU regulatory oversight is seen increasingly as the only hope Bulgarians share for democratic change and justice in their country, despite traditional suspicion of encroachment on national sovereignty. Just like all the preceding governments, the latest team of official lead by of the PM Boyko Borisov too proved highly disappointing and unable to stand on their pledge to ‘take revenge against the transition on behalf of the poor’. The political setting then clearly commanded a statement from Mr. Rutte, which seemed also well awaited.

There was something about the text of that interview nevertheless, which took the reader by surprise right from its gawky title. “Bulgarians are unable to create a working state!” it read, as the opening paragraph laid out the broader strokes of the “Dutch rejection” and highlighted Europeans’ concerns on why Bulgarians appeared “unprepared” to join the club of the privileged. Half-way-through the opening remarks, however, and the unsuspected reader confronted a portrayal of Bulgarian life that was so meticulous in the way it narrated popular anxieties that any lingering confusion over the nature of the document was timely dispelled. “This is a mock interview,” wrote the Sofia-based journalist Martin Karbovski, well-known for his inflammatory investigations and style of writing. “But also one of the most cited pieces in the social networking sites today” […] “Read it!” he urged and another reprint appeared this time in the nationally distributed newspaper “Standard”.

In reality the text originated from a blog on the worldpress platform. The site explicitly states

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3 Including the respectable daily newspaper Dnevnik, as well as popular online-news sites such as Mediapul, Dnesbg, long commentaries under the line followed with a formidable body of debate taking shape for moths to come.

4 Registered under the route (“neverojatno.wordpress.com”) “unbelievable”.wordpress.com and dubbed “Bzikileaks,” which is a play on words that are derivatives from “wikileaks” and the Bulgarian word for “prank” and a “joke,” which is [b]a[z]ik.
that the presented content is a literary invention, yet this was precisely the piece of critical information systematically lost on readers in successive reprints. Dozens of other such documents – interviews, speeches and open letters – comprise the bulk of the content of this blog, which has been regularly spilling information over to other media venues in Bulgaria. The world-renowned writer Umberto Eko, according to another interview, declared that all “reasonable Bulgarians” are running away from the county. The Canadian comedian James Ron scorns Bulgarians harshly for their obedience and similar to Mr. Rutte envisions the country extinct in an observable future. Even American President Obama had a clever remark to make on Bulgaria, this time in reference to the Bulgarian PM. “Don’t complain about your commander in chief, he is simply the kind of political material that is at your disposal” he notes alluding to a scandalous remark the PM Borisov himself has made in front of the Bulgarian diaspora during a trip to the US in 2001, when he exclaimed that the reasons for the stalled reforms in the country are due to the “bad human material in disposal”. These texts have been so ubiquitous in the Bulgarian cyber realm that on occasion institutions too (the BNR in the case I mentioned) have been pressed to offer official disclaimers for having no relation to the publications. Lawyers have raised concerns about the authors potentially facing defamation charges from the public figures, behind whom the texts hide. Until today the actual writers has remained undisclosed.

Embedded in a social agency that pulses in the language of despair, a unifying feature of this material has been a text shaped as a commentary delivered by a foreigner. It is this feature of the interviews that raises most questions for Bulgarian readers and lends them a certain “scandalous” tenor in that they are both irritated by but also acknowledge the fact that put in the mouth of the outsider the claims have a better chance to reach their targeted audiences. The Bulgarian anthropologist Ivaylo Ditchev have pointed out that the construction of local identities in the Balkans shares a historical affinity to use the foreign gaze and approval to self-observe. It seems as such identities always speaks to the outside, because the outside has so powerfully determined what the Balkans is. The interviews are embedded then in this practice with a twist: eliciting the foreign gaze to speak truth to the Bulgarian citizens and elites alike, presumed unable to articulate (and act upon) for themselves the woes of their nation. In this respect, it is worth asking furthermore who exactly complains here and to whom complains are directed. What sorts of indignities provoke complaints? What do complaints seek (just recognition or also change)? And finally, what kinds of assumptions we can make about the authorities and citizens, the changes and the role of the cyber space today as an institutional venue of popular dissent in these narratives?

While these are all critical questions worth unpacking, I use this particular text here solely as an illustration of the general tone for the societal political sensitivities in Bulgaria today, and the kinds of themes and narratives that saturate public debates about the geopolitical and cultural present of the country. These narratives, I would further argue, illuminate publicly crystalized formulae for the interpretation of reality, which help the average Bulgarian citizen package their individual experiences of a period solemnly defined in the official discourse as the “transition from communism to capitalism”.

The bulk of the text, which I will cite here in some detail, works with some of the foundational symbols of collective self-imagining, even if as it seems these to be turned on their heads. And before I go into the text itself, one last note regarding the line of continuity that the genre establishes with narratives of lament that span a long tradition of what many scholars of EE discuss as a “culture of complaint”, specific to Eastern European public traditions.
Bulgarians are ill equipped to create a working state and stable legal institutions and thus doomed for long to remain outside of the Schengen space, concludes the first section of the interview. Europeans might just as well recognize Bulgaria only for its value as a territory, since the country’s administration is highly deficient.

The state of the nation is even more troublesome, which he sees ultimately as irrelevant to the overall wellbeing of Europe. To the question where the PM finds the reasons for this dismal political and social outlook of the country, he points out the “innate characteristics” of Bulgarians – their inability to unite, pettiness and a streak to sabotaging everyone, including oneself.

Bulgarians have a legacy of slavery to blame for that, which spans over the larger part of their history. The nation is stifled in the grip of crooks, unscrupulous gold-diggers, sycophants and cowards, while society at large sits aside, endures it all, all the while continuously electing to power criminals and political adventurists.

