

The Illusion of Inclusion: *Configurations of Populism in Hungary*

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Introduction

Populism, which was once a feature of the Hungarian *népi* (popularist) writers' movement and preserved in cultural tradition throughout the twentieth century, has appeared in different waves in the last decades. Populist ideas and policies never had the chance to provide a political alternative in a totalitarian and authoritarian dictatorship. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the fate of these political ideas was not clear. Moreover, its form—whether a political idea, a political style, or a political practice suitable for every purpose—was not clear either. Recently, populism re-appeared in a form of a nationalist “package” of neoliberal economic policies.¹

With regard to its nature, populism has induced many radical ideas. Some thought it to be the ideological cover of fascism or the radical Right, others believed it to be a statist economic policy that could appear not only on the right but on the anti-liberal Left as well, which was defending its position. Others thought that populism is a rather harmless phenomenon, because democracy cannot exist without some elements of populism in it; therefore populism is simply a demagogic way of speaking, a political style. Judging populism proved to be as controversial as the attempts at describing it, not only for those in politics but for observers as well.²

According to the class theory approach, populism is an expression of the interests of one or more classes (farmers, urban settlers, intellectuals, informal proletariat) depending on the social and historical context. Others regard populism as a flexible, opportunistic, anti-ideological concept: much more of a syndrome than a doctrine.³ Many scholars insist that populism is an ideology which comprises some typical elements, for instance: “hostility to the status quo, mistrust of traditional politicians, appeal to the people and not to classes, and anti-intellectualism.”⁴ Recently, populism was defined as “an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogenous people, against a set of elites and dangerous others.”⁵ Some say populism is

not an independent ideology but a variant of socialism, while others claim that populism can also be an expression of nationalism,⁶ the radical Right,⁷ or even neo-liberalism.⁸

Others follow a functionalist explanation by suggesting that populism is a premature incorporation of the masses into political life at times when political structures are unable to institutionalize participation.⁹ The weakness of the structures of representation, the lack of autonomous workers' organizations, and the rising expectations of the masses create a particular social context favorable for populism.¹⁰ Students of democracy may also use populism as indicator in distinguishing between liberal and illiberal democracies.¹¹

Finally, populism can be analyzed within the framework of discourse analysis. Here, in the populist discourse politicians express the supposedly uniform interests of the people as an ultimate reference. Good and evil, workers and oligarchs, producers and parasites are presented as polar opposites in this political discourse, in which elites, migrants, and other minorities do not "truly belong" to the people. Therefore populism is not a singular phenomenon linked to a certain age and phase of development. It can accommodate itself in different social contexts and political regimes.

In this paper, my approach is based on Edward Shils' classic and comprehensive definition of populism. This approach can be interpreted as the forerunner of the discourse analytic school of thought that gained prominence in research on populism as well. "According to populism the will of the people enjoys top priority in the face of any other principle, right, and institutional standard. Populists identify the people with justice and morality."¹²

Generally populism promises a broad inclusion of the people to the political process. The following will demonstrate that populist attitudes and policies served just the opposite goal in the European semi-periphery. Populism has not only been applied flexibly to different, contradictory politics, but it is often used for exclusionary political purposes. I aim to establish a typology of Hungarian populism as 1.) The fusion of nationalism and socialism in the interwar period (1919–45); 2.) Cultural nationalism in the communist period (1948–88); 3.) A form of discourse by intellectuals in politics during and after the transition (1987–94); 4.) A form of anti-liberal discourse at the millennium (1998–2002); and finally 5.) A fusion of nationalism and neo-liberalism most recently (2010–14). I will demonstrate that most of these forms of populism were presented rhetorically as new forms of political inclusion while

they were mostly serving exclusionary policies. The many types and *long durée* dynamics of Hungarian populism seem to be one of the permanent characteristics of policy-making in the last decades.

The Birth of Hungarian Capitalism and Its Social Discontents (1867–1914)

The development of Hungarian society was induced from above and as result of external impacts as well as belatedly compared to the modernization of the West. The defeated Hungarian Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century failed to reach national independence, and Hungary was at first part of the Habsburg Monarchy. After the 1867 Compromise with the Austrians, it became equal to Austria in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, witnessing rapid economic development before the Great War. The railway network of the country was developed and capital Budapest became a metropolis. Skilled Czech and German labor as well as emigrating Jewish traders played a significant role in this economic boom. An urban-bourgeois Hungary was in the making, its growing attraction in direct contrast to the backward rural peasantry. However, in the relationship between the gentry and the unfolding bourgeois, the former remained decisive; it was not the nobility that developed a bourgeois mentality, but the thinner bourgeois stratum was adjusting itself to the gentry.¹³ Assimilation to the Hungarians was synonymous with assimilation to the values and attitudes of the gentry middle class as an estate. Thus “embourgeoisement,” capitalist development, and modernity contrasted the “organically” developed character of Hungarians: those who expressed the values of Hungarians often confronted them with the bourgeois European values. The elements of the “homeland and progress” program, elaborated in the Reform Age in the first part of the nineteenth century, were fatally disposed to be turned against each other. The true “patriot” looked at the “Jewish” capitalism with suspicion, while the representatives of the growing capitalist class cared very little about the problem of national independence.

The Social Democratic Party of the age was just as much an urban phenomenon as the representation of the bourgeois political parties, hence it was unable to channel and handle the social tensions accumulating in the countryside. In the 1890s, strikes by the harvesters and movements of the poor peasantry came in quick succession in the Plains. The agrarian movement of 1897–98 involved tens of thousands that turned against the large estates as well as big capital and social democracy. The political rise of these strata of the underclass was

equally suppressed by the politics of the gentry, the big estates, and liberalism. Thus, a broad-based authentic agrarian party could not develop in Hungary. What developed, however, represented the interests of landed smallholders only, and the party gradually lost some of its social sensitivity and hence much of its significance in its bargains with gentry politics. The poor peasantry turned to religious sects that were advocating anarchistic principles, and instead of making new attempts to express their political will they turned away from politics.¹⁴

World War I meant an end to the hegemony of liberalism and conservatism all around Europe. New collectivist ideologies and movements (replacing the former ones in several cases) appeared: nationalism and socialism. World War I and its tragic ending, which meant for Hungary the loss of two-thirds of its previous territory, deeply shocked the whole of society.

Populism as the Fusion of Nationalism and Socialism in the Horthy Era (1919–44)

The first significant Hungarian populist ideologist, the writer Dezső Szabó (1879-1945), assessed the outbreak of the World War as the “failure of individualism.” According to him, liberalism committed the sin of neglecting the collective identity of society and the war was a punishment.¹⁵ Ideologists of liberalism were forced onto the defensive, at first against socialists and syndicalists, then against nationalists. Following the revolution of 1918, the social-liberal government could not dissolve the tensions caused by the war’s shocking defeat. Although it tried to pursue a radical policy in the social field, it proved too weak, and for a transitory period of four months power was shifted to the communists. After the fall of the communist dictatorship, in the autumn of 1919, a right-wing “Christian-national” restoration began to consolidate. The ruling circles blamed liberalism for the war and for the temporary expansion of Bolshevism. Therefore, the moderate liberalism of the pre-1914 period could not return; the new regime could be characterized by a conservative, authoritarian, revanchist policy. In contrast to Peronism, the interwar Horthy-regime was unable and did not intend to involve the anti-liberal democratic forces. The politically articulated part of Hungarian society was split in two: besides the dominant “neo-baroque” national-historical society, there was a weaker bourgeois society, which had developed under the capitalist growth. Below them were the rural, uneducated peasant masses, left without

political representation and equally despised by the politics of the gentry and the bourgeoisie.¹⁶

In the 1920s, the ideologists of the Hungarian *népi* (populist) movement realized that if they wanted to make a stronger impact they must unite national and the socialist radical movements. Their program was drawn up by Dezső Szabó in the early 1920s, in his series of articles entitled “Towards a New Hungarian Ideology.”¹⁷ In their opinion the two revolutions (the bourgeois one in 1918 and the Bolshevik one in 1919) failed because they were socially, but not nationally, radical. Also, the emancipatory movements against social oppression could renew themselves only if they were able to open to the nation, or more precisely to the people. This renewal must come from the suppressed strata, the peasantry, and the new Hungarian middle class should be created out of them (because the existing middle class was of alien origin). This new class, which would be committed to the people, would be the promoter of social transformation. To the *népi* movement, peasantry meant the people, and the people must be identical with the nation.

