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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

‘A leader or a father?’: Exploring transference in large groups as an explanation of populism

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this article is to provide an alternative explanation about the occurrence of populism through the lens of psychoanalysis. Using the concept of transference, the article explains why populism occurs in politics and what the unseen unconscious psychological processes are that form political choices in some societies. It also aims to open a discussion about what type of culture, society, or large group may experience transference when populism is on the rise, and also what type of populism may be the result of transference.

Using the example of a popular media figure winning an election in Bulgaria in 2021, this work combines political, social, and psychological literature on populism with the psychoanalytic concepts of transference (Freud, 1921) and ‘names-of-the-father’ (Lacan, 2013) to explore some large-group processes (Volkan, 2020). By bringing transference from the field of psychotherapy to the field of politics and large-group studies, the work offers a new explanation of why populism is a phenomenon of psychoanalytic nature.

On the strength of exploring the role of transference in large groups within a specific context of politics, the content makes a contribution to the literature on group transference, extends its application to the social and political sphere, and brings the concept of transference to Vamik Volkan’s large-group psychology field. This addresses a gap in current psychoanalytic literature related to social and political phenomena such as populism. Hence, the work creates a bridge between the fields of politics, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis.

KEYWORDS: transference; populism; large group; name-of-the-father; politics

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INTRODUCTION

After twelve years of discontents facing different social problems, governments, and parties, Bulgaria—the sixth poorest country of the European Union (EU) (EU Commission, 2020; Nielsen, 2016)—entered a period of political and parliamentary crisis. An election was held on 4 July 2021, but the formation of a government proved impossible at this time.

During this period, the emergence of a well-known music producer and media mogul had become the last hope for Bulgarians. Social media, particularly Facebook, turned out to be the main resource for political discussions among Bulgarian citizens. Bulgarians were openly expressing their desires for someone to 'save the nation', to 'look after the nation', and to 'help the people'. These collective emotions had patriotic content that manifested in comments such as: 'He can scratch the corruption!', 'You are the only one to save our nation!', 'You are only the one to fix Bulgaria', and 'We give you Bulgaria!'. This was a demonstrated attempt to place the attainment of state dependency (Kaysel & Mussi, 2022) on one person. It was clear that the Bulgarian large group was inclined to search for a rescue figure. This person was expected to have combined authoritative, protecting, leadership, and masculine characteristics.

The striking feature of the political discussions that Bulgarians had in the public space was creating a 'set of requirements' for the eventual leader that the Bulgarians demanded. The new person had to be a 'legally approved' Bulgarian citizen who was also a 'legitimate person'. In addition, they had to write in clear and grammatically correct Bulgarian, because otherwise such mistakes were 'not acceptable for taking the lead of the country'. Bulgarians demanded having a clear communicator and protector to understand and explain everything. They needed an informed person who knew about the popular (for 2021) COVID-19 vaccination debates, European funding, immigrants, wars, health, politics, business, religion, culture, and history. Most importantly, Bulgarians desired their new leader to glorify the name of Bulgaria and its culture, language, traditions, and history.

An ideal image was formed. The image that emanated from the Bulgarian large-group desire was of a popular pop-folk (*chalga*) singer who had been a well-appreciated media showman and TV owner since the fall of communism in Bulgaria. With him being elected brought about two questions—what does the Bulgarian large group really want—a leader or a father? Another question that arose from that is to whom does the Bulgarian large group feel drawn to and why?

As different demands and desires were combined with emotions, this led to the surprise election of Svestoslav Trifonov. This popular figure combines the roles of a showman, singer, producer, media presenter, and a well-known nationalist supporter, who has been in the public space since 1990 (Manolov, 2021; Marinov & Popova, 2021). This means the group was not only drawn towards a leader in an already established role, but was willing to select and assign a political role in a crucial time for the country to someone who has no experience in

politics. This choice has led to three questions: (1) how a media celebrity can be selected for a political role; (2) what triggered the Bulgarian large group to make this choice; and (3) to what extent was this choice relational?

In attempt to answer the questions above, this article takes the concept of transference to explain large-group decision making and the experience of populism. It also discusses what the psychological causes behind a collective choice of a popular figure are and why cases like Bulgaria bring the concept of 'transference' into large-group studies. Even though the concept of transference applies mainly to the therapeutic setting, transferring or directing feelings from one to the other takes place in any social context too. Therefore, exploring transference outside the therapy room is needed when searching for answers about large-group behaviour in political and social spheres. This is why the article focuses on how transference can be an alternative (if not the main) explanation for populism.

EXPLAINING POPULISM AS A POLITICAL PHENOMENON

When researching populism, the main fields of studies that come up are politics, international relations, history, and social policy. They describe populism as a social and political 'two-way' phenomenon that depends a lot on the connection between the leader and their followers (Ostiguy, 2017).

