

Comparative populism: Romania and Hungary

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Abstract

The paper aims to test the mechanism of autocratic populism (term which will be used as a synonym for illiberal democracy) in Hungary and Romania. A mechanism could help to better explain the phenomenon of populism across different spatiotemporal settings in which it occurs, therefore it is suitable for a common understanding of populism. I am going to use a minimal definition of liberal democracy as well as authoritarian populism and compare Romania and Hungary along three major components of the mechanism: constitutionalism (division of powers), the cultural construction of “the people” and the different conditions of the emergence of a charismatic personality. Investigating political processes will show why authoritarian populism or illiberal democracy has gained prominence in Hungary but has failed in Romania.

Keywords: Hungary, Romania, autocratic populism, illiberalism, political mechanism, political culture

Introduction

In everyday parlance, with some reason though, Hungary and Romania are considered very different countries. The dominant religion in Hungary is the Western Christianity, while in Romania Eastern Orthodoxy. The Old Kingdom of Romania was firmly grounded in the Balkans, under constant Russian and Ottoman influence, meanwhile Transylvania (now part of Romania) and Hungary were under Habsburg (Austrian) domination. In Romania the long process of unification, started by the middle of 19th Century ended in 1918-1920 as a result of the so called “Trianon Treaty”, bringing about the Great Romania, while the same treaty resulted in a small (but sovereign) Hungary. The story of communism is quite different in both countries, as it is the fall of it. Fierce Stalinism in Romania, “Goulash Communism” (i.e. reformed state capitalism) in Hungary, “refolution” (peaceful revolution, agreed or “velvet” revolution) in Hungary, bloody revolution and popular uprising in

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Romania. Post-communist transformation has taken different paths, similarly as the NATO and the EU integration.

Obviously, these various histories resulted in different *political cultures* which may be accountable for the prospects of autocratic populism¹. Investigating political processes deeply embedded in political culture is the main aim of this paper.

The other aim is to put to test a mid-level theory of autocratic populism. I am deliberately going to refrain from trying to formulate definitions, or to reconceptualize populism.

Most of the literature on populism is an effort to define populism, concentrating too often on the rhetorical aspects of populist experiments, or is reduced to a mere description of the populist “style” of doing politics. The leading scholar Cas Mudde led this line of research by defining populism as “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004). Mudde and Kaltwasser understand populism in its relationship to (liberal) democracy as a *reference* to the original meaning of democracy as self-rule of the “pure people” against the institutionalization of ruling and against the constraints upon such rule: “populists often invoke the principle of popular sovereignty...” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.81).

A very useful classification and methodological analysis of the literature is to be found in (Pappas, 2016). I agree with one of the statements of this paper, that after a careful and in-depth overview we have got no conclusion and we even do not know, that after so many works have been done, why we do not have any conclusion? “As most seem to agree, for over half a century now we have been engaged in a lively but hitherto futile search for a common understanding in the study of populism. As the battle of definitions has become in recent years even more intense, most scholars admit a conceptual morass.”

My approach may be best characterized as midway theorizing, describing the political mechanism of populism. Jon Elster does not give a definition but rather a circumscription of what he means by “mechanism” and exemplifies it taking as departure points the works of Alexander Zinoviev, Paul Veyne and Alexis de Tocqueville². “Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the alternative to nomological thinking is not a merely descriptive or narrative ideographic method. Between these two extremes there is place and need for the study of mechanisms. I do not propose a formal definition but shall only provide an informal pointer: A

¹ A more comprehensive comparison regarding political culture is to be found in (Vörös and Bretter, 2022).

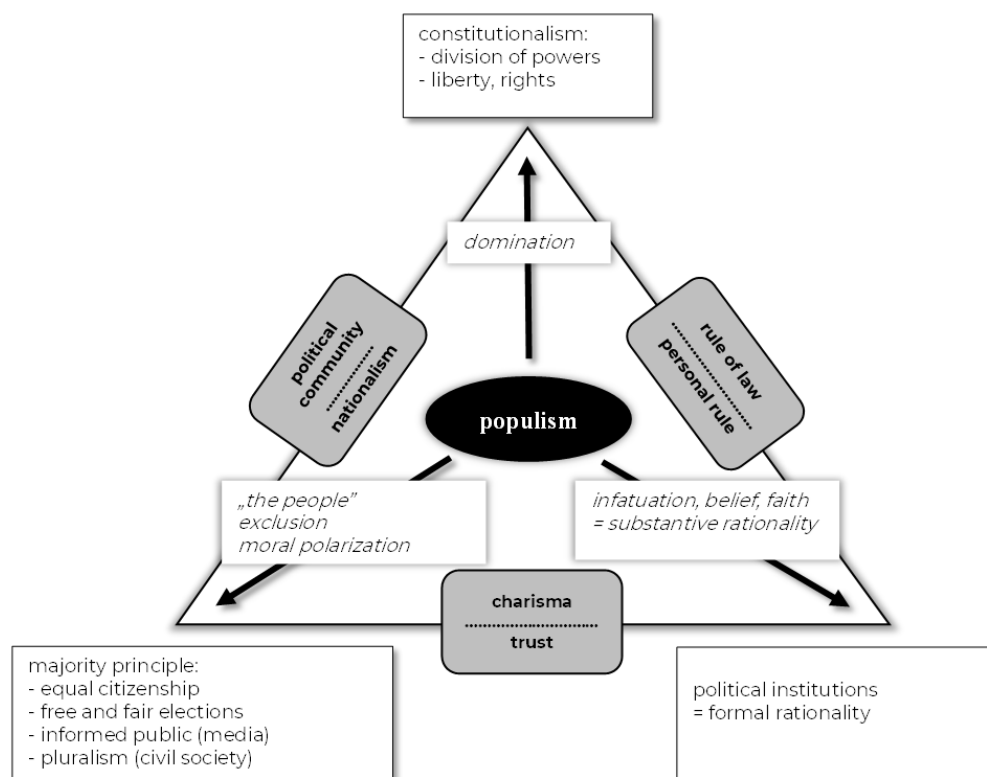
² Jon Elster could have very well included István Bibó’s method on the list. Bibó’s approach is “midway theorizing” on the political psychology of East Central European societies. Especially his famous essay, available in English translation, “The Miseries of East European Small States” might be used for my purposes (Bibó, 2015, pp.130-181). As a personal note I would add, that for the Romanian public Bibó’s oeuvre is largely unknown. As the director of the Hungarian Cultural Institute, I commissioned a roughly 1000 pages translation into Romanian, which still lies unpublished.

mechanism is a specific causal pattern that can be recognized after the event but rarely foreseen. A mechanism stands midway between general theory and empirical facts and points to a specific causal pattern.” (Elster, 1993, pp. 2-3) A mechanism could help to better explain the phenomenon of populism across different spatiotemporal settings in which it occurs, therefore is suitable to work out a common understanding of populism.

