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Rescue for Political Use: The Populist Consensus on the Fate of Bulgarian Jews During the Second World War

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Abstract: In recent years, the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria during the Second World War has aroused the research interest of humanities scholars from various disciplines, with a number of studies published (see e.g., and many of the following cited (Avramov 2012. “Спасение” и падение. Микроикономика на държавния антисемитизъм в България, 1940–1944 [“Rescue” and fall. Microeconomics of State Anti-semitism in Bulgaria, 1940–1944]. Sofia: Sofia University “St. Kl. Ohridski; Daneva 2013; Krsteva 2015; Koleva 2017)). Many rely on research on the construction of memory. At the same time, fewer research efforts seem to have focused on how the topic has become politicized in the years since 1989 (see e.g. Benatov 2013. “Debating the Fate of Bulgarian Jews during World War II.” In *Bringing the Dark Past to Light the Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, edited by John-Paul Himka, and Joanna Beata Michlic, 108–31. University of Nebraska Press; Ragaru 2020. *Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauve... Une histoire des savoirs sur la Shoah en Bulgarie*. Paris: Science Po). The aim of this paper is to offer precisely this perspective on the topic of non/rescue, and in the last ten years. Politicization has traditionally been understood as the process of attributing salience to an issue of public interest through various channels such as political discourse and media, and in the presence of the multiple and diverse opinions associated with it (de Wilde, Pieter. 2011. “No polity for old politics? A framework for analyzing the politicization of European integration.” *Journal of European Integration* 33 (5): 559–75; de Wilde, Pieter, Anna Leupold, and Henning Schmidtke. 2016. “Introduction: the differentiated politicisation of European governance.” *West European Politics* 39 (1): 3–22). In some texts on the politicization of the migration crisis in Bulgaria in the years since 2012, the author shows how a topic can be politicized in the absence of political debate and in the context of a dominant populist understanding, multiplied by various power actors – politicians, institutions, media and intellectuals (see e.g. Otova, Ildiko, and Evelina Staykova. 2022. *Migration and Populism in Bulgaria*. London: Routledge). For the purposes of this paper, by politicization the author will understand the blurring of ideological differences of interpretations of

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who the savior is in a populist consensus around the construction of the rescue narrative for foreign policy use, but mostly as a nation-building narrative. The focus of this article is on the last ten years, in which the political interpretations and actions surrounding the commemoration of the 70th in 2013 and 75th in 2018 and the 80th anniversary in 2023 of the events surrounding the so-called rescue of Bulgarian Jews are particularly interesting. It is during these last years that populism has become the norm for the political scene in Bulgaria. Populism is not the obvious entrance to the topic, but it is the political framework within which the politicization of the topic of the rescue is developing, and a possible theoretical entrance. Populism became a persistent part of Bulgarian political life more than a decade after the beginning of the democratic changes of 1989. There are several key factors involved in this process—exhaustion of the cleavages of the transition period, but especially the transformation of party politics into symbolic ones (Otova, Ildiko, and Evelina Staykova. 2022. *Migration and Populism in Bulgaria*. London: Routledge). Symbolic politics deal more with emotions and less with ratio and facts; they build narratives that are often nationally affirming. The article does not claim to be exhaustive, especially in its presentation of historical facts. The limits of this rather political science approach are many. On the other hand, however, it adds to the research effort with a missing glimpse into the interpretations of the no/rescue theme and could open the field for further in-depth research.

Keywords: Jews; populism; antisemitism; Bulgaria

In recent years, the fate of Jewry from the Bulgarian territories during the Second World War has attracted the research interest of humanitarian scholars from various disciplines, and a number of studies were published (e.g. Avramov 2012; Daneva 2013; Koleva 2017; Krasteva 2017). The historiographic approach is explicable, as understanding events in their entirety is crucial. Numerous researchers of events in Bulgarian territories, as well as in Central and Eastern European countries, have staked on studies devoted to the construal of memory. Moreover, in the post-1989 period, the theme of memory is of particular importance and affects more than one historical period, which often generates competing narratives. There are quite a few studies devoted to the politicization of the topic (e.g. Benatov 2013). Among the most thorough and valuable studies is that of Nadège Ragaru, published in French (Ragaru 2020), Bulgarian (Ragaru 2022), and English (Ragaru 2023).

This article proposes a completely different and innovative approach, looking at the topic through the prism of populism. Some researchers explore the positions of the Bulgarian state in the post-1989 period, or the years generally referred to as the “transition” (e.g. Benatov 2013; Sage 2017). My analysis focuses on the last 10 years, in which of particular interest are the political positions articulated around the commemoration of the 70th in 2013, the 75th in 2018, and the 80th anniversaries of the events surrounding the so-called “rescue” of Bulgarian Jews. It is in these latter years that populism has become a norm for the Bulgarian political scene, as will be shown.

My methodology is mainly based on a discursive analysis of secondary sources, insofar as this is a pilot study, which at a later stage intends to comprise field research, including semi-structured interviews with key actors. In order to understand the topic fully, it is necessary to analyse different actors – intellectuals, scholars, members of communal organizations, descendants of victims and survivors. At this stage, my main focus is on representatives of state, and political circles. A limited number of civil sector stakeholder, as well as representatives of the Jewish community organisations are also cited, as they are also necessary for the main analysis.

The article has no claim to comprehensiveness, especially in terms of the representation of historical facts. As already mentioned, this is a pilot study, so this paper also does not offer an analysis of all actors – such as the civil sector, the influence of the EU institutions and their debates, and external players, such as Israel and the USA. It is also important to stress that the analysis does not address the relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia – neither the historical context of these relations nor their current dimensions, but the author is clearly aware of their importance, which would merit a stand-alone article.