Through the lens of political science, the literature agrees on defining populism as a 'global phenomenon' whose ideological foundation is 'nourished' by a nation and its people (Urbinati, 2019). Additionally, there are clear indications for populism performing mechanisms that clearly work within cultural, social, economic, and religious conditions (Urbinati, 2019). Moreover, populism happens concurrently with nationalism (Singh, 2021). In this regard, political and social formation processes make populism a specific 'model of development' (Kaysel & Mussi, 2022, p. 94). When discussing the Latin American situation, an encounter of dependency is present. This demonstrates the state being dependent on the masses and on ideology with nationalistic content that goes into populism (Kasel & Mussi, 2022). Populism has an ideological function that rises when there is a decline in the political representation (Martin & Berrocal, 2022; Salgado, 2019), especially when democratic principles become transformed (Urbinati, 2019).

As much as populism has its political explanation, some psychological explications have been encountered by political scientists, demonstrating a search for a deeper understanding. What can be seen among those attempts is defining populism as a society's 'self-defence mechanism' (Martin & Berrocal, 2022, p. 88) against the system during moments of insecurity. Some emotions (fear and anger) have been discussed alongside feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, and uncertainty. This is discussed as running simultaneously alongside a national identity crisis (Martin & Berrocal, 2022). Beside nostalgia and national sentiments,

emotions have been related to discussions on populism around Brexit. The debate is if the British nostalgic reaction of national identity or an expression of a need of a group to defend itself caused Brexit. This remains unanswered according to Martin and Berrocal (2022). In a search for answers, this article aims to introduce a psychoanalytic concept that relates more to seeing *why* and *who* people legitimise as an event or a leader. This may pave the way for responses and moving closer to understanding a large group's selection of a 'charismatic leader'—seen as a figure that offers solutions to problems in a fixed political position and with strong media engagement.

Another moment the literature addresses is how populist narratives are able to 'cultivate' the feelings of insecurity. The cultivation is connected to emotions—both addressed within a 'discourse style and frame', as well as a 'political strategy' (Stathi & Guerra, 2021; Weyland, 2021). In agreement with Laclau's view on populism, Chantal Mouffe (2018) describes populism as a 'discursive strategy'. As such, it has ideological forms, according to 'both time and place'. The occurrence of populism is specific to historical time, forms, and discourses around a country's current affairs. Discourses originate from cultures because as a concept 'discourse' engages with power and knowledge, expressed through language and communication. These are two elements of culture. This means the experience of populism is a culturally unique event, such as the 2021 election in Bulgaria. Also, this may give fluidity and adaptability to the used discursive 'strategy' that depends on the two-way relationship between a leader and their followers.

In its relation between people and the system, populism has the role of a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). As such, it splits society between people and the elites opposing them. The psychological side of populism, coming from the works of Mouffe (2005), Mudde (2004), and Carral et al. (2023), sees populism as an 'archaic form' of identification based on 'emotional belonging' to a community (Carral et al., 2023, p. 3). This manages people's emotions and their group attitude in a concrete situation. It relates to people's feelings of to which large group they belong to. Belonging in this case becomes the emotional ability to establish identification with a leader. This creates feelings of closeness combined with a revolutionary gist that brings the populist 'the people vs. elites' attitude.

Mudde (2004), Ostiguy (2017), and Aslanidis (2018) recognise that populism has a 'discursive frame', which is navigated through communication and media. One element of it is an image of 'popular masculinity'. Ostiguy (2017) explains this image as people's 'fighting heroes' who perform decisive actions. These characteristics more or less relate to the ones of a childhood father figure who is proven to be responsible for the development of social processes, discipline, sensing protection and strength, as well as experiencing authority and domination. As a representative of a communist bloc and being a collective culture (Ivanov, 2010), Bulgaria has these characteristics strongly embedded within one 'unifying' figure. It is presented as a 'hero' in the social psyche, symbolising protection. Hence, populism in some cultures becomes a result of the presence of these figures because of the unseen

psychological material transferred onto someone else rather than something else. This poses the question of what type of populism may be the result of transferred father-like characteristics onto a leader.

Particularities of populism

Recent work by Timothy Appleton (2023) discusses whether populism can be located as left or right wing. Appleton concludes that it can be either one or the other because of the connection between populism and people's behaviour being directed by their 'passions'. These passions make populism an emotional response. As such, it can be seen as more irrational than rational. Another reason is what Appleton sees as the 'Other affect', related to 'popular enthusiasm' (Appleton, 2023, p. 61). Looking at the historical and cultural makeup, feelings can be different for individualistic or collectivist societies where the Other has a different sort of social and political power over people.