Regarding the essence of a mechanism, I will consider the indications of both Jon Elster (1993) and Takis Pappas (2019) for a primary classification of political regimes, who both consider that authoritarian populism is endemic to (liberal) democracy. Nadia Urbinati also points out that: “populism is a phenomenon that is parasitical on (being internal to) representative democracy” (Urbinati, 2013, p.137). What Urbinati calls “parasitical” will hereby be referred to as the mechanism of populism, which “implodes” (liberal) democracy.

The theoretical framework of the paper and my argument as well, might be represented as a triangle:

Figure 1. Scheme of the political mechanism of autocratic populism



Source: Authors' representation

In essence, the triangle is the scheme of a middle-level theoretical approach³, more engaged with understanding the political mechanism of authoritarian populism⁴ rather than reconceptualizing populism, which latter entails the danger of “conceptual overstretch” (Collier and Mahon, 1993). My intention is to refrain from describing populism in the framework of discourse theory (Laclau, 2005)⁵, which focuses primarily on rhetoric, and this is in line with the mainstream literature (Aalberg *et al.*, 2017). The aim of the study is to analyse, from different perspectives, the elements deemed central to the mechanism of populism, such as *domination*, “*the people*” and *charisma*, and to present a comparative analysis of Hungary and Romania.

I am indebted to Alexis de Tocqueville, whose ideas are echoed by Piotr Sztompka: “I submit that for our present purposes – i.e. investigating the dilemmas of post-communist transition – the more fruitful approach is cultural: the search for underlying patterns for thinking and doing, commonly shared among the members of society, and therefore external and constraining with respect to each individual member” (Sztompka, 1993, p.87). Tocqueville – just as the author – is in search of *mores*, as part 3 clearly demonstrates⁶: “By mores I mean here what the Ancients meant by the term: I apply it not only to mores in the strict sense, what one might call habits of the heart, but also to the various notions that men possess, to the diverse opinions that are current among them, and to the whole range of ideas that shape habits of mind. Thus, I use this word to refer to the whole moral and intellectual state of a people.”⁷ My paper will also draw on the interpretive sociology of Max Weber,

³ Pappas (2016) provides a valuable classification and methodological analysis of the literature on populism. Echoing the statement of this paper, we may ask why – after a careful and in-depth overview and despite the wealth of studies in this topic –, we have still not reached a definitive conclusion. “As most seem to agree, for over half a century now we have been engaged in a lively but hitherto futile search for a common understanding in the study of populism. As the battle of definitions has become in recent years even more intense, most scholars admit a conceptual morass.”

⁴ Jon Elster does not offer a definition but rather a circumscription of what he means by “mechanism” which he illustrates by drawing on the works of Alexander Zinoviev, Paul Veyne and Alexis de Tocqueville. “Despite a widespread belief to the contrary, the alternative to nomological thinking is not a merely descriptive or narrative ideographic method. Between these two extremes there is place and need for the study of mechanisms. I do not propose a formal definition but shall only provide an informal pointer: A mechanism is a specific causal pattern that can be recognized after the event but rarely foreseen. A mechanism stands midway between general theory and empirical facts and points to a specific causal pattern.” (Elster, 1993, pp. 2-3).

⁵ For an application of Laclau’s discourse-theoretical theory for Hungary, see Palonen (2018).

⁶ For an extensive analysis of the *mores* in Romania, see Bretter (2020a).

⁷ Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Library of America. Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 5343-5345) Tocqueville also speaks about “tyranny of majority” in the sense of autocratic populism, in Vol. One., part II., Chapter 7:

the first theoretician to have fully grasped the inherent problems of modernity and to offer a number of analytical concepts for its interpretation.

Methodologically, we shall jump erratically – but not irrationally – from empiricism to philosophical conceptual analysis and sociological theorizing. In three main chapters of the paper we will discuss the three transformative elements of authoritarian populism which would impact the basic assumptions of liberal democracies: domination, “the people” and charisma which entails infatuation, faith, belief.

1. Domination

This element of the mechanism of autocratic populism will be investigated from two distinct angles.

The first question we will be asking is: what are the possibilities of a ruler to dominate institutions - in our case, those constitutional institutions, which, according to liberal constitutionalism have to be separated (the classic triad of executive, judicial and legislative branches of government) or in certain cases, notably in the US, will form a system of checks and balances, a system in which not only the institutional separation of powers, but also the “separation of individuals” (not allowing for any individual to have different roles in different institutions) is assumed to keep in check the different powers. The idea of domination runs not only against the division of powers, but against equal rights as well. As we shall see, the extension of rule has had quite different chances in Romania and Hungary.

The other perspective will be the investigation of the nature of domination, which is distinct in Romania and Hungary. To be able to demonstrate this we will use Max Weber’s concepts of patrimonialism and prebendalism.

1.1. Extending the rule

The immediate outcome of the revolutions of 1989, regardless of them being “velvet” or “bloody”, was the adoption of liberal constitutionalism as a guarantee of freedom, which was the yardstick against which the future should be measured. The fever of constitutionalism swept over the former, so called “communist” states, anxious to draw up their constitutions, as were the scholars and politicians of the “Free World” to give free advice. Hungary promptly, but ultimately unsatisfactorily, resolved the problem in 1990, undertaking a wholesale amendment of the old constitution, modifying it almost from word to word, while Romania adopted a new constitution in 1991. The two differed in two vital ways, with long-lasting effects,

“Omnipotence of the Majority in the United States and Its Effects: Majority in America increases the legislative and administrative instability that is natural in democracies” (Kindle Locations 4628-4629).

which would decisively shape the prospects of populism. The first major difference is that Romania, drawing on the French model, opted for a semi-presidential system, introducing the permanent conflict between the parliament and the president into the political system, while Hungary opted for the English parliamentary system, which is described as a “government sitting in Parliament”, mixed with the German “constructive censure motion”, strengthening the executive according to the model of the constitutional status of the German chancellor.

The other major difference is that Romania validated its constitution by a referendum, while the Hungarian constitution was adopted by a two-thirds majority in the Parliament, as a result of the compromise between the government and the opposition, the then two largest parties.