If no for some material recompense Bulgarians are never united, you see them always planted in front of large TV screens in the coffee shops and restaurants around the cities, where they observe in apathy the ravaging of their won state and nation. Unlike their Greek neighbors, who have not turned their heads down when their government and international institutions demanded austerity measures, Bulgarians have been agonizing under the weight of austerity since the times of the very collapse of communism and continue.

When you arrive in Bulgaria, figure-points the foreigner now the nation-state as a whole, all you see are only ailing, poor and frightened people. While the Greeks might have in fact built a debt for billions, and even stolen from European funds, you still can see these funds somewhat gone to purpose and in the infrastructure of the country. In Bulgaria, instead, European funds are swindled under the table and nothing reaches the ordinary citizen.

In a final gasp for sympathy and to redeem his nation the “interviewer” throws his last question: “Okay, … but how about our culture, our education? We have also given something to the world!” The alphabet and John Atanasoff, the inventor of the first computer?” Even to the face of this hefty evidence, the foreigner is unmoved and think Bulgarians have little chance to change their fortune. Illiteracy among the young is on the stiff curve up, he points, and even if some young people choose to stay in Bulgaria, their self-indulgent lifestyles are the lesser version of the predatory models they are offered from those in power on the top. As if it hasn’t been true, he points, that the minister of education has been trying to lure some international students to Bulgaria suggesting they could binge on alcohol morning to dusk. In the Netherlands, a statement of this sort would have yielded immediate dismissal. Where are your world-renowned writers, asks the PM, your artists and musicians that can contribute to the culture of Europe as a whole? Or do you take for culture the Museum of socialist art? Or perhaps you tag as culture the tours of the scantily-lad singers of Chalga music, or the restless surge of reality shows booming on TV? And then, who supports your culture?

Facebook is now booming with enraged statements of people, who having omitted the disclaimer inserted in the text, find the tone of the interview “impudent” and “disrespectful”: “how is this foreign official daring to assume he has the right to judge”.

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“What is phenomenal about [the piece]”, continues the journalist I mentioned earlier in his small insert accompanying a reprint in the newspaper, “...is something else: the man, who wants to state something true, yet hides behind a fake journalistic product.” [...] “This is an interview by a provocateur, a man, who rejoices he is the bearer of the awful news”. Among the hereafter-formed opponents of the interview, mainly among the educated professional layers of society, this view shares the main concern with the text, which is that while skillfully delivered and ringing the bell of truthfulness, the document, nevertheless, endorses the common habit of complaining and Bulgarian’s characteristic cynicism when it come to local life, politics and society.

Echoing these concerns, others have seen the interview as an expression of “the deeply-seeded sense of inferiority and insignificance” among Bulgarians, “a self-imposed predicament of social pessimism,” – a fruit of another inclination towards conspiratorial thinking that is often mixed with a doze of perverse “rejoicing in the pose of the brave victim”. These fake interviews of foreigners speaking about Bulgaria are seen as “feeding on people’s slavish feelings of despair,” as they “release the tension among the mass internet consumers away from active civic engagement”. Among the various faults identified with this popular pastime of public complaining then is also the concern about popular disaffection being blocked – the freezing on civic action as we see here how public rage dissolves into a form of detached talk.

While such texts might indeed contribute to what another post frames as the “fastening of the otherwise already grim climate in the country”, I’m interested in the resonance of this kind of social anxiety and the politics of fear with wider structurally-determined developments concomitant with globalization. In the critique offered by liberal intellectuals in Bulgaria I read along with Michal Buchowsky, another kind of reflex at play here and a form of “internal orientalization” that blames the lower tiers of society for their own degraded circumstances and for society’s difficulties” (2006:467) (also Kideckel 2002, 2007). What is left outside of such concerns are the systemic structural violence imposed through years of economic and financial restructuring and policies of authority. It refers to a public climate in which large groups in society in a self-accusatory mode refer to each other as ‘civilizationally/culturally incompetent’ to sustain and provoke real productive changes in their lives (Sztompka 1993).

**Nationalism of the web**

The web has become the main platform for deliberations on such topics and a central vector a new national phantasm. In Bulgaria’s highly fragmentated public sphere however rumours circulate at the speed of light and fanciful tales compete freely with centuries of scientific tradition. One of the favourite topics on the Bulgarian web aside from where to get free software and movies, as I hoped to have made it clear by now, is nationalism, present in its many guises, including the above somehow more stylized and critical concern with the state of the things national. The main refrains of Mr. Rutte’s fake interview spotlight a general concern with the loss of the national ethos, status and identity in a world seen overwhelmed by corrupt local elites and disinterested international forces. A call to national unity is then invigorated in the sentiment that only united the society can handle truly the negative effects of neoliberal globalization.

There is much negotiation and variety however around how and who speaks truth to the nation
and who is to be pointed a finger at in this expanding public (narrative) sphere stretching between the cyber and traditional media outlets. There is nationalism on the right, which is directed against a Russia that is somehow still understood as a communist country. And there is nationalism on the left which sees the United States more bluntly as the grand provocateur in the Bulgarian politics. Those – and that’s an overwhelming majority – who see elites being at the root of the nation’s demise highlight not only the riff that runs deep between “us” – people drawn more to the fringe of existence – and “them” – politics being synonymous for methods of personal enrichment – yet also a culture of civic obedience which certainly affect some layers of society more than others.

Left and right is a retreat into cultural phantasm spining yarns of glory to Thracian sages and proto-Bulgarian khans that also seek the resurrection of the orthodox creed. In the last several years for instance a group of former socialist nomenklatura poets and artists issued a public demand to introduce orthodox religious instruction in schools as the best defence against the current moral degradation.

The trappings of these sentiments, as we will see, lay in how they simultaneously validate oppression of difference as a way of patriotically mobilizing the whole of the nation, but more specifically its resourceful side: under the liberal paradigm focusing on skills and education.

