

Populism in Estonia and Slovakia: Performances, Transgressions, and Communicative Styles

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Abstract

The paper relies on empirical evidence from Estonia and Slovakia to develop an understanding of populism as a performative and transgressive political performance. We argue that populism cannot be defined in ideological terms nor can it be attached to particular political subjects. Instead, it is a political style that can be adopted and mimicked by various subjects from extreme right to social liberal. The performativity of populism presupposes forms of transgression that disrupt the normalcy of political routine. Populist performances thus seek and construct an authenticity by taking politics outside of its conventional institutional frameworks. We examine the cases of EKRE in Estonia and LSNS and OĽaNO in Slovakia.

Introduction

This paper intends to juxtapose and compare with each other the political effects of the populist rhetoric and imagery in two affected countries, Estonia and Slovakia¹. We look at these two cases as representing, correspondingly, Baltic and Central European experiences of populist politics that cause divisive effects upon the societies and reinforce hybrid forms of political coalitions within the elites. We discuss the reverberations of populism from the perspective of performativity, a concept that connotes a rhetorical strategy and the multiplicity of its representations in mass culture, media and popular arts. It is through this prism that new societal divisions and cleavages might be researched, and new political hybridities unpacked.

Slovakia and Estonia might be compared with each other based on a number of parameters. First, they are geographically and demographically small countries at the

¹ This work was supported by European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822682 "Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism - POPREBEL"

EU's eastern border, with a self-perception of smallness as part of identity discourses that engenders a particular sense of liminality. Being located at geopolitical margins, they share widely spread feelings of vulnerability that are compensated by their institutionally embedded commitments to Western-led political and security frameworks.

Secondly, Estonia and Slovakia used to be part of several colonial / imperial projects (Austro-Hungarian/Soviet for Slovakia, Swedish / German / Russian / Soviet for Estonia). In Slovakia, in the 19th century there was the Hungarian colonial project aimed at attempts to Hungarianize Slovaks and other non-Magyar ethnic groups in the Kingdom of Hungary. The echoes of that project still provokes tensions between Slovakia and Hungary though anti-Hungarian rhetoric was shelved away by populists in recent years, especially following the migration crisis, which provided them with a new enemy. The second colonial project is the Soviet/Communist one (1948-1989), and here differences with Estonia may be notable. While in Estonia occupation is ostensibly the dominant interpretation of that period, in Slovakia the Communist era is seen somewhat more positively, as it was a period of urbanization, industrialization, and general improvement in living standards.

Thirdly, the two countries' trajectories of integration into the EU and NATO seem to be similar, though Slovakia was a "laggard" among the Visegrad Four owing to Meciar's authoritarian leadership. But it's also true that (partially as a result of that fear of the Self)² - it became the most pro-European state in the Visegrad group, the only one to adopt the euro, whilst Estonia was also the first one among the Baltic states to introduce the common currency – through austerity measures and in the midst of the European financial crisis. These similarities between the two cases are paralleled by another shared tendency which is the notable growth of anti-establishment performative populism. This suggests that both countries have an increased demand for politics that challenges or runs contrary to the liberal, pro-Western achievements, hinting at deep divisions and dislocations existing in the respective societies.

Relatedly, Estonia and Slovakia appear to have similar structure of national political landscapes: in both countries presidents embody a spirit of liberal democracy, while parliaments are under a serious influence of illiberal populists. The two female presidents are a remarkable point of comparison since rhetoric of both might be considered as a form of benign (liberal or "elvish") populism.

² By 'fear of the Self' here we mean that the experience of authoritarianism - which made Slovakia an outlier in Central Europe and almost cost the Slovaks their membership in the EU and NATO - produced a feeling of insecurity, an implicit fear that authoritarian and pro-Russian tendencies could resurface if Slovakia was not firmly anchored in Western alliances. For more see Kazharski, Aliaksei. Two kinds of small? The 'EU core' in Slovak and Czech geopolitical imagination. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Volume 27, Issue 4, 2019, pp. 424-438.

The research puzzle we try to tackle stems from the vagueness of the concept of populism that looks academically overstretched and politically judgmental. On the one hand, the frequent associations with right wing extremism made populism a negatively marked notion. On the other hand, some left academics (in particular, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Muffe) infused much more positive connotations to populism that in their interpretation is an intrinsic component of democracy. This plurality of barely reconcilable approaches is complemented by the striking diversity of populist personas themselves: among them one may find ‘upstarts from the people’ (such as Aliaksandr Lukashenka in Belarus), but also members of the corporate elite (Donald Trump). How then can we salvage the concept of populism from the potential fragmentation and likely dispersal, and maintain its academic integrity? Arguably, one of possible responses to this challenge might consist in approaching populism not from the position of its actors’ alleged belongingness to - or embeddedness in - a specific class or ideology, but from the vantage point of their performative resources that might be widely shared and borrowed from each other all across the political spectrum.

Therefore, unlike many other studies grounded in attributing populism to concrete and easily identifiable actors, we in our analysis approach populism as a performative style rather than an ideologically marked or politically substantialist construct. What stems from this key point is that any specific issue or policy strategy might take populist and non-populist (this is to say, policy-based / managerial / administrative / technocratic) forms. For example, the strategy of sustaining and reinforcing national identity might be implemented through language and citizenship policy, as well as through public - and largely symbolic - actions aimed against foreigners.

By the same token, it is the performative approach to populism that seems to be instrumental for understanding the proliferation of hybrid political practices. Examples are an ‘unthinkable’ coalition of mutually exclusive parties in the Estonian government after April 2019; or a populist melange of “left and right-wing ideologies, e.g. the founding of a national commercial bank and radical tax reductions at the same time”³; or intricate combinations of globalization / cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and the retrieval of archaic cultural / political forms, on the other. Hybridized populism in this sense is a socially contagious phenomenon, and fosters convergence of political styles between political opponents: in both countries we have identified cases of the populist style performed by liberal actors, which only proves the trans-ideological character of populism that enacts and empowers different political subjectivities.⁴

Methodologically, populist performativity ought to be distinguished from political campaigning that involves a great deal of affective and expressive tools. The reason for

³ Liivik, Ero: Right-wing extremism and its possible impact to the internal security of the Republic of Estonia. In: *Proceedings, Estonian Academy of Security Studies* (2015). pp. 83-116 (98)

⁴ Angelos Kissas. Performative and ideological populism: The case of charismatic leaders on Twitter, *Discourse and Society* 2019, p.2; doi.org/10.1177/0957926519889127

this limitation is that during electoral campaigns all their participants are structurally forced to adhere to the populist *modus operandi* by the sheer nature of electoral democracy. This is why we prefer to mostly focus on the “regular” situations not directly affected by electoral considerations. This distinction we draw between campaigning - when almost everybody tends to be a populist - and regular politics explains our selection of political parties in the respective countries. Our analysis thus focused on the activities of those political actors that are known for their performative style outside of the campaign period.