The key concerns were very different, and the options were defined by the nature of the revolutions themselves (hereby referred to as revolutions, regardless of whether they were “peaceful” or “bloody in nature⁸”).

The peaceful transition in Hungary was the result of the so-called “Round Table Talks”, a negotiation between the old “communist” elite and the new, for the time being, self-appointed democratic opposition, with the complete exclusion of “the people” from the process. The Romanian post-communist – and in the absence of a “democratic opposition”, largely “communist” – elite, after the popular revolt, could not even consider excluding “the people” as an option. On the other hand, in Hungary the key motivation was executive stability, while in Romania it was the urgency of catching up with the West.

For Romania, the constitutional choices are summed up by Dragoş Dragoman: “Thus, the legislators intended back in the early 1990’s to provide Romania with an *executive power-sharing* in broad, multiparty coalitions and a multiparty system, deriving from a favourable proportional representation, alongside a legislative-executive balance of power. Moreover, those early legislators have opted for a bicameral legislature, conceived as a fair counterweight for an executive power which encompasses a president directly elected by the citizens.” (Dragoman, 2013, p.32 - emphasis added)

The effects of the constitutional choices made in 1990-91 stretch into the present, *setting the stage* for political processes. Back in 1990, the possibility of a single party acquiring a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian Parliament would have appeared unthinkable (even more so that more than 100 parties were keen to get into the parliament that would be created after the first free elections), just as the prospect of one party, one person dominating the entire legislature. Likewise, no one could foresee that Romania would undergo quasi-incessant political crises and changes of government (though Romanian political life, by its nature, was always beset with

⁸ For a description of the Hungarian transition, see Bozóki (2002). For a theoretical analysis of Romania, see Davies, 1996, Roper, 1994. A recent account of the revolution as a counter-revolution is found in Ursu, Thomasson, & Hodor (2019).

conflicts). Over the last 12 years, real political conflicts and even meaningful debates have been cancelled in the Hungarian Parliament, and the person of the prime minister has remained unchanged, while in Romania, 14 governments have been formed since 2008; since 1990, 12 governments succeeded each other in power in Hungary, of which 4 were led by the same person (Viktor Orbán), while in Romania there were 25, excluding the number of interim prime ministers.⁹

But the seeds of institutional conflicts in Romania have other offsprings as well. A notorious problem is the trespassing by the executive of the boundaries between the executive branch and legislature, through the so-called “Emergency Decree” (Ordonanță de Urgență de Guvern – OUG). Although the OUG was meant to address pressing problems in times of transition, it runs contrary to a clear-cut division of powers and was criticized many times by the European Commission’s reports on Romania. While it requires parliamentary ratification, it also permits the government to take immediate action, and thus to acquire legislative powers. This tool is used exceedingly frequently by the governments. But can it be regarded as an element of the mechanism of populism?

The most famous case was that of the “Midnight Decree”.

On 31st of January 2017, at around 22:00 p.m., the Romanian government adopted an amendment (emergency decree) to the Criminal Code that would have indirectly exempted the President of the PSD (Liviu Dragnea), among others, from charges of abuse in office.

The news of the decree was followed almost immediately by mass demonstrations across Romania. Citizens abstaining from voting at the December 2016 parliamentary elections suddenly jumped up from their armchairs to raise their voice against the lurking danger of authoritarianism.

The ‘Midnight Decree’ proved to be not just a political mistake, but a downright political sin. It thwarted the possibility of the emergence of populist authoritarianism. Fleeing from law enforcement, the populist leader lost almost all moral credibility and embracing Orbán’s demagogic style turned out to be insufficient for adopting Orbán’s model of rule.

To reiterate our argument, the formal division of powers in itself is no sufficient guarantee against authoritarian populism. Political play is also an overwhelmingly important factor. For example, in 2008 a large majority dominated the Romanian parliament, 70% of the deputies belonging to the PSD – PD-L party coalition. The prime minister, Emil Boc, had no populist ambitions, and was nominated by President Traian Băsescu, who on the other hand, nurtured such dreams. While there was no conflict between the prime minister and the president,

⁹ Such a brief presentation of constitutional problems is unilateral and serves the sole purpose of reconstructing the mechanism of populism. We will not examine, for example, the trespassing of boundaries by the executive.

the executive being split among two persons, the chances that the President would implement authoritarian rule were minimal.

In Hungary, gaining hold of the legislature grants the government control of the Constitutional Court, whose members are elected by the single chamber parliament. In the first decade of the post-communist transformation, a consensual custom was developed whereby the governmental parties and the opposition parties agreed upon the nomination of Judges. After 2010 this practice was completely abandoned. The President of the Republic is a rather symbolic position, so it does not play any significant role in the division of powers scheme.

The “disempowered” Hungarian legislature is aptly presented by Ilonszki and Vajda (2021, p.782): “... during the three legislative terms under the rule of Fidesz, relations between the executive and the legislative have changed. In particular, we have witnessed different practices coming to fore. The first term (2010–2014) featured intensive change to formal legal rules but also informal practices. In the second term (2014–2018), the former dynamic slowed down while a new institutional framework was systematically employed to deprive parliament of its core functions and competences. Finally, during the third legislative term (2018 onwards), traditional parliamentary procedures and functions lost their importance. During the first term, Fidesz mainly pursued its goals with the help of private member bills and emergency legislation. Lately, with an extensive application of omnibus legislation and disciplinary measures affecting the opposition (such as financial fines), the executive has turned parliament into a window-dresser of representative institution.”

1.2 Patrimonialism and prebendalism

Iván Szelényi, a renowned Hungarian scholar writes:

[...] during the early 1990s liberal democracy, even in the countries that were the closest to the “ideal type,” like the Czech Republic and Hungary, there was an inevitable *patrimonial component* in the system of domination. The privatization legislations—especially those that relied heavily on vouchers—gave a great deal of discretion to the executive branch. In countries that tried to use citizenship vouchers, like in the Czech Republic or Russia, or compensation vouchers, like in Hungary, still needed massively subsidized government credits or grossly undervalued property prices to obtain ownership of large corporations without market-tested creditworthiness. So, who was creditworthy was decided by an official in governmental and semi-governmental agencies or by banks—in every case through personal networks. (Szelényi, 2015, p.18 - emphasis added)

What exactly do we mean by “patrimonial component”? Answering this question requires that we reconstruct the original meaning of the term.