In recent anthropology Andre Gingrich, Marcus Banks, John and Jane Comarros, Don Kalb among others, highlight the importance of taking seriously about social insecurity, fear and anger and treating social anxiety as a receptor of the general conditions generated by neoliberal globalizations. These conditions they argued have spurred “a popular receptiveness for ideologies of ethnic or religious exceptionalism,” as people increasingly question the status of their societies, elites and states. The question “who we are,” (or in the Bulgarian rendition perhaps better “why are we this way”) has acquired a single most important status is public discourse, which is a fact observable around Europe (Eastern Europe included) but also as Comaroffs argue worldwide (Gerchire…). Thinking with Don Kalb then we might acknowledge that for Bulgarians testing, sensing, talking and resisting the present-day conditions of life (political and economic), two questions loom large: first is the issue about how to “make a living”; and the second – how to “make a difference”.

In the above-mentioned commentaries we sense some of the nagging anxiety that many Bulgarians convey today about the systemic loss of skills and status that they have experienced in the postsocialist era where inequalities have been running high and social dislocations – including sudden professional irrelevance – massive. This “civilizational collapse”, as it is seen, have been accompanied by a mass outmigation of the most productive sections of society and the young, while the care for the vulnerable and those laid off in thousands was withdrawn by the state. Such colossal social shifts were rendered legible in the public discourse through claims that portrayed the changes as “inevitable” and in a promise that at end of the day capitalism was superior to communism.

**The political context: populism in the political rhetoric**

The entire decade of the 1990s that scripted the history of the democratic “transition” in Bulgaria was played out in the continuous swapping of places in power between two ideological party camps. The *United Democratic Forces* (UDF) stood for the emerging Bulgarian “right,”
while the former communist party, rechristened into the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) played the political “left” in the parliament. The shaping of Bulgarians’ political experience, the expansion and in many ways also rewriting of the public sphere and public discourse was initially primarily focused on the parties, as these formations handled the big questions of the era: democratization, privatization and liberalization of the market.

In these cycles of exchanging seats, the first government to actually fulfill its full 4-year mandate was the UDF’s administration of Ivan Kostov (between 1997 and 2001) taking over after the BSP had brought the Bulgarian economy to near insolvency in 1996 when inflation ran at 300% and people’s savings evaporated overnight. The UDF called a close collaboration with both the World Bank and the IMF and committed sturdily to structural adjustment reforms in Bulgaria. Moreover, the UDF initiated what was at the time portrayed by the party as the long-overdue privatization of the largest Bulgarian companies, still in the hands of the state (Ghodsee 2008:28, Smilov 2008, Ganev 2009). However, not unlike their opponents in BSP before them, the UDF’s reforms squared with widespread allegations of corruption, in which even long-time supporters of the new “right” agreed the UDF leader failed on his largest promise to disentangle political from economic interests, and promote a transparent process in the privatization of state industries.

The perpetual allegations back and forth between the two leading political forces sat into a permanent trait of the emerging political culture in Bulgaria, where ideological polarization run extreme and determined the political dispositions of Bulgarians. The consequences of this polarization were twofold and both critical to the actual social and economic developments unfolding in the midst of the first postsocialist decade. On the one hand, the ideological division helped craft a newly differentiating political constituency out of the unanimous electorate passed down from the communist era. On the other, the political polarization contributed to the obfuscation of the “actual nature” of what some pundits at the time alluded to after Marx as “the first stage of the primitive accumulation of capital” through which the elite begun converting political into economic power. In Bulgaria where the purported “transition” [преход] from its very start begun as a project of elites and technocrats from within the ranks of the former communist party, the shift to market capitalism unloaded entirely around the state and focused on extracting accumulated resources at the center.

Venelin Ganev tracks this genealogy of capitalist transformation in Bulgaria working off Charles Tilly’s analysis of state formation in Western Europe. He argues that despite the persistent demand for more and better government, postsocialist elites (perhaps in different countries to different degree) were far from incentivized to work on establishing strong state institutions. They focused instead on the pillaging of the national wealth, which was the only big pool of resources available to work with in cultivating capital. This he identifies as the single most defining feature of the Bulgarian first postsocialist decade, which extends even into the present, given the centrality of EU funds in the management of the national economy. Yet, while paradoxical perhaps on the surface, more conducive to “stateness” and the building of strong institutions historically has been the opposite situation, the availability of resources in the hands of wider populations, which resources then in order to be extracted, as has argued Tilly, motivates the building of institutional state infrastructure.

In the postsocialist Bulgaria instead the conversion and accumulation of capital took place behind closed bureaucratic doors. Since the participation of citizenry in the state bureaucratic
domains is traditionally restricted, the process of extraction was not likely to face mass
cfidence either, at least initially (Ganev 2007: 180). And as the timeless plot of how the strong exploit the weak unpacks, the postsocialist state, Ganev insists, presented in essence opportunities for an “extraction of the already extracted,” which meant powerful actors did not need to galvanize mass participation to privatize resources. Moreover, with public life largely flattened and the lack of mobilized social constituency or developed media and civic organizations, the crucial practice of monitoring the management of the state was left to no one at the time (Ganev 2007, 191). What occurred on the surface and within the public domain instead was a public spectacle of “politics” for divided masses to consume.

More importantly throughout the 1990s discussions on a possible alternative or “national” path in the building of democratic and market institutions in Bulgaria were consistently curbed. Nationalism, equated with communism was stamped a shameful “vestiges of totalitarian thinking”, or otherwise inviting a dangerous “return to communism”. Similarly futile were interrogations into the interventions pursued locally by the international organizations of IMF and the World Bank. The Bulgarian transition was pushed forward entirely under the rationalities of the ‘Right” and without alternatives, argues the Bulgarian anthropologist Dostena Lavergne, and it was this same paradigm conflating “neoliberalism” with “modernization” that came to furnish later the aspired membership into the EU as well (Lavergne 2012:586).