We also choose our reference period based on these methodological assumptions of the difference between “regularity” and the campaign mobilization season. As we address two countries with different electoral cycles, the time frames for the two cases will necessarily be decoupled. For Estonia it started in April 2019 when the coalition government with the participation of EKRE (Estonian Conservative People’s Party) was formed, thus commencing a new era in Estonian politics with populists in power. Slovakia experienced a similar event three years earlier. In 2016 several right-wing populist parties made a breakthrough in the national parliamentary elections, as the migration crisis radicalized public discourse and created additional discursive opportunities for new players.⁵ We, naturally, do not claim that populist politics did not exist in the respective countries outside of these time frames. As a political style populism is always an option, but these specific reference periods were selected in light of the electoral cycles in both countries and the availability of data which depends directly on them.

In terms of data gathering our analysis has relied primarily on official websites of the respective political parties, as well as social network pages of their most influential members, and also on reports by the local media provided within the reference period. Since performative political action by its very nature tends to draw increased media attention and resonate with the public strongly, documenting its main instances was not particularly difficult.

Performative Populism: Introducing the Concept

Most of the attempts to define populism in essentialized categories are usually misleading and counter-productive. An example could be the misrepresentation of populists as those political actors who allegedly „a) see the ostensible cleavage between “ordinary people” and “the elites” as the only one that matters; b) reject compromise; and c) dismiss minorities and disregard institutional legality while favoring raw

⁵ See A. Kazharski. The End of ‘Central Europe’? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four. *Geopolitics*, Volume 23, Issue 4, 2018, 754-780.

majoritarianism“⁶. We consider all these points useful in some respects but also questionable, as they do not, in our opinion, fully comprehend the nature of the phenomenon. Instead we prefer to approach „populism as a distinctive political and communicative ‘practice’ that „is actually present in the language of almost all political leaders“⁷. From the empirical viewpoint, our approach does not necessarily contradict those who address populism as a form of anti-establishment politics. On the contrary, it is the performativity of populism, its “carnavalesque” and transgressive nature, the strategy of being deliberately shocking or rude which disrupts the normalcy or regularity of politics and thus allows it to wage war on the “establishment”.

Therefore, populist discourses unfold within “systems of meaning, which are integrated by particular communicative codes”⁸. This relates populism to culture wars⁹ replete with „mannerisms, gestures and aesthetic flourishes”¹⁰, which justifies the characterization of populism as a ‘style’ of politics“¹¹, more emotive than normative, and always a matter of degree (there may be more or less populism in a specific discourse)¹². Populism might therefore be defined as a “political style and the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations”¹³, a mode of operating “rather than a self-sufficient set of ideas”¹⁴.

Arguably, as a performative phenomenon populism manifests itself through discourses and imageries, rather than through substantive and politically coherent strategies. This approach is rooted in the concept of performativity and, more specifically, in its interpretation by Judith Butler and her multiple followers. In borrowing the idea of performativity from Butler’s philosophy of power, we approach identities as “cultural fictions”¹⁵; in other words, “after Butler, identities and belongings ... can never be securely

⁶ Takis S. Pappas. Exchange: How to Tell Nativists from Populists. *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 29, Number 1, January 2018, pp. 148-152 (150)

⁷ Alberto Martinelli. National Populism and the European Union. *Populism* 1, 2018: 59-71 (62)

⁸ Ingolfur Bluhdorn and Felix Butzlaff. Rethinking Populism: Peak democracy, liquid identity and the performance of sovereignty. *European Journal of Social Theory* 2018: 1–21 (16)

⁹ Jacques Rupnik. The Specter Haunting Europe: Surging Illiberalism in the East. *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 27, Number 4, October 2016, pp. 77-87 (82)

¹⁰ Jonathan Dean & Bice Maiguashca (2020): Did somebody say populism? Towards a renewal and reorientation of populism studies, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, DOI: 10.1080/13569317.2020.1699712 (5)

¹¹ Fabio Wolkenstein. What can we hold against populism? *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 2015, Vol. 41(2) 111–129 (112)

¹² Jasper Muis and Tim Immerzeel. Causes and consequences of the rise of populist radical right parties and movements in Europe. *Current Sociology Review* 2017, Vol. 65(6) 909– 930 (911)

¹³ Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies* 2014, vol. 62, 381–397 (387)

¹⁴ Thomas Jacobs (2018) The Dislocated Universe of Laclau and Mouffe: An Introduction to Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory, *Critical Review*, 30:3-4, 294-315 (318)

¹⁵ Alan McKinlay. Performativity and the politics of identity: Putting Butler to work. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21 (2010): 232–242 (235)

pinned down. They must be seen as fundamentally contingent, stabilized only through the performative acts that attempt, unsteadily, to fix them as integral markings of our existence”¹⁶. Guy Debord’s ‘society of the spectacle’ seems to be a good match to this theorizing.

Since political identities emerge “as neither foundational grounds nor fully expressed products”¹⁷, they are recurrently re-signified through rituals of repetition and reiteration¹⁸. In our analysis we assume that to qualify as performative, a social action (a speech act, a political or cultural gesture, or a public event) should be “repeated”, “re-enacted” and “re-experienced” within the already established set of meanings¹⁹. To add some semiotic perspective to this argument, we agree that “every sign can be cited, and consequently it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts”²⁰. This presupposes that performative actions require publicity (as opposed to technocratic decision making behind closed doors of corporate institutions, parliaments or governmental agencies), that they should be replicable and reproducible in a variety of discursive forms, and should engender a certain narrative of resistance to - and subversion of - the dominant discourses of power. One may say that “reiteration is compulsory, but agency lies in the possibility of resignification, i.e. the reworking of the discourse through which subject effects are produced”²¹.

Thus, populism as a political style creates political relations that entail “repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performances”²², involving actors, audiences, stages, scripts and mise-en-scene”²³. In this sense, populist agendas are less about “policy content than ... the form”²⁴, and populism as a style is self-reproducing phenomenon with a broad variety of genres that might be inscribed into its frame, including “parodic recitations”²⁵ and other performative forms. With the rise of populism, “many existing conventions (concerning politeness, conversation maxims, conventional norms and rules

¹⁶ Lynne Segal. After Judith Butler: Identities, Who Needs Them? *Subjectivity*, 2008, 25: 381–394 (381).