The *népi* movement was recruited from the company and followers of the populist writers,¹⁸ and although it had members of peasant origins, it remained largely a middle class group of intellectuals. The populist writers of the 1930s were the “Hungarian Narodniks” who, similar to their nineteenth century Russian predecessors, considered it their mission to mingle with “the people,” and to document the problems of rural Hungary: the decreasing population, the spread of religious sects, poverty, and the issue of land ownership. They hoped to achieve the reformation of government politics by honestly exhibiting the real and cruel life of the peasants.¹⁹ Their intention proved to be illusionary, even though populist writers personally contacted members of the governing circles. Later on, some of them drifted towards the extreme political right, whereas others moved towards the extreme left (the illegal Communist Party). However, the core of writers’ group remained together and founded the National Peasant Party in 1938. This party, however, never became an influential, mainstream party, and after 1945 it became a “fellow-traveler,” a closely co-operating ally of the communists.

According to critics of this movement of writers in the 1930s, the initiative was not populist but *völkisch*, which paid service to anti-Semitism in the shadow of German Nazism.²⁰ The sympathizers of the *népi* movement, on the other hand, emphasized the plebeian, radical-

democratic nature of the movement and stressed its social sensitivity.²¹ As this present paper does not aim to discuss the populist vs. urban disputes in detail,²² the following only dwells upon problems linked to the nature of populism.

The main issue concentrated around the unity or separation of political democracy and social reforms. Was social equality possible without democracy? Would the intentions of social reforms of an authoritarian system be acceptable? Those who were thinking in the dichotomy of democratic left and right refused to co-operate with representatives of the regime, saying that “neither popular self-government nor social progress can be imagined without personal freedom.”²³ However, the system of coordinates for populism was not left and right, but rather up and down, and thus when searching for a vertical alliance of classes they were more inclined to compromise with the authoritarian power than were urban thinkers whom they considered doctrinaire.²⁴ *Népi* thinkers were convinced that the people must be lifted out from their suppressed state, and questions of “dogmatism of the sides” were considered secondary. Although there are certain analyses that sharply separate left and right-wing populisms,²⁵ populism is primarily characterized by a denial of this dichotomy, and is a mixture of the elements of the left and right.

While the Hungarian movement of *népi* writers considered the solution of the peasant issue to be one of its most important tasks, its attitude towards the peasantry’s *embourgeoisement* was rather ambivalent. Besides the need for social democratization, it wanted, rather romantically, to preserve certain traits of the peasant way of life. Moreover, it wanted to base a specific Hungarian democracy on rural way of life, considered “deeper” than the one dominant in Western Europe.²⁶ Putting emphasis on the national and social aspects laid the course for many of the representatives of the movement towards the extreme and racist right or towards the extreme communist left. Characteristically, in Eastern Europe, the populist movements received greater sympathy from proto-fascist and communist groups than liberals, social democrats, and ruling national conservatives. The latter expressed reservations towards such movements. For communists however, the appearance of the populist movements represented the possibility of a future alliance between the working class and the peasantry in the spirit of the revolutionary strategy and the policy of alliances of Lenin. The fascists regarded them as the natural continuation of the right-wing movements of agrarian societies, who turned against the aliens symbolizing a cosmopolitan life style and particularly against the Jews by an idealization of the peasantry.²⁷ The relationship of the Hungarian extreme right and the

writers' movement is fittingly described by the following fact: the former criticized the popular writers' movement because, by emphasizing the issue of land reform and large estates, it diverted attention from the "Jewish question." On the other hand, the majority of the populists, who did not interpret the social reforms in terms of protecting the races, felt that the extreme right was the one that diverted attention from the truly important issue: land reform.²⁸

During the interwar period in Hungary, no populist government policy could evolve. The government—with the exception of Gyula Gömbös' (1886–1936) premiership, between 1932–6, when the interests of the lower middle class were represented verbally—was not inclined to channel the democratic demands coming from below. Extremist political forces attempted to articulate initiatives coming from below that were induced by growing social tensions and that were too radical to participate in the organization of a broad social coalition. The middle class was thin and weak: its majority supporting a national sentiment made a compromise with the Horthy-regime's bourgeois groups. Yet for reasons of their Jewish origins, the group was forced onto the defensive against the representatives of the regime, and their isolation made it impossible for them to form a broader social coalition.

The peasantry belonged to the underclass, suffering from social exclusion, and for this reason it was unable to articulate its interests itself and to enter into a political alliance. The *népi* writers attempted to close this social gap with their activities, but they themselves proved to be of limited influence: neither the political class of the Horthy-regime, nor the national middle class that entered into a compromise with the regime, nor the isolated bourgeois strata, and not even the targeted peasantry could have been mobilized by them. Thus the function of their writings remained primarily to keep social self-conscience alive.

Populism as Cultural Nationalism in the Communist Period (1948–88)

The defeat suffered during World War II, the following brief spell of democracy, and the communist change of 1948 fundamentally transformed the structure of Hungarian society. The gentry elite was wiped out and a large part of the bourgeois middle class was destroyed by the war. In the 1940s many people from both strata migrated to the West. In the 1945 land reform, more than one million peasants were given land, which was subsequently forced onto

kolkhozes. A larger proportion of the rural poor were absorbed by forced industrialization in the totalitarian communist regimes, which was associated with the name of communist leader, Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971) who ruled the country in the periods of 1948-53 and 1955-6. The era of totalitarian dictatorship ended with the anti-totalitarian and anti-communist (although not anti-socialist) revolution of 1956.

The “soft dictatorship” of the reformist politics of consolidation launched by János Kádár (1912-89) in the 1960s was able to make society digest the shock of the 1940s and 1950s. The old issues raised by the populist writers (large estates, land, agrarian poverty) became obsolete. Populist thought, however, survived in a cultural form through a linkage to literature, and in the meantime it did good service to the opponents of reform with the criticism of Western modernization and consumer society. It played a role in the revival of national traditions from the seventies onwards and, as a new element, it put on the agenda the problem of Hungarian minorities living in bordering countries. Thus it tried to make populist cultural heritage a national one, and also to maintain the idea of “middle of the road”—which had a different meaning earlier—equally turning against Western liberal capitalism and Eastern internationalist communism. Populists found internationalism common to both, and they condemned the economic influence of the Western multinational concerns as well as the power monopoly of the Soviet type system. They tended to regard both as foreign oppression. Although the messages of populist writers could not be explicit due to censorship, it was this group which established the nationalist interpretation of populism with special attention to the situation of Hungarian minorities living abroad.