Historically, the purest form of patrimonialism might be seen as the essential characteristic of feudal domination. The staff (followers) of the ruler get a “fief” and in exchange they owe services to the ruler. This “fief” is a kind of property, whose owner is entitled to the extraction of the benefits of the property, which, however, are non-alienable and might be handed by the lord to another vassal who is more willing to render better services. In most cases, property rights can be exercised freely and, in special circumstances, a successor might even inherit the property, provided that he will assume the same responsibilities as his predecessor.

On the other hand, there exists a specific subspecies of patrimonialism, the so-called *prebendalism*, which in modern language could be translated as “state allowance”. Again, historically, prebendalism meant that the property granted to the follower took the form of *benefice*, rather than fief. Despite the free exercise of property rights, the benefices were exclusively linked to the person who received them, which made them insecure, being dependent on the caprices of the ruler.

By using the terms of patrimonialism and prebendalism for analytical purposes, one might gain a clearer picture of the nature of domination, which shows large differences in the case of Romania and Hungary.

In Romania, the popular language used by the media already exposes, on a day-to-day basis, the nature of domination. Expressions such as “fief” and “local baron”, recurring in almost every news story, is a crystal-clear indicator that the nature of domination in Romania is based upon a patrimonial, feudal structure.¹⁰ In Hungary, the absence of such expressions might indicate a different structure. Likewise, the term “oligarch” has quasi vanished from political discourse. Since the ousting of the last oligarch from the staff (Lajos Simicska) in recent years, it has become a common-sense knowledge among the public that the fortune of a person is subject to the caprices of the prince. Who will be granted state commissions, which media will obtain government advertising, who will receive the benefice of becoming rich and who will be left on their own, who can be appointed servant in different public positions or who can receive cultural subsidies? Huge fortunes have been accumulated: the classmate of Viktor Orbán, Lőrinc Mészáros, has become the richest man in Hungary. Nonetheless, the common understanding is that Viktor Orbán disposes of his wealth. While in Hungary corruption was centralized by Orbán (the abolition of the liberties of local governments, the centralization of schools and health care institutions have in fact all served this purpose), in Romania we can find local lords who can be corrupt “in their own right”¹¹.

¹⁰ Magyari (2019) provides an excellent analysis of Romania. The study of Magyar and Madlovics (2020) presents a comparison of Romania and Hungary where the authors apply a specific terminology, “patrimonial democracy” for Romania and “patrimonial autocracy” for Hungary, which does not capture the differences in the nature of domination.

¹¹ The difference might be compared to that between Yeltsin and Putin (Chaim Shinar: „The Russian Oligarchs, from Yeltsin to Putin”, *European Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4. [2015]. pp.583–596. Szelényi also describes the difference as the transition of Yeltsin’s patrimonialism to

Whoever aspires to be a successful populist should consider the nature of domination. Reliance on “local barons” or the state should be weighed.

2. “The people”

I will investigate the question of “the people” from two different angles, exclusion and moral polarization. Exclusion runs against the inclusive republican-liberal political community, equal citizenship and political rights, and has an impact on free and fair elections, media and civil society pluralism. Pluralism, in general terms, is a *conditio sine qua non* of liberal democracy, while its absence is characteristic of autocratic populism. Nationalism can be the instrument that drives exclusion and moral polarization.

2.1. Exclusion and polarization

“The people” here does not refer to a demagogic element, which belongs characteristically to populist rhetoric and is analysed regularly within discourse theory. “The people” is an artefact, a creation during the implementation of the mechanism of populism, which implies first and foremost *exclusion and moral polarization*.¹² Echoing the influential illiberal thinker, Carl Schmitt, the essence of the political (*das Politische*) lies in being able to fight the enemy in a life-and-death struggle. Rhetorically, the fact that the concept of the “enemy” can take on different names at the same time seems to hold with the public and calls forth some deeply engrained prejudices. But the enemy is not, or is not exclusively a rhetorical element, because one must possess the strength and power to effectively fight the enemy. In our case, Viktor Orbán, dominating the legislature and being the head of the executive, thanks to his stable two-thirds majority in Parliament, has all the power to stop immigrants at the borders, to modify the constitution to incorporate a “proper definition of family” or to launch a crashing attack on the LGBT+ community and civil society.¹³ More generally, he has the power to encroach on civil society,

Putin’s prebendalism ((Szelényi, 2015, pp. 20-21), pointing to Orbán as being the vanguard of Putinization. Interestingly, the Romanian case remains an unsolved puzzle for Szelényi (p.23.). See also the description of the Yeltsin era in Klebnikov (2000).

¹² The term *moral polarization* is employed here in the sense of the Ancient Greek *stasis*, described masterfully by Thucydides in his *Peloponnesian War* and theoretically later developed by Aristotle in his *Politics*.

¹³ A general discussion is to be found in Osborne (2021). An empirical study demonstrates how illiberal politics constrains civil society in Hungary compared to other CEE countries (Kákai, 2020).

creating what Juan Linz has called a “limited, not responsible political pluralism”, a characteristic of autocracies.¹⁴

Such degree of power has never been concentrated in the hands of any Romanian politician. They had to resort to much weaker means to fabricate “the people”. Nevertheless, a referendum represents such a mechanism, where “the people’s” voice might be heard.

Liviu Dragnea, in his attempt to mimic the exclusionary populist politics, supported and encouraged the referendum initiated by the Pro-Family Coalition (CPF) in 2018, on a constitutional amendment that would include “the proper definition” of the family.

Due to low voter turnout, the referendum failed miserably.¹⁵

One, for our purposes, decisive reason why this could happen in a society where political culture is more undergirded by conservative-authoritarian than liberal-individualist values, is summarized as follows: “The first reason was opposition to the ruling coalition and its leader, Dragnea, motivated especially by the respondents’ identification with the anti-corruption campaign that dominates Romanian politics. Hence, it appears that the existence of a “conflict of interests”, where support for cultural conservatism overlaps with opposition towards other political actions and the ideas of the politicians who champion cultural conservatism, undermined the mobilisation potential for undertakings such as the one initiated by CPF.” (Racu *et al.*, 2020, p.78)

The abortive referendum made Dragnea appear more pathetic than powerful. Thus, he was stripped of all possibilities of becoming a charismatic leader. Previously, President Klaus Iohannis barred him from becoming prime minister (on account of previous charges of corruption), and now the referendum deprived him of the opportunity to be elevated in the eyes of “the people”.