¹⁷ Alecia Youngblood Jackson. Performativity Identified. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Volume 10 Number 5, 2004 673-690 (675)

¹⁸ Lise Nelson. Bodies (and Spaces) do Matter: The limits of Performativity. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 6:4, 331-353 (338)

¹⁹ Silvia Stoller. Expressivity and performativity: Merleau-Ponty and Butler. *Continental Philosophical Review* (2010) 43 :97–110 (102).

²⁰ Moya Lloyd. Radical Democratic Activism and the Politics of Resignification. *Constellations* Volume 14, No 1, 2007: 129-146 (131)

²¹ Mark Laffey. Locating Identity: Performativity, Foreign Policy and State Action, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Jul., 2000), pp. 429-444

²² Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, op.cit., p.36.

²³ Andrew Arato and Jean L. Cohen. Civil society, populism and religion. *Constellations*. 2017; 24: 283–295 (286)

²⁴ Angelos Chryssogelos. State transformation and populism: From the internationalized to the neo-sovereign state? *Politics* 2018: 1-16 (10)

²⁵ Moya Lloyd. Performativity, Parody, Politics, *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (2), 1999, p. 197.

governing discussions, negotiations, conflict management and so forth) are increasingly being jettisoned in political debates... Apologies no longer seem necessary, insults are left standing. People are obviously moving in different, totally segregated discursive worlds”²⁶, thus causing divisive effects upon the society.

Of paramount importance is that “discourses are performative to the extent that they co-produce what they name and “claim to represent”²⁷: they directly appeal to the people, skipping normal / regular institutional practices, and in the meantime they re-signify the concept of the people in opposition to a variety of newly invented internal and / or external ‘others’. In other words, “populist discourse is performative because the people do not exist independently of the claims to represent the people”²⁸. In this vein indeed „the definition / naming of the ‘people’ by populism is a performative operation“²⁹, and our case studies below appear to illuminate this argument further on.

As could be seen from the literature review, our analysis is in no way the first to argue the performative nature of populism. We build it on a growing body of literature that has relied on the concept of performativity, and interpreted it in various empirical contexts and through different methodological lenses. Some³⁰ have used a discourse analytical framework focusing predominantly on the usage of language while other studies have focused on visual rather than textual aspects of the performance. While we share the general analytical premises with many of those studies, we contribute to the debate by broadening the empirical focus both by shifting it to Central and Baltic Europe, and by including other dimensions of analysis. For instance, while we certainly agree that charismatic leaders have been “a distinct mode of the performativity of populism”,³¹ empirically our analysis transcends the idea of populism as a one man show, expanding to elements of performativity that are found in group actions and representations and do not necessarily hinge on a charismatic individual.

²⁶ Ruth Wodak. ‘The boundaries of what can be said have shifted’: An expert interview with Ruth Wodak (questions posed by Andreas Schulz), *Discourse & Society* 2020, Vol. 31(2) 235 – 244 (239).

²⁷ Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey. Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style. *Political Studies* 2014, vol. 62, 381–397 (389)

²⁸ Lasse Thomassen (2019) Representing the People: Laclau as a Theorist of Representation, *New Political Science*, 41:2, 329-344 (331)

²⁹ Neil Robinson and Sarah Milne. Populism and political development in hybrid regimes: Russia and the development of official populism. *International Political Science Review* 2017, Vol. 38(4) 412– 425 (404)

³⁰ Mats Ekström, Marianna Patrona, Joanna Thornborrow. Right-wing populism and the dynamics of style: a discourse-analytic perspective on mediated political performances. *Palgrave Communications*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, pp. 83-83, 2018

³¹ Angelos Kissas. Performative and ideological populism: The case of charismatic leaders on Twitter, *Discourse and Society* 2019, p.2; doi.org/10.1177/0957926519889127

Estonia: More than One Populism

Populism became a buzzword in Estonian political parlance with the accession of a party named EKRE to the government as a coalition partner in April 2019, in the immediate aftermath of parliamentary election that more than doubled this party's popularity, from 8,1 % in the previous election to 17,8 %.

In the opinion of many Estonian political experts, "EKRE's rise in politics already has led to the vulgarization of public debate"³². As an Estonian analyst concluded, "the national conservatives create one scandal after another that spark short-term media crises but also blow over relatively quickly. They sometimes include no-confidence motions in the parliament, while these are dismissed just as expediently... Frequent scandals that disappear as abruptly as they were created coming to nothing – it is a new logic we have not yet adjusted to"³³. This is exactly how EKRE - without a direct attribution to the party - was portrayed in a critical video created by the Kõigi Eesti ('All of Estonia') group: as a gang of hooligans encroaching upon a big peaceful family and staging a mess insulting and attacking all the decent people gathered for a party³⁴.

Indeed, EKRE has a long record of performative appearances aimed more at transgressing the standards of political behaviour than at problem solving. In 2018 an EKRE member Mart Saarso has called Tallinn City Council chairman Mihhail Kõlvart "an Asian who is unfit for the hall at City Council". Alluding to Kazakh roots of Kõlvart, he added: "The capital city is in the hands of migrants"³⁵. In the public space like-minded youth organization – 'Blue Awakening', 'Sovereign Movement Smart and Healthy Estonia' and some others – had been particularly visible in organizing torch rallies³⁶ on Independence Day³⁷, along with anti-immigration "street patrols as a performative act of white militarized masculinity"³⁸. Torch parades, popular with youth organizations before

³² Jari Tanner. Estonian populists, 2 other parties seal coalition deal, *Associated Press*, April 7, 2019, https://news.yahoo.com/estonian-populists-2-other-parties-seal-coalition-deal-122913751.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAAhMoFV15LQPN_O9ihKUdkYSmT2bflZ5WQ2tHbuGQolXUFv3SOBYT1czBk7brwMJJijyocdF7KsnO13-YTB53VgoKAKQ_7KNiracy19F-Li7_C1vdZ5egxwZwuoRnBCj6PrG_V8VGTQzhNQsJgqs8blMfzgy9ney1lJDQFrOWyZEw

³³ Analyst: New mode in Estonian politics, *ERR*, December 17, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/1014858/analyst-new-mode-in-estonian-politics>