Communist cultural policy, often associated with the name of György Aczél (1917-91), culture boss of the Communist party, tried to use the populist resurgence to divide the opposition in the late 1970s. He suggested that the two major variants of criticism against the regime—Western and populist—could not have a common platform, as the urban opposition groups were Jewish and the *népi* were not. This rumor propaganda, which was amplified by the populists at the rhyme of systemic change,²⁹ has again made anti-Semitism and the conflict between Jews and non-Jews a (not so transparent) political issue. It meant a past anachronism for the younger generations that had grown up in the shadow of the Kádár-system, having learned about the “Jewish question” and the populist vs. urban conflict only in history books.³⁰

Populism as Discourse of Intellectuals who Entered Democratic Politics (1987–94)

By the second part of the 1980s, the cultural criticism of popular origins was replaced by the organization of political movements with the pluralization of the intelligentsia and society.³¹ The Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum*, MDF), which was established as a loose intellectual association in Lakitelek in September 1987, was transformed into a political organization a year later. Not accepting “either the tag of pro-government or of opposition and the pressure of choice,”³² the Forum did not initially function as a party, yet it was active as a party that collected groups from a wide range. Populist thinking emerged from its purely cultural forms and reappeared on the political stage. It reappeared under such historical conditions that its effect could become far greater than that of the former National Peasant Party. The disappearance of the Soviet oppression, the return of national sovereignty, the seemingly “classlessness” of the Kádár era, the desire for a welfare society, and the lack of new political ideas apparently strengthened the assumption that the time may have come for the renaissance of populism.

By then, however, the anti-capitalism of the late successors of the populist writers was in contrast to the “embourgeoisement” of the majority of Hungarian society. Thus what they represented was instead a romantic notion of society, the respect of traditions, moralizing and nationalism—in addition to the demand for economic democracy and social security³³—that remained from populism. The advocates of the “middle-of-the-road” attitude, setting out as leftists, allied themselves with those authentically center-right gentry-conservative politicians in order to ensure their success at the elections, and whose predecessors were the adversaries of the populist intelligentsia of the 1930s.³⁴ The national issue, as separate from popular radicalism, became the common denominator of their alliance. This political change that apparently parted from populism—coupled with the moderate message of the “calm force” that successfully reached the middle strata—brought about the electoral success of the MDF, organizing itself into a party. The president of the party, the liberal-conservative József Antall (1932-93) became prime minister in 1990. Although the concept of the nation of conservatives and populists was initially different—the conservatives were thinking in terms of a historical nation-state and the populists in cultural nation—they were brought closer by the moral interpretation of their political mission. Their objective was to present the entire

right (from center to the extremes) in a single, big party, but their cooperation did not prove to be lasting.

The difficulties of economic transformation, growing unemployment, and the downward slide of one part of the middle class had again strengthened social dissatisfaction. The voice of radicalism grew stronger in parliamentary debates on “doing justice,” compensation, and property return to the Church, suppressing the moderates’ “calm force.” István Csurka (1934-2012), then vice-president of the MDF and leader of his movement the Hungarian Road (*Magyar Út*) used this moment to launch an attack against professional politicians of his party—and, through them, against the democratic system—in August 1992, and provoked the gravest crisis in the history of the MDF. In his manifesto Csurka demanded that the wing of the MDF that was of “national spirit” (extreme right in essence) should remove the “liberal” Antall government that engaged in a “politics of pacts,” or should press it to settle the political conflicts by force and not by compromises. Csurka presented a theory of conspiracy, by which he explained why the “issues of Hungarian destiny” were not solved, arguing that the parties in opposition were intertwined with Western liberal finance circles, which—because they were Jewish—financed the representatives of the communist nomenclature turned managers. Their common feature was that they were alien to Hungarians, as contrasted to the “national middle class rooted in the people,” and therefore were unable to understand the problems of Hungarians even if they wanted to. All this would excuse the national-populist forces from the pressure of seeking compromises.³⁵

Nevertheless, Csurka failed to impress the middle class by his anti-Semitic proposals, for which the values of bourgeois welfare had been more attractive than the exclusivity and witch-hunt of the Hungarian Road. In his later writing Csurka did not strive to create a national middle class, rather he tried to mobilize the “bitter hinterland” of the common people.³⁶ With this he tried to return to the populism of the popular writers who turned to the underclass, instead of the middle class populism of Dezső Szabó. Although Csurka sensed accurately the growing inequalities of Hungarian society, he was wrong when he thought that he would be able to mobilize those who were sliding towards the periphery through anti-elitism and nationalism. Thus he found himself the representative of extreme rightist radicalism: he has become the Hungarian Le Pen. His writings have gone from anti-communistic³⁷ to a comprehensive, combatant criticism of liberalism.³⁸

To solve existing social tensions, a true populist policy would wish to find such political alternatives that can be realized (or are at least credible), rather than adjust the existing people to an imaginary political idea. Despite all his qualities, Csurka could not become a populist politician, because the preconditions of populist politics “of the Argentine type” were missing for the realization of his program. The majority of the unemployed were unskilled, rather than skilled, and thus in a far more disadvantageous position. In Argentina populist governmental policy could establish itself as a result of collective action of the large, mobile, and skilled emigrant (and other) groups. In Hungary, however, the equivalent groups did not think of collectively asserting their political interests. Middle class in Hungary was much weaker and its members aimed at developing individual survival strategies instead of organizing themselves collectively. The older and less educated people tended to turn away from the entire political order, while younger generations faced increasing difficulties to enter the labor market.³⁹

Successful populist politicians are popular, easy to understand, and, above all, their political messages can be followed by the targeted masses. They tend to say what the people want to hear from them; for that they need flexibility and pragmatism. Csurka’s political aims, however, were too radical for the masses. For these reasons, his message was not open and inclusive, but isolating, racist, and exclusive.⁴⁰ He represented a sort of “old school” right-wing populism of literary intellectuals, which had gradually lost its appeal.

Why There Was No Chance for Peronism in Hungary in the 1990s

Social science literature has often referred to twentieth century political developments in Latin America as a possible scenario for Eastern Europe after the years of transition. Some exponents of this proposition argued that peripheral capitalism would probably produce illiberal democracies, if not hybrid regimes, with or without populism.⁴¹ Some tended to see Peronism as an option for the post-communist regimes, or if not, a kind of lesson to be learned. The appearance of authoritarian political leaders like Vladimir Mečiar in Slovakia, Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia, Lukashenka in Belarus, or Franjo Tudjman in Croatia in the 1990s could indeed give ground to this impression. More than twenty years after the transition, there are some strong signs of peripheral capitalism in the region, especially the widening gap between the rich and the poor, which was reminiscent of Latin America.

Nevertheless, the resurrection of Peronist populism in Eastern Europe was not a realistic way to go in the post-transition years.⁴²

By his style and political tactics, József Torgyán, President of the Independent Smallholders' Party (*Független Kisgazdapárt*, FKGP) in the 1990s, could be regarded as an ideal-typical populist politician. Although Torgyán was an excellent speaker, a real demagogue, in the original sense of the term, who understood all the tricks of "low speech," his relative lack of success was caused by his lack of political strategy and program: he demanded total re-privatization and spoke against (supposed) foreign interests in defense of the homeland. His prime objective was to recruit followers at all cost,⁴³ and his exaggerated promises with no concept only ended up being ridiculous. His party was a party of "nostalgia" for the pre-communist times that was unable to attract supporters from any other social groups beside the rural, uneducated, and aged population and the easily definable, relatively small group of farmers. The methods used by József Torgyán to expand his electoral base closely resembled the strategic steps of President Juan Domingo Perón in the 1940s in Argentina: his actress wife attempted to organize a "Torgyán party," and female populist Ágnes Maczó, who had five children, referred to herself as the "representative of the people," and was pushed into the foreground.⁴⁴ Compared to Perón, his possibilities were far more limited. Nevertheless, he remained an important figure of the Hungarian post-communist politics until 2002.⁴⁵

In Hungary, despite the occasional lack of legitimacy⁴⁶ of the new democratic regime, the nationalist and social populist politics were limited in the first part of the 1990s. The reasons of that are manifold. It was equally due to the heritage of the "soft communist" past of the Kádár regime, and to the general economic and political characteristics of transformation. Moreover, in the first years of communist rule in Hungary, in the 1950s, people had the opportunity to see the disadvantages of "personality cult," and thus became sceptical towards it. The relative popularity of János Kádár was the result of the fact that, by presenting himself as puritan man, and he was against personalization of politics. In the Kádár regime, the majority of society followed individualist strategies of survival, and during the course, had become less susceptible to collectivist political demagogy. Instead of collectivism, the soft dictatorship had created informal patron-client lines, along which people could assert their interests informally, and compensate for the losses suffered in the economic transformation. After the fall of communism, the size of those groups that had nothing to lose was limited, their conditions were deteriorating, and this kept them from supporting such political actions.