Appleton, like Singh (2021), sees populism connected to nationalism. Using Badiou's work, Appleton states that today people may still carry out a 'national liberation struggle' (Appleton, 2023, p. 75). He states that this struggle can be around any form of national liberation, communism, and/or transition to socialism. This relates to the Bulgarian case where there is something that Appleton sees 'transcending' a situation. He relates it to a 'void' which can be seen in different ways, either for the country or for the holder of power. Either way, though, it is a psychological void felt by the people. Additionally, for Appleton, '"the people" form the sovereign' (Appleton, 2023, p. 76). This void can be seen as the Bulgarians' desire mirrored by a populist figure in a moment of insecurity.

The word 'sovereign' holds a lot of meaning and emotions around independence and freedom to Bulgarians. It represents one of the Bulgarian national distinctive characteristics related to history. Bulgarians experienced five centuries of Ottoman rule during which they did not have the power to rule their own land. This period is recognised as painful and referred to as the 'Turkish yoke' (Tsanov, 2017). This word for Bulgarians means 'slavery'. This period accumulates a lot of negative emotions that were replaced by unity and a fight for independence. This ended with the Russian–Turkish war of Bulgarian Liberation and the Unification of Bulgaria, both achieved with a major contribution from Russia. Not long after these moments of national sovereignty being felt, Bulgarians entered a 45-year period of communism that formed the Bulgarian national identity which built on the Ottoman past. Both these periods gave two images of powerful Other(s)—one destroying the Bulgarian large group (perceived as its enemy as the face of the Ottomans) and another one building and rebirthing the Bulgarian spirit (as the face of communism). In these two cases, authority was imposed over the Bulgarian large group.

Bulgaria's intense history left its people with no breathing space between periods of change. The themes of helplessness, vulnerability, and neediness combined with independence, unity, and established statehood appear to be conditioned historically in the

Bulgarian psyche. As a result, the nationalistic idea may be quite strong and may facilitate patriotic feelings that engage the population with images around the country's past, current situation, and future visions. When explaining populism and to whom a large group can be drawn to, this leads to consideration of what Appleton (2023) calls 'national particularities' within Mouffe's (2018) notion of 'discursive strategy'.

Bulgarian national particularities are a result of many ups and downs. However, they are related to how the populist discursive frame is played out in a collective culture with a strong nationalist idea and a turbulent historical past. This allows for the application of specific strategies that mirror, express, and potentially mobilise national problems, alongside their underlined emotions of identification, closeness, and belonging. This can be skilfully embedded in any political program that represents the future of a great country and large group. The Bulgarian example of such an idea is manifested by electing a TV host and musician who promised to scratch the corruption, save the country, and establish a great future for Bulgaria.

The Bulgarian example demonstrates the existence of a deep psychological process that forms specific voids in the large group—masterly navigated desires—all managed through distinct actions by a populist figure. These actions can be viewed as tactics that have 'cultural components' (Ostiguy, 2017) as well as social, national, and psychological specifics.

EXPLAINING POPULISM AS PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON

The psychological framework can be mainly explained from two theoretical angles—cognitive and behaviourist. Both are linked to emotions when exploring people's psychological experiences of populism.

The cognitive perspective explains populism in relation to a large group forming perceptions in the context of power and authority. This leads to people following extreme movements such as radicalism and xenophobia, as well as nationalism and propaganda (Forgas et al., 2021). At the same time, cognition bonds with emotions. The emotions related to authority and power are anger and fear. They are a part of attitudes that create attraction to populist agendas and ideologies. Emotions also play a role by allowing identification with a person of authority and power. This identification develops the person's ethnic identity and communication (Lilleker & Weidhase, 2021) or social identity. Aslanidis (2018) puts importance on the social identities that align with political ideologies. He revises the work of Tajfel (1974) when viewing social identity as a part of the person's self-concept. This part 'derives' from a person's 'knowledge' of their 'membership' in a social group. This membership is emotionally engaged because emotions respond to a social and political examination of ideology. This awakens identification with the ideology's representative, and furthermore, 'belonging' to a political party can occur. According to Vanessa Hirneis (2022),

belonging is the main reason for people to organise in groups. Widmann (2021) states that there is a specific set of emotions that populist parties operate under within the public space. There is an 'emotional appeal' that relates to the void people experience while looking for a national hero.

To some extent, cognition-emotion makes sense in regard to populism because it explains how people's emotions, perceptions, and identities are activated within social representations and how these representations respond mentally to the parties' agendas and rhetoric. Populism is also apparent in relation to the formation of social identity that makes people become drawn towards specific personalities and groups. However, it is unknown where the emotions facilitating the group's identification come from, why identification is a complex process, and why, as such, it relates to a person's sense of who they are and where they belong.