A repetitive voters’ complaint towards the late 1990s has been that parties’ programs became increasingly indistinguishable and emptied of rhetorical clout. Pundit arguments persisted that such complaints reflected a “structural deficiency” in that the postsocialist public lacked enough exposure to public deliberation from the communist era to a proper understanding of the political talk and the political process of the postsocialist period. This assumed Homo Sovieticus syndrome, overworked as it was, still captures something of the fact that even the educated sectors of the Bulgarian public occurred less familiar with the principals and the lived ethics of capitalist life overall, especially concerning the first years of the transition. Yet, more often than not parties’ political platforms appeared incomprehensible also because differences between political worldviews, between an identifiable “left” and “right,” were gradually divested from meaning (Krastev, Smilov, Crasteva, Ghodsee). Small wonder then that in the public imagination politicians are consistently lumped together in the derogative “всички са макарки” (“they are all rascals”). Such perceptions have been paralleled by a diminishing trust in the institutions of the representative democracy overall. Even with the Bulgarian “transition’s” most substantial and widely supported goal of becoming a member of the EU in place, the political process in the country remains for the majority hugely disappointing, grounded on the uncontested impression that politics do not make a difference at all (Smilov :20,

This belief is certainly traceable for once to the real material disposessions that have embedded postsocialist political processes and whose effects have been overwhelming across society. Today the country is the poorest in the EU, with consistent trends in rising inequality highest in Europe only after Latvia, stagnant income levels (even after EU membership) and a significant decrease in the size of the population due to death and emigration. Triggers are to be found in the ever-declining government expenditure on social security and welfare in the context of a volatile and as of today contracting economy. Unemployment only among the economically active population (since Bulgaria also has a significant portion of the labor force that has resigned from looking for jobs) grew for instance from 5.6% in 2008 (before the “global
Ivan Krastev, to whom I have alluded earlier, finds the roots of the popular impression with the deflated politics of the Transition arise from what he terms “the transition consensus” (alluding to a local expression of the “Washington consensus”) (Krastev and Smilov 2008). The consensus is expressed in the fact that all the mainstream parties in Bulgaria, and especially the UDF and the BSP, have undisputedly accepted the neoliberal creed of reform and development embedded in the structural adjustment plans orchestrated by the international development regime. This process was aided by a range of Bulgarian and western European think-tanks and NGOs (Laverge 2010). As “policy” and “expertise” replaced politics, alternatives to the neoliberal “doctrine” (Klein 2008) were presented as unthinkable: the road that cleared ahead towards political reform and market liberalization was the only one affordable. Dissent was deemed “communist”, declared “uncultured”, “uneducated” and not living up to “European values” (Ivancheva 2013). So it appears that both external and internal political and economic constrains have conspired towards a situation in Bulgaria, in which critical and varied debate about the direction of changes and especially about the economy, or the international commitments of Bulgaria were foreclosed for public argument.

It was this climate of radical and unsurpassable, as it seemed, political polarization around issues, that at the same time appeared highly circumscribed, that by the late 1990s, begun turning people away from the voting booth (Karásimeonov 2006, 87). The diminishing voter turnout testified to a beginning retreat from official politics, but also to an ideological impasse that one way or the other was meant to offshoot new developments.

The first opening in this discursive impasse and effectively the first instance of populism in Bulgaria (even if not entirely recognized) was the appearance of Simeon Saxecoburgotski, the grandson of the Bulgarian Tsar Ferdinand from the pre-communist era. Simeon Saxecoburgotski’s movement, as it came to prominence in the two months before the parliamentary elections of 2001, run against existing parties and across the rigid ideological divide that has split the country in two. His movement was supported by a team of unlikely politicians, among whom young Western-trained expats, who have been part of the mass outmigration of educated youth at the beginning of the 1990s, and who have now returned to join his political crusade to save Bulgaria. The new party’s outsider position, hyped by Simeon’s royal reputation and slightly archaic Bulgarian accent, promised the right combination of a Bulgarian spirit marrying western expertise as the superior vessel in the murky waters of the Bulgarian transition (Ghodsee 2008:28, Stoilkova 2003). Against the self-interestedness of those who dominated representative politics prior to Simeon’s arrival, the King and his disciples came to personify the possibility of a new national revival and “fair conditions for everyone”.

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Contrary to the prevalent perception of populism as anti-democratic and anti-liberal, Simeon’s movement in the early 2000s in no way disrupted the ongoing processes of liberalization of the Bulgarian economy, and in that actually sustained the course of the neoliberal transition and democratic reforms in the country (Krastev 2007). While in the early 1990s economically speaking the first governments might have still had some discretionary space for action of their own, since 1996 and the razing hyperinflation eroding trust in the banking system, Bulgaria adopted a “Currency board,” which effectively meant loosing the right to alter the exchange rate for its currency and fixing the economic policies around the demands of the board. Furthermore, accepting loans from the WB and the IMF locked decision-making on policies related to privatization and the impending administrative reforms in the hands of foreign institutions. The King’s party, while unseasoned, was especially successful in deepening relations with the West, paving the way to Bulgaria’s membership in NATO and its pending accession to the EU. The EU accession procedures and membership negotiations with NATO de facto sealed a second “review board” on Bulgaria extending significantly into the political domain as well (Smilov 2008:20).

**Ataka’s: anti-politics**

In the political realm, one political formation has managed to capture best the widespread resentment with the country’s arrested reforms and to ride on the widespread laments over the demise of the nation. This is the formation known by the name Ataka, standing in English for “attack”.