But there are some other, more general reasons that explain the lack of successful populist mobilization in Hungary after the regime change as well. First, politics appealing to the people, and alluding to a state-defined concept of justice, had been present in Hungary in extreme forms (fascism, communism), and have caused serious damage and backwardness. The memories of these were alive for a long time. Hungary after 1989 was more a “post-populist,” individualistic society than a pre-populist one.⁴⁷ Second, the small size of the country and its dependence upon the world economy limited the space for economic nationalism, which was a feature of populism. The broad masses of Hungarian society saw no alternative to the desirable, Western welfare democracies. There was no massive aversion to the penetration of Western capital in Hungarian society, rather people wanted to have their share of the benefits. Third, in the society, during the regime change, the intelligentsia committed to the ideals of liberalism, democracy, and autonomy of the individual was quite influential and they were still credible at that time.⁴⁸ For the decisive social strata, being those who could take part in the conflict, the concept of capitalism and democracy seemed to belong together. The social strata that would have been able to produce a Latin American type of populism, through forming an alliance and demanding democracy as well as authoritarian paternalism, was missing. Fourth, populism usually evolves in places where considerable social groups believe that there is much to be distributed, so they hope that by changing the internal proportions of social redistribution, they might find themselves in a more favourable position. But due to the indebtedness of the country and the initial strength of the belief in “entrepreneurial spirit,” no such belief was apparent in Hungary in the early years of post-communist democracy.⁴⁹ Fifth, a characteristic feature of populism is confidence in the central role of the state, but in Hungary such confidence and the expectations resulting from it were missing. Even if they had existed, the weak state heavily in debt was not in a position to meet these expectations. Sixth, paradoxically, the relatively strong individualism of Hungarian society and its scepticism toward the state in the 1990s did not only weaken the credibility of the new democracy (which could not exist without an accepted authority of the state), but it also hindered the development of populism temporarily (which cannot flourish long without the belief in a strong, paternalistic, redistribute state).⁵⁰ Finally, the chances of populist mobilization were further reduced by the fact that there were underclass groups that were turning away from politics, falling behind, and even forming ghettos, which could not be mobilized by any kind of political agitation, not even populism.

Social, economic, and cultural conditions did not favor the Latin America scenario. But this condition started to change with the austerity package of 1995, a late promotion of shock therapy by the socialist-liberal coalition government. At the beginning, dissatisfied groups, those that were sinking into poverty and falling behind, oriented themselves towards the extreme right to a lesser extent, and to a greater extent towards the old-school socialists. Thus, the mixture of Left and Right, which crosses class boundaries, gained influence.

Populism from Below: Failed Attempts for a More Inclusive Polity in the 1990s

In Hungary, the strikes organized by the trade unions were only able to mobilize a few people, and they were not able to influence government policy in the 1990s. The strongest trade union, the National Alliance of Hungarian Trade Unions (*Magyar Szakszervezetek Országos Szövetsége*, MSZOSZ), liked to use elements of populist politics (putting the difficult to grasp values, such as “justice,” ahead of other social values and political demagogy). However, this was not populism, because the anti-elitism, the desire for an independent political role, and challenging the system of democratic institutions were instead limited to the trade unions. The largest unions were more oriented towards 1.) acquiring suitable positions for their negotiations with the employers and government in the field of economics; 2.) acquiring political influence in the leftist parties, particularly in the Hungarian Socialist Party. Demagogy itself cannot be identified with populism, though it is undoubtedly part of it. Demands that are not populist in their content or in their possible consequences can be expressed in a demagogic way.

To some extent, groups that have been disappointed by the regime change of 1989 strengthened the camp of populism.⁵¹ They demanded the consistent completion of systemic change or, in other words, the replacement of the elite through a “second” or “permanent” revolution,⁵² and also wanted strongly state-controlled privatization. In addition to Csurka’s Hungarian Justice and Life Party (*Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja*, MIÉP), this heterogeneous group is comprised of: some smallholders groups, members of the Hungarian Market Party, former fighters of the revolution of 1956, political prisoners, former followers of plebeian democrat György Krassó,⁵³ and groups that are dissatisfied with compensation, or attack the Constitutional Court because it hindered their plans of doing justice. Here can also be

mentioned those who believe that the revolution “withered,” and the original goals were betrayed and those who demand a broad-based national unity instead of the “policy of pacts” of the parties.⁵⁴ The representative meeting of these groups was held in August 1993 in Balatonszárszó in the spirit of anti-liberalism.⁵⁵ The addresses of this meeting indicated that the coalition of the populist-nationalist and national conservatives, created at the end of 1989, had been in disintegration.⁵⁶ The anti-institutional argumentation was similar, but the rhetoric employed the concepts of civil society in the case of populist organizations such as the “Committee of Social Adjustment,” the “Intellectual-Moral Parliament,” and the “Civic Movement for the Republic.” Economic nationalism, almost always accompanying populist politics, appears in these groups: it is mostly they who object to, and hence wish to limit, the inflow of foreign capital, or who want to prohibit the purchase of land by foreigners once and for all.

The initiative of the Association of People Living Below Subsistence Level (*Létminimum Alatt Élők Társasága*, LÁÉT) at the end of 1992 may be regarded in many respects as an “underclass” populist experience, because it aimed to create a social coalition that went beyond the impoverished segments of society, crossing boundaries to gain the support it demanded. At first the Association organized a hunger strike against the anti-social policy of the government and, next, it collected a hundred thousand signatures for a plebiscite that would oblige the government to dissolve itself before the elections were due. This was an initiative coming from below, which successfully utilized the general dissatisfaction of the public toward Parliament and the parties, something that could turn against the entire political elite. The plebiscite was not held; hence the actual opinion of society remained unknown. However, when the Constitutional Court declared the initiative anti-constitutional, it did not provoke a new wave of protest across society, which shows that the action of the LÁÉT was not based on a real multi-class alliance, but expressed only the dissatisfaction of the poorest strata.

After the shock of political and economic transition, the political class in power had to face the challenge of democratic consolidation. In theory, consolidation is the policy of social peace, healing of wounds and the common prosperity to a gradually widening segment of the population. It is a policy that encourages a diversity of identities, instead of forcing them into the over-simplified, dichotomy-based worlds of the political left and right. Liberal democracy

can secure both freedom in politics and freedom from politics at the same time. For this reason, the idea of “permanent revolution” is alien to its rhetoric and essence.

Reinterpreting Democratic Consolidation: Populism as Anti-liberalism (1998–2002)

The coalition government of Fidesz and the Smallholders’ Party led by Viktor Orbán attempted to consolidate democracy by using the controversial slogan of an “all-out attack” in the period of 1998–2002. This proved to be a contradictory policy. As it soon came out, consolidation could not be concluded by further dividing society and widening the gap between social groups. Consolidation could not be done by reducing the political field to one dimension, namely to the dichotomy of friend or foe. In 1998 Viktor Orbán felt that it was the last moment to rearrange power structures and implement a change in elite. Called “more than government change,” the program was an effort to modernize the Right. It intended to build a “Fidesz-Hungary” in order to help implement a new political structure in the name of a second revolution. Orbán believed that it was better if two oligarchies competed for power than just one, and he therefore made the effort to organize a possible economic and social base for the contest for a divided Hungary. Instead of social reforms, he saw it as his mission to change the elite, secure key positions for his supporters, construct a new base of support, and construct an institutional background for Fidesz once and for all. He could not align the majority of the people with his program.

