

CHAPTER IX

COMPREHENDING VETËVENDOSJE AS FREE-ZONE OF ANTI-SYSTEMIC DISCOURSES: LACLAU'S PERSPECTIVE

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... operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification is what I have called hegemony.
(Laclau, 2005,70)

Introduction

The political movement, Vetëvendosje, was established in 2005 as a restructuring measure of existing KAN (Kosovo Action Network). (Manifesti i VETËVENDOSJES, 2005, 2) The new structure, VV, served as a crucible of anti-establishment thought and action, ideologically hardly traceable. Nonetheless, the transition from KAN to Self-Determination Movement cannot be depicted merely as organizational advancement; it represents a watershed moment that marks the identification of the organization with the primary cause. The “self-determination” has been selected as the “primary concept” around which the discursive operation will evolve. The founders identified the organization with self-determination due historical importance – inasmuch as it reflected the acute matter within post-war context of Kosovo, (Vetëvendosje, 2006, 1) and the concept embodies the most substantial notion in the Kosovo’s political realm, during the 20th century (Manifesti i VETËVENDOSJES, 2005, 1).

The existence of VV was evidently symptomatic, as it manifested the presence of structural questions. (Kurti, 2005, 2) The illegitimate establishment of an

international mission, namely UNMIK, which applied a neutral approach towards war-related events and constructed a framed political process in what could be alleged as 'controlled opposition', symbolizes the main source of discontent. Operating inside this system, political parties were performing the pre-determined role, alien to grass-roots subject. The reformation of political elements recognized as war affiliated into conventional systems parties, Kosovo's Democratic Party(PDK) and Alliance for Future(AAK), in addition to excluding a significant portion of mass "people' from political process, relinquished one of the most resourceful articulative paradigms: that of popular and democratic self-determination. Ultimately, this unarticulated stance of mainstay political concept, served as inception for discursive discontent, articulated and structured out by VV movement.

Five years after foundation, the VV underwent a transformation process which lead them to participation in the election. In terms of strategic approach, from a political organization that repudiated the role within the political system(Kurti, 2005, 4), to one engaged in more comprehensive, dialectical political activity. This metamorphosis enabled VV to maintain its position as an anti-systemic agent — advancing an out-of-system agenda, as stratagem for political action and maintaining the connection with the grass-roots. VV's frame of reference, unchangingly, conceived politics as characterized by constant antagonism and confrontation, nevertheless politics as decision-making was shuffled by heterogeneous approaches, techniques, and practices. The decision to participate in elections, as it is a critical transformational decision, equally typifies a context wherein the Movement adds a difference from strictly conceptualized confrontational scheme.

Furthermore, the movement initially participated in the elections in 2010 and has continued to act in that accordingly, on four additional occasions, since then. In all of them, VV was repeatedly distinguished for an "alliances-driven logic," attempting to construct a diverse and unique political framework to challenge the system through alliances, which had primarily been discursively dominated by the Vetëvendosje movement. This central role in integrating oppositional organizations transformed VV into a dominant body for anti-systemic action — such a condition had a significant impact on the VV discourse, leading it into a permanent state of adaptation.

To wrap it off, VV, by refusing to comprehend the reality from a conventional perspective, apparently portrayed itself as an enemy of the common political sense. In the first phase, as political movement, VV placed itself in exclusive or extreme strategic positions — without intermediate measures, the dilemma was

freedom or subordination (Kurti, 2005, 6) and the VV role, explained Kurti, consisted of an organization that serves to abolish the illusions of freedom. (Kurti, 2006, 4). In the second, post-independence period, with the transformation of VV into a political subject, open to electoral campaigns, its strategy became rationalized by a populist logic, opening the analysis to external articulations that expressed dissatisfaction with the existing situation. The inclusion of sub-articulations, through equivalent links, aiming to transform particularities into a hegemonic condition, or the particular into universal, will be considered in the article.

LACLAU, DISCOURSE, AND VETËVENDOSJE: CONVERGING STANDPOINT

In the conceptualization of the architects of the theory of radical democracy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, neither society nor politics can be imagined in the absence of structural struggle, the organization around which challenges the existence of order, in an antagonistic manner. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the fundamental contradiction of society—the ongoing conflict of conflicting interests—is not resolved by the elucidation of right-wing liberalism (Mouffe, 2001, 114). In this context, radical democracy serves as critique upon of the orthodox left's legacy: aiming at radicalization of social subjects and still conceives the freedom as the basic premise of human rights, a *sine qua non*.