Another moment that the literature does not address is what develops the sense for someone to identify with a political figure and vote for them. According to Forgas et al. (2021), behavioural explanations of populism relate to specific formed motivations around voting, use of persuasive strategies, and motivational speeches. This leads to questions about what internal processes people experience so that they identify with a populist figure and vote for them. In other words—what causes someone to be attracted and drawn to a particular person?

Large groups and populism

Populism can be related to the large-group psychology concept of 'us and them' (Volkan, 2009). Obradovic et al. (2020) describe 'us and them' as a 'classic social psychological division' (cited in Stathi & Guerra, 2021, p. 51) which creates social categorisation resulting in a specific intergroup dynamic facilitating opposition. This opposition is explained by Stathi and Guerra (2021) as a one of two 'distinct groups—the pure people versus the corrupt elite' (p. 51). However, social categorisation is a cognitive process. In this case, populism is a result of cognition forming a large-group behaviour around social differentiation and grouping on the basis of belonging and identification. When linked to belonging, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) defined populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' (as cited in Obradovic et al., 2020, p. 125) that has a 'folkloric style' of politics (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This is a foundation of the right-wing nationalistic populism with a set of ideas that makes the divide between 'us and them' visible. This mobilises large groups through belief systems related to the political right and left. In this case, psychological explanations of populism have an important role in looking for ways to explore large-group implicit processes. However, they engage with the cognitive-behavioural interplay between the social and psychological, focusing on intergroup dynamics, social identification, and polarisation and mobilisation of emotions. This shows cognition results in behaviour within a social context which a large group experiences in a moment of time.

Questions remain about what causes this identification in order to polarise into 'us and them', where these emotions come from, and what drives the attention of the voters towards particular political leaders and parties that use predominantly nationalistic and patriotic propaganda. Further questions occur around whether the vote for these populist figures is rational or if it is a result of mobilised emotions, or if the vote is a result of objective evaluation of facts or a subjective set of beliefs that feed a political party program.

The work of Erisen et al. (2021) explores the attitudinal and behavioural factors linked to psychological determinants of populism. There is a focus on psychological drivers such as the presence of 'trust vs. mistrust'. This has its cognitive side. However, when and how this mistrust was conditioned in a large group, and how it directs or becomes a driver, requires more in-depth study. Erisen et al. (2021) extend the common cognitive and behavioural studies on populism by looking at empirical research on personality traits, uncertainty, and avoidance within the country context. They also seek answers about whether a country's uncertainty, crises, or any other complicated event may be a reason for activating basic survival instincts among the population. These survival instincts may form a specific set of thoughts for seeking control, security, and order. These thoughts can draw the large group towards popular figures that mobilise a system of beliefs and emotions, including rescuing, saving, and protecting, in order for the large group to 'take the control back' (Martin & Berrocal, 2022, p. 98). This may lead to a preference for leaders that have father-like characteristics, displaying masculine traits within their protective saving-the-country-from-evil rhetoric that contains strong national and patriotic sentiments. However, what is the mechanism that influences people's cognition of decision making and people's behaviour of voting for a populist figure? What is the reason that people look for a leader and a father figure in one person?

As discussed, the psychological literature offers more cognition- and behaviour-based psychological explanations and not much explanation of psychoanalysis. Recognising the strong connection between cognition, emotions, and behaviour does not seem enough. Specifically, recognising what type of emotions the populist parties operate under within the public space and where they come from requires more in-depth understanding. Both political and psychological literature demonstrate the presence of a logical link between cognition, emotion, and behaviour with identity and belonging in people's experience of populism.

What unites cognition, beliefs, behaviours, belonging, identity, and emotions is the concept of transference. This directs discussions towards reasons for why people become drawn to a particular person and if this is because of charisma or if there is a deeper unseen cause. The psychoanalytic lens illuminates an unconscious reason regarding the dynamic between them. Often, this reason is an internal desire that, in the view of the group, can only be fulfilled by one person.

In summary, particular attitudes and emotions start to be played out by a large group around urges of identification and belonging. When any crises occur, individuals and groups act out their internal survival instinct, having the need to feel safe. Therefore, survival and safety are the two existential demands a large group starts to respond to when feeling under threat. The father figure comes to fulfil these two existential needs, which create cognitions, beliefs, emotions, and behaviours. The greater the ability of meeting these needs that is demonstrated in an individual, the more a large group has potential to desire a father rather than a leader during moments of crisis. Then, all factors, strategies, and tactics can be played out very well by any populist figure through sensing the large group's wants and the cultural particularities that the large group operates within. At that point, transferring large-group feelings from the past to the present can occur.