³⁴ Kõigi Eesti seisab üksteist austava, hooliva, väärika ja võimalusterohke Eesti eest, <https://koigieesti.ee>

³⁵ EKRE member, Riigikogu hopeful Saarso calls Kõlvart 'unfit Asian', *ERR*, October 11, 2018, <https://news.err.ee/868288/ekre-member-riigikogu-hopeful-saarso-calls-kolvart-unfit-asian>

³⁶ Stefano Braghiroli and Vassilis Petsinis. Estonia's populist and radical right: how radical are they? *Open Democracy*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/estonia-s-populist-and-radical-right-how-rad/>

³⁷ Kutse tõrvikurongkäigule 2016 / Estonian torchlight march 2016. EKRE, February 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=to9IOd77FC4>

³⁸ Sarai Aharoni and Élise Féron. National populism and gendered vigilantism: The case of the Soldiers of Odin in Finland. *Cooperation and Conflict* 2019: 1– 21 (2)

the 1920s and 30s and closely associated with the Nazi symbols, are however perceived as metaphors “of light and freedom”³⁹ among EKRE’s sympathizers.

After the parliamentary election that brought 19 members of EKRE to the national legislature - as compared to 7 in 2015 - the space for populist performances expanded, thus triggering public outcries. Thus, the father and son Martin Helme and Mart Helme, two key figures in EKRE, while being sworn in to the Estonian Parliament, made gestures that appeared to be an "OK" sign with their thumbs and index fingers making a circle while their other three fingers were held out. Since 2017, the gesture has taken on new significance in white supremacist circles; according to the Anti-Defamation League, white supremacists use it to signal their support for white power⁴⁰. A few months later EKRE member Ruuben Kaalep took a selfie with the same gesture, posing with the head of the French National Rally Marine Le Pen who was visiting Tallinn. Later she insisted he delete the picture from his Facebook page⁴¹; however, Martin Helme pledged to continue to use the gesture as a sign of defiance to “left-wing radicals who want to hijack the language.”⁴²

Another performative scandal was Estonian Interior Minister Mart Helme’s verbal offense of the new Finnish prime minister Sanna Marin: in December 2019 he characterized the new coalition government in Finland as an “evidence of leftist efforts to destroy the country from within ... What has happened in Finland now still makes the hair stand on end”⁴³. “Now we see how one sales girl has become a prime minister and how some other street activists and non-educated people have also joined the cabinet,” Helme said on his party’s radio talk show, making the prime minister of Estonia apologize for this insult⁴⁴. A few months later Estonian Ambassador to Finland Harri Tiido resigned due to his disagreements with the government in Tallinn; he particularly cited the episode with Mart Helme’s verbal attack on Sanna Marin: "They may think they are saying it ... for domestic consumption. However, everyone gets to know everything nowadays, and if

³⁹ EKRE: ‘Inappropriate’ symbols not welcome at Independence Day torch parade, *ERR*, February 23, 2016, <https://news.err.ee/117680/ekre-inappropriate-symbols-not-welcome-at-independence-day-torch-parade>

⁴⁰ Rachel Frazin. Estonian lawmakers appear to make white power sign, *The Hill*, March 5, 2019, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/europe/441956-estonian-officials-raise-concern-new-lawMAKERS-FLASHED-WHITE>

⁴¹ Aliide Naylor. Could right-wing populism push integrated Estonia toward Russia? *EuroNews*, May 22, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/05/21/could-right-wing-populism-push-integrated-estonia-back-towards-russia>

⁴² Jack Montgomery. Populist revolt spreads: Estonia’s new government ministers oppose EU integration, *Breitbart*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2019/05/20/populist-revolt-spreads-estonias-new-govt-minister-will-oppose-eu-integration/#>

⁴³ ‘Reds’ trying to destroy Finland, says Estonian Interior Minister, *ERR*, December 16, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/1014332/reds-trying-to-destroy-finland-says-estonian-interior-minister>

⁴⁴ Estonia apologizes after minister taunts Finnish PM as ‘sales girl’, *Reuters*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-estonia-finland-minister/estonia-apologizes-after-minister-taunts-finnish-pm-as-sales-girl-idUSKBN1YK1Q2>

[Estonian] diplomats need to ask Finland for support, for example, after this type of statement, then it's going to be hard to approach them."⁴⁵

Very illustrative of EKRE's performative style in politics is their members' justification for trolling and fake accounts as communication tools. Thus, Ruuben Kaalep admitted that he has used a fake name to fool the editorial desk of the *Eesti Päevaleht* newspaper: this opinion piece, in his words, "was written from a dogmatically left-wing and liberal democratic position. It included harebrained accusations aimed against EKRE. The aim of the article was to show the dominant worldview in Estonian journalism»⁴⁶.

However, the lines of division charted by the right wing populism are not always well fixed. In a revealing public utterance, the Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid has lambasted a new political style in the parliament that legitimizes rudeness and distracts attention from policy making to mockery and nonsense, yet in the meantime clearly alluded to some kind of tacit solidarity between the different forces in the ruling elite. In her words, even decent proposals made by populists "are discarded, since they offend and gag all others. Particularly annoying is to see how the offender and the offended go for a coffee together, being confident of themselves, and failing to acknowledge the lack of policy decisions beneficial for Estonia"⁴⁷. Indeed, EKRE is by no means the only source of performative populism on the Estonian political stage. The removal of the EU flag from the parliament building in June 2019⁴⁸ was a highly symbolic gesture of performative EU-skepticism of which EKRE was one of major driving forces, but definitely not the sole one. Of particular salience are EKRE parallels with the *Keskerakond* party which for a long time has been propagating left-wing populism aimed at providing a counterbalance (state interventionism, higher pensions, a progressive tax system) to the rigid free-market reforms that dominated in the 1990s and 2000s⁴⁹. Having proposed to form a coalition government with EKRE, *Keskerakond* extended its populist style to making clear that it

⁴⁵ Estonian ambassador to Finland resigns over worldview clash with government. ERR, August 1, 2020, <https://news.err.ee/1119484/estonian-ambassador-to-finland-resigns-over-worldview-clash-with-government>

⁴⁶ Martin Laine and Sander Punamae. EKRE sees no problem with trolling, *Postimees*, January 17, 2019, <https://news.postimees.ee/6501755/ekre-sees-no-problem-with-trolling>