“The task of radical democracy is indeed to deepen the democratic revolution and connect different democratic struggles.” (Mouffe Ch, 2008, 37).

Laclau's and Mouffe's theories proffer organization for the rise of antagonistic action within the framework of pluralized causes, responding to the subject's isolation within the apolitical framework of liberalism (Mouffe, 2017, 104). Furthermore, “democratic revolution”, also disapproves the class essentialism of the orthodox left's doctrines and asserts the emergence of new subjects, causes, articulations, communities, and groups whose actions constitute hegemonic struggle. In this condition, the ‘democratic alternative’ aspire to create links of equivalency, in a fragmented society wherein there is no single center of power. Such a relationship between societal subjects is always made discursively and its materialized as a result of one of the counter-system discourses being established dominantly in respect to the others (Laclau & Mouffe, 2008, 270).

Laclau argues that truth is an endless texture (Laclau, 1980, 87) in the complexity of social and political events—it is permanently shaped by articulatory practices. The universalization of a partial discursive truth over the totality, is recognized

as the moment of hegemony. This circumstance occurs when a discourse or narrative overlaps into every other social articulation, political organization, entities. The inherent diversity of this hegemonic operation, according to Laclau, indicates plurality of articulations, groupings, and communities, which have found a political concept that can politicize the entirety of dissatisfied categories, but still empty/flexible in interpretation. Broadly speaking, political causes that have the power to effect the hegemonic equilibrium cannot be reduced to limited interpretation; therefore, anti-systemic discourses assembly around these 'groundbreaking' causes, and through articulation process, a "people" that is not ideologically profiled but also recognizable as a unit of dissatisfied subjects, emerges (Laclau, 2005, 93).

In this sense, concepts such as freedom and independence are the archetypal examples of ideological/discursive concepts, around which causes are forged, in the name of overarching anti-system politics. In the VV case example, within a complex political process that Kosovo went through around the period of independence, knowledge of political conceptualization didn't meet the required mark. Furthermore, the technocratic practice of negotiation process for the political status, the conditionality of status and the uncertainties on future, erected an ideal situation for permanent and immutable dispute of the system's version of truths.

In a political system wherein conventional parties, as the main political subjects, disregarded the importance of facing the construction of reality from the discursive perspective, the ground for a dislocation of discourse was ideally been established. While the parties aimed to produce popular satisfaction within the electoral framework and through institutional practices — the completely unoccupied ground for interpretations of indefinite concepts, such as negotiations, independence, justice, remained to be ascertained. The discursive field for the creation of the objective and irrefutable truth was being reshaped: liberation was lectured as a new occupation; independence, as symbolic and illusional reality (Vetëvendosje, 2008, 1) and the Republic itself, as non-existent state of organization, required a revolutionary transformation.

On the contrary of the common comprehension, VV, at no stage presented an organic creation from an ideological point of view. The movement, in no sequence, illustrated a unique structure that reflected analysis and ideological action — so to speak, ideological discourse. In fact, VV consistently reflected a 'stable system of signification', characterized by an unstable structure of discourse, open to various sub-articulation. Thereby, VV, unceasingly, acted as a system of channeling discontent towards power — its history consists of perpetual endeavor to create a 'people' of the excluded citizens.

Through parallel interpretation of VV, a disaffected/alienated category of 'people' was emerging, whose internal composition was diverse – a beyond-ideological body, but the common denominator can be reduced to discontent. In the first phase, the discourse of the VV, although included different causes, the elaborated ideal of "self-determination" served as principal cause for political discourse – as mediator between the subjects. Between an anti-Rugovism as a criticism of pacifist paradigm and anti-Thaqism critique centered on reformation of the idea of resistance, VV aimed to build validation for its parallel/authentic truth, wherefrom the new "subject" of disaffected people would be carved.