However, the possible or rather necessary existence of a parallel pathway toward the creation of “the people” is worth highlighting. Public policy is a versatile tool expressing the care of the leader for its “people”, and indicating, at the same

¹⁴ Juan S. Linz’s definition of autocracy still holds and is applicable to autocratic populism: „Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.” (Linz, 1970, p.255). The article originally appeared in 1964, but Linz quotes himself in his book (p.159), making further clarifications on the distinction between autocracy and totalitarianism (dictatorship).

¹⁵ Though not a scientific analysis, but an excellent overview of the whole campaign is that of Vlad Levente Viski: “Două săptămâni de foc: campania electorală la referendumul pentru familie din 2018” [Two weeks of fire: the 2018 referendum of family campaign], available at https://www.academia.edu/56328573/Dou%C4%83_s%C4%83pt%C4%83m%C3%A2ni_de_foc_campania_electoral%C4%83_la_referendumul_pentru_familie_din_2018.

time, an ongoing battle against different, mainly economic elites, which entails, sometimes paradoxically, the creation of a “new elite”, often referred to as “our elite”. The equation “Leader = State = Public policy = Care for the people” must be imprinted into the minds of people, to extort loyalty to the leader, eventually offering an identity on a platter. On the other hand, it should be stressed that public policy can only be effective if it is implemented and does not entirely refer to a remote promised land.

In politics, the foregoing phenomenon is known by its derogative name of “buying votes”. Max Weber would put it in another way. For him, the prophetic exercise (see below, in connection with charisma) is directed towards “drifting laymen”, or, to use metaphorically a modern political designation, “floating voters” destined to become part of an otherwise “volatile community” (Weber, 1978, pp. 454-455 - *emphasis added*).

In Romania, the practice of “buying votes” is linked primarily, but not exclusively, to the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and its former leaders Victor Ponta and would-be populist leader, Liviu Dragnea. “Buying votes” is not electoral fraud, properly speaking, but rather an expression of the populist “public policy”, represented in Romania by the symbol of the “bucket” (serving for carrying water in poor, rural communities), and a similar endeavour of Fidesz symbolized by “potatoes” (the meal of the poor) in Hungary’s case.

But the practice of “buying votes” extends well beyond electoral campaigns. A set of public policy measures serve the same purpose: central fixing of the price of utilities or cuts for selected food prices, different family support schemes (loans or simply lump sum support) and so on. The content of the varying list depends solely on the imagination of the leader. The most shocking and recent example of such a list might be that of Viktor Orbán who effectively distributed 4.5 billion euros before the April 2022 elections, to pensioners, families with children, and police personnel.

Public policies, public support for certain groups – in contrast to the acknowledged populist rhetoric which refers to an undefined people – always entails some more or less hidden exclusions. The literature on public policy (see, for instance, Stone, 2002) leaves no doubt that intended policies must first define the target group within which they will be employed.

2.2. Nationalism

Nations are imagined communities (Anderson, 2006), but as Ferdinand Tönnies observed well before Anderson, all communities are imagined (Tönnies, 1963). Beyond the tribal era of humanity, communities had already developed models of cultural integration (Harari, 2015). The specificity of a national community is that its characteristic feature is democracy, and its institutional organization is the state. Summing up these assumptions, we might conclude that the

requirement of the cultural integration of a state must be a political project, in which a secular prophet might have a leading role.

Clearly, Viktor Orbán has this capacity to rise to that role, being able to provide certain cultural definitions of the political community that he is the leader of, to draw an overall picture of time and space, past and future, mores, mentality or characteristics of the Hungarians.

There are two occasions each year when this panorama of the Hungarian fate is brought before the public. Namely, at Tuşnad Băi Summer Camp in Romania and at the Kötöcsé Picnic in Hungary, where this latter usually is intertwined with the articulation of the political agenda for the upcoming year, in front of a large public, comprised by Fidesz-devotees, intellectuals and leading politicians. Aside from these leading events, other occasions may arise over the year where Orbán nuances the picture or adds new colours to it.¹⁶

In 2009, a year before his accession to power, Orbán outlined the principles of the “System of National Collaboration” (NER) at the Kötöcsé Picnic. The political aim was the creation of a hegemonic, dominant party, while the cultural aim was to constrain the public discourse to focalise exclusively on those themes and solutions which are animated and coordinated by the dominant, ruling party. In 2014, at Tuşnad Băi Summer Camp, Orbán unequivocally pronounced his desire to build an illiberal democracy in Hungary.¹⁷

To my knowledge, there is no Romanian politician who would be on par with Orbán, capable of the same level of abstraction, being able to generate mythology and meaning.¹⁸ In other words, to create a „meaningful totality” (Max Weber), not in a metaphysical sense, but in a political manner, resulting in a community willing to accept the answers that a secular prophet might offer to hitherto unsolved questions, forged in an unstable, insecure, worrying, anxious situation.

¹⁶ Most recently, in his answer to Timothy Garton Ash’s accusations and suggestion that Hungary should be excluded from the EU, due to its departure from the core values of the community, Orbán explained the major cultural differences between the Western and Eastern parts of Europe, thus providing an overarching explanation of his anti-European attitude.

¹⁷ “...the new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, not a liberal state. It does not deny the fundamental values of liberalism, such as freedom, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but adopts a different, specific national approach.”

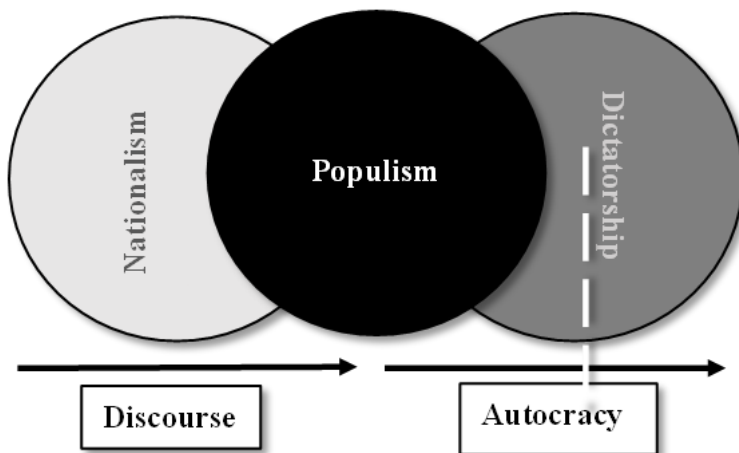
¹⁸ “... prophetic revelation involves for both the prophet himself and for his followers ... a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated meaningful attitude toward life. To the prophet, both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning, to which man’s conduct must be oriented if it is to bring salvation, and after which it must be patterned in an integrally meaningful manner.” (Weber, 1978, p.450) Regarding the former president Traian Băsescu, a journalist succinctly observes that „He is not, and cannot be, a locomotive for concepts, ideologies or religions”, as quoted in Shafir (2008, p.455).