⁴⁷ Kersti Kaljulaid: Eto byl god, zadevayuschiy i ranyaschiy dushu, *Postimees*, February 24, 2010, https://rus.postimees.ee/6907613/kersti-kalyulayd-eto-byl-god-zadevayushchiy-i-ranyashchiy-dushu?fbclid=IwAR10MA-g29rK9o5aNVo8HXNwH9hZ8yiiX6u6oizyRS4Q_VSciQWAOkZbA-Q&utm_campaign=fb_post&utm_content=6907613&utm_medium=wallpost&utm_source=pm_rus_fb

⁴⁸ Riigikogu opts to keep EU flag out of Toompea White Hall by one vote, *ERR*, June 12, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/951537/riigikogu-opts-to-keep-eu-flag-out-of-toompea-white-hall-by-one-vote>

⁴⁹ Jeroen Bult. Estonia adrift: How a digital pioneer became a source of political anxiety - opinion, *LRT*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1063301/estonia-adrift-how-a-digital-pioneer-became-a-source-of-political-anxiety-opinion>

considers Russophone votes more as an electoral resource rather than a matter of principle. As Marje Lauristin remarked, “Helme very much reminds me of what we’ve said about Savisaar⁵⁰ – that he created a father figure and those who needed one followed him. Helme is doing the exact same thing today – he is shaping a father figure, a brutal and powerful but reliable image of a protector, one who notices and defends the downtrodden”⁵¹.

Moreover, many anti-EKRE gestures may ostensibly be performative. President Kersti Kaljulaid walked out of the ceremony during the swearing in of an EKRE politician, Marti Kuusik, as technology and foreign trade minister, who faced a series of domestic violence allegations and had to resign the next day⁵². In an even more performative move, Kersi Kaljulaid appeared at the oath ceremony in the parliament in a sweatshirt emblazoned with the slogan “Sõna on vaba” (“Speech is Free”) because of the climate of increasing verbal attacks on Estonian journalists⁵³, which was a clear signal of disdain of EKRE. Shortly afterwards Martin Jaanus composed a song under the same title⁵⁴, thus contributing to cultural commodification of the President’s motto.

Another clearly visible performative action was a series of public demonstrations against the far right⁵⁵ with ‘pink slime’ emblems⁵⁶. The “pink slime” lexem, being initially EKRE’s insult aimed at its opponents, became a badge of pride of those who wished to visualize their belonging to the liberal community of Estonia. This ironic devaluation of a populist speech act is a typical performative gesture of semiotic re-appropriation of the sign and its drastic re-signification.

Within this context one should also mention a series of public projects that have appeared as a direct reaction to EKRE’s nationalism and spilled over beyond the sphere

⁵⁰ A former head of the Center Party.

⁵¹ Saarts: Split between openness and closeness in Estonian society, *ERR*, December 31, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/1018898/saarts-split-between-openness-and-closeness-in-estonian-society>

⁵² Estonia’s Populists, in Power for the First Time, Face the Hard Task of Governing, *WPR*, May 15, 2019, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/27858/estonia-s-populists-in-power-for-the-first-time-face-the-hard-task-of-governing>

⁵³ President attends Riigikogu oath ceremony wearing ‘speech is free’ slogan, *ERR*, April 29, 2019, <https://news.err.ee/934728/president-attends-riigikogu-oath-ceremony-wearing-speech-is-free-slogan>

⁵⁴ Unistaja - sõna on vaba. Martin Jaanus, October 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1i4iaOPArE>

⁵⁵ Sten Hankewirz. Anti-EKRE activists are organising a demonstration against the coalition talks, *Estonian World*, March 27, 2019, <https://estonianworld.com/security/anti-ekre-activists-are-organising-a-demonstration-against-the-coalition-talks/>

⁵⁶ Estonians are protesting populism by wearing “pink slime”, *Economist*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/06/06/estonians-are-protesting-populism-by-wearing-pink-slime>

of institutional politics. A series of public expositions (in particular, “Ours” in Tallinn⁵⁷ and “*Me koik oleme Tartus*” (“We are all Tartu”), aimed at celebrating Estonia’s cultural diversity, were meaningful political acts grounded in resources of performativity. Another example is the ‘Kõigi Eesti’ project whose founders were listed among 12 outstanding Estonians in 2019⁵⁸.

Thus, as a result of EKRE’s accession to power the entire political space became a scene where right wing populism is counterbalanced or complemented by center-left (*Keskerakond*) and liberal (Kersti Kaljulaid) counter-performances. In fact, EKRE and its opponents and coalition partners exchange performative actions, and opposition to EKRE goes performative too, which supports the presumption that “that anti-populism becomes structurally like populism itself”⁵⁹, and sustains our vision of populism as a trans-ideological phenomenon whose bearers range from national traditionalists to cosmopolitan liberals.

Slovakia: on Elves, Fools, and Their Transgressions

Slovakia’s demand for anti-establishment politics goes well beyond the reference period (2016-2019). As early as 2013 Marian Kotleba was elected governor in the Banská Bystrica region (Central Slovakia), where poverty and the problems of the marginalized Roma minority were acute. Kotleba’s previous political project was outlawed in 2006 by the Slovak Supreme Court for extremism. However, its successor, Kotleba-People’s Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), capitalizing among other things on the 2015 anti-immigrant sentiment in Slovakia⁶⁰, made a breakthrough in the 2016 national election, winning 14 out of 150 seats in the Slovak National Council. The party remained a pariah in Slovak politics, as what made it untouchable was its veneration of the wartime authoritarian Slovak state (1939-1945), Germany’s satellite which was complicit in deporting its Jewish citizens to Nazi death camps.⁶¹ This shocking legacy, however, did not prevent LSNS from enjoying electoral support. Thus, in the Slovak presidential elections 2019, managed to

⁵⁷ V parke Taamssare otkryta vystavka ‘Svoi’, *Tallinn.ee*, May 22, 2019, https://www3.tallinn.ee/rus/Uudis-V-parke-Tamssaare-otkryta-vystavka-Svoi?filter_otsing_uudis_rubriik_id=35

⁵⁸ Top 12 outstanding Estonians in the world 2019, *Estonian World*, December 30, 2019, <https://estonianworld.com/life/top-12-outstanding-estonians-in-the-world-2019/?fbclid=IwARoJZRpmvRxvnCRW1GMShoRgzYlEoOBUfzoDf8qaOUQLstnYMsUNWpJLJmQ>

⁵⁹ Jan-Werner Muller. “The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People”: Reflections on Populism. *Constellations* Volume 21, No 4, 2014, 483-493 (491)

⁶⁰ See L. Kissová. The Production of (Un)deserving and (Un)acceptable: Shifting Representations of Migrants within Political Discourse in Slovakia. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* (2017), DOI 1-2410.1177/0888325417745127

⁶¹ See also E. Harris. “Nation before democracy? Placing the rise of the Slovak extreme right into context”. *East European Politics* (2019), 1-21. DOI: 10.1080/21599165.2019.1667770

secure over 10% of the national vote (222, 935 votes) in the first round, and winning in a number of smaller municipalities (an impressive result, considering he had to compete with other right-wing populists). Particularly astonishing and symbolic was the fact of his victory in Ostrý Grúň, a village in Central Slovakia that became the sight of a massacre in 1945, when German anti-insurgency units retaliated by burning the village down and killing 64 of its inhabitants – including women and children.