Thus, the limitations to this mostly political-scientific approach are numerous, and the choice to analyse the topic and place it in the context of populism has its methodological delimitations. On the other hand, however, it complements the research effort with the lacking perspective to the interpretations of the non/rescue theme by proposing a novel approach and could open the field for more extensive subsequent studies.

Selecting Populism as the Theoretical Entry to the Subject

Thus far, no consensus has been reached as to what exactly populism is, neither is it necessary, since it is the talk about it that has an enriching effect on science. A widely used media term, or label for political opponents, it is also one of the most controversial concepts in political and social science. For over 50 years, the scholarly community has been trying to define it, with some even questioning whether the term even makes sense. In my understanding, a vague and loosely defined concept, “populism” allows understanding the nature of present day’s challenges encountered by liberal democracy better than any of the finely defined concepts. Most researchers agree that there are in general three approaches to its study.¹ Each

¹ Also, for example, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (eds. Roviera Kaltwasser, Taggart, Ochoa Espejo, Ostiguy) published in 2017, there is a section in which leading researchers develop their understandings of populism. Cass Mudde (2017) offers an understanding of populism as an ideology (“ideational approach”), Weyland (2017) as a political strategy and Ostiguy (2017) sets out his

approach, however, emphasizes, in one way or another, one of the basic characteristics of populism: the people-elite dichotomy, with the people always pure and untainted and the elite standing as its antipode (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Some studies question whether the elite can be externalized, to be extraneous to the people (Otova and Staykova 2022). According to Moffit, the most common and preferred approach to populism is to view it as an ideology, a set of ideas, or a way of understanding the world (Moffit 2020). Many other researchers also adopt this approach (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004; Rooduijn 2014; Stanley 2008). Starting from the understanding that populism is a thin ideology, it can coexist with many other ideologies. Most often, however, we see it coexisting with nativism or, more comprehensively, nationalism. The scholarly literature has devoted numerous studies to the similarities and differences between populism and nationalism, including the methodological need to distinguish the two in order to better understand their coexistence.

The discursive approach to the analysis of populism is also among the most common according to which different schools can be distinguished, following traditions in understanding the concept of discourse (Moffit 2020). Moffit (2020) outlines several schools of researchers. In the first group (Panizza 2005; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014) are those who follow the tradition of the Essex school of discourse analysis influenced by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and combine poststructuralism and Gramsci's theories of hegemony viewing discourses as attempts to fix meanings and identities in the struggle for power (Moffit 2020). Others follow critical discourse analysis mostly influenced by Ruth Wodak (Wodak and Meyer 2001; Wodak 2015), focusing on the linguistic dimensions and ideological effects of discourse (Moffit 2020). Some, according to Moffit (2020), take a more general understanding of discourse, and some understand it as a type of discursive frame (Aslanidis 2016) or as a form of claiming (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). One of the main researchers of the mainstream process, – or as I prefer to call it *normalisation* – Wodak is also associated with the discursive approach. The process concerns how the far right and its often nativist, nationalist and extreme ideas become normal and eventually a norm. Among the main mechanisms of mainstreaming are the politics of fear: far-right populist parties deliberately exploit and evoke a range of moral emotions, such as anxiety, fear, indignation, anger, rage, shame and nostalgia (Wodak 2021). By Wodak's definition, the populist far right has several characteristics. The first has to do with the instrumentalization of an ethnic, religious, linguistic, or political minority as culpable for the current problems of society and as a threat to the nation. It is this phenomenon that Wodak calls the "politics of fear." The second derives from the first – the construction

understanding of a socio-cultural approach. There are of course other typologies, but due to the limitations of this text I will not present them here. See for example Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017).

of the image of saviours and representatives of the “real” or “unadulterated” people who will make “us” (the nation) great again. The third is related to the politics of emotions: they support what can be called the “arrogance of ignorance” or what can also be called the politics of post-truth or anti-politics (Wodak 2021).

Quite a few researchers consider populism as a mobilization, or as a strategy for political mobilization. In this approach, the leader – usually a charismatic one – plays a key role. In Tiwa’s understanding, populism is primarily a strategy for gaining and exercising political power (Pappas 2012; Weyland 2017).

I understand populism as a practice – or as Jansen writes populism is not a “thing” or “object” to be studied but “a mode of political practice” (Jansen 2011, 82) – that transforms into reality through a process of normalisation. In the following sections I will analyze how exactly the process of normalization is taking place in Bulgaria. The issue of the rescue of the Jews of Bulgaria is one of the focal points where populist interpretations are found.

Normalisation of Populism in Bulgaria

A change of leadership in the Bulgarian Communist Party launched the “transition period” in November 1989 (Zankina 2017). In the 1990s, the principal political encounter developed between the former communists and the democratic opposition (the Union of Democratic Forces – UDF). 2001 marked the end of the bipolar model of former communists versus the democratic opposition. In that year, several months before the parliamentary elections, former king Simeon of Saxe-Coburg Gotha² returned to Bulgaria and founded a political party: the National Movement for Simeon II (NDSV). The formation unexpectedly won the 2001 election with 43 % of the votes and headed a coalition government (Zankina 2017). NDSV emerged on the scene as an anti-elitist, populist alignment. Its emergence is associated with the first wave of populism in Bulgaria, which became a steadfast part of political life (Otova and Staykova 2024).