In the first period, during pre-independence, VV, against the establishment had embraced an exclusionary political position. In a political process strictly confined within institutions, VV, sought to mold the equivalent link between groups, categories, classes and political unrepresented subjects. Irrespective of the context, VV's articulation was fundamentally 'populist' (Laclau, 1980, 92). In a more detailed manner, interpreting the political context Vetëvendosje, considered pathos activism and inclusion of popular will as antidote to the presence of international mission UNMIK (Kurti, 2005, 4), which was pondered as proof of lacking the freedom for unfeigned political action (Kurti, 2005, 4). Additionally, as a second alternative feature of VV's discourse, was the critique of privatization and neoliberal capitalism, whose application created a stratum of population unprotected from the shortness of economic condition.

During the post-independence context of Kosovo, in terms of positional orientation, the main approach of VV to the actors of political process was thoroughly identical – exclusionary, though it advanced strategically. At this stage, along with the articulation of ideas related to the concept of self-determination, VV's analysis gained content from the policy dimension. Criticism of corruption and the lack of an impartial and meritocratic justice system, the pervasive nepotism and clientelism of public appointments began to take part in the discourse of the movement. Consequently, VV's analysis was concretized in two pillars – political status related dilemmas that are now articulated upon the dialogue with Serbia and issues in regard to state-building process – around which groups, classes, categories of the dissatisfied were mobilized.

Examination of the strategy of the VV in relation to the subjects to be articulated, portrays it as a free zone, wherein different articulations permanently interacted. This which the main discourse made achievable the integration into a single unit—although there were substantially contradictory stance among these articulations. VV's willingness to create spaces in the process of forging a 'people', as a construct beyond the classical ideological that convene the dissatisfied, can

be ruminated in openness attitude towards [almost] any political category, entity or organization. This willingness to include diverse perspectives allowed VV to consolidate a broad base of dissatisfied individuals and groups. As the dominant force in oppositional politics, VV sought to integrate the plurality of anti-systemic positions, which according to Laclau are named as “plural positions” (Laclau, 2005, 86) or “differential positions”.

In the first post-independence elections, in 2010, certified as a civic initiative, VV competed in coalition with *Lëvizja për Bashkim*, a political party that articulated the idea of unification of Albanians, although the outline of the unification process was conceived to follow different path from the *Vetëvendosje*'s scheme. At this conundrum, wherein politics was thoroughly framed from the perspective of Kosovo's status, independence and the conditionalities formatted under the Ahtisaari Plan (*Vetëvendosje*, 2008, 1), *Vetëvendosje* provided the simplest solutions of unification with Albanian, as per their radical official position. In terms of membership, VV's intelligence included different currents of thought: from anti-Rugovism and anti-Thaqism as a local/strategic counter-system position; from the orthodox left to right-wing activists with a more nationalistic formation — and everything in between, as typical for populist movements.

In terms of discursive evolution, 2011, in the analysis of VV represents critical momento. *Fryma e Re(FER)*, a political party with membership and non-ideological politics, merged within VV, an action that brought diversity within Movement into new stage. The inclusion of this group, gave wider acceptance to the VV, since until then the dominant popular perception towards VV consisted on characterization of them, as confined organic sect of radicals. In addition, substantial dimension of policy-making was added to the Movement's discourse, and its activity began to be propelled by the social-democratic agenda, so to speak: measures to improve the economic situation of the subject, fighting escalating inequality and poverty, isolation of woman, workers' rights, categories arising from the war, etc.

Between the articulation of existing discontent and the creation of causes to deepen and enlarge discontent into hegemonic crisis, is settled was the praxis of VV. The crisis of legitimacy within the political process produced causes, whose meaning was constantly calibrated by the VV. The meaning of the negotiations with Serbia, was illuminated from the dominant discourse of VV; the recognition of the Agreement on Association of Serb Majority Municipalities, only through the pejorative meaning from the Serbian language as “*Zajednica*” was made possible through the dominant discursive activity of VV; so for the consolidation of the understanding of the political parties and of the internal politicians as

symbols of corruption and nepotism, as well as inequality as reality of economic relations, lack of workers' rights, etc. A partial narrative on objective reality, cautiously, was being transformed into universal societal word — truth.

The empowerment of VV's discourse was undeniable, though it didn't convert, immediately, into significant electoral results. This situation created a necessity for a distancing action from system. In this perspective, such an action took place after the 2014 elections: all political parties decided to become part of a coalition against the Democratic Party of Kosovo, led by Hashim Thaqi. This so-called VLAN as broad coalition which existed within an antagonistic border represents a triumph of the discourse of Vetëvendosje.