The first Orbán government consciously identified the political community with the cultural community (even though the latter notion was only with reference to the Right) and it contributed to its electoral defeat in 2002. It is one of the basic characteristics of a liberal democracy that political and cultural communities are utterly different: any number of cultural communities might peacefully coexist within a single political one. Anyone trying to enforce an existing (and culturally heterogeneous) political community to follow the norms of one specific culturally homogeneous community proclaims that he or she is not necessarily committed to the principles of liberal democracy. The first Fidesz government tried to balance the division of the political community with the reconstruction of the imaginary cultural community of the nation outside the borders.⁵⁷ It became more important that Orbán considered himself to be the leader of a country or of a state. While he was constantly making reference to 15 million Hungarians, the citizens felt that he was only realizing the interest of

voters on the right, something that caused tension over the policies of the Orbán government. When he argued for the spiritual strengthening of Hungarians and their reunion (which brought with it the suspicion of nationalism), the country's left could easily have felt that this rhetoric of the spiritual reunification of Hungarians across borders was only used to make people accept the symbolic and normative structure of an imaginary cultural community that was dear to the government. It was capable of causing fear.

It seemed that the first Orbán government was inclined to restructure all of society from above with the values and models of one particular cultural group. The government does have the function of organizing society, but the organization of cultural communities is not its responsibility or task, and generally occurs from below following civic models. The prime minister vainly sent the message that "the future is here" because, as it soon became obvious, the past could not be wiped out for long. The coalition could have won in 2002 with a calm, mature, conservative-liberal policy, but with anti-liberal radicalism, they were defeated.

With the policy of social mobilization, Orbán re-drew the political map as had happened in the 1940s and 1950s in Argentina under Perón, in the 1990s in Croatia under Tudjman, and in Slovakia under Meciar. All these countries saw the supporters of illiberal, populist democracy opposing the supporters of liberal democracy. A similar move was observable in Italy in 2001, where the former competition between multiple parties disappeared, and the political struggle's frontline lay between pro-Berlusconi and anti-Berlusconi groups. Some observers even compared it to the U.K. governed by Blair.⁵⁸ The Hungarian election campaign of 2002 saw the fierce and emotionally overheated fright of the pro-Orbán and anti-Orbán political coalitions. The "cold civil war" took the shape of a hot campaign. Although Fidesz lost the election politically, Orbán could manage to create a "second Hungary" politically with his own cultural milieu, which survived despite the electoral defeats.

This sort of political style is often called populist policy, i.e. when the democratic process is represented as a polarized choice: life or death, truth or lie, past or future, good or evil. As mentioned earlier, populism also entails a re-definition of the role of the state, emphasizing its distributive role. Other characteristics of populism are: economic nationalism, a moralistic rhetoric constantly referring to the idea of the nation and justice, a steady process of searching out and stigmatizing the "enemies of the nation" (traitors within, communists, big business, financial oligarchy, cosmopolitan intellectuals, and so on), and the polarization and

reduction of political pluralism to a one single dimension. During those few years, political competition did not center around different programs and rationally debatable arguments but was reduced to a passionate and symbolically mediated meta-political war of “us vs. them,” which was justified with “cultural” reasons. National symbols (the flag, the circle ribbon, and the national anthem) that represent the unity of the nation were appropriated by Fidesz and its supporters, thus stressing the idea of division. The slogan known from football “Go Hungary” and “Go Hungarians” became the campaign slogan of the party, similarly to the “*Forza Italia!*”⁵⁹ The community of national politics was identified with the circle of Fidesz supporters, and they were called upon to “defend the nation.”⁶⁰ Soon it was evident that populism did not need intellectuals, rather propagandists.

One of the most important components of a leader-centric populist policy is a technique of personalization of power.⁶¹ Modern democracy is, in many ways, a media democracy or a campaign democracy. In such a world, anyone who can simplify his ideas and communicate real or apparent truths in a watered-down but credible way gets the upper hand. Most people prefer parties that transform politics into a visual experience as opposed to those that convey their policies using the classic devices of verbal debates and programs. Feelings become more important than a conscious understanding and acceptance. These feelings are most accessible through those charismatic personalities who communicate the message of the party. The personality that conveys the message becomes the message itself.⁶² In this way the political leader becomes the leader of a charismatic group that is similar to a religious community, and becomes a figure who is central to the experience, and whose politics give those youth who are searching for identity the opportunity to “feel” it. In a “leader-democracy,”⁶³ for the followers of the policy, it conveys the message of experience, immersion and a sense of belonging together; ideologies become identities and the rational-argumentative type of policy becomes a policy of identity.

By 2000, it was visible that some segments of Hungarian society felt a need for this type of claustrophobic, anti-liberal, commanding behavior.⁶⁴ Those living in the countryside needed it more than people living in towns. They could feel that there is someone who tells them what should be done in that irrational, decadent, and confusing world in an understandable and simple way. During the period of the first Orbán government, changes took place in the manner of exercising power that had long lasting consequences.⁶⁵ These include changes in political communication, making politics more dynamic, conditioning people to think long

term, and aspiring to make politicians more comprehensible and clear to common people. The first Orbán government looked beyond everyday problems and focused on forming an understandable and attractive picture of the future in a more direct, propagandistic way. The elections of 2002 however, proved that voters were more interested in the present than in the past and believed in the dreams and successes of the future only if they could see them begin in the present. Hungarian voters were not in the situation to be able to disregard the circumstances of their everyday lives.

In his statements after the lost election of 2002, Viktor Orbán found no connection between the performance of the government and the defeat of Fidesz.⁶⁶ He tended to explain the defeat with transcendental causes and started to establish a populist mythology about his own performance against those who allegedly served “foreign interests” and regarded their homeland as a “stock company.” To oppose this, Orbán chose a mythical role to be the spiritual leader of the people, and made it clear that he did not want to get used to parliamentary politics again. For one year following the elections, he refused to accept posts in the party or within the faction, and had aversions from the traditional roles in opposition. By organizing “civic circles” and spontaneously active groups, he transferred his political activities into the activities of a movement,⁶⁷ and announced his belief that his followers were not in a minority because the “nation cannot be in opposition.”⁶⁸ As he said in his famous speech after the lost elections:

“We are not going to move from here. Our homeland exists even if it is under the influence of foreign powers, be the Tartars or Ottomans. Our homeland exists even if it is shaken by storms of history. Our homeland exists even if we do not hold governmental responsibility. Our nation is not simply politics, it is our life. Perhaps, our parties and representatives will be in opposition in the Parliament, but we, here in this square, cannot and will not be in opposition, because the nation cannot be in opposition. At worst, a government might turn to be in opposition to the people, if it gives up the goals of the nation.”⁶⁹

Orbán wanted to represent the “nation” by rising above opposition parties, and wanted to organize the infrastructure and social base of a new “Future-Hungary,” that he imagined.

Yet he was still the prisoner of his own campaign rhetoric. From leading Fidesz as a party campaigning for election victory, he moved to the idea of building a wide political movement, a future right-wing party union. The first Orbán government made an attempt to realize goals which confronted one another: the “revolution of souls” and consolidation. He prioritized confrontation to compromise in his politics, and voters did not like that. By the time he returned to Fidesz as President—after a year of internal emigration—he positioned himself as the unquestionable leader of his party and changed the internal party rules, procedures, and regulations accordingly. Since 2003, Orbán has not simply been an elected representative of Fidesz, it is Fidesz that belong to him and represents him.