These electoral developments suggested that the anti-establishment feeling among some of Slovakia's voters was strong enough to create increased demand for shocking and sometimes even ugly and transgressive politics, which went against the system at any cost. Political sociologists classified LSNS as an actor which - despite being represented in parliament - exemplified the '*anti-system*' and not just '*anti-establishment*' approach.⁶² Indeed, LSNS had long been calling for *direct democracy*, implying that the current Slovak system of parliamentary democracy was to be replaced by something else. Outside of the electoral cycle LSNS engaged in several *performances* which can be interpreted as attempts to resignify the 'people', popular will and democracy. Inspired by the Brexit referendum, LSNS launched two petitions in 2016 for Slovakia's exit from the EU and NATO.⁶³ The initiative had zero chances of succeeding, considering Slovakia's generally Euro-optimist orientation and its dependence on the West. As a performative gesture, however, it carried the symbolism of taking politics outside of the establishment walls and bringing it back to the people. LSNS installed a petition booth outside, in front of the Slovak parliament, and leading members of the party posed in front of it, appealing directly to the people rather than to institutions.

Another performance that LSNS systematically relied on were the train patrols. LSNS had long capitalized on the issues of the marginalized Roma minority and criminality on Slovak trains. Until the practice was outlawed, LSNS was sending its people dressed in the green party T-shirts to serve as home guard or militia units that would patrol the trains. One of the symbolic functions of this performance could be seen as delegitimizing the current Slovak state in virtue of its inability to serve as security provider and maintain its monopoly on legitimate violence and reappropriating the basic state functions for LSNS.

In yet another performance in 2017, Kotleba shocked the public at a gathering in Banská Bystrica when he gave out checks to impoverished families. While these donations were apparently meant to represent the party's support for Christian or "family values", which is part of their official agenda, it is the value of the checks (€1488) that carried additional symbolism. Reportedly, Kotleba started practicing this when he was still a

⁶² O. Gyárfášová. The fourth generation: From anti-establishment to anti-system parties in Slovakia. *New Perspectives*, 2018, 26(1), 1–25.

⁶³ Denník N. Kotlebovci zbierajú podpisy za referendum o EÚ a NATO už takmer rok, vraj ich majú desaťtisíce. June 8, 2017. <https://dennikn.sk/788590/kotlebovci-zbieraju-podpisy-za-referendum-o-eu-a-nato-uz-takmer-rok-vraj-ich-maju-desattisice/>

governor of Banská Bystrica. This time, however, the allusion to Neo-Nazi agenda (through 88 which in the extreme right's code language stands for *Heil Hitler*) had gotten him in trouble as he had to stand in court facing charges of extremism.⁶⁴

LSNS performances did not only aim at undermining the establishment but also involved a search for *tradition* - which was sometimes clumsily invented - and *authenticity* - which on more than one occasion turned out to be fake. What could be considered theatrical in itself is the LSNS's use of costumes such as the ritual wearing of uniforms deliberately similar to the uniform of the Hlinka Guard, a nationalist militia active during the times of the 1939-1945 Slovak wartime state (see note above).⁶⁵ The 1939-1945 wartime state is not officially celebrated in Slovakia and its legacy generally remains anathema to the liberal minded Slovaks. Thus LSNS' rituals venerating it symbolically point beyond the country's current political system, to an alternative state building project which, if judged by their discourse, should be something else than a liberal parliamentary democracy.

In another widely discussed (and ridiculed) attempt, LSNS tried to inscribe themselves into the traditions of the century Slovak national revival by organizing a hike to the Kriváň mountain in the Tatras. In the 19th century, the climbing of Kriváň united many of the prominent father figures of the Slovak national revival movement which was active in what was then the Habsburg empire (after 1867 officially Austria-Hungary). The mountains are a powerful reference in the Slovak culture. Featured on both the state flag and in the anthem (opening line) they remain a token of national identity. The performance of climbing the Kriváň could be read as spiritual unification with the forefather revivalists which, at the same time, also symbolically moved politics beyond the walls of deliberative institutions and into the pre-political authenticity of Slovak nature. Sadly, for the performance, several hours after LSNS reported photos of it through social networks, it turned out that the hikers confused two mountains with a similar name (Kriváň and Veľký Kriváň). The actual 19th century site was located several dozens of miles away and presented a more challenging climbing route.⁶⁶ Poor knowledge of

⁶⁴ Denník N. Súd s Kotlebom pre šeky so sumou 1488 eur odložili po voľbách, hrozí mu väzenie. January 29, 2020. <https://dennikn.sk/1735429/sud-s-kotlebom-pre-seky-so-sumou-1488-eur-odlozili-po-volbach-hrozi-mu-uz-aj-vazenie/>

⁶⁵ The 2020 parliamentary campaign only developed these tendencies as LSNS some candidates were campaigning for traditional Slovak values in what they implied to be traditional ethnic costumes. Subsequently, more biographical details about the LSNS champions of Christian values surfaced. They included nude magazine photos and seeking out swinger couples to engage in bisexual relations, causing some members of parliament elect to resign from their mandates and leave the party.

⁶⁶SME. Nie je to síce správny Kriváň, ale mohol by byť. Kotlebovci si pomýlili vrchy a sú na smiech. June 30, 2017 <https://fci.sme.sk/c/20571675/nie-je-to-sice-spravny-krivan-ale-mohol-by-byt-kotlebovci-si-pomylili-vrchy-a-su-na-smiech.html>

geography and history thus made the performance of authenticity and tradition a tragicomic failure.