“Ataka” came to prominence during the parliamentary elections in 2005, garnishing a success that stunned the political stage with its more than 8% of the vote. While 2005 was also the electoral season with the lowest turnout in the postsocialist electoral history of Bulgaria, Ataka’s success had an overwhelming impact on Bulgarian politics. Similar to the Simeon movement, “Ataka” too was created and organized just a few months before the elections. Its leader Volen Siderov is a charismatic journalist who became popular countrywide through a televised show under the same name “Ataka”. Development in the media itself is an intriguing element of his story and an important facet for the shaping of public discourse in Bulgaria of the new millennium.

In the late 1990s thanks to a legal loophole and the relatively low cost of subscription prices, dozens of new cable stations sprung up in Bulgaria, which rather than reselling global products (for which they often lacked the money) focused instead on impromptu local programming that mixed “authentic” folk music, new-age clairvoyance, historical data reminders, and the ubiquitous telephone calls from viewers taken live by some aspiring writer or historian (Ditchev

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6 An important role in these processes here played also the Bulgarian Constitutional Court, whose independent role was sought as a safeguard of the democratization processes in the early 1990s. As often the case the political establishment would find themselves with diminished opportunities for policy disagreement on issues, which have passed the Court, in turn largely in accord with the external political stipulations. Subsequent attempts, however, to reform the judiciary – a policy area, which became prime since 2001 under the demand of international institutions – might have given the parties some space of maneuver and a way of cleaving more distinct identity. However, the constitutionalization of a very strict conception of non-interference with the juridical system, which originally was pursued in support of democracy, effectively curtailed that opportunity, further contributing to the amalgamation of the two political specters in the country.

7 [http://www.ataka.bg](http://www.ataka.bg)
One channel in particular, known as SKAT, begun drawing large number of viewers among the newly disenfranchised layers of society with a series of talk shows. Much of the success of these shows rests in the fact that they gave voice to the marginalized former professional class sharing views often outside of the mainstream pundit culture and to non-professionals alike. SKAT also hosted the Ataka leader’s show, where he garnished a devoted following of what started to shape as a constituency of nationalistic and anti-establishment inclinations.

An veteran journalist and once associated with the anti-communist “dissident” circles, in his show Volen Siderov made it a habit to attack governments on issues highlighting the hidden economic side of the transition and corrupt privatization schemes. He passionately argued against the “mindless obedience” of Bulgarians to the West and the selling off of state assets to foreign investors, who acquired previously valued state resources at well below their actual value. In these examples Siderov saw Bulgarian people being “robbed of their wealth” by their own political elites, while everyone’s attention has been fixed on a political theater of mutual accusations and sabotage. Meantime, he would argue, these same politicians “somehow managed to own mansions and German luxury sedans on their state salaries of about $300 a month” (Ghodsee 2008:36).

What brought people’s attention to Siderov’s shows was his swift ability to cross through the political divide and expose governments – previous and current -- regardless of their political affiliation. Some of his ideas are also packaged in books. “Bulgarophobia” for instance, plotted about the “freemasonry” that is “plundering” and “selling” the Bulgarian national treasure. Offered in the format of a popular conspiracy theory the book zooms in on the culture of political patronage and the partisan appointments to senior management positions and governing boards that has framed the entire first decade of the Bulgarian transition. The visibility of such books certainly also gain from the more forceful incentives and pressure on corruption issues that have stemmed from anti-corruption activities of major NGOs in Bulgaria, as well as from foreign institutions, especially the EU.

However, with time Siderov’s commentaries became exceedingly more nationalistic and it was his inflammatory tackling of subjects such as the high crime rates among the Roma, and the dramatic increase in the construction of new mosques, that made him the anomaly in liberal political circles at home and abroad. His party Ataka was vilified both by internal and external observers as an extreme right-wing formation, the success of which came as a “shocking warning” to the majority of political observers in the country.

Nevertheless, Ataka’s electorate went far beyond the suspected “uneducated” and “rural minority,” which are the sections of society as a rule associated with populism. And this is an important nod in the riddle that Eastern European neonationalisms pose. Ataka’s voters extended from urban centers outside the capital, to people from low to average income groups and those with secondary education (Smilov 2008:30, Cristova 2010). It was the broader socio-economic position of Ataka that seemed to have struck a particularly deep cord with Bulgarians from within wide sections of the population. Favored were Ataka’s campaigns against

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8 A number of excerpts from Volen Siderov’s speeches, TV journalism and books is available also through wikiquotes: http://bg.wikiquote.org/wiki/%D0%92%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD_%D0%A1%D0%B8%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2
unfavorable working conditions in foreign-owned factories in the Bulgarian south; the party’s pronouncement against the stationing of US troops on BG soil; and their urges to obtain laws that would re-examine privatization transactions and re-nationalize state-owned companies sold to foreign investors under dubious circumstances (Ghodsee 2008:36). In fact Ataka’s anti-establishment rhetoric, as Kristen Ghodsee observes was remarkably and radically on the Left.

Nationalism and leftism combined in Ataka’s political positioning the two ideological orientations, to remind you, almost entirely removed from the public debates in the last 20 years since the communism’s collapse. And while to some critiques this conflation appeared as a particularly nasty form of “nationalist populism”, Attakers challenged the ideological mandate of the “transitional consensus” and became, in the words of Kristen Ghodsee “the anti-establishment something-for-everyone party” (Ghodsee 2008:37).

Ataka’s radical rhetoric then offered a discursive opening that was not inconsequential to the forming of a genuine culture of discontent in postsocialist Bulgaria. Populism garnished the possibility to express concerns people shared about the collective commitments of their political elites in the face of weaning solidarities and radicalized inequality. National pride came to express social and political critique.