The role of VV as a system of signification, in the same manner, continued until the moment of electoral victory. In terms of the electoral projects, the movement did not change substantially after 2017. In the elections of 2017, the movement drafted the program called "Alternativa - Priorities of the Republic" which in three subsequent elections, in different electoral contexts and alliances, we find packaged and presented in alternative platforms. The platforms as part of 'discourse' of change in the sense explained by Laclau, as "*a complex of elements*" (Laclau, 2005, 68) that are not limited to writing and analysis; articulated problems of a political nature, such as negotiations with Serbia and question of internal government, such as the reform of the economy, enormous corruption, the lack of a rule of law and mismanagement, educational reform, etc (Vetëvendosje, 2016, 3).

In the 2017 elections, the VV experienced a remarkable result, a doubling of electoral body, whereas in 2019's elections, although with a close margin emerged as the main party. In the sense of praxis, in both cases, Movement acted as link to assemble for anti-systemic signifiers — or main discourses. In acting this linking role, VV, stood out in the 2021 elections, wherein secured over 50% of vote. Since the programs of these elections, in general, registered tautological content, the analysis of the discourse ought to be deepened in the analysis of several sub-articulations, the discursive content of which VV had inextricably integrated within its main discourse.

The articulatory practices and political activities of the VV movement played a central role in anti-systemic discourses, positioning itself in a hegemonic stance in relation to competing discourses, causes, and sub-articulations. This dynamic can be described as the monopolization of multiple "differential positions," from which anti-systemic content could be shaped (Laclau, 2005, 72). Expressed differently, the organization served as an open zone for sub-articulations against the

existing order, although their representation by VV was thoroughly inorganic. Accordingly, VV served as linkage of various and diverse discourses, the equivalence of which was balanced by the leader figure whose articulative content obtained popular consent.

The VV's adopted politics of change, as significant emptiness, integrated a nationalist standpoint, which served to be an essential feature in the process of reaching public consent. This pillar of articulation, primarily consisted in the depiction of the dialogue with Serbia as a destructive process for the Kosovo's statehood. Chief features of this rhetoric included historical claims, emphasizing Kosovo's victimhood in conflict against Serbia and highlighting the inability to manage relations with Albanian state in a more cooperative manner. Examples of causes derived from this category of articulation, are the critical assessment of Agreement for the Border Demarcation Agreement with Montenegro or the Agreement on the Establishment of the Association of Municipalities with a Serbian Majority, or the introduction of the missing persons from the war time, as precondition for dialogue itself.

As second sub-articulation in VV discourse, was driven by the nature of the economy — it highlighted the great social inequalities created as a result of the application of neoliberalism. In this regard, VV had gave essential part of analysis to inclusion of vulnerable subjects — dissatisfied citizens, from the state of market inadequacy that was being produced by this economic order. The creation of the Sovereign Fund as a general institution that manages the activity of public companies was the main counter-proposal, while alternative measures for a welfare state were, also, conceptualizations of VV.

Thirdly, the lack of rule of law, corruption and nepotism, as basic problems of state-building, symbolize one of the pivotal articulating practices integrated within VV's politics of change. Criticizing the lack of meritocracy, VV identified corrupt practices as synonymous with the existing order, while engaged in appearance of VV as the only opposite experience. An example of the cause of this type of content is the proposal for Vetting or even the proposal for the creation of the Bureau for the Confiscation of Unjustifiable Property, as an instrument to establish the order that annihilates the injustices created by previous unjust practices.

Last articulation that dominant discourse of VV managed to integrate was human rights area. Initially, VV outlined judgements or treatments from inclusiveness perspective, including feminist articulations that lectured on woman's rights, with a separate emphasis on elevation (Vetëvendosje, 2018, 1). Paradoxically, VV's discourse integrated both the causes of the conservative community

and the completely opposite, liberal groups. To illustrate this trend, one of the causes was the challenge of the Administrative Instruction which determinate the wearing the headscarf within schools forbidden. Whereas the movement, also, was very open to figures who articulated voices, from the perspective of the openness of society, towards marginalized groups, such as the LGBT community.