THE BULGARIAN STYLE OF POPULISM

Anna Krasteva (2016) charts the start of populism in Bulgaria in the 21st century when there was an important change from 'party' to 'symbolic' politics. Krasteva explains this transition based on the establishment of 'fragile' democracy in the country in the 1990s. Extremist parties appeared and became successful during 'severe economic crisis' and 'political instability' (Krasteva, 2016, p. 165). What could be observed during these challenges was the lack of trust, political and social crisis, the vast personification in politics, and national rhetoric with strong patriotic elements. Krasteva reports that back in 2006 the first Bulgaria populist figure, Volen Siderov, achieved the 'highest ever' result not only for his party, but for him personally (Krasteva, 2016). This starts to map and define the presence of the Other and 'identity' politics.

Krasteva (2016) also discusses grouping factors as internal and external. External factors are the rise of globalisation and a change in the global economy during which Bulgaria struggled to find its place. Internal factors, on the other side, include the attitudes resulting from the opposition 'communism–democracy' that established new divisions of left and right. This facilitated the growth of perceptions around 'disregarding people' for the benefits of the corrupted politicians and the struggle for the country's geopolitical representation. Additionally, a political competition was entrenched on the basis of a personalised 'identity' rather than on ideological projects with a clear political program. Everything was media-managed, which played a role in cognitively forming two Bulgarian national mental images—one for a leader and another for the country itself. This was expressed through the examination of the personal charismatic traits, examination of power, 'de-ideologisation', and 'people-lisation' of the whole reality and public sphere. However, the development of Bulgarian national populism did not stop there because emotions were involved.

Anna Krasteva (2016) acknowledges the presence of a 'fear' because of 'overproduction of othering' (p. 179) in the form of enemies. This goes alongside protection, coming from the church as a symbol of religion, Bulgarian folklore, and Bulgarian identity (perceived in its ideal form). This picture has its nationalistic and patriotic elements, but it needed someone to navigate it. Krasteva (2016) sees 'family–religion–nation' bringing historical and predominantly 'unifying' content in Bulgarian populism, which makes sense with Bulgaria being a collective culture. The unity aims to establish a feeling of 'belonging to' and being 'part of something big' that aims to bring the nation into its 'organic whole' (Krasteva, 2016, p. 188). National populism is accompanied by patriotic attitudes crystalising into the idea that 'Great Bulgaria will prosper as never before!'. The attitudes are navigated through the dichotomy of the 'pure people–the corrupted elites' as Ostiguy (2017) and Martin and Berrocal (2022) describe.

Krasteva (2016) points out that Bulgarian national populism has its radical form because there is 'absence' of a well-developed democratic stance. Because Bulgarians struggle to understand their form of political governance, they look for potential leaders with whom to identify. In the view of Krasteva, this is because there is a change from socialism to nationalism and from 'ideological to identity' politics that provide 'social cohesion' in Bulgaria (p. 163). This results in one person being perceived as a leader because they become the provider for Bulgarian desires; the protector and the long-awaited national hero that can unify the nation by giving safety, comfort, security, and belonging in moments of crisis. What Krasteva additionally sees is a form of 'togetherness' that Bulgarians desperately try to achieve through finding somebody that can lead and unite them in the name of Bulgaria.

In conclusion, the fear, instability, personalisation of politics, presence of the Other, and the desire for unity paved the way for a large group's search for protection, security, and organisation of the Bulgarian reality. Using a discursive, culturally designed strategy led to the transfer of father-like characteristics onto the perceived consumption of populism by the Bulgarian large group.

TRANSFERENCE IN LITERATURE

The definition of transference comes from Freud (1912) in his work 'Dynamics of Transference'. The concept explains a repeated stereotyped pattern of early life expressed impulses embedded in human development. These impulses are directed towards reality in forms of mental functions, cognition, emotions, and affects. They are projected from the past onto someone in the present. Transference begins early in life through the interaction with any parent figure.

Sigmund Freud was the first to form the concept after observing his patients falling in love with him by idealising him. He observed presence of an unconscious load playing a role in this

idealisation. As a result, patients related to him as a figure of significance that a parent figure from their past had. His clients were transferring some parent figure's emotions, images, thoughts, and feelings from their past onto him into the present in the therapy room.

Transference is mainly used in therapeutic settings and within the therapist–client relationship. It addresses a redirecting of the inner feelings and desires towards someone else. However, the patient transfers feelings within a therapeutic setting. This puts conditions on the transferring process. Applied to the social context, conditions may explain why a large group feels drawn towards a specific person who has the power to operate with the group's emotions in a certain time and space.

Scholars argue that transference occurs every day, even though the main research on it comes from the area of therapeutic studies. Transference happens in human daily communication in situations of judgements perceived from others, but originates from a judgemental parent being overprotective towards a child. In a working environment, an employer incorporates authority and power, but also indirectly provides security and protection in the form of a salary. The worker may mimic the behaviour they had with parents as the child's authority figures. Expecting to be looked after is already a feeling that is formed in the past, based on the received parental care in childhood. This acknowledges the presence of emotions, beliefs, behaviours, and self-identity that stem from childhood, but that are applied to present social contexts.