The focus on ethnic minorities works in Atacka’s ideology under the same impulse with popular politics of despair discussed earlier. Such anxieties are not foreign to the processes of Europeanization more broadly. At the core of the Europeanization developments, as many have discusses, lay also issues of national security, of immigration, and a growing Europe-wide form of Islamophobia. What I believe is critical to understand here is how populism in Bulgarian is also critically related and animated by processes and debates of European enlargement. As a paradoxical mark of Europeanness, some of Ataka’s most conspicuous campaigns against minorities, like sabotaging Muslim public players, borrow directly on a symbolic entourage explored in other parts of Europe, where reductionist reading of the debates on nationhood pitch majority publics against Muslims in particular.

The impact of European rhetoric aside, Ataka’s aggressive nationalist pitch has had real implications in raising ambivalence towards “outsiders” of all sorts, internal and external alike. As mentioned, the drawing of boundaries, the rejection of those who are different, or who are perceived as “foreign” or “alien” has had a major role to play in all forms of populism. Eastern and western populisms have been coined to differ particularly in the way they defined this Other: the Minority vs the Immigrant. I assert that in the politics of belonging of the either side the category of the Other has been becoming more evasive (even if not less oppressive) than we ordinarily imagine. We will see in the final section of this paper, how swiftly – under different circumstances –the space of the “other” in the public discourse is fast filled with alternative subjects in demand requires, more specifically – the immigrants deemed unwanted. What operates as a final marker of belonging however and comes to provide in the post-national state the content of alterity more broadly is the neoliberal norm of inclusion, focused more and more on resources, skills, and European cultural background, rather than ethnicity, race (etc.) per se. Attitudes towards the Other amalgamate in a complex set of conjoined disquiets that extend also to corrupt elites, inequality and economic injustice more broadly.

(example 1)
First, consider the anti-Roma actions, which in the summer of 2011 troubled to expand throughout the country, spreading racist slogans and destroying property. They have been linked to the effects of the Ataka-sponsored openly xenophobic rhetoric in the public domain, which fixated on a notion that the Roma are on a mission to obliterate the Bulgarian nation with their high birthrates and aggressive (as of recently) delinquent behavior pillaging resources from the countryside. The killing of an ethnic-Bulgarian man by a Roma triggered the initial spark to the protests (or “pogroms” as they were termed in the local media). Thousands of people, and many of whom young, went on the streets of 5 major cities to express their outrage about the incident. The protests’ responses started to shift however when it was also revealed that the offender was an infamous Roma crime boss, one of many such figures, be they Roma or ethnic Bulgarian, who in the postsocialist era came to control different towns in the countryside.

In a conversation with a human rights advocate working with Roma communities, I learn his colleagues alluded to Roma neighborhoods as “private specialty zones”. Some of these spaces, which have been growing into real “ghettos,” previously unknown to Bulgarians, as he puts it, have become instrumental to the global circuits of trafficking in drugs and humans, passing through the territory of Bulgaria. To my objection that such allegations echo popular conspiracies, which facilitate discrimination against Roma, he replies: “Why do u think for so many years “we are still to the prospect of devising active policies of Roma integration. Our alleged inability to act upon what has been happening to this community, meets conveniences of all sorts”. In truth, at least two very public cases against Roma leaders implicated in human trafficking have been brought to the courts in the last 5 years. The pogroms ultimately framed an outrage with dysfunctional institutions overall rather than solely what was initially seen as Bulgarians’ suppressed radical xenophobia towards this community.

In the face of diminished social activism, for long associated with the organized activities of the communist party of the near past, and shortage of legitimate political causes to express mounting social descent, it is something like ethnic prejudice that can bring Bulgarians to the streets. Nonetheless, as highlighted by one prominent figures in Bulgarian: “criminality” and “extreme wealth” were the other two “kinds of hatred here” that justified the protests. The country has faced years of heavy criticism from international institutions for not prosecuting any high-level organized-crime figures or corrupt government officials. It is worth noticing furthermore that in statistical terms those who assert themselves openly “nationalist” in Bulgaria have in fact remained within the stable 6% of the population, even after the intervention of Ataka.

The call to arms with groups presumably on a quest to obliterate the Bulgarian culture and nation are mobilized here by the unprecedented awareness on issues of belonging, “national interests” and the status of boundaries but also borders more broadly that were spurred by the rhetoric of Ataka. This rhetorical opening resonates with special urgency in a place where every social status and form of authority has been unhinged. And while some theoreticians of populism (Paul Taggar in particular) have been particularly weary of populism’s effect on limiting debates, in the Bulgarian case, as I have already asserted, populist rhetoric legitimized opinion-making per ce, expanding rather then foreclosing discussion on variety of issue from variety of perspectives and diverging ideological positions.

Ataka’s intervention in official politics then has not so much unleashed as certified also a burgeoning undercurrent discourse on the choices of the political “transition” – choices in fact
never truly electorally approved – and the fate of the Bulgarian nationhood more broadly, as people felt urged to ask now questioning not only the collective commitment of their political elites and the state as a whole, but also the somewhat “outmoded” notion of the Bulgarian national interests in the economic process of globalization. As an example of what was until recently politically unacceptable, with populism many such ostracized topics have entered mainstream circulation. Everything has been up for grabs: from Bulgaria’s entanglements with structural adjustment prerogatives of the WB and the IMF, going hand in hand with vocal new anti-Americanism, to the state’s privatization schemes, from country’s membership into NATO, to the outcomes of EU integration. The unhinging of public debate from certain entrenched ideological propositions was not a small achievement of Attaka, even as if the shift has been also augmented by a boom in the Internet usage in Bulgaria especially prominent since the 2006. We see in this the slow displacement of material struggles (and the weakening of organized bargaining per ce) onto the plain of public symbolic confrontations.