The above explained causes served as a general illustration of the construction of discursive practices of VV, within which ultimately succeeded in incorporating numerous sub-articulations, such as the monopolization of discourse advocating the opposition tendencies towards each other. The political algorithm of including opposing positions within same campaigns continued until the 2021 plebiscite-like winning elections; but the period between the 2019 and 2021 elections does not represent a common context for the development of discourse. This period represents what in Laclau's populist readings is coined as "moment of emptiness" (Laclau, 2005, 97). This period consists of the conclusion of a populist operation, the final period of a crisis of hegemony, which closes up with the establishment of a new set of articulative validation — hegemony.

MOMENTO OF EMPTINESS: MAPPING THE POPULIST EXPLOSION

In the polarized situation of us against them, subject/citizen has disparagingly depicted the old politician, as the maintainer of corrupted political order; whereas endorsed anti-systemic politicians as markers of change. This climate of distancing from the existing order, whose wording hegemony had long since been eclipsed, shaped the approach of political parties. In the 2019 elections, two political parties, VV and LDK, appealed equipped with discourse that conceives the necessity to terminate the so-called "old order", while they were led by figures harmonious to new archetype of "popular politician", imposed by the discursive triumph of VV hegemony. Albin Kurti, as ceaseless opponent of the existing order and Vjosa Osmani, a politician with an anti-Thaqist sentiment, who beforehand had antagonistically approached politics.

The election results reconfirmed the new hegemonical setting — Kurti and Osmani, gathered more than 50% of votes, with the former leading by narrow margin of 1%. The result ultimately confirmed the hegemony of the narrative of VV, while the will expressed electorally, has marked the internal boundary between the new politician — modern and meritocratic politicians and the old type, stereotyped as corrupted model. The expressed popular legitimacy, highlighted the necessity for an executive coalition for a **"people's government"**. Both of

candidacies, Kurti and Osmani, presented in different programs or political articulations popular dissatisfaction — voice of a **“people”** composed from excluded citizens. The government of VV and LDK, created after the election was tenuous, with the latter toppling Kurti’s government, couple of week later. The inability for this acquired legitimacy, to convert into resilient reformatory executive branch of power, due to the lack of will within the “old” ruling elite of LDK, left unrepresented within political process the popular will, expressed in elections. Consequently, an act as such led to separation of LDK which lost the authentic signifier of the politics of change, Vjosa Osmani, who freely relocated within overarching coalition of populist discourses, directed by VV.

This political context prompted two basic preconditions, which influenced the outcome of subsequent elections. Firstly, the populist explosion or momento of emptiness triggered by the non-manifestation in the political process of the will expressed in the 2019 elections. Momento of emptiness, is the moment of materialization of the empty signifier — this condition typifies the context of the universalization of a signifier which contains multiple discourses, groups, classes, subjects — it is the aggregate state of a newly constructed hegemony. The period between 2019 and 2021, especially after overthrowing the Kurti government, exemplifies a massivization of the demands for change, which can be called a populist explosion.

The second, pre-electoral condition is the unification of all the signifiers of change in a common struggle, as a single bloc of power. Disengaging a signifier of change, comparable to Osman, implies abandoning totally the discourse of change. In the configuration of the populism scene, the release of a figure of change enabled the creation of a common front of change, identifiable with VV; whereas Osmani, from an organic indicator of change within LDK, converted into a ‘floating signifier’, (Laclau, 2005, 153) or one of the signifiers that represented political demands in the chain of equivalences constructed by VV.

This conditioned context, eventually, heightened the antagonism in the paradigmatic boundaries of populist: we/they. Adding to it, having a sophisticated political insight, was not necessary to conceive the dichotomy of internal border between the young/old; the meritocrats/nepotists; we/they; etc. In the context of the dominant change politics, which absorbed all political actors, organization, parties, the strategy of LDK, facilitated the creation of a unified front of anti-systemic/populist politics, identifiable with VV.

VV, as political organization permanently attempted to impose its discourse upon any other political articulation that partially or radically maintained the demands for a change of political order. This strategy, largely, proved successful,

as figures or public speakers of change did not survive, the VV's monopoly in the anti-systemic action and thought, as free figures of change. In this context, Osmani, managed to persist as a free signifier. Her ability to remain as an independent signifier from the dominant anti-establishment discourse, at a time when society was deeply immersed in the populist conditions, enabled the LDK's position as an authentic articulation of change. In other words, LDK, possessed enough discursive attributes to resist VV's attempt to absorb totality of signifiers of discontent within society. Consequently, there were real possibilities for a populist critique within the LDK, headed by Osmani which would compete for unsatisfied mass of 'people'.