The New Right government of Hungary led to a campaign in 2002 in which the idea of “democracy” and “nation,” country” and “homeland” could be turned against one another. The government wanted to restructure the cultural community according to a (right-wing) cultural value-system, and by doing so, it suggested that whoever fails to agree cannot be a member of the political community. It resulted in people who did not believe in the “order-authority-homeland-work-discipline-family-will” type of value system communicated by the government concerned. The government played on offense because its members believed that the majority of the national political community was behind them and identified with their system of values. They were wrong. With its voluntarism, the cabinet alienated social groups that would have been easy to win over by a moderate center-right government.

The first Orbán government slowly turned out to be slightly anti-Western, anti-American, and anti-liberal, but did not go as far as the old Left approach.⁷⁰ It was a gradual move because, in the meantime, the government successfully negotiated Hungary’s entry to the European Union and was already been a member of NATO since 1999. Negotiating with the EU had a moderating and restricting effect on internal politics in Hungary, which limited Orbán’s room for action. However, Fidesz, which used to be the member of the Liberal International, left the Liberals in Europe and joined the European People’s Party party-family in 2000.

The Hungarian New Right that had been created by Viktor Orbán between 1998 and 2002 turned out to be an unsuccessful political project in the short run, but it remained very strong culturally. Fidesz lost the parliamentary elections of 2002 and 2006. However, as we will see, it emerged as the only powerful opposition force afterwards.

From Social Populism to Elitist Reformism: The Socialist Modernizers (2002–2010)

Ten countries joined the European Union in 2004 among them were the Visegrád countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. On the day of the accession three countries out of four had a center-left, social democratic government in power. A day later, Leszek Miller, the Polish premier was forced to resign. He was soon followed by the Czech prime minister, Vladimír Špidla, and the Hungarian Péter Medgyessy. They were replaced by new faces from the same political camp.

The Hungarian prime minister enjoyed a high rate of popularity at the beginning of the term. By 2004, however, it appeared that the initial successes of his materialist-redistributive politics had faded away in the memory of the people. Although Hungary was not in a bad economic state, political actors sensed that there was a crisis in leadership. They felt that leadership was in a way absent, because governance took an *ad hoc* character and political decisions did not constitute any part of a more or less coherent narrative. No one knew what was happening and for what reason. Political strategy was replaced by a merely reactive type of communication. Many felt that the socialist-liberal government would not be able to articulate why they were governing and what ideas and principles motivated their ambition. As long as the political Right was mobilizing crowds on the streets, a message of social peace sufficed. As soon as the opposition calmed down, however, the slogans of peace and normalcy proved to be lacking for the platform of the political Left. Many had the impression, therefore, that following a promising start, things took a turn for the worse.

Why was it that such a “turn for the worse” happened to coincide with one of the most significant political steps Hungary had ever taken? This was the step the nation had wanted for so long; a true chance of catching up, the accession to the richer and more fortunate half of Europe, membership in the EU, from which they had been excluded for decades. A national consensus supported the European accession almost everywhere. It appeared that it did not need any further arguments. The question arose whether one could find some regularity behind these changes in premiers that pointed beyond the personal character of these individuals. To answer to this question, one should take a look at the process of transformation of reformist communists into post-communist technocrats.

People of the Visegrád countries, Hungarians included, expected some crucial achievements from the new political elite and those in charge of the regime change in 1989–90. First, they wanted democracy; second, a functioning market economy; third, a democratic political community and national identity; and fourth, their country to “join Europe.” Each wish contained one implicit desire for prosperity. These societies experienced being locked behind the Iron Curtain against their will as history’s utmost injustice, as indeed it was. Hungarians found it “natural” to demand that their living standards be on a level with the Austrians. Already at the time of the regime change, people associated democracy with prosperity. They wanted democracy, because they saw the wealth of the democratic countries. It seemed logical that those who have democracy prosper.

The term “capitalism” was already viewed with disdain, but the phrase “well-functioning market economy” sounded convincing. It was generally perceived that a working market economy was needed in order to usher in prosperity. Redefining one’s national identity and one’s political community was important—especially in the newly emerged post-communist nation states—because it had to be clearly defined who could take part in that prosperity as the legitimate member of the “sovereign people.” That defined who belonged to the nation and could be considered as citizen of the country. Finally, the European and the Euro-Atlantic integration appeared in the target of siding with the strong and the successful.

As long as the expectations of society were matched with international expectations, and as long as these expectations could be answered by formal, institutional arrangements, the technocratic and pragmatic elite of the Hungarian communist successor party, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) struck a note of accomplishment with their manager style modernization. The international academic world of political science cannot but acknowledge the proficiency with which the Hungarian successor party completed the democratic turnover after 1989, demonstrated a readiness to reform, and handled the crisis of the 1990s. It was no wonder that the leaders of the party—those who were socialized in the post-Marxist, anti-ideological reform period—preferred to see themselves as “neutral experts,” standing against all ideologies. These pragmatic reformers abhorred political ideas, as they recalled the bitter taste of Marxism-Leninism in their mouths. Moreover, wherever they looked, they saw economic decline and political crisis. First they had to prove that they were able to think independently from the ideological outlook of the previous communist generation. They had to prove that they could identify a problem for what it was, without the ideological dressing.

They had to be able to solve, or at least to handle, the emerging issues. The great challenge of this generation was to do crisis management in the space between confined political opportunities and economic rationality.

By the 1980s there was not one member among the socialists who still believed in communism. For them, Marxism was an unclear concept of progress with a fuzzy, linear understanding of history with no world-shaking contents attached to it. After 1989, the general opinion among the socialists was that only the specific analysis of a specific situation, only conscientious management and the handling of the various crises mattered. So the flower of modernization was placed into an empty vase. The post-communist political elite wanted a normal, consensual world, free of ideologies. Since the desired consensus happened to be called the “Washington consensus” at the time, it came natural for these political managers to accept the international liberal discourse. They strove to attract capital, thinking it would bring about a society that functioned better.

Such politics could continue only so long as obstacles were eluded on Hungary’s course of regime change, institution-building, economic stabilization, democratic consolidation, and historic EU accession. While the political Right was occupied with rebuilding its base, it was the task of “the Left,” between 1994–98, to manage the economic crisis, conduct the politics of privatization so far left unfinished by the previous rightist governments, and to show a friendly face towards the West.⁷¹ The Hungarian New Right stepped on stage in 1998 testing its newly gained strength through confrontational behavior. It yearned impatiently to legitimize its new, proud, and very distinct identity by any means. In its eagerness, however, it went too far at that time. They divided the country into the “decadent powers” of the failed communist past and the “bulging forces” of the rising national future. This confrontational behavior of the first Fidesz government created a deep divide in society between pro-Orbán and anti-Orbán masses, which gave the socialists a chance. As it turned out at the 2002 elections, a slight majority of voters, preferring peace to war, turned back to the well-known Left. The fears of the larger part of society were resolved by their electoral victory. The ruling sentiment was that the time of symbolic politics was over, and that it was only a residue of the past. To gain success, one simply had to make trustworthy accomplishments. However, as it turned out soon afterward, for the Left to be successful more was needed than remaining a “party of peace.”