Romanian politics tends to employ the oftentimes obsolete language of ethnicity. Its main pillars are ethnic origins and Orthodox Christianity.

Albeit less markedly, Hungarian nationalism is distinct from the Romanian one, while nationalist discourses overlap, not in terms of their substance but their form. The former might be referred to as a “Weberian (liberal-individualist)”, and the latter as a “traditionalist (ethnic-communitarian)” nationalism.

In analysing Max Weber’s nationalism, Pfaff argues: “For Weber, nationality is a political achievement cemented through economic development, political integration, and emotional attachment. In Weber’s view modern societies are national societies to the extent that the “people” are regarded as sovereign and united in the pursuit of collective political interests. Nationality belonged to a democratic era that saw the shift from traditional to legal and rational forms of domination. Weber’s theory of nationalism was thus “democratic” without having any normative commitment to democracy or popular involvement in government.” And Pfaff continues: “feelings of national affinity are not simply objective reflections of interests but based in part on that which *“affects the individual’s sense of honour and dignity.”* Among all modern ideologies, nationalism is uniquely suited to provide the ethical values and personal commitments that a modernizing society needs as it shifts the basis of political legitimacy from an elite enshrined by tradition to the people more generally.” (Pfaff, 2002, p.18.)

Figure 2. Dynamics of populism



Source: Authors’ representation

However, even if we acknowledge the differences of Romanian and Hungarian nationalisms, the theoretical question of the relationship between populism and nationalism remains to be clarified. Several attempts have been made

to resolve this question, the majority of which use discourse analysis as their primary tool. In my theoretical scheme – if it is correct – the dynamic relationship between populism and nationalism goes beyond the discourse theoretical approach, without denying its validity. Nationalist and populist discourses tend to overlap, in the sense that populism makes good use of the streamlined historical narrative, which most often finds its natural end in a comprehensive mythology of the nation. Mythology succeeds in filling the gaps that history – an interplay between circumstances, persons and necessity – leaves open.

But the crucial difference between nationalism and populism might stem precisely from the populist aspiration to become a form of domination. Excessive loyalty to the nation comprises an infatuation that binds the individual to a leader, in other words, populism tends to be authoritarian, its ultimate aim being autocracy.

3. Infatuation, belief, faith – and charisma

Trespassing the rule of law and withdrawing political and moral authority from civil society becomes the main business of the leader who is bound to exercise full personal domination, in other words, to install autocracy. But ultimately, even in this case, the leader requires the recognition of society, that is, legitimacy and belief or faith vested in a charismatic leader.

In Max Weber's understanding, this would imply a departure from formal rationality by its replacement with substantive rationality.

But where does charisma stem from?

As Peters (2010) succinctly observes, charisma has three overlapping components: innate, accrued and deriving from status. These “components” are not only overlapping in various degrees but are mutually reinforcing each other to achieve the qualification of being charismatic.

Because ultimately, charisma is the capacity of being followed.¹⁹ Or in a different perspective, as David Norman Smith puts it in an excellent article addressing Max Weber's theory of charisma: “In short, personal and group qualities matter - but to grasp charismatic faith, we must study the faithful. Faith has roots deep in the believer. Personal traits may qualify certain people as candidates for charismatic faith, but charisma is a social status, *not a personal attribute*. The crucial

¹⁹ During the writing of this article Russia invaded Ukraine. Volodimir Zelensky, a former comedian and current President of Ukraine, who was regarded as an unlikely war leader, convinced even the sceptics overnight of his capacity to unite Ukrainians against the aggressor. As Yulia McGuffie, editor-in-chief of the *Novoye Vremya* news website observes, quoted by BBC analyst Stephen Mulvey: “Zelensky has suddenly grown cojones of cosmic proportion, and this really reflects the attitude towards him right now.” (Zelensky: The comedian president who is rising to the moment: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59667938>) Indeed, refusing to flee from Kiev, shooting selfies on the streets amidst the shelling of the capital city seems to be a heroic deed, a warlord's cosmic task.

question, then, is why the public so often invests groups and individuals with charismatic status. Studying the leader is easy, but the more difficult task, the more vital one, is to understand the »followers«...” (Smith, 1998, p.53 - emphasis added) Formulated differently, charisma is a *public projection*. “Charismata, like stigmata, are classically social phenomena. Of course, to know why any specific group or person becomes a screen for projection, we need knowledge of that group or person. But to discover why the public is disposed to follow “great leaders,” we need to study the public.” (Smith, 1998, p.52)

Max Weber’s complex theory of charisma is unequivocal in its conclusion. Charisma should be manufactured; it must be accrued even when the possession of certain qualities enable a “gifted person” to achieve a status whereby they can consolidate their personal charisma.

The charismatic leader is put under constant pressure to perform “working miracles”, allowing them to set up and steadily sustain the momentum of this manufacturing process.

Charismatic authority is naturally unstable – argues Weber – the holder may lose his charisma, he may feel ‘forsaken by his God’, it may appear to his followers that ‘his powers have left him’. Then his mission comes to an end, and hope expects and searches for a new bearer; his followers abandon him, for pure charisma does not recognize any legitimacy other than that which flows from personal strength *demonstrated time and again*. The charismatic hero derives his authority not from an established order and enactments, as if it were an official competence, and not from custom or feudal fealty, as under patrimonialism. *He gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice*. He must work miracles if he wants to be a prophet. He must perform heroic deeds if he wants to be a warlord. Most of all his divine mission must prove itself by *bringing well being [emphasis in original]* to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master.” (Weber, 1978, p.1114 - emphasis added).

The “working miracles” definition of charismatic personality leads us to the exemplary case of the prophet.

In his sociology of religion, Max Weber would analyse extensively the place of the prophet in different religions, in different historical cultures, many times making huge leaps into his own present, when employing striking comparisons.