In the following years, other political entities, falling within the populist spectrum, gained recognition. What is interesting in the Bulgarian case is that for a very short period from an isolated or at least a sporadic mannerism, reserved for a selected few, populism has become a common practice of behaviour, talk or action, and mobilization – including by shifting the ideological orientation of parties or

2 Simeon of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha is the last king of Bulgaria, reigning as a child from 1943 to 1946 as Simeon II, overseen by a three-man regency comprising of his uncle Prince Cyril, former war minister General Nikolai Michov, and former prime minister Bogdan Filov. He later served as the country’s prime minister from 2001 to 2005.

emptying them from ideology. The second wave is related to the emergence of GERB,³ which *de facto* ruled the country after 2009 for an extended period. The most recent wave of anti-establishment pop-up projects occurred in 2020.⁴ Following the mass protests, which raised demands for replacement of the corrupt government, in which business and state are closely connected, there arose several digital pop-up projects of purely anti-system, populist nature (“Rise up! Oust the Thugs!”⁵ Civil Platform “Bulgarian Summer”,⁶ “There is Such a People”⁷). Some of them unite the characteristics of anti-elitist movements and nationalism. Although, in the first years after 1989, nationalist formations gravitated around the two main blocs – the transition right (successors, for example, of (pro)fascist forces from before 1949) and the successor of the former Communist Party – the BSP (for instance, the circles behind the so-called “Revival Process”⁸), national-populism became an important factor only with the advent of “Ataka” in 2005; however, on the political scene there are entities such as VMRO.⁹ In the following years, many other similar formations made their appearance

3 Founded in 2006, on the initiative of the then Mayor of Sofia Boyko Borisov (former Secretary General of the Ministry of Interior and bodyguard of Simeon Saxe Coburg Gotha). Boyko Borissov ruled Bulgaria as prime minister from 2009 to 2021 in various coalitions, including with far-right and nationalist formations.

4 The 2020 protests began on July 9, with demands of the resignations of Prime Minister Borissov and the Attorney General, Ivan Geshev. They received support from opposition-backed President Rumen Radev, who, on several instances, took part in them and invented the motto “Out with the thugs!” Many young Bulgarians, who had made a return to the country due the COVID pandemic, also became involved in the protests.

5 “Rise up! Oust the thugs!” is a civil coalition of political parties in Bulgaria, founded in 2021.

6 The party was founded in 2020 by Vasil Bozhkov, who is considered to be the wealthiest Bulgarian. In January 2020, Bozhkov left the country and escaped to Dubai to avoid detention after a number of charges were brought up against him, including accusations of murder, money laundering, tax evasion, rape, etc. On the 2021 parliamentary election the civil platform “Bulgarian Summer” ran under the mandate of another party, Bulgarian National Alliance (BNO) and won 2.95 % of the electoral votes.

7 Established by Bulgarian singer, TV host and politician, Slavi Trifonov in 2020. The party initially attempted to run under the name “There is No Such State,” but the Supreme Court of Cassations denied entry permission due to established violations of the Law of Political Parties.

8 In the early 1980s, certain circles within the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party enforced the conception of the necessity of changing the names to “Bulgarian Turks.” The first stage of the campaign was carried out under strict secrecy in the winter of 1984–1985. After 1985, the purpose of the communist regime was the full and total integration of the Turkish minority into Bulgarian culture. A restriction was enforced against using Turkish language in public places. This campaign of forced assimilation is known as the “Revival Process.”

9 VMRO (Interior Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement), a self-identified successor of the historical Interior Macedonian Organization, formerly Internal Revolutionary Organization for Macedonia and Odrin (founded in 1893 with the purpose of liberating the Bulgarians who, from 1878 had remained within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire in the

and gained recognition such as NFSB of Valeri Simeonov.¹⁰ This is the case as well of Vazrazhdane¹¹ – a nationalist, pro-Russian anti-European and anti-democratic party. In November 2021, Vazrazhdane became the surprise in the Parliament.

Factors related to the emergence of the populism in Bulgaria can be grouped along the lines of social, ideological and political categories (Krasteva 2013). Krasteva (2013) asserts that social factors comprise the social basis of political identifications and the dispositions to politics in the first place, the growing perception of the transition as unjust, disregarding the people and favouring impostors; in the second place, the crisis of representation; in the third, the Bulgarian citizens' extremely low confidence in the parliament and political parties, in the widespread opinion that

aftermath of the Treaty of Berlin which governed the establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria). It resumed activity in the 1990s, and since 1997 is active as a political party. Over the years the party has participated in various ad hoc coalitions with varying success. It had members of parliament after the parliamentary elections in 1997, 2005, 2014 and 2017. The leader of the party, Krassimir Karakachanov, remained on ninth position on the 2011 presidential election, but ended third in 2016. In 2014, on the election for the European Parliament, the VMRO appeared in coalition and had one representative in the EU (and another one for the coalition partner). In 2019, appeared individually and won two seats. As a part to the Patriotic Front coalition – NFSB/VMRO, it lent support to the third Borissov government. In the 2017 United Patriots coalition – VMRO/NFSB/Ataka became junior partner in the government and had ministers in the cabinet (2017–2021).

10 Valeri Simeonov is a businessman and politician. His career started in the Union of Democratic Forces in the 1990s, and later he founded the Ataka Party together with Volen Siderov. Owner of the SKAT Television, which played a crucial role in the advancement of the party. Following the local elections, he was elected chairman of the Municipal Council in Burgas in coalition with the GERB Party. In January 2009, he submitted his resignation because of the decision voted by the majority of municipal councilors to endorse the erection of a mosque in a neighborhood of the city. After a series of public scandals with Siderov, he left Ataka to found the NFSB. Initially of regional importance in Burgas, the party later joined the coalitions Patriotic Front – NFSB/VMRO (2014) and the United Patriots - VMRO/NFSB/Ataka (2017). In his capacity as a Member of Parliament and the Parliamentary tribune, he described the Roma people as “*raging anthropoids*,” and their wives as “*having the instincts of streetwalking bitches*.” On May 4, 2017, he was elected Deputy Prime Minister of the economic and demographic policy in Boiko Borisov's third government (GERB-United Patriots). In October 2018, he called the mothers of the children with malfunctions “*clamorous females with allegedly sick children*.” This sparked another wave of protests, which continued for over a month and he was compelled to submit his resignation. Simeonov returned to the National Assembly and shortly afterwards was elected vice-chairman. In the parliamentary elections of 2021, NFSB appeared in coalition with Vesselin Mareski's “Volya.”