The abandonment of the discourse of change by LDK, caused a moment of populist explosion, during which LDK lost the most important signifier of change, thereby enabling the unification of all populist signifiers within a unique program. This platform, associated with indispensable change, was formally represented by VV's 2021 election campaign — KREJT DHE DREJT (PRIORITETET PËR KREJT QYTETARËT DREJT SË ARDHMES, 2017).

The confrontation of two distinct discourses, which articulated the politics of change, concluded with the complete unification of the anti-systemic sub-articulations, an event that led to the final hegemony of VV's articulation. This organization, VV, between the Movement and the Party, functioned like a machine that internalized any form of dissatisfaction. Osmani's rapprochement within VV's program, in addition to adding a new signifier that somewhat managed to connect main discourse, ultimately positioned VV as a symbol of collective imaginary of a new category of 'people', of the dissatisfied. They represented 'we' in circumstances where the boundary between 'we' and 'they' — of the most essential conditions in building a successful populist praxis — was established (Laclau, 2005, 70).

Kurti and Osmani, as two leaders with over a decade experience in anti-system politics, within a moment of populism explosion, united in beyond ideological formation, personified the 'we' of the people; against politicians who represented 'they' which was subjectively identified with corruption, scandals and power abuses. The idea of being excluded from the political process, while carrying a political will, also helped in identification of this bloc with the "people" — with "we". Thus, in addition to deepening the discontent, it strengthened the identification of people with politics of change, whose political grasp consisted of VV.

When the post-Kurti government collapsed, the conditions for a unified front had already been established. Later, Osmani and her associates from the LDK created a political organization called GUXO, which formed a pre-election

coalition with VV. The coalition, also, included a civil initiative called ALTER-NATIVA. In terms of its government program, this amalgamation of parties, movements, and activists, with VV as the leading symbol, presented a document titled 'KREJT and DREJT,' which was, in effect, a tautological presentation of the programs from the previous elections.

This governing program, does not adequately reflect sub-articulations or micro-narratives within the project. In the case of the 2021 elections, there was a noticeable disconnect between these sub-narratives and the overall program — especially in the direction of GUXO, whose ideological orientation totally was unreflected. Formally, this involvement of this broad social coalition was led by VV, while the ontological function in this populist moment was carried by Albin Kurti. The popular consent, regarding this bloc of power, did not come as a reasonable consideration of the feasibility of the project; the project itself was reduced in the leader, and his arrival was experienced as a cathartic moment — as the final culmination of the confrontation between 'we' and 'they'.

VV's campaign as a full representation of the society of the disaffected: it reflects the emptiness of a populist signifier of change — developed in the diversity of irreconcilable opposites, led by internal division 'we' and 'they' and with a popular identification with change. Notwithstanding, VV promised radical change, the whole hegemonic project was reduced to the leader whose function was entirely ontological: carrying on the populist momento. The totality of this complex engineering of linking the beliefs, opinions, attitudes of different groups, classes, categories into a discursive political body that articulates discontent, represents an exemplary operation of populism — a Magnum Opus.

Conclusion

The article scrutinizes the formation of Lëvizja Vetëvendosje—more concretely, its discursive development. Initially, the paper briefly describes the analysis of Vetëvendosje during its period as an anti-systemic movement, while the central part of the paper focuses on the treatment of the Movement's discursive evolution after its transformation into a political party. The research adopts a Laclau perspective, which attempts to inquire into the Movement's strategy of building connections between causes, articulations, communities, and classes, in a discourse not only identified with the VV, but also reduced to it. In arguing the main hypothesis of the paper, the analysis of the Vetëvendosje Movement as an open zone of anti-systemic articulations, the second part describes an open approach both to alliances and opposing, incompatible articulations.

The article concludes by addressing the populist moment or explosion that occurred between 2019 and 2021, where the anti-systemic discourse became personified and ontologically carried by the leader figure, Albin Kurti. This period was characterized by intense antagonism and a profound shift in the political landscape, marking the full realization of VV's populist discourse.

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