The early religious communities were not permanent congregations. In the spirit of Max Weber, we might add here an analogy: after WWI, the German society was disoriented, on the brink of falling apart due to irreconcilable party struggles, while the Weimar Republic failed to integrate society into a consensual constitutional order. After the 1989 revolutions, the societies of former “communist” countries were disoriented and on the brink of falling apart, and liberal

constitutionalism – despite being promising at the beginning of the transition period – proved to be insufficient to reintegrate them, hence the communist nostalgia. The believers opened the door through which a charismatic leader might step in.

Many have interpreted Weber's theory on charisma, and Weber's nationalist-authoritarian approach as having its roots in a society confronted with "stasis", the moral falling apart of a society, a phenomenon well understood by Ancient Greeks: Thucydides, and Aristotle in particular. If we conceive society as a moral unity, then it is natural to suppose that it can fall apart and cry out at the same time for a charismatic leader, a prophet who would reinstate its moral integrity.

The enterprise of the prophet is close to that of the popular leader, the *demagogos* (Weber, 1978, p.445), and who by its nature – as already mentioned – must "work miracles".

What is then the "performance" of a politician, the "miracle" that is needed to be repeated time and again, how can the politician extract infatuation from the staring eyes of the public, set in motion the mechanism of faith towards his person, the infatuation needed to keep charisma thriving and blind?

The eyes of a believer are never "objective", and they are open to recognize only certain, *culturally bound "miracles"*.

Viktor Orbán is usually treated as a charismatic politician who simply "has" charisma, described in a hastily drawn conclusion as "innate". But a brief glance at his political career clearly demonstrates that his path to achieving the status of a charismatic politician was a long one, laden with defeats. Moreover, while the three variants of charisma are hard to decouple, the efforts undertaken by Viktor Orbán to accrue charisma were presumably non-negligible. Building the authoritarian rule in this case is tantamount to manufacturing one's personal charisma, which is the aim of the populist leader, the performance in the show, the "miracle".

In the case of Orbán, the source of charisma is strong leadership, the capacity of acting, and a precise knowledge of which direction the community should go. Ultimately this capacity implies moral, prophetic leadership.

In Romania, the public highly appreciates the play put on stage, even if from a moral point of view, it rightly condemns it. The public wants to see the political role played according to the highest standards, with maximum intensity. This controversial relationship to "the political" is expressed in the specific term of "politicianism" which might be translated as politicking or politicism, a word frequently used by Romanians to describe the political scene. It denotes the role that the politician must play and which spectators are eager to blame.

The cultural roots of politicking were magnificently represented for the first time by the playwright Ion Luca Caragiale in the early 20th Century. His oeuvre is considered to be the quintessential presentation of "Balcanism", which refers back to the Eastern origins of Romanian politics. As early as 1904, the philosopher C. Rădulescu-Motru had already defined "politicking" as a constantly recurring illness of Romanian politics: "By »politicianism« we mean a kind of political activity, – or

rather, a crafty practice of political rights, – by which some of the citizens of a State tend and sometimes succeed in transforming public institutions and services from means for the achievement of the public good, as they should be, into means for the achievement of personal interests.” (Rădulescu-Motru, 1904, p.5) The explanation offered by Rădulescu-Motru is enlightening from multiple viewpoints. It suggests that Romanian early modernity is confronted with a dilemma which proved to be enduring, that of Europeanization, adopting institutional settlements, while acknowledging the strong linkage to Eastern political heritage. Another important point is identifying politicking as a decisive element of the mechanism of populism, defying the constitutional notion of public good, which is regarded as the proper definition of politics. A third aspect not addressed here in greater detail is how it used to feed Romanian extreme right populism in the interwar period by calling the enemy by its name: the politicking elite as the enemy of “the people”. “In the first case, the old political activity is exhausted, ossified, and therefore cannot master the constitutional forms, which, left to themselves, degenerate into a sterile mechanism; and in the second case, political activity is not old enough to be able to inspire its external mechanism. In both cases the mechanism replaces real political life; it loses its role as a means to the public good and becomes identified with the personal interests of those who claim to defend it. What used to be a means for the upliftment of the whole people becomes an end that hides individual interests.” (Rădulescu-Motru, 1904, p.6)

Politicianism or politicking might best be depicted as a political sub-genre of *commedia dell' arte*, where improvisation and intrigue are performed on stage to enchant the public, generating strong sentiments of love and hate, being devoid of any larger political perspective, yet revealing the naked essence of politics, the Renaissance era's royal court, the world of Machiavelli.

In Romanian politics President Traian Băsescu was credited with the best performance of *commedia dell' arte politiche*.

Băsescu was seen as a master of pulling the strings. The “player” president, as he came to define himself, despite the role he was officially assigned by the constitution. It is telling enough that the next president Klaus Iohannis began his office by claiming that contrary to his predecessor, he would remain within the boundaries fixed by constitutional law, but shortly afterwards he realized that staying away from daily political battles and quarrels would prevent him from earning the title of a “good president”. He must therefore learn how to “pull strings”, and become a “player” if he wants to be hailed as a good president.

In 2008 Băsescu succeeded in having what was widely acknowledged as his own party, the PDL (Democratic Liberal Party) This ensured that the party was not constituted along group (or class, as in the 19th century) interests, but was meant to serve a sole purpose, the personal political aspiration of a single person. This is precisely what occurred in Hungary in the case of Fidesz and Orbán, who „unified” the remnants of different right and extreme right parties to create the future, all-encompassing governing party.

For Traian Băsescu the apex of his career was his peak performance in the 2007 referendum, when almost the entire spectrum of political actors formed an “unholy alliance” to impeach him. Băsescu won the referendum, remaining in office by obtaining the votes of nearly 3/4 of voters attending the polls (44% of the electorate). A similar achievement of Viktor Orbán was his victory in the 2010 elections, gaining him a 2/3 majority in the Hungarian Parliament.

Building on his success in the referendum, and supported by well-known intellectuals and the media, Băsescu attempted to transform the semi-presidential system into a cabinet system, according to the French model, which would have meant establishing the Third Republic. But more importantly, it would have meant the institutional extension of domination of the president over the cabinet and prime minister. The argument was that the permanent clash between the prime minister and the president served only to set the background for politicking, while a strong president would terminate the endless debates about who should rule. Indeed, this is what a large, authoritarian part of the electorate still wishes to see. While Traian Băsescu did not draw up an entirely new Constitution either in 2008 or in the period that followed, Viktor Orbán hastily drafted one in 2011. Reflecting on the stance of Traian Băsescu, Michael Shafir observes: “Băsescu himself would never argue against the democratic system; rather, as in his proposal to change Romania’s electoral system, he would argue that democracy must be improved by substituting outlets for corrupt politics with improved mechanisms for the genuine expression of people’s will.” (Shafir, 2008, p.451) Albeit unintentionally, this quote also reinforces my perception of populism as a mechanism. In addition, it should be emphasized the role of the “sight of the believer”, and the authoritarian tendencies inherent in both Hungary’s and Romania’s history.