Beyond the therapeutic field

There is literature around 'transference and populism' within the field of psychotherapy. It relates to group psychotherapy. Transference is a concept that is discussed within group analysis, but not beyond that. When looking at why leaders are followed, Michael Maccoby (2004) makes a clear link between leadership and transference, resulting from the Freudian realisations about his clients. He discusses transference related to the choice of a leader in the business context. Maccoby suggests the presence of 'irrational followers' whose irrationalism is explained by being outside of their awareness, which questions rationality and control. Maccoby sees motivations arise from the powerful unconscious images and emotions. They are projected onto relationships with leaders. For Freud, these motivations may be the result of reproduced infantile stereotypes.

The psychotherapist Arno Remmers (2023) provides further clarity. This reproduction of stereotypes takes place in early interactions that become unconsciously projected. This is why transference includes repressed expectations, fears, longings, desires, experiences, 'drive impulses, relationship needs and patterns and interaction stereotypes' (Remmers, 2023, p. 76).

Maccoby (2004) gives examples of the worker–employer relationship where employees' transferential expectations exist (Maccoby, 2004). For Freud, this occurred with his patients.

When applied to large groups, this becomes the group's transferential expectations. In a political context, these expectations are transferred to a large group's (party, nation, country) leader. They become the foundation of a large group—the leader's relationship is the social element in the process of transferring.

In a new way of interpreting the 'Dynamics of Transference', Almond (2011) concludes that an individual's transference is 'interactional'. The reason is that transference is more associated with social connections that have 'energetic investment'; an individual's sense of 'satisfaction, frustration, fixations and defence' (Almond, 2011, p. 1134). Even though transference is not related to a particular 'prototype', both Freud and Almond talk about this energetic and emotionally loaded investment coming from the 'father' or 'mother' image.

When referring to the leader, Almond addresses the view of Max Weber about 'charisma', suggesting that certain powerful, sometimes unexpected, behaviours by the leader evoke strong emotions and reactions (Almond, 2011). This becomes the first time when transference is applied within a social and political context outside the therapy room. The charisma and direction of a large group's emotions are two psychological mechanisms behind populism that influence large-group choice in voting. This has been strengthened by contemporary tools—social media and television. The use of digital technologies helps to direct the group's emotions, and this results in what Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez (2021) see as a reason in the recent rise of populism. This is the ability to provoke and deepen a large group's 'national sentiments'. This encourages 'tribal forms of nationalism' during political events (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021, p. 332).

The group's transference

Earl Hopper's work addresses transference in groups. Hopper (2006) claims that transference can occur between participants, and from the group's members to the group's conductor. In addition to this idea, Kraus et al. (2010) explain that transference occurs when the figure of a significant other is activated and applied to a 'target person'. The 'significant other' refers to a parent. This figure shapes how humans interact with others during the transferring process.

According to Kraus et al. (2010), transference is about thinking, feeling, and acting towards the other, considering them as the significant one. In a Lacanian context, this indicative 'other' refers to power and social constructs. By exploring the actual mechanisms of the transferential process, Klaus et al. (2010) explain that transference occurs when the significant other is given inferential power and 'emotional significance'. This significance has also 'cognitive material' (Klaus et al., 2010, p. 2). Therefore, cognitions, emotions, and behaviour appear as the main components of transference. They also explain the experience of populism. The image of the significant other is activated in the face of a populist leader. Once they know how to operate with the cognitive and emotional material, they can navigate the social and political processes. This becomes evident in the work of Lobont (2009), who unfolds transference in application to genocide. In particular, negative transference is present

in hostile emotions of 'unconscious past origins', and many 'destructive energies' are channelled (Lobont, 2009, p. 27).

Towards transference in large groups

Because populism conceptually engages with ideology and discursive strategy for large groups in terms of their political choices, there is a need to define the large group first.

A large group is a group formed of 'tens or hundreds of thousands or millions of persons' (Volkan, 2009, p. 206) that share psychological processes. This leads to three suggestions. Firstly, the large group as a concept does not constantly cover an entire population, but those who choose a particular person as a leader during a particular time. An example is the large group of 41.5% of voters aged between 18 and 30 who voted for the TV presenter in the 2021 Bulgarian election (Nikolov, 2021). Secondly, because time and circumstances change, a large group may change too, by content, or by increasing or decreasing. Thirdly, a large group may have different social characteristics, such as age, gender, and occupation.