Some thoughts on theory
By way of interposing a more general theoretical note here let me emphasize the several propositions that I have made so far: first that that the Bulgarian populism has been, to put it bluntly, neither anti-liberal, nor anti-democratic, even as it highlights democracy’s breakages and the limits of liberal capitalism highlighting the crisis of popular sovereignty in Bulgaria and the concurrent crisis of labor. Furthermore, following leads of several anthropologists I raise the case not only about the synergies between western and eastern European populisms, which seem to share broadly similar social roots and comparative constituency (Kalb 2009:209, Rupnik 2007), but about populism’s more general appeal world-wide. Defensive non-liberal popular responses have been observed in areas as diverse as Central and Western Africa, the US, the Caucasus and East Asia (Derluguian 2005, Comaroffs 2012, Nonini 2003). Could this setting occasion a suggestion about populism’s globalization itself, as anthropologists Jean and John Comaroffs seem to imply (2012) aligning in this development Africa and the “West”.

The particular event-based dynamics of the various populisms we observe in different parts of the world today, naturally draw on very differently ordered and sequentialized political fields, reminds us Don Kalb in his investigation of Polish populism (Kalb 2009:209). Each derives their symbolisms from profoundly different national histories, memories, and amnesias. Yet, suggest Comaroffs, this fact does not compromise the evidence that populisms are also witnessing a shared global appeal. And as such, we might be rather faced here with a phenomenon that is more structural in nature, and one at that occasioned by the particular conjuncture of the neoliberal globalization today (alluded in fact as the post-neoliberal era) (see also Friedman’s concerns (2004). This conjuncture on its turn has been producing a world-wide class restructuring and a disproportionate expansion of the world proletariat, as well as popular disenfranchisement (Kalb 2009).

One of the expressions of this global populism then is the heightened awareness and debates raised in so many different countries around the world on questions of peoplehood, belonging and diversity, or as Comaroffs term it the upsurge of “policulturalism” (2012:24). On the more positive note, others have also noticed that this new awareness invites in addition a unique opening for new forms of critical cosmopolitanism(s) that tinker creatively with normative debates on modernity more generally (Delanty, Tiktin, Mmbembe).

And a final point in lieu of linking, as many have also done, the proliferation of these ideologies of culture and “identity talk” (or as with Benhabib “cultural pluralization”) (2004:174)), to the
increased mobility of people as well: of experts, tourists, cosmopolitans, but also refugees, immigrants, and undocumented migrants. Mobility, as we are encouraged to view by John Urry is also an ontological condition – people, communities, cultures, technologies are all mobile today (Urry 2002). I will not be able to recapitulate here the many studies on this topic and some quite complex arguments laid out within them. Yet, I would like to illuminate in particular the argument that some have made about the changing nature of the modernist nation-state itself in the era of world globalism(s) (Tsing 2009) occasioning this turn to “culture”. Part of the pressures that fall onto nation-states and the increased heterogeneity that they experience is triggered by the proliferation of identity claims and demands for recognition coming from a wealth of positions of difference (professional, ethnic, cultural, religious, but also sexual) some of which previously suppressed (Cheah and Robins 1996, Delanty 2006:30). Most interestingly culture and identity claims are increasingly staked today specifically as a measure of sovereignty against the very nation-states they seem to otherwise embrace, and against the idea of the universal citizen, as Yasmin Soysal (1997) has illuminatingly explored in her own work.

Whether the nation-state is the most suitable mechanism in resolving these tensions and differences or furthermore whether it is indeed the proper shell of our communal cravings is altogether a different issue. Yet, It is on the turf of the national claim that debates about the “common good,” “wellbeing” and how one “belongs” are most often found (Feldman 2012). Could that be signaling, as Comaroffs seem to suggest, that we have arrived at “a post-Weberian moment in the longue durée of modernity, one in which the “imagined community” of the 19th and the 20th centuries demands “re-imagination”? (Comaroffs 2012:25). Their question echoes an academic concern that has been in the making ever since the publication of the “Nations Unbound”. There, Shiller and Bach, et. have first forcefully raised the question about group identities, that in their view were no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious, or culturally homogenous.

**Populism and the immigrant**
In the last section of this paper I explore the impact of the rhetorical opening that was provoked by the populist turn in Bulgaria on the reception and perception of another kind of social difference: the arrival of immigrants.

Much of the country’s attention and conversations until recently concerned themselves with Bulgaria’s large emigration concurrent with the fall of the communist regime in 1989. Over 20 % of Bulgarians live today abroad. Many move in seasonal swings to and out of the county. At the same time, immigration to the country – a much more recent development - constitutes a small 1.3 % of the overall 7.3 mil population. This ranks Bulgaria among the countries with the smallest number of immigrants currently in the EU.