The concept of “welfare regime change,” already introduced in 2002 by the then Prime minister Péter Medgyessy, identified a social problem: a political debt of the new democracy to its own people. It turned out that democracy has no value for the people as long as a general poverty prevailed over them. There is no value in the nation if it is poor, and there is no value in the European Union if it is only a club for the wealthy, by downgrading the new member states. It was no accident that for both the referendum held about the EU accession in 2003 and the EP elections in 2004, the turnout was low in Hungary and in Central Europe. People did not think that technical issues of EU enlargement concerned them. Not that they opposed them; they gave their passive support instead. Having put the unresolved welfare question into the spotlight, it became obvious that one parliamentary cycle was not enough to complete a change in welfare politics. The inability to solve the problem in the short term led to a political crisis of forces labeled as “the Left.” Although in the 1990s they were successful in crisis management, new issues emerged that could not be solved in the same old way, following the old schemes. Increasingly, the correct reaction required strategic thinking, ability for innovation, and commitment by political values. The new issues were not about technical task resolving and crisis management, but about the political content of social democracy. Such values were not to be articulated by experts instead of politicians. “Expertise” is irrelevant when it comes to choosing political values. Value-less elitist politics could only provoke a new wave of populism.

Nonetheless, the promise of renewal of the Socialist Party along “Third Way” lines looked like a promising process. It offered a hope that after one and a half decades of post-communism, things were slowly being put in place. For instance, the political Left stopped acting like the Right, and the other way around. Everything was the other way around in Central Europe in the 1990s: while the Left was busy privatizing, for instance, the Right was “building a nation.” Many felt that this reversal of political roles could not be continued and the ex-communist socialist politics had to re-evaluate itself. The influence of the anti-global movement decreased after September 11, 2001, and the new social democratic politics of the once successful “Third Way” had to face the challenge of renewal. One had to consider whether the increasing crisis of neo-liberalism in the 2000s would destroy its central-leftist, alternative variants or revive its nationalist populist alternative. What happened in Hungary after 2004 was the connection of the region to the present concerns of the Western world. By the 2000s, it appeared that the opportunities of the sort of externally driven follower, or “catching up from behind,” type of technocratic politicking, which gained its identity solely

from external sources and which denied the autonomy and the social context of politics, was exhausted.

In 2004, Medgyessy was replaced by Ferenc Gyurcsány, a dynamic socialist prime minister, whose rise was considered the “Third Way” Left’s political answer to the New Right. Gyurcsány was able to keep the socialist-liberal coalition in power as a result of his successful electoral campaign of 2006. His warrior political personality proved to be not as far from the leader of Fidesz as the more reserved Medgyessy was, which is why Gyurcsány was able to beat his right-wing opponents. From 2004 until the end of the decade, the country’s sharp polarization was symbolized by the increasing personalization of politics that centered around the two rivals: Orbán and Gyurcsány.⁷² After a few years in power, the socialist-liberal government of Gyurcsány was widely judged as “Josephinist” in its top-down, modernizing reforms and also overly technocratic and alienated from the people. Although Orbán lost two consecutive elections, he remained party leader and managed to achieve his long-term political goal: the social integration of New Right and further polarization of Hungarian politics. The sharp opposition of political camps resulted in protest campaigns against the government in the fall of 2006, which culminated in street battles between protesters and the police. Finally, partly as a result of the global economic crisis of 2008, Orbán was able to reintegrate the political center on populist ground, and returned to power with a qualified majority in the new parliament of 2010.

Although the “negotiated revolution” of 1989 was largely elite driven, most people (rather passively) endorsed the new regime of freedom. They could travel, start their own enterprises, and speak freely about their lives in public. Free elections, a representative government, a constitutional court, and democratic opposition were all firmly established. The years between 1990 and 2010 were far from unproblematic, as prime examples show: a widening gap between the living standards of the capital city and the rest of the country as well as the educated classes and the Roma population. Still, the regime was a liberal democracy where governing parties lost elections and the media aggressively criticized politicians. Democracy was consolidated, and the country successfully joined the European Union.⁷³

The first signs of deconsolidation occurred in 2006 and were followed by the rapid decline of GDP during the economic crisis. The regime could not keep its original promises and was

widely judged as corrupt. By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, it became vulnerable to a new populist challenge.⁷⁴ An era had come to an end, but anti-elitist, populist politics survived in the opposition. It is represented by a mix of nationalism and neo-liberalism to be a new form of populist politics delivered by the Fidesz government since 2010. Despite all of its problems, Hungary after 1989 has been a relatively successful in a worldwide comparison. But the success has been challenged in ways that were very much unexpected.

Populism as a Mix of Nationalism and Neoliberalism (2010–14)

The victory of Fidesz in the April 2010 elections altered the developments of the previous twenty years in several instances. Although Fidesz received 53 percent support from voters in the general elections, this translated into a two-third majority in Parliament due to the oddities in the proportional electoral system. With such a super majority, the second Fidesz government was willing and able to change all fundamental laws, including the constitution. The returning leader, prime minister Viktor Orbán, conceived of this victory as a “new social contract” or even as a “revolution,” declaring the need for fundamental political changes purportedly as the “will of the people.” Orbán declared the installation of his “System of National Cooperation” that sought to replace the “troubled decades” of liberal democracy. In a characteristic populist fashion, Orbán announced a “declaration on national cooperation,” a text which had to be put on the walls of all institutions of public administration.⁷⁵ It reads,

“We, members of the National Assembly declare that we shall elevate the new political and economic system emerging on the basis of the popular democratic will to the pillars that are indispensable for welfare, living a decent life, and that connect the members of our diverse Hungarian society. Work, home, family, health and order—these will be the pillars of our common future.”⁷⁶

Many people asked whether it was possible to roll back history. They wondered whether it was possible to make a reverse transition, back to a hybrid regime within the European Union.

Although the electoral campaign of Fidesz said nothing about these steps, the governing majority started a fundamental restructuring of the political system. The state was fully

captured and centralized. Public offices were renamed as government offices. Those in the civil service became easily and legally dismissible. Central and local public administration became heavily politicized, and the former colonized the latter ones. All leading positions in the purportedly independent institutions were filled by Fidesz party-cadres. Retroactive taxation regulations were introduced to punish the personnel of the previous governments. Almost all major government-promoted businesses were offered to entrepreneurs close to Fidesz or allies of the prime minister. Central campaigns were initiated against the “criminal elements” of the previous governments, as well as cultural and intellectual elite. The government press started a campaign against the intellectuals, fiercely attacking philosophers related to the former Georg Lukács School who allegedly received overly generous state funding for its research (which turned out to be false).⁷⁷ Alternative artists, actors, and actresses became targets of populist propaganda. Anti-intellectualism and intolerance of marginal groups and alternative lifestyles has appeared again— that are all characteristic features of populism.⁷⁸

Unlike mainstream European standards, a rare combination of anti-social policies were enacted. Populist and ethno-nationalist rhetoric overshadowed the ongoing neoliberal economic policy processes. By introducing a flat tax system, the cabinet has aimed to win the support of the wealthy against the interests of the poor. Welfare benefits for the homeless and unemployed have been cut from six to three months only, while more money has been given, in “the national interest,” to stay at home mothers for raising more children, promoting a traditional concept of family. New laws on public and higher education control high school and university students more strictly, aiming to significantly reduce the number of university students. These restrictions were presented as bonuses to the Hungarian middle class, which was described as the holder of national interests. This middle class populism went effectively hand in hand with the exclusion of lower classes and the unemployed from the nation.

Strict regulations on trade unions effectively have limited the right to strike, and the government has campaigned against some trade union leaders, seeking to discredit the unions. A so-called anti-terrorist organization was set up, mainly to defend the personal security of Viktor Orbán and members of his cabinet. Electoral laws have been changed just a few weeks before the municipal elections (held in October 2010) in order to narrow the chance of smaller parties entering local governments.⁷⁹ The broad powers of the Constitutional Court have been significantly curtailed. Citizenship has been given to ethnic

Hungarian who lived outside Hungary in order to gain more potential voters for Fidesz in future elections. The private pension system was nationalized in a coup-like manner, forcing people onto the state pension system. By doing this, Fidesz kept the annual deficit low to achieve the Maastricht criteria of the European Union. Importantly, while Fidesz pursued scrupulously restrictive fiscal policies to please the EU leaders, it took political steps that drove Hungary away from the rest of democratic Europe. A new era of populism, in the form of nationalist neo-liberalism, had begun.⁸⁰

Procedurally, all bills have been proposed as “modifications” of previous regulations by individual MPs of Fidesz and not by the government to avoid public debates and to speed up legislation. Commentators, analysts, and the press hopelessly lagged behind this breathtakingly speedy legislation.