Volkan (2013) mentions transference when explaining large-group traumatic societal responses. He states that there is a 'transferential figure' (p. 139) who plays as a 'symbol'. This symbol unconsciously represents a parent figure who speaks for the large-group identity. Volkan gives an example of some parental figures, such as John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, that consolidate a sense of identification and belonging. Transference in a large group explains this consolidation as a process of moving emotional material from the large group's unconscious onto the perceived 'significant other' who is an 'idealized oedipal father' (Volkan, 2024, p. 346). When the unconscious interplays with national desires, voids, and sentiments, then large-group transference occurs. Because these feelings can be manifested in a form of populism within a leader–follower relationship, large groups can swallow propaganda (Volkan, 2020). Such propaganda includes 'taking back control', which is central to populist narratives in moments of helplessness (Martin & Berrocal, 2022).

Applying Volkan's explanation of what a transferential figure is, transference to a leader is then the logical explanation of how populism takes place. The transferential figure characterises populism as emotionally charged political appeals to address crises through 'neonationalism, masculine... phantasmatic ethnic golden-ageism' (Gagnon et al., 2018, p. 6). When one country's crises are considered, collective emotions are mobilised and combined with nationalistic attitudes. They form a way of transferring unconscious group feelings. The social, political, and historical context of the crises form the set of conditions under which transference is performed by a large group. These specific conditions create the climate for something to unconsciously trigger the large group's instinct. There is a collective mind that comes to light. Large-group behaviour reveals the presence of unconscious drives that lead to identification with a person who can meet the group desires. However, conditions are played out in a world of relationships and communication. Lacan (2013) calls this world the

'Symbolic Order'. In it, law, culture, and society control human desires and ways of communication. This is explained by the concept 'on-the-name-of-the-father'.

THE SYMBOLIC WHERE TRANSFERENCE ENDURES

The Symbolic Order for Lacan is the social reality in which people live. It is organised accordingly with the type of culture and society. It also echoes the historical period and context that facilitates processes for individuals and groups. In the Symbolic, humans work with language, rules, structure, manners, norms, and values. The Symbolic is also the field where conformity to the law and regulations takes place. Communication, media, and language is also part of it. They foster specific interpretations of reality because they provide coordination and articulation of human experience about self, identity, group and groupings, social relations, etc. Therefore, in the context of groups, the Symbolic facilitates a specific interaction through which groups respond to symbols and elements with specific meaning. Hence, the Symbolic influences the large group's unconscious.

Symbolic interactionism explains how every society is constructed through its members' interpretations (Carter & Fuller, 2015). This suggests having a uniqueness in the meanings of things. Making, having, and communicating meaning depends on language, culture, history, and the use of the group's symbols (in linguistic or physical form). These symbols can be in the form of a national character. For instance, these can be national flags, anthems, national songs and stories, as well as some words from the group's language that may have specific meaning for the group's existence. When these are used, then the group's interaction is directed, navigated, and managed symbolically. However, these symbols can also become triggers for the group's unconscious material (images and emotions) to come to the surface and be transferred into a person that represents the group's Symbolic.

When transference within already formed social interaction takes place, the symbols mentioned can give more importance to certain ideologies, beliefs, and people, and less importance to others. Examples come from the value of the monarch in Great Britain and the value that a president has in republics such as France, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, etc. The value comes from the type of culture (individualist or collectivist) and the political form of governance each county has. It is part of their specific Symbolic Order and interaction with the established specific meaning each country has. Therefore, types of politicians may rise to power responding to cultural values. In this sense, every large group that comes from a different country and culture may become drawn to a leader who is able to come to power exactly within a nationally and culturally particular Symbolic Order because of the established intersubjective relations within. These relations are navigated by large groups and political leaders through using national language, proverbs with cultural and historical meanings, folklore, places for gathering, laws, regulations, and ideological conventions. All these keep

the large group together by empowering the sense of belonging. Relations are expressed as a collective action through activities such as voting, striking on the street, or taking part in referendums.

Humans accept the Symbolic reality in the 'name-of-the-father' (Lacan, 2013). In Lacanian meaning this refers to cultural and social order; learning it in the family and practicing it in society. Examples can be commonly spread family traditions, disciplining practices, and parents' ideologies. All of them bring some type of control applied to the external world. When the family is established within a specific culture or society, then it is likely to practice repeated patterns. They are navigated by the society's rules. Large groups formed in this society also follow the same rules. They have familiarity of childhood experiences. So, they will know the 'name-of-the-father' in its specific cultural and social way. They will also react to the one who is able to manage the order so it meets the large group's needs and desires.

One basic need is safety. It comes with an order. For a large group, social factors (what others do, say, and how one relates to others) influence judgement of safety and direct decisions about it (Eller & Frey, 2019). The feeling of safety in a large group within any context comes with a secure base. This is provided by the father's support in a child's daily play (Grossman & Grossman, 2019). The father as a child's playmate provides a training ground; so, he can be regarded as the established Symbolic structure during interactions. In this, Lacan (1954, 1955, 1988) sees transference taking place.