Numbers notwithstanding, immigration is provoking on the other hand an unprecedented interest. The topic is continuously toyed with in the media, in the blogosphere, in everyday conversations and on TV that invite ponderings about the European future of the nation, and the impact of mobility overall. Within the wider forces of Europeanization underway in Bulgaria, one crucial development in the last several years has been the redefining of the national border as the new outer borderzone of the EU. This complex transformation entails not only an actual rewriting of the physical dimension of the border, yet crucially also impacts the symbolic boundaries that in the context of Europe are now re-inscribing national populations as part of the larger European society.
Official statistics, while not entirely reliable, highlight the three largest groups of registered “foreigners” in BG are coming from the country’s former and present allies: Russia, the EU and the United States and form the most visible subset of immigrants. These “Westerners” arrive as highly trained professionals on managerial positions in foreign-owned companies, or as retirees with investments in the promising real estate market, choosing seasonal residence. Other immigrants (from the Arab Middle East and Africa) are joining already established communities that were formed already during socialism. There is also the Chinese that have made their ethnic cuisine a ubiquitous element of urban cultural experience in Bulgaria, as elsewhere in Europe. Some minimal substitute labor force from the Philippines and Vietnam has also been a factor. However, overall new immigrants have had minimal impact on civic life up to the present (the exception being 5 “foreign” candidacies for municipal seats in 2010). Therefore, unlike in Western Europe, immigrants in Bulgaria are relatively well integrated, with high percentage of intermarriages as well as employment. Significant portions of immigrants are in fact job-creators for natives (Krasteva 2008, 2010). Presuming immigration continues to expand, the question that looms large for Bulgaria is how these newcomers are going to integrate as “immigrants”, given the dominant idiom in the Bulgaria’s politics of difference traditionally focusing on the minority clause. What is more, now that the status of minorities is doubly in question – once as part of the probing of national standards, untied by the populist movements; and twice, as a response to the Euro-wide reconfiguration of immigrant statuses: this social phenomenon acquires an undue importance to Bulgaria.

This history in the making however becomes a bit more unbalanced, when it comes to the alternate subjects of mobility -- these of the refugees and the undocumented immigrants -- and the discursive effects that frame their articulation in the Bulgarian society. An increase is observable in both of these categories; concomitant with EU membership and occasioned by BG’s convenient geographic location in the middle of immigrant routes originating from the Middle East via Turkey. Numbers here too have been far from alarming even with the recent reorientation of illicit flows away from economically challenged Greece and towards the other gates of Europe like Bulgaria. Undocumented migration remains within the range b/w 5,000 to 10,000 illicit crossings yearly (since 2007).

These two categories – of the refugees and the undocumented immigrants – on the other hand have occasioned the brunt of a significantly different set of commentaries, some much in sink with the xenophobic rhetoric on minorities discussed earlier. Refugees have been compared to the Roma, in that they too appear in the eyes of the more anxious Bulgarians as “super-aggressive, lazy and arrogant,” while “insisting on rights without responsibilities”. “They should go back where they come from”, insists aggressively present hate-speech in certain cyber forums, because “the Bulgarian state is hardly even able to tend to the human rights of its own citizens”. “And besides”, in the words of still other groups the “country has never had any dealings – military or otherwise – with the states where these refugees come from”: why is that, these Bulgarians ask, “Bulgaria now imposed responsibility and the costs of a humanitarian intervention without a possible historical engagement”. These comments represent a random pick from forums following publications in the media on both sides of the political spectrum. The transpired attitudes towards the “foreigner” (and as the case at hand is – the “unwanted” others) reflect volatile articulations dwelling at the juncture of local but also global historical configurations of power. What strikes as particularly unusual in these verbalizations is how discrimination seems to be increasingly directed not so much against foreigners per se (mind the
positively apprised category of Westerners), as it is against people seen as illegitimate members of the Bulgarian and European cultural milieu overall – those of poorer backgrounds, of different religious affiliations (i.e. muslims), and the overall “un-resourceful” (see also Fassin 2001:7).

The state itself has been inconveniently implicated in keeping the public radar turned on such debates. About a dozen publications in the last three years have discussed the impact of illegal immigration and trafficking for Bulgaria in central media outlets, highlighting the government’s “unprecedented success” in intercepting illicit flows. The politization of the issue of migration has also served to uphold the significant investment that flows into making Bulgaria the new southeastern borderland of Europe. The state has established partners with the EU-run border-policing program Frontex. In planning are additional detention facilities (currently only two) and the government has also introduced state-of-the-art border inspection devises, much outside of the scope of its affordable scale of investment. These developments form part of an elaborate assemblage of border control technologies aiming to selectively filter the passage of migrants into and out of the European territory. Walls and detention centers in borderland Europe are strategically located sites that have an instrumental role in establishing and reinforcing borders. In this much is at stake for the Bulgarian authorities on the one hand catering to disaffected publics, but also to EU partners, who have made it challenging for Bulgaria to join the Schengen travel zone.

Immigration issues came first into public focus during the Bulgaria’s negotiations with the EU in mid 2000s. Synchronization with the EU Acquis Communautaire in the domain of asylum and immigration proved the more ameliorable area of intervention, than the fuzzier subjects of corruption or juridical reform standing as the two largest hurdles in the way of Bulgaria’s acceptance in the union (Lavenex 2002). This was the decisive push that brought the topic of migration to the forefront of both legislative work and public concerns as part of the larger strategic and EU-driven agenda of biopolitical regulation and statecraft. Moreover, the very presence of immigrants in this troubled “transitory” state seems to suggest life in Bulgaria is “normalizing” under the fold of Europe, as all former EU member states who have once been migration sending countries, upon admission have seen the trend revert.

I want to suggest that, put in the larger context of Europeanization the focus on difference and diversity in Bulgaria, which populism at its core engenders, can be further explained by the fact that it has become the discourse of the border control and the way borders are policed.

In some way then, what we see here is that national and local differences are in effect “allowed” to reappear at this new EU external border and the presence of neonationalist sentiments in particular comes to serve a paradoxical place now in justifying the more strict control system that Bulgaria is building since its coming within the fold of Europe. It is in this sense that I have argued, populism comes to view more as a structural effect now also of the new Europe-wide approach to immigration. As Ginette Verstraette has also suggested, populism seems to come to serve the very mechanisms that seek to “discipline” the new frontiers of Europe, carrying the brunt of the burden for keeping Africans and Asians out (2009).

References not yet inserted ....

9 See: http://noborderbulgaria.wordpress.com/2011/04/07/bulgaria-camp-announced/
Ref ALL + Bulgarians Activist Alliance http://bulgarianactivistalliance.org/