In sum, ESNS performances could be seen as both (an imitation of) a search for authenticity and tradition outside of institutionalized politics and, simultaneously, a direct appeal to the pre-political (and therefore authentic) *people* (“direct democracy”) - an appeal bypassing the institutions which are, from the populist viewpoint, corrupt and captured by the establishment. The concept of the people has played a prominent role in ESNS discourse. They repeatedly emphasized their intent to protect and represent the “decent people” (“slušní ľudia”) - as opposed to the corrupt “system” and “villains” like Roma criminals, Islamic terrorists or the LGBT.

Ironically, the same concept (“decency”) was used in the 2018 mass anti-corruption protests - the most numerous in Slovakia since the anti-Communist Velvet revolution of 1989. Murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018 caused a political earthquake in Slovakia, forcing the then prime-minister Robert Fico, whom many saw as the leader of a corrupt establishment, to retire and brought to life a new civic movement called “For a Decent Slovakia”. Decency was also the main theme around President Zuzana Čaputová’s - which we do not analyze here in more detail because of the methodological frame we chose. Čaputová’s trademark politeness and her restrained, “decent” political style could be seen as an antipode to the impertinent and transgressive nature of many populist performances. Unlike her Estonian counterpart Kaljulaid, who famously appeared in parliament in a sweatshirt, Čaputová did not employ transgressive performative gestures. (Slovak political cartoonists dubbed her “a calm force”⁶⁷). Probably, the only distinctly unconventional thing she did after being elected was launching her own talk show broadcasted from the presidential palace through social media.

However, the overall liberal narrative built around the Manichean and non-ideological divide into the “decent” and - by implication- the “non-decent” bore a degree of structural resemblance to the narrative juxtaposing “decent people” against the evil “system” which could be discovered in the extreme right-wing discourse. (For instance, Čaputová’s sympathizers released an illustrated fairy tale that featured “a girl Zuzana” who lived “in her grandmother’s garden of flowers” and saw herself as “a brave hero fighting on the side of the good”).⁶⁸ This could be seen as a trans-ideological struggle over the pre-political concept of decency, and hence, even here we discover indications that

⁶⁷Denník N. Shooty: Pokojná sila. March 17, 2019. <https://dennikn.sk/1413838/shooty-pokojna-sila/>

⁶⁸ A. Kazharski. The “Good”, the “Bad” and the “Ugly”. Anti-Establishment Populism and the Slovak Presidential Election. *Baltic Worlds*, April 1, 2019. <http://balticworlds.com/anti-establishment-populism-and-the-slovak-presidential-election/>

populism as a style crosses ideological boundaries that right-wing authoritarian populism has its counterpart in liberal or “elvish” populism.

The trans-ideological character of populism has to do with the fact that performing allows this political style to construct shape-shifting political subjectivities which cannot really be pinned down as subjects in the traditional sense of the word, i.e. as entities with stable predicates. Our next Slovak case study demonstrates how performance and transgression allows populism to hold together an ideological variety of political forces without being pinned down.

The 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections saw the sudden triumph of Igor Matovič and his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO). Starting from the threshold level of 5% just weeks prior to that OĽaNO surprised everyone by growing to be the campaign winner with 25, 02% and Matovič was entrusted by president Čaputová with forming the new government.⁶⁹ And while many parties used clearly performative gestures during the 2020 campaign, Matovič has been known in Slovak politics as its *enfant terrible* and a performer *par excellence*, who loved disrupting the normalcy of political life with his repeatedly transgressive behavior.

Unlike ĽSNS and other more recent populist newcomers, Matovič had been in Slovak parliamentary politics for a decade. His party’s name could in itself serve as a textbook example of an anti-establishment message: “*ordinary* people” (not “the elites”) and *independent* personalities. Hence, Matovič’s rhetorical strategy was often built around lambasting establishment corruption rather than promoting a consistent ideological program. At the same time, OĽaNO has been known for its turnover, attributed to its leader’s unrestrained behavior.

With his excesses Matovič earned himself several symbolic nicknames, including *Blaznovič* - a *portmanteau* of his last name and the Slovak *blazon*, which can be translated as “madman” but also as “fool” or “jester”. He was also known as “*šašo z Trnavy*”, “the jester from Trnava” (his hometown) or *Zmatovič* (cf. *zmätok*: confusion, disruption - so, literally, “one who wreaks havoc in parliament”).⁷⁰

In European culture the *fool* (jester) is both an important and deeply ambiguous figure. The primary function of the fool is to entertain the court by *performing* his tricks and making the king laugh. But also, the jester finds himself in a unique position of being able to speak the bare *truth* (however unpleasant and offensive) to everyone, that is, including the monarch. In that sense he is also a *transgressive* figure whose impertinent

⁶⁹ M. Grančayová. Slovak Parliamentary Elections 2020: Drugs, Computer Games and Islamophobia. *Baltic Worlds*, March 2, 2020. <https://balticworlds.com/slovak-parliamentary-elections-2020/>

⁷⁰ Aktuality.sk. Volby 2020: Ako si Matovič osvojil prezývku „šašo z Trnavy“ a vyhral voľby. March 2, 2020. aktuality.sk/clanok/768942/volby-2020-ako-si-matovic-osvojil-prezyvku-saso-z-trnavy-a-vyhral-volby/

behavior must violate the existing rules and standards of normalcy much in the same way a carnival performance does.

Over the years leading to his triumph, the “jester from Trnava” developed a clear taste for political actionism, delivering shocking and impertinent performances which were also supposed to be seen by voters as acts of naming a spade a spade. In 2012 Matovič famously scandalized the parliament by emptying a bag of syringes on another MP’s head after the latter admitted to having used drugs in the past but argued controversially that “pure heroin brings less harm to the body”.⁷¹

Many of Matovič’s performances were attempts to ridicule and publicly humiliate the ruling SMER-Social Democracy party which was becoming increasingly associated with corruption scandals and whose leader Robert Fico had to step down as prime minister in 2018 following the mass protests triggered by the murder of the investigative journalist Kuciak (see above). In 2016 the Trnava jester interrupted a parliament session by stretching out a large banner on which SMER’s minister of interior Robert Kaliňák (who was about to be fired on suspicions of real estate related corruption) was called a “criminal”.⁷² In another performance dedicated to the same corruption scandal, Matovič had his party members empty sacks full of (fake) euro banknotes in front of the parliament as he was delivering his speech.⁷³ That performance was meant to visualize the amount of money Kaliňák’s associate Ladislav Bašternák (sentenced to five years in prison in 2018) had stolen from the Slovak state. His vendetta on SMER sometimes came on the edge of physical violence. In 2019 Matovič interrupted the press conference of the party leader Robert Fico with his usual corruption call out poster performance, which led to some roughing with the SMER people who tried to push him away from the conference site.⁷⁴

Matovič also used performances to discredit and humiliate SMER’s coalition partners. In 2020, he stood in front of the parliament speaker Andrej Danko holding a poster that featured an arrow pointing at him and the words “He is wasted (drunk)”.⁷⁵ Rudeness became Matovič’s regular rhetorical instrument as he sometimes used the

⁷¹DennikN. Matovič sa už pohádal s väčšinou možných spojencov a často sám začal (zoznam). February 21 2017 dennikn.sk/688398/matovicove-ostre-konflikty-pohadal-sa-s-vacsinou-moznych-spojencov-a-casto-sam-zacal/.