Indeed, Traian Băsescu never argued against democracy, while his attempt to dismantle the liberal checks on democracy would naturally have amounted to establishing an illiberal democracy. Besides, he never launched any attack on the EU, and contrary to Viktor Orbán, he was strongly committed to European values. (Liviu Dragnea was the only one to express an anti-European stance, using a similar rhetoric as Orbán, causing a serious backlash in his populist quest.)

Traian Băsescu’s attempts to dismantle checks and balances have only been met with partial success. Emil Boc, his appointed prime minister had to resign due to unpopular austerity measures. Using a populist rhetoric, the next prime minister, Victor Ponta, capitalized on the austerity measures, instantly drawing popular support away from Traian Băsescu, who in fact lost a second referendum of impeachment, but was reinstated in his office by the Constitutional Court due to low turnout. In addition, the Constitutional Court struck down an “Emergency Decree” initiated by the Victor Ponta-led governing alliance, which was meant to lower the electoral threshold in a referendum.

There is no storyline in this *commedia dell' arte politiche* or politicking in a situational play²⁰, but the lessons learnt are important from the point of view of autocratic populism.

The prospects of Romanian autocratic populism are hindered by various factors, most importantly, by the simultaneous co-presence of several competing, “right” or “left” populisms on the scene, none of which have been able to grab the full attention of the audience, which tends to fluctuate anyway. Politicking undermines moral credibility, making it increasingly difficult for a charismatic leader to develop their charisma and then to impose their will upon the whole political system. What Romanians resent the most, politicking, will save them from an autocratic leader.

In the same vein, it appears that Hungarian politics is imbued with morality, and much more prone to be seized by a charismatic leader.

The difference lies between Machiavelli and the art of politics on one hand, and Carl Schmitt and political theology on the other.²¹ For Machiavelli, the enemy is situationally chosen, and the good politician is the one who is sufficiently resilient to choose between different weapons so that the enemy might be defeated or even destroyed if necessary. For Schmitt, there is no such thing as a defeated enemy. Only one who has been destroyed in the transcendent moral battle of the good and evil.²²

Conclusion

The main question addressed in this paper is why authoritarian populism or illiberal democracy has gained prominence in Hungary but has failed in Romania.

Our comparative analysis has demonstrated several reasons for this.

To begin with, there are differences in their constitutional arrangements, within which the crucial role is played by the scheme of the division of powers: a parliamentary system in Hungary, and a semi-presidential system in Romania. Institutional settings give birth to different political processes, making it easier in Hungary to set up a system of domination (the so-called System of National Collaboration), when a two-third majority in the parliament enables dismantling

²⁰ The sequence of events is briefly summed up in *Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2013 - Romania, 18 June 2013*, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/51c1680f18.html>.

²¹ This distinction is presented in two articles of the author: „Machiavelli the artist” (Bretter, 2020b) and „Carl Schmitt – The Sheet Music of Illiberalism” (Bretter, 2021).

²² Or as an article published online on 6 March 2022 puts it: “... here at home, we are entering the campaign finale of what promises to be another historic parliamentary election. In the Fidesz mythology, practically every election is the final clash of civilisations, the fateful clash of Good and Evil, Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader's lightsaber duel, Thanos and the Avengers' battle, Neo and Agent Smith's final fight, Jesus and Satan's boxing match from South Park, plus Ripley's fight with the alien queen all at the same time.” (<https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/03/06/lajkbajnoksag-67>).

parliamentarism itself. The presence of a political personality is crucial to the capacity to build up charismatic leadership, while being able to deliver populist public policies is also indispensable. Albeit wide-spread nationalism characterizes both countries, for historical reasons and due to varying pathways to identity-formation, its use might be limited in the case of Romania, where anti-Europeanism would contradict the needs inherent in the political culture. Last but not least, it is worth recalling the bon mot, as Adam Michnik once put it: “We all are bastards of communism”. The Stalinist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu continues to have a profound impact on the recent collective memories of society, making it more difficult to install populist authoritarianism in Romania, while the recent memory of the soft-authoritarian regime of János Kádár disguises the dangers that an authoritarian rule might entail. Furthermore, the post-communist success of Hungary brought the problems of liberal democracy readily to the surface, while in Romania those problems are more desirable than any dictatorship.

There are some lessons to be drawn from my analysis that will be worth bearing in mind in a comparative study of autocratic populism.

First, that the concept of political mechanism is a relevant theoretical starting point. It also follows that it is not enough to consider populism as mere rhetoric (as I already alluded to in the introduction, in relation to Cas Mudde), or just a “phenomenon”. A very good summary of the “phenomenological” approach is to be found in (Glied, 2020) and (Shroufi and De Cleen, 2022). Referring among others, to Canovan (Canovan, 1999), Glied arrives to uncertainty regarding the treatment of populism, calling it an „ideology without ideology”. Populism “is nothing else but a bunch of reactions to actual or putative events, articulated in a simple and instinctive way, without any actual substance, aiming to polarise the public and gain political advantage” (Glied, 2020, p.25) or citing Van Reybrouck²³: “populism is a rhetoric means of reaching the widest possible audience, with the simplest possible tools and communication formats” (Glied, 2020, p.26).

These quotations strongly suggest that we will not get to the heart of the matter only if we develop more theoretical tools for investigation. It is necessary to analyse the political system as a whole, the dynamics of politics, and to examine the political culture that emerges historically. To sum it up, it is necessary to widen our analysis in time and deepen it theoretically. Further research may show that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, not only because of the long rule of the Soviet Union, but also because of the more distant cultural heritage of their history, offer a more suitable terrain for the triggering of the mechanisms of *autocratic populism* than Western European countries, although populist tendencies can be observed worldwide.

²³ “populism is a style of making politics on the one hand, when someone is not afraid of catching the attention of masses with simplifications, meaningless buzzwords and programme objectives narrowed down to single sentences”.

Acknowledgment: Research for this paper was supported by the following grant: EFOP-3.6.3-VEKOP-16-2017-00007 Young researchers from talented students – Fostering scientific careers in higher education.

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