11 Vazrazhdane was established in 2014. Its leader Kostadin Kostadinov has experience in other nationalist formations such as VMRO. Vazrazhdane started with regional influence in Varna, gradually gaining national representation and becoming a parliamentary political force. Over the years, there have been civic initiatives to disable it because of extremist xenophobic positions. Among the latest initiatives of the party is a petition for a referendum on Bulgaria's accession to the Eurozone. The party is also known for its anti-vaccination and pro-Russian position.

elections cannot effect a fundamental change – “the frustration of democracy” (Smilov 2008); and finally, the absence of efficient, open and responsible institutions (Krasteva 2013). Among the ideological factors, Krasteva gives prominence to the weakening of the traditional for the early post-1989 years cleavages and the increasingly crucial role of symbolic politics, employing strong mobilizing resources such as (anti) Europeanism and nationalism (Krasteva 2013). The political factors are related to the depletion of the already mentioned oppositions, the decline of reformist right-wing parties and the crisis – mostly ideological – of the Socialist Party (Krasteva 2013). Other authors have derived this tendency in terms of electoral vacuum (Zhdrebev 2019), where place can be found even to actors with very light ideological and organizational baggage (Smilov 2008).

In my understanding, the normalisation of populism in Bulgaria happens through several factors – such as the coalitions, topics and media and other power holders. Due to the limitation of this text, I will concentrate on the topic of the “rescue” of Bulgarian Jews. In my previous research, I have shown how this normalisation happens for example through the topic of migration. Another such example is the topic of “gender” and “gender ideology.”

Some researchers like Stanoeva (2017a, 2017b), working on the “gender” topic, talk about a nationalist consensus. I find her arguments valid, but I think a populist consensus allows us to better understand the phenomenon. According to Stanoeva (2018), Bulgaria has a long tradition of constructing the nation in ethnic terms, which leads to the discrimination of ethnic minorities. During the years of transition through democracy, or as Stanoeva writes the last two decades, the dominance of the understanding of an ethnic nation over a civic one is also affirmed through the trinity of nationality-ethnicity-religiousness, which establishes a quasi-biological norm of citizenship that excludes minorities (Stanoeva 2018). Here, the leading thoughts are the understanding of something external to the nation, deviating from the nationally unified norm, threatening the “natural state” (Stanoeva 2018). Interestingly, Stanoeva’s (2018) introduction of the labels “left” and “right,” which she argues work in an ideologically flexible way, define parties based on their background rather than on consistently followed political principles (Stanoeva 2017a). Also, in the presence of “hot topics,” political differences, even in periods of serious opposition along other lines, lead to curious ideological alliances between the “left” and the “right” (Stanoeva 2018). For her too, in the post-1989 period, nationalism, exploited by the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s (Stanoeva 2017b), remains at the disposal of new political actors (Stanoeva 2018). As I have already posited, these hypotheses are perfectly valid. However, it is precisely because of the divergence of left and right and the de-ideologization, the emptying of ideological content that I prefer the term “populist consensus,” as it actually does assert itself as a nativist or nationalist one as

well. Populism and its normalisation, however, are in a sense the mechanism for this. I argue that the example of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews proves exactly this, as we will see in this article.

The Non/Rescued: The Facts

To understand the topic, it is necessary first to clarify the rescued/non-rescued dichotomy. This article is not a historiographical one and will only present the facts necessary for further analysis.

Bulgaria joined the Axis Powers on the first day of March 1941. The anti-Jewish legislation, however, was introduced as early as 1939. The Law for the Protection of the Nation was crucial, as it essentially turned antisemitism into state policy. The drafting of the law began in the summer of 1940, under the auspices of the government of Tsar Boris III¹² and Prime Minister Bogdan Filov.¹³ Passed in late 1940, and enacted in January 1941, it imposed anti-Jewish measures and sweeping restrictions on the political and civil rights of the Jewish population (Marinova-Christidi 2017).

In April 1941, the Bulgarian Army occupied Aegean Thrace and Eastern Macedonia (in Greece) the region of Vardar Macedonia in Yugoslavia, as well as the region of Pirot in Serbia and Bulgarian administration, courts, police and the army moved into the “new territories” (Marinova-Christidi 2017).

Pursuant to its agreement with allied Germany, the government prepared for the deportation of Jewish population in early 1943. A group of parliamentarians, church leaders, public figures and citizens pressed for countermanding the decision. On 24 May 1943, the deportation was remitted and a great part of Bulgarian Jewry survived. However, Jews from the occupied territories were denied Bulgarian citizenship and their fate was different.

Around 48,000 Jews, holders of Bulgarian citizenship and coming from the “old” (prior to 1941) state boundaries, were not deported; but some 11,343 Jews from the “new” territories – annexed from Yugoslavia and Greece under Bulgarian occupation – were.

The facts are categorical, but the Bulgarian state not only refuses to acknowledge its responsibility, but also deals with the interpretation of history only in relation to that part of it, which has a connection with the rescue. It is this process that is of interest for the present analysis.

¹² Boris III was Tsar of Bulgaria from 1918 to 1943. During the last years of his reign, his regime could be described as a dictatorship.

¹³ Bogdan Filov is a Bulgarian archaeologist and politician. He was the Prime Minister of Bulgaria under whose term of office the anti-Jewish legislation was passed and Bulgaria joined the Axis powers.