According to Derek Hook (2016), the leader is to 'make the function of the father work' (p. 114) in the Symbolic. This is because the leader introduces order to human relations. They are symbolically implicit, but physically explicit. Because they are present in the physical, they are able to reconstruct, re-articulate, and re-order (Hook, 2016) the Symbolic to match with what is current. This may happen by bringing new meanings and vocabulary to present explanations. They can also re-form the context of what is going on in the life of a large group during a particular moment in time. Therefore, the 'name-of-the-father' is the big Other that functions as a father to provide safety. An illustration of this father is the idea of God. In all religions, he is in a masculine form and has the power and authority to navigate people's experience by bringing rules and meanings. In politics, this father is the leader.

According to Gagnon et al. (2018), a populist can be an individual or a political party or organisation that adopts a certain style of 'behaviour, discursive frame, or thin ideology' (Gagnon et al., 2018, p. 12). In 2021, the events in Bulgaria put the country into another crisis about power, with failures at a European level, a poor economy, and low voting turnout. During this political cataclysm, the country was crying out for a new leader and a new future. Bulgarians lived in symbolic chaos rather than symbolic order at that time, with three elections in one year (Todorov, 2021). Considering Bulgaria as a collective culture that has 'we' as the centre of its existence (Ivanov, 2010), Bulgarian hopes for stability, security, unity, and a new beginning were at their peak.

It took one experienced singer and TV presenter to respond to the hopes and re-order the social reality for Bulgarians so that they would start acting in the 'name-of-the-father'. Trifonov presented a discursive frame that delivered not only a thin-ideology, but also a thin-management of collective emotions around the country's past and future. He was described as going 'from being a political novice to a kingmaker' of the 2021 Bulgarian election (Prince, 2021a, para. 6). He became the 'significant other' in pushing out the long-standing government of Boiko Borisov that was linked with corruption. Trifonov was 'chipping away' at the popularity of Borisov for long time before the election (Prince, 2021b), demonstrating anti-system behaviour and a protective role over Bulgaria and Bulgarians. Moreover, he protected and cherished all the attributes or symbols of Bulgaria-ness such as folklore, history, music, religion, young people, and the large-group identity. He had made a great symbiosis between acting, singing, speaking, presenting, making fun, and making business for the last 20 years in the Bulgarian Symbolic Order. This demonstrated his incredible style of behaviour by mixing the role of facilitator, protector, and presenter of Bulgarian stories, representing reality in his own way. He managed to fill the Bulgarian void by offering a populist narrative and was consistently responding to the Bulgarian large group's desires.

CONCLUSION

Transference occurs in the sphere of the Symbolic that provides instruments for navigation, the triggers, and the people that can facilitate it. The choice of a leader comes under the 'name-of-the-father' because of cognitive and emotional causes that manifest in particular large-group behaviours. The example in this article demonstrates how transference legitimises one person's populist ideology during a large group's search for security, safety, and certainty in situations when fear and anger are cultivated feelings.

'The father' is a mental idea. It is a representation of emotions combined with thoughts and expectations. The father manifests in the physical form in the face of popular figures who display protective characteristics. They exhibit skills of navigating the Symbolic Order with its national particularities at times of instability. What people transfer is the mental picture with the underlined emotions in an ideal expectation of what their leader should be. This mental idea contains a set of expectations, ideas, abilities, and qualities that the large group desires their leader to have. Transference takes place according to the common goal of a collective culture. This explains the presence of national populism in it.

When the culture is collective as it is in the Bulgarian case, large groups may identify with a specific theme (cultural aspect), such as unity or togetherness, that is represented by a leader for the specific time period on a strong nationalistic and patriotic basis. With the application of national particularities such as history, politics, and culture, this becomes a form of national populism. This can facilitate certain thoughts and emotions around which a

discursive frame can be formed. Then, transference is able to situate the large group to act out of emotional connection rather than logical evaluation. Hence, it can be concluded that the Bulgarian large group shows signs of emotional, rather than logical, voting. Then, any populist leader that promises order, protection, safety, and security may become a transferential figure, taking on a large group's unconsciously transferred father-like characteristics, expectations, and idealisations.

Not all large groups will transfer the same emotions and have the same triggers during the same circumstances. That is why large groups from collectivist cultures should be studied separately from individualist ones because case studies from each can provide observations of patterns, if any, and explain modern dictatorship, fascism, and other extreme behavioural tendencies.

The Bulgarian case demonstrates that there are internal invisible driving forces that make a large group feel drawn towards particular figures at certain times. In this sense, the article opens a door for more research and explanations about what, who, and how transference occurs in different cultures so that a particular form of populism materialises within a large group. The need for psychoanalysis to be applied outside of the therapy room becomes inevitable in order to not only explain what takes place in the large group's unconscious, but also to help provide a potential way or mechanisms for healing.

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