In general, there has been an anti-constitutional coup d'état driven by a single person, the prime minister.⁸¹ Government controlled public media (radio and television channels) did not give a chance for opposition figures to give their opinion. The central propaganda machine transmitted messages of nationalism and Christian and patriarchal family values with demands for law and order. In the meantime, the governing majority already changed the Constitution nine times in half-year, effectively destabilizing legal security, responsiveness, and accountability. Additionally, in April 2011, the governing majority changed the Constitution of 1989, which is now called the Fundamental Law and contains a long preamble entitled the National Creed emphasizing Christian values, national history, and a united nation as a cultural and political community with state interests. Economic and social rights were fundamentally restricted, if not taken away from the employees. The country is no longer called officially as the Republic of Hungary, its new name is simply Hungary “as the people call it,” according to Orbán. Only one sentence refers to the existence of the republic in the Fundamental Law. President Pál Schmitt, hand-picked by Orbán, was a former Olympic champion in fencing who had little or no idea about constitutionalism at all. Since Schmitt lacked any political autonomy, he was easily removed a few months after the signing the Fundamental Law due to a plagiarism scandal.⁸²

Previous electoral defeats motivated Orbán's feverish wish for revenge. Strangely, these defeats did not weaken his unquestionable leadership position within Fidesz, which he transformed from a democratic entity to a highly hierarchical, centralized party controlled

exclusively by him. He is simply transplanting the logic of a boss-controlled populist party to a leader-state. The high rate of unemployment and the increasing influence of the state to all aspects of life have silenced many potential critics. Popularity of Fidesz stayed for a relatively long time because new taxes were always presented, in classic populist manner, as decisions that did not hurt ordinary people but rather banks and multinationals that served foreign interests anyway.

Internationally, Orbán was often compared to such populist leaders as Lukashenka (Belarus), Kaczyński (Poland), Chávez (Venezuela), Mečiar (Slovakia), Berlusconi (Italy), Milošević (Serbia), Erdogan (Turkey), Tudjman (Croatia), and others. Some of these comparisons might seem tempting but most of them miss the point. Orbán was not like Lukashenka, because Hungarian authorities did not kill journalists and did not jail or force anti-government protesters into exile. Despite the fact that both loved European soccer, Orbán was not like Berlusconi, as the latter already owned several TV channels before he entered government; Orbán used his newly acquired government position to capture the media. Berlusconi was rich already before entering politics while Orbán became rich as result of being in politics. Kaczyński had aimed to establish the “Fourth Republic” in Poland but did not change the liberal economic policy of the country despite his nationalist rhetoric, and he failed very quickly due to the existence of a strong democratic alternative. Chávez nationalized certain industries and campaigned against foreign investors but he favored the lower classes in Venezuela while Orbán preferred promoting the upper middle classes and the national bourgeoisie with economic nationalist rhetoric *and* neo-liberal policies, e.g. minimizing unemployment benefits, introducing cheap social work, marginalizing the underclass and introducing a relatively low flat tax). Tudjman was an uncompromising and principled nationalist leader, a self-elected founder of a “new Croatia,” while Orbán was much more an opportunistic populist who mixed leftist rhetoric and right-wing economic policies with nationalism, just as he was ready to mix traditional values with far right ideas (although he presented himself in Brussels as the last bastion against the rise of the far right). He pursued unorthodox policies and pro-Russian foreign policy orientation like Mečiar did in Slovakia in the 1990s, but he was against the welfare model and also more consistent in attacking and monopolizing democratic institutions.

Turkish prime minister (since 2014: president) Erdogan used his qualified majority to reshape his country’s political regime but the opposition gained some strength after his first term and

prevented him from further restructuring of the regime at least temporarily. As an opportunist, Orbán was not afraid to praise the effectiveness of China's "market Leninist" communist capitalism while on a visit in Beijing he equally encouraged anti-capitalist, anti-globalist, and anti-communist sentiments at home. As someone who was truly at home in populist politics, Orbán followed non-consistent policies: aiming to reunite the nation with cultural nationalist arguments, he redistributed the income of the state from the poor to the rich. His populism was based on middle class fears of being disenfranchised and his populist talk covered his political intention to promote the rise of a new elite. He gave a voice to the antisocial, anti-underclass sentiments of the upper and middle classes in Hungary.⁸³

Despite all efforts to homogenize the people behind the leader's political camp,⁸⁴ Hungary still has a multiparty system, though its formerly liberal democracy became increasingly non-competitive and illiberal because of a rigged political, judicial, and media system.⁸⁵ The free and unfair elections of 2014, both national and local, reinforced Hungary's place among the illiberal regimes. Freedom of the press is increasingly restricted to the blogosphere and to opposition-leaning journals. This is presented in the ethno-populist rhetoric of the government as a genuine "national freedom fight" against the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and other Western, multinational institutions. Nevertheless these and similar attacks on the multinational firms and institutions hide the neoconservative-neoliberal characteristics of his policies.

The government enjoyed a democratic "input legitimacy," due to the free elections in 2010, even if it has not been followed by a democratic "output legitimacy" afterwards. Even the democratic input became questionable after the 2014 elections which were widely evaluated as free but not fair. The way of governance can be called the "tyranny of the (qualified) majority" in the legislature, which gives permanent backing to the prime minister to feel like being the embodiment of the will of the people. This underlines the importance of a visible, prevalent, and consistent democratic resistance to the authoritarian-populist tendencies. If Hungarian civil society resists this illiberal, neo-populist challenge, it is possible that democracy may become stronger than it was before.

Conclusions

The goal of this chapter was to demonstrate that populism can fit easily both with different political regimes (democracy, semi-democracy, and non-democracy), and ideologies (socialism, nationalism, neoliberalism). Certainly, it is one of the most elusive concepts in the field of the history of ideas and political science. Political changes in Hungary demonstrate that populism is flexible enough to complement both redistributive and neoliberal policies. Populist discourse always promises a new, more inclusive community, but at the end populist politics often promotes new ways of exclusion.

In democratic societies, the discussion of populism is often related to the quality of democracy. As mentioned above, some scholars distinguish between liberal and populist (i.e. illiberal) democracies.⁸⁶ Further research is needed to clarify whether illiberal democracy can be still considered as democracy in any meaningful way, or it should rather be considered as a hybrid regime, a curious mix of democracy and autocracy. The recent Hungarian “revolutionary” populist turn offers a lesson for theorists of democracy as well: It demonstrates that the concept of modern democracy cannot be reduced to certain institutional frames, because those can easily be compromised by authoritarian-minded leaders in the “populist moment.” The regime of a liberal democracy can be revived only if it is supported by committed and active people. This support for mass political participation, on the other hand, is often channeled into populist movements, which use their popular democratic demands to achieve not necessarily pro-democratic, but anti-elitist political purposes to help promoting a new elite in the name of “the people”.

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⁶⁰ For more details, see the speech of Viktor Orbán delivered at the University of Physical Education on April 9, 2002, reprinted in the April 10, 2002 issues of *Népszabadság* and *Magyar Nemzet*.

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⁸² Pál Schmitt served as President from 2010 till 2012. During this time he signed all bills that had passed by the governing majority and therefore he contributed to the transformation of Hungary’s legal and political system significantly. In April 2012, he was forced to resign due to a plagiarism case (i. e. he copy-pasted his doctoral dissertation).

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