The Non-rescue Under the Veil of the Rescue

There seems to prevail certain consensus that the myth of the “rescue” was devised in the years following the Second World War, during the period of state communism (Sage 2017). Some researchers see it as a cover for the criminal acts of the totalitarian regime. Thus, for example, according to Ignatov (2011), that pride [had escalated] into a propaganda campaign by the 1980s – a historical period during which, paradoxically, Bulgaria gave little evidence of ethnic tolerance, the most glaring example being the campaign for enforced assimilation of Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin, disguised behind the designation “revival process.” Precisely in the 1980s, the communist regime started losing ground mainly for economic reasons and for purposes of propaganda, both interior and exterior, the Bulgarian communists monopolized the merit for the alleged rescue of the Bulgarian Jewry (Ignatov 2011), mobilizing the popular culture.

In the years after 1989, the rescue narrative became dominant in order to construct a positive image of Bulgaria world-wide (Benatov 2013) and in the Bulgarians’ own self-perception, projecting itself regularly as the most significant “untold” Second World War story of Jewish rescue and survival (Benatov 2013). The anti-fascist rescuer people already reformulated Bulgaria as a rescuer nation (Ragaru 2020).

Deriving from the first decades after 1989, among the most striking examples of truth-revising statement, antisemitic by its nature, was the pronouncement of Dyanko Markov,¹⁴ a deputy from the UDF¹⁵ and a representative member of the Bulgarian Democratic Forum – an organization, which declared itself the successor of the Union of the Bulgarian National Legions¹⁶ – which he delivered from then tribune of the National Assembly that “deportation of inimical population” was lawful and did not constitute a crime under international law (Cohen 2022).

The endeavour to exonerate the Bulgarian state began to be systematically implemented at the time of the administration of the National Movement of Simeon

14 Member of the Bulgarian National Legions (see next note). One of the founders of the Bulgarian Democratic Forum and Union “Truth” (1990). Member of Parliament in the period 1995–2001, in the UDF parliamentary group.

15 The Union of Democratic Forces – UDF – a coalition established in 1989, uniting pro-democratic forces in opposition to the Bulgarian Communist Party and lately Bulgarian Socialist Party. The coalition also includes descendants of pro-fascist movements.

16 The Union of the Bulgarian National Legions was a pro-fascist/pro-Nazi organization in Bulgaria, active in 1932–1944. In 1942 Hristo Lukov, a retired Bulgarian general and former minister of war, became head of the organization. Since 2003, an annual Lukov March has been held in Sofia – a torchlight procession in his memory, uniting various neo-Nazi formations, but also representatives of nationalist far-right parties such as VMRO.

II (NDSV) administration and the government of the so-called Tripartite Coalition¹⁷ (NDSV, BSP, and DPS¹⁸). Naturally, a logical explanation can be found in the filial relationship of NDSV leader Simeon of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha with King Boris III. What is essential to my analysis, however, is that NDSV emerged as the first populist project on the political scene, which managed to revert steadily the layers and to shift cleavages of the transition. After 2008, its successor – GERB, a representative of the second wave populist projects – kept up the efforts to downplay historical responsibility and deny whatever blame royal pro-fascist Bulgaria had for the deportation of Jews (Cohen 2022).

In 2013, the year marking the 70th anniversary of the rescue, the National Assembly adopted a declaration: “Assessing objectively the historical events, there cannot be any disputing today of the fact that 11,343 Jews were deported from Northern Greece and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which were at the time under German jurisdiction. In condemnation of this criminal act undertaken by Hitler’s military command, we express regret for the fact that it was not in the power of local Bulgarian administration to prevent it” (State Gazette 2013).

Based on this declaration, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee¹⁹ went public with the following position: It is with alarm that we note the misrepresentation of certain historical facts and the attempts to conceal the responsibility of Bulgarian authorities for the deportation of more than 11,000 Jews from the territories, occupied by the Bulgarian State in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Northern Greece (...) We voice our indignation at the refusal of the Bulgarian Parliament to acknowledge the responsibility of the incumbent Bulgarian authorities at the time for their cooperation in this genocide. The Parliament was bound to make this acknowledgement and to extend an apology to the memory of the victims” (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee March 8, 2013). Along with the declaration of the National Assembly, in a series of international activities, President incumbent Rossen Plevneliev²⁰ was also involved in the political instrumentalisation of the “rescue”. Thus, for example, in a speech

17 The government of the Triple Coalition (2005–2009) governed with the mandate of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) and was formed on the basis of a coalition agreement between the three largest parliamentary forces at that moment – BSP, NDSV and DPS.

18 The Movement for Rights and Freedoms is a centrist political party supported mainly by ethnic Turks, defining itself as a liberal party and a member of the Liberal International.

19 Bulgarian Helsinki Committee is an independent non-governmental organization for human rights founded on July 14, 1992.

20 Rossen Plevneliev is a Bulgarian politician (GERB) served as 4th President of Bulgaria (January 2012 – January 2017). He was previously Minister of Regional Development (2009–2011) as part of the cabinet of Boyko Borisov.

addressing the Anti-Defamation League,²¹ he stated: “In the dark years of the Second World War, Bulgaria did what no other nation in Europe did – it successfully saved the entire Jewish population of the country [numbering] nearly 50,000 [people]. [Regrettably], Bulgaria was in a situation where it [failed to] do the same for the Jewish people from Northern Greece and parts of Yugoslavia, as they were not Bulgarian citizens”.