⁷² DennikN. Odvolávanie Kaliňáka prerušili pre transparent: Horšie ako za Mečiara, tvrdí opozícia. June 30, 2016 <https://dennikn.sk/502058/odvolavanie-kalinaka-prerusili-transparent-horsie-za-meciara-tvrdi-opozicia/>

⁷³ YouTube. Matovičovci vysypali v parlamente dvanásť miliónov kešu. June 7 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE59olCcL54>

⁷⁴ HNOnline. Matovič vtrhol na Ficovu tlačovku. Poslanci Smeru sa ho snažili vyhnat. October 16 2019. <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/2024924-matovic-vtrhol-na-ficovu-tlacovku-poslanci-smeru-sa-ho-snazili-vyhnat>

⁷⁵ DennikN. Minúta po minúte. January 2020. <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/1725130/>

words like “idiot”, “dick” (“čurák”) or “fucker” (“trtko”) against his political rivals. He described the judge and justice ministry undersecretary Monika Jankovská - who was later taken into custody facing corruption charges - as “mafia’s prostitute”.⁷⁶

Matovič thus had no problem demonstrating *authenticity* through obscene language and speeches delivered in a state of frenzy but also through other forms of transgressive emotionality - such as weeping on camera for example. His transgressions were meant to publicly challenge the hypocritical establishment by openly calling a spade a spade - the luxury that only a *jester* figure can typically afford.

Reflecting on the similarities between performative populism in Estonia in Slovakia we can thus see several clear parallels from which we can generalize. Firstly, it is clearly a transgressive search for authenticity. Notably, this search tends to take us outside of the standard setting of institutional politics and into the authenticity of the pre-political. Here, nature is one important reservoir of authenticity.⁷⁷ More often than not, transgressions are also performed through rudeness or the use of obscene language (cf. “prostitute”, “salesperson”).

Furthermore, performative populism also tends to be a transideological phenomenon. This has to do not only - or not so much - with the fact that performances were associated to “hybrid” political subjects without a clear ideological physiognomy (OLaNO). Like in the Estonian case, populists were also met with equally performative counter-gestures from opponents of the respective parties. For instance, shortly after the election of LSNS to Slovak parliament in 2016, two MPs came to work with yellow stars sewn to their clothes, explaining that this is how they wanted to warn of “the presence of fascists in parliament”. Characteristically, LSNS MP Uhrík called their performance “a circus”.⁷⁸ Obscenity and rudeness have also been used. Anti-LSNS protesters in Košice (Slovakia’s second largest city) promised the “Kotlebists” “shit with poppy seeds” instead of votes (*Hovno s makom Kotlebákom* - a rhymed line in Slovak)⁷⁹ and called them mentally ill in another rhymed line (*Keby mali Tatry ústa, kričali by: tam je ústav* - If the Tatra mountains had a mouth, they would be screaming: the psychiatric ward is over there!). Protestors also used irony and trolling, alluding to the LSNS’ public blunders (see above), and thereby suggesting the party was culturally and geographically illiterate. Thus, they held signs saying: “I offer additional courses in Slovak language and history”

⁷⁶ Pravda. Matovič: Jankovská je mafiánska prostitútká. Jankovská na neho podáva trestné oznámenie. 26.08.2019. <https://tv.pravda.sk/relacie/spravodajstvo/epizoda/2256-matovic-jankovska-je-mafianska-prostitutka-jankovska-na-neho-podava-trestne-oznamenie>

⁷⁷ Images of the mountains (Slovakia) or the forest (Estonia) are archetypal for the respective cultures, and function as important symbols of the nation. Nature here can be understood as something primordial, and therefore authentic. It precedes human politics with its hypocrisies and divides and provides people with a sense of mystic unity.

⁷⁸ HNOnline. Dvaja poslanci prišli so židovskými hviezdami. Je to cirkus, vyhlásil Kotlebov poslanec. 23.03.201 <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/594352-dvaja-poslanci-prisli-s>

⁷⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/robo.hakl/posts/10218709382879160>

and “Kriváň 133 km” with an arrow pointing in the direction of the mountain LSNS previously failed to locate.⁸⁰

Conclusions

Here are three main points we may infer from this comparative analysis. First, in both cases of Slovakia and Estonia populism is divisive, and fails to play a unifying role. Thus, the populist appeals to “the people” as a re-signified political subject turn into a false promise: with its heavy investments in transgressive politics and emotional imageries, populism fosters further polarization within societies and fragments national identities.

Second, in both countries illiberal populists capitalize on the rhetorical external othering (Russia in the case of EKRE, and Hungary in the case of Slovakia). In the meantime, in recent years in Slovakia the image of Hungarians as the main enemies - which ethno-populists used to actively exploit – took a backseat to other strategies of othering, in particular turned against immigrants. Estonian right wing populism goes through its own dynamics of othering: EKRE have become less anti-Russian (in the way in which Slovak nationalists are basically silent about Hungary).

Third, we have found out that populism as a performative phenomenon and a matter of political style is broadly dispersed all across the political spectrum. Populism usually connotes a search for authenticity beyond the sphere of institutionally regulated / controlled politics, and in this regard lacks its ‘own’ institutional subject. The populist political style and mode of communication can be performed by different actors, from fascists to left liberals. Being used as an instrument for performative actions, it reproduces itself through multiple forms of transgressing the established practices and searching for some kind of indigeneity, or behavioral specificity. In the two cases of Slovakia and Estonia we have identified different modes of transgressive behavior, from the President's appearance in a T-shirt in the parliament to self-appointed street patrols. The search for authentic political forms can also take different shapes, all aimed at imagining, constructing and communicating with “the genuine” people adequately capable of representing the nation and its identity.

⁸⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/robo.haki/posts/10218709382879160>