Populism always puts the term “people” to good use. In this case, one can see distinctly how the image of the Bulgarian people is cast as the “rescuers,” i. e. bearers of morality, as contrasted to the Germans, who are to blame. Rozett summarized: “It was the Germans, not us . . . ” (2019, 27) – Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people bear no guilt for the deportation, they “were in a situation” where they were unable to do what they were able to do for those with Bulgarian citizenship, in short: it was the Germans who were to blame, not the Bulgarians.

Thus the position of the state departs from the facts, while a number of public figures also legitimize the tendency of “whitewashing history,” affirming it as a government policy. And whereas in 2013, at least during the commemoration of the anniversary, principal government institutions were dominated by one single political force – GERB, five years later there is a different pattern of political representation and the principal institutions are largely failing to work in concert, although they are united in their denial of historical facts.

On March 12, 2018, there was a last-minute announcement that a high-ranking representative of the Bulgarian State was to attend the commemoration ceremony for the Holocaust victims in the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje for the first time (Ragaru 2020). Boyko Borisov, Prime Minister and leader of GERB, made the following statement: “This is a fine sunny day, and we are friends; if we try to picture Nazis, who were at this place – what inhuman things they did to living human beings. On Saturday, in one of the largest synagogues of Europe and surely the most beautiful – [the Synagogue of] Sofia – there was a celebration attended by representatives of Jewish committees from all over the world, very dear guests (...) For that reason the people of Bulgaria deserve great respect. We are greatly grieving [about it] and for that reason we are here, because we should not forget anyone who was sent to be burned in the death camps ... Barely twenty years ago, no less brutal and bloody events took place on the territory of the Balkans. Therefore the point, other than expressing our homage and grief, is to understand that we have some rebuilding to do on the Balkans, to march toward a better system and, if you like it, that our peoples

21 The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is an international Jewish non-governmental organization and advocacy group that specializes in civil rights and combats antisemitism and extremism.

would live happily and that all this should remain in history (...) May their memory live forever, they are not forgotten, they are on our minds and for that reason we have come to render homage and to grieve for those who did not succeed to get away from the Nazi machine” (ClubZ 2018). At that moment, the junior partner in the ruling GERB government was a coalition of three nationalist formations – VMRO, Ataka and NFSB.

In the process of transformation of populism into a norm, however, through coalitions featuring such formations and appropriating their peculiar topics and rhetoric, is precisely how nationalist tendencies come to prevail. These processes are largely “contagious,” ultimately turning into a populist nationalistic consensus.

A few days earlier, on March 9, there was an abrupt change in the agenda of another authority figure in Sofia. President-elect Rumen Radev,²² nominated and supported by the BSP, was scheduled to take part in a ceremony commemorating the anniversary of the rescue. To the surprise of the organizers and the attending representatives of national and international organizations, it turned out in the last minute that he had another urgent appointment. Later on the same day, Radev received representatives of Jewish organizations. The official press release states: “This signs, unprecedented in the history of Europe, united politicians and statesmen, intellectuals, clergy and ordinary people to stand up for their compatriots, the Bulgarian Jews,” as stated further by the president. The head of state stressed that this was no accident, ‘because Bulgarian Jews had always been an important and integral part of Bulgarian society and at the forefront of public life, in art, culture and science. This will forever remain one of the brightest pages in our history, an event that we take pride in,’ added Rumen Radev. [...] ‘The rescued Bulgarian Jews have made an important contribution in the building of the State of Israel’ (Rumen 2018). It became clear that the fate of the deported Jews was not mentioned in his statement. The topic failed to find its way into subsequent appearances, thus becoming a taboo. Nevertheless, Radev makes regular pronouncements on the exclusivity of Bulgaria and the rescue act.

As of that moment, the coalition dominating the government, and the President were ardent political oponents who find and reach agreement with difficulty. Following this logic, Radev’s actions can be decyphered not as a position on the topic of non/rescue, but rather as an action in opposition to the GERB government on the topic, however, this is not how things stand five years later.

²² Rumen Radev is a military pilot, general of the Bulgarian army, president of Bulgaria after 2017. He is known for his nationalist and anti-European and anti-democratic stance, and his pro-Russian positions linking him to Putin’s regime. Within his mandates, he seeks to govern unilaterally, which is in violation of Bulgaria’s constitution.

Glorification of the State

By 2023, following the 2020 street protests, the political instability in Bulgaria have crystallized in a *de facto* anticonstitutional presidential regime, where the head of state rules monocratically through caretaker governments. Precisely in this situation involving an empowered and uncontrolled populist leader with undisguised aspiration for authoritarianism and overt antidemocratic leanings, was the commemoration of the rescue's 80th anniversary taking place, for the purpose of which an initiative committee was formed under the patronage of president Radev, and a national program was drafted. Months earlier, the conditioning of the public had already begun with a declaration of some historians, asserting that in Bulgaria fascism never came to power (Offnews 2023). At the announcement of the above mentioned national programme for celebrations the "notable" anniversary in Bulgaria and abroad, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nikolay Milkov,²³ in his capacity of a co-chair of the National Initiative Committee, stated: "I am convinced that we will all be working for the cause of showing the significant role of the Bulgarian state, the Bulgarian institutions, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian people for this act is unprecedented for Europe in some of the darkest years of the continent, when the Bulgarian people and state demonstrated tolerance, involvement, but also willpower and courage to effect the rescue of their Jewish fellow-men. Against the background of the dark times in Europe, this act is sending an extremely important message also to present-day generations about a state and its society being able to generate such substantial forces and public energy, with which to achieve a seemingly impossible political act" (BTA 2023). It becomes clear that the so-called commemorations will proceed under the line of exoneration of royal Bulgaria and its transformation from a country allied to Nazi Germany with actual anti-Jewish legislation and labour camps, into a rescuer state. State policy is no longer restricted solely to covering the truth, but also to transforming the state itself into a rescuer. In previous months, there had been initiatives to award King Boris III, posthumously, with a Stara Planina Order as a rescuer of Bulgarian Jewry. An open letter calls for a "worthy commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the rescue of Bulgarian Jewry in front of the memorial plaques of the rescuers," and stating further that: "These plaques are exact replicas of the plaques erected in the Bulgarian Forest, outside Jerusalem to Bulgaria and the Bulgarian people, by philanthropic benefactors in token of acknowledgement for their 1943 rescue. The same were installed at the initiative of the National Committee for Protection of Historical Truth in Bulgaria." The authors and signatories of the appeal claim that the fact that in previous years the official events were not held there "has created an unpleasant feeling that

²³ Nikolay Milkov is a Bulgarian diplomat and politician related to President Rumen Radev.

Bulgarian officials were made uncomfortable by the presence of the names of King Boris III and Queen Joanna”, and also that, apparently, “[t]he behaviour of Bulgarian authorities in our own state makes them incapable of showing that they are not enslaved by counterfeit historical (...) mantras, enforced by Bulgarian Communist Party and the Yugoslavian Communist Party about “monarcho-fascism” in our country and about the ‘Bulgarian fascist occupation’ of Aegean Thrace and Macedonia” (Dnevnik 2023). An important particular, however, is that in Israel there are no such plaques – they were removed following a decision of the specially formed commission (Ofer 2004), while the appeal drew stricture from representatives of the Bulgarian expatriate community in Israel (Facebook 2023a, 2023b). At the same time there were other controversial figures mobilized in replacing the facts surrounding the deportation, as well as to exonerate royal pro-fascist Bulgaria as a rescuer. It is interesting to emphasize that this group includes supporters of President Radev, representing various left-wing, pro-Russian circles, but also some of his opponents and outspoken critics on other topics, such as his position concerning the Ukraine war, or representing far-right neo-Nazi movements, circles and groups.

On the eve of March 10, a group of Bulgarian intellectuals made a public declaration covered by several independent media (Free Europe 2023), but not by the Bulgarian News Agency, which refused to do so. The declaration emphatically criticizes the position of the state and its mobilized mouthpieces. Undoubtedly the boldest act by Bulgarian public figures on that score, which was supported by Jewish organizations such as B’nai B’rith Bulgaria.²⁴

On March 10 proper, President Radev celebrated the rescue side by side with Simeon of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, but without a single representative of the Bulgarian Jewish community in attendance, including leading a procession to the above mentioned plaques, and placing a wreath in front of them. The representatives of Bulgarian Jewish community disclosed in publications on social networks that the President’s Administration had pressured community members to take part in the commemoration ceremonies.

Provided that the so-called commemorations have a mobilizing effect in Bulgaria and in communities abroad, which pridefully show to the world the “unique” act of the Bulgarians, they nevertheless end in international scandals and shall not remain unnoticed at international level. A number of influential scholars and representatives of Jewish organizations have labeled the position of the official Bulgarian institutions “revisionist” (e.g. BNR 2023), and almost all frontline media in Israel have remarked on the absence of the Jewish community from the events (JTA 2023).

²⁴ B’nai B’rith Bulgaria is one of the oldest and most influential Jewish organizations in the country. It is known for its firm public positions in the fight against antisemitism.

The above examples make it clear that the politicization of the rescue issue occurs within the top-level agreement between different political actors. Otherwise holding radically polarized positions, they find themselves in an absolute consensus. In this sense, as L. Dejanova wrote, as early as in 2014, there is a new and unexpected consensus in the official public domain on the issue of the responsibility of the Bulgarian state for the 1943 deportations – a populist, nationalist, post-political, i.e. an expert or quasi-expert consensus, a consensus between the official discourses of the anti-communist opposition and former communists (Dejanova 2014). Peter-Emil Mitev aptly notes that “the [rescue] of [Bulgarian Jewry] is a screen onto which all ideological deformations of Bulgarian history are projected” (Mitev in Dejanova 2014, 169). This distorted reality is especially visible in the days surrounding the 80th anniversary – such as the deniers of Bulgaria’s role in the deportation, as well as the advocates of the significant role of then Bulgarian State in the face of Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and King Boris III in the rescue, one can identify otherwise ideological opponents, including as of currently, the topic of the Ukraine War.

Let us see, however, if there is any consensus on who the rescuer is. The most compact answer to this question is given by Jacky Comforty: “[it has] always meant King Boris III for the monarchists, or Todor Zhivkov²⁵ for the Communists” (Comforty 2021, 467).

In the years following 1989, especially around the celebration of the 70th anniversary, a conception gained footing in Bulgaria of the rescue as an act of the civil society: “In its post-Communist version, rescue could be ascribed to the Bulgarian people at large via a concept of ‘civil society.’ This officially sponsored syncretism was featured in a series of display panels prepared for exhibition at Bulgarian diplomatic missions abroad. Credit for rescue is shared collectively, and no single action is accorded paramount weight, thus failing to actually explain Jewish survival. And in extolling an idealized national character, the approach glosses over the suffering incurred by the harassment, privation, ghettoization, forced labour and property confiscations imposed on Bulgarian Jewry for four years” (Sage 2017, 144).

And if “civil society,” despite being a syncretism, represents a term of the democratic vocabulary, further nominations for the rescuer role border on perversion. In recent years, especially under the aegis of some political figures – former military minister and VMRO leader, Krassimir Karakachanov and President Rumen Radev – an attempt was made to interpret the existence of the labour camp system as a kind of rescue. On January 27, 2020, a National Round Table was held with the title “The Jewish Labour Conscription During the Second World War – a rescue

25 Todor Zhivkov was a Bulgarian communist official, who from 1954 to 1989 was the *de facto* leader of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria as Secretary General of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

plan or a repressive measure?” organized by the Institute of Historic Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Defense, attended by representatives of the Sofia University, the Military Academy, the University of Veliko Tirnovovo, the deputy minister of education (at the time from GERB), deputy minister of culture, and mayors. Media offer divergent information, but it becomes clear that a wide range of state institutions have some connection with the event, which, among other things, is extremely paradoxically dedicated to the International Holocaust Victims Remembrance Day. The main report purports that it was precisely compulsory labour that “saved” the Bulgarian Jews.

There was also a book published by seviceman Dimitar Nedyalkov, affiliate to President Radev, with a title “The Bulgarian Army and the Rescue of Bulgarian Jewry 1941–1944”. One of its editions was sponsored by the GERB representative in the European Parliament from the EPP group, – another by an Israeli weaponry company. This did not go unnoticed at the international level, as articles on the topic were published in leading Israeli (and not only) media (Haaretz 2022a, 2022b; Nation 2022).

Distinct participants in this single plot are representatives of three political formations – VMRO, GERB and President Radev, supported at least to a certain point by the BSP. Populism also often blurs the horizontal differences – for example, along the left-right axis (Meny 2002). Apparently, there is another post-political, post-ideological and populist consensus forming around the role of the army-rescuer or the rescue through compulsory labour.

In his text dedicated to Bulgaria, Chary (1996) writes that Bulgarian historians developed the myth of the rescue, while the question as to who the rescuer of the Bulgarian Jews is, has become like a political football. This football, and its bandying in one direction or another, often bear strong antisemitic character. One of the most current myths among the right-wing interpretations is that the Jews rescued from extermination have murdered their rescuers through the People’s Court²⁶ (DW 2021). Attempts to seek the historical truth are interpreted as “Jewish ingratitude”: “The political exploitation of ‘heroism’ and ‘saving the Jews’, and Jewish rejection of these myths brought an antisemitic response which distinguishes between ‘Good Jews’ who accept the Bulgarian imposed narrative, while those who are critical are ‘Ungrateful Jews’” (Comforty 2021, 492).

These attempts to divide Jews into grateful and ungrateful, however, do not emanate only from the right, but also from the left. After various Jewish organizations have aired concern at the distortion of the truth on the Holocaust in the Bulgarian context, President Radev took actions, for example, inviting the public

26 The People’s Court was an extraordinary court that operated in the Kingdom of Bulgaria from December 1944 to April 1945.

figure Michael Bar-Zohar for a meeting, and having his picture taken with him.²⁷ This is what Radev says on his Facebook: “Bulgaria values highly the contribution of Prof. Michael Bar-Zohar in vindicating and affirming the historical truth about the feat of the Bulgarian people and state in rescuing their Jewish fellow-citizens 80 years ago. This act of tolerance and humanism was unique for Europe during the Second World War and should be promoted before the world. Prof. Bar-Zohar’s activity is of exceptional importance also against the background of the unholy attempts to misrepresent the past, to replace this luminous page in our history and to impute undeserved historical guilt to Bulgaria.” (Facebook, November 7, 2023)

Conclusions

Of course, these attempts to distort the truth of the Holocaust and whitewash history are not uniquely peculiar to Bulgaria. Similar tendencies can be observed in a number of Eastern and Central European states. Historian Robert Rozett employs the already accepted term “usable past” to describe these processes: “A further aspect of forging a useable past is the idea that the good name of a nation must be protected from attempts to sully it. This has led to the promotion of idealized and twisted historical narratives and has engendered attempts to legislate history and the discussion of history” (2019, 32).

In recent decades there are a number of states in the region, with empowered populist, non-liberal, authoritarian leaders in rule, where such measures are being adopted. This whitewashing of history, the pursuit to exonerate the people and the state, of protecting the moral purity of the nation can be seen as one of many topics mobilized in a similar direction – migration, the so-called “gender ideology”, “*europieishtina*,”²⁸ all models imposed from outside.

In the Bulgarian context, the hardening of the narrative exonerating the Bulgarian people, around which the populist consensus is forming, can also be seen as satisfying a latent need of a society, insecure in itself (Avramov 2021). The rescue is a narrative of greatness, “a refrain, universalized in the tradition of David and Goliath, [which]receives the sanction of the state, and is banalized and propagated, gradually making its way into textbooks and the annual official festive calendar,

²⁷ Michael Bar-Zohar is an Israeli historian and politician. Born in Bulgaria, he emigrated to Israel in 1948. Author of the book *Beyond Hitler’s Grasp*. The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews. He is known for his claim that Boris III personally stopped the deportation of Bulgarian Jews, and he also attempts to whitewash Bulgaria for the deportation of Jews from the occupied territories.

²⁸ “Euro-affectation”, “Europeanness”, “misguided and shallow emulation of European”.

while around its protagonists (in a continually changing alignment) a new pantheon is being erected” (Avramov 2021, 417).

Internally, this not only brings self-confidence, but also hardens the nationalist sentiment, and is a resource for their mobilization for political purposes, similarly as with other topics mentioned above. In the conditions of a political scene dominated by populism, where ideological differences are blurred, the rivalry between individual political actors is now in terms of how much further the rescue myth can be embellished. This act, unarguably deserving of respect, was turned into a political instrument.

At the same time in an environment, dominated by populism, the tolerance to antisemitic acts also increases. In the months following the 80th anniversary, a shop in Sofia was covered with swastikas and with the inscriptions “Jude,” antisemitic sketches are shared in a social media group of a parliamentary represented political force, while politicians take the liberty to make remarks, rephrasing those, which sparked the persecutions of the Jews in the times of Stalin. Although, these processes are self-intensifying, the lack of clear political alternative is what poses the real great danger.

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