

INCREASING EUPOPULISM AS A MEGATREND IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE: FROM FACADE DEMOCRACIES TO VELVET DICTATORSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Brexit and Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election has launched a wave of discussions in the international media and political science literature on "authoritarian populism" and a "populist explosion." Although this paper also reflects on this new wave of populism in the West, it concentrates on the connections between democracy's decline and the so-called populist explosion in eastern central Europe (ECE) and closely investigates the Hungarian case within the context of ECE. This paper describes populism in ECE as a product of the transition from fading facade democracies to emerging velvet dictatorships. These velvet dictatorships rely on the soft power of media and communication rather on the hard power of state violence. Paradoxically, the ruling anti-elite populist parties have developed a system of populism from above, managed by the new politico-business elite. Populism (social and national) and Euroscepticism are the two most basic, and twin, terms used to describe these new (semi)authoritarian regimes. Populism and Euroscepticism are convertible; they are two sides of the same coin as they express the same divergence from the EU mainstream. Therefore, this paper introduces the term: Eupopulism. Key words: decline of democracy, comparative ECE populism, three periods and types of populism

INTRODUCTION: INCREASING EUPOPULISM AS A MEGATREND IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

Populism's many faces change within different socio-political environments, therefore it is very difficult to give a comprehensive definition of populism. All approaches to populism, however, converge at a general condition for populism: two homogeneous and antagonistic groups—the "pure" people and the "corrupt" elite—face off in a political contest based on this people-versus-elite dichotomy. In this Manichaeon vision of society, a decision-making shortcut between the people and the elite emerges in the form of a charismatic and honest leader, who with sizeable popular support, makes all decisions—eliminating the need for the intermediary institutions as the general will of the people is evident. Populism is messianic, the charismatic leader offers salvation to the people by defeating society's internal and external so-called enemies. "Although vague and ill-defined, the concept of 'populism' does a better job than

any other currently circulating well-defined concepts of capturing the nature of the challenges facing liberal democracy today.” (Smilov and Krastev, 2008, p.7). Thus, there is a paradox in the academic research: despite the large amount of literature on populism, content on populism’s nature is missing or minimal. Because populism is a *thin* and eclectic ideology, it can easily be combined with *thicker* ideological counterparts such as conservatism, liberalism, and socialism.¹

Populist parties can be analysed more deeply by examining the contrasts between responsive and responsible parties, between short-term and long-term approaches, and between direct political action and strategic vision (Bardi et. al, 2014). Actually, according to the seminal work of Mény and Surel (2002), populism is a pathology of representative democracy because populism always reveals the primary national and regional deficiencies of a representative democracy. As most studies mention, populism is difficult to conceptualize because its varieties depends on context, time, and local conditions.²

As populism has a different form for every period of democratic malaise and a face specific to different countries, regions, and continents, and as the definitions and descriptions of populism as a pathology hinge on the standards of democracy in a given period and reflect the features of a particular country or region, this paper—though it relies on mainstream literature on populism—deals only with populism particular to ECE.³

Populism has been a megatrend in eastern central Europe since the onset of systemic changes in the region in 1989. Populism has been, to some extent, an endemic feature of all parties in the region—including the mainstream parties—and reached its peak in the populism-from-above of the currently ruling parties. The basic statement of this paper is that the main reason behind ECE’s populism is the region’s failure to catch up to the West and “return to Europe.” This unsuccessful attempt to achieve the so-called central European dream (Darvas, 2014) has defined the region’s last quarter century. In reaction to the global crisis, “countries like Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and [the] Czech Republic appeared to take a ‘populist turn’ . . . the incidents of threats to the EU’s democratic principles and values has increased” (EPC Discussion Paper, Balfour and Stratulat, 2012, p. 2). Hence, the populist drug has been instrumental to the ECE’s survival of a long triple-crisis and to bridging the gap between unrealistic expectations

¹ As Richard Youngs indicates, we have to “reframe the debate on populism” after its victory in the United Kingdom and United States. On the new wave, see Judis (2016a,b) and Mishra (2016). There have also been two waves of politics of memory in the West, first Patterson and Monroe (1998) and Winter (1998), and second, Lebow et. al. (eds) (2006), Mark (2010) and Blacker et al.(2013).

² From the massive collection of Western mainstream literature on populism, see Barr (2009), Chwalisz (2015), Degan-Krause and Haughton (2009), Giusto et al. (2013), Haughton (2014), Herman (2015), Kessels (2015), Krastev (2007), Kriesi (2014), Kriesi and Pappas (2015), Laclau (2007), Ladrech (2014), Lewis (2014), Mair (2002), Mény and Surel (2002), Mudde (2002,2007), Painter (2013), Pytlas (2016), Rupnik (2007a,b), Wolinetz and Zaslove (2016), and Woods (2014). The academic history of populism since the late 1960s has been presented by Pappas (2015). For international literature on ECE, and on populist parties, see Cabada et al. (2014), Casal Bértola (2012), Gherghina (2014), Haughton (2014), Kopecky et al. (2012), Lewis (2014), and Sedelmeier (2014).

³ The populist drive has been stronger in ECE than in the Baltic states, since the latter have been much more internationally competitive, as indicated by ranking institutes like Bertelsmann and others. The Baltic states have not suffered from a decline in democracy to that extent that ECE’s states have. Unlike ECE’s states, the Baltic states still stand a reasonable chance of integrating into the European core. Thus, this paper deals only with five ECE states and focuses on the Hungarian case, which has been regarded as the worst case by international political scientists and the media (BF, 2016a,b).

and the region's worsening realities. ECE's populism has been an international and domestic product of at least two of the West's fallacies: 1) that traveling the road to the West would be an easy journey; and 2) that ECE's states would rise from Soviet repression ready to become European overnight with the same ease that Sleeping Beauty awoke from the witch's spell.⁴

Populism may be an important feature of the party system in the West, but it has been much more influential in eastern central Europe where there has been a megatrend in party development due to ECE's populations' high and unmet expectations. In fact, eastern central Europe was a semi-periphery of western Europe for centuries and, after regaining independence from Soviet repression, the region has indeed "returned to Europe," but only with a new form of semi-peripheral status. Increasing populism in ECE is the political price the region has paid for its transition from socialism to various forms of semi-western market economies and formal-legal macro-democracies. Thus, this paper will not engage in a discussion on the definition of populism in general, but it will pursue the specificities of populism in ECE. This paper contributes to the rich academic literature on populism in ECE by both widening the topic first to the ECE's general features based on the region's common historical trajectory, and by narrowing the topic later to describe the successive stages and types populism.

Of course, populism is not a new phenomenon in ECE, populism has a long history in the region and its path, characteristically, includes many forms of populist movements and narratives. ECE's populism—or the populism of individual countries in ECE—is an organic extension of traditional forms of populism from the region's former periods. The region's historical turning point occurred around the late 1980s and early 1990s. The collapse of the bipolar world rendered systemic change in the region that were so drastic a new kind of populism was born. A new period of hopes and expectations began and the path dependence motives returned with a vengeance. I will discuss this return-to-history scenario, in lieu of a return-to-Europe scenario, as the re-emergence of a traditional narrative articulated in the region's new situation. The path dependence motives, however, just scratch the surface in reframing this narrative as a freedom fight against the EU (Orbán, 2016), which is evident in the absolutely new approach of confrontational, anti-EU, hard populism.

Finally, ECE's case demonstrates how populism traditionalizes an anti-EU narrative with soft power by manipulating the masses with simplistic traditionalizing narratives—the main weapons of populist parties and actors, both oppositional and in government. The populist parties in ECE are often prisoners of history, they use the politics of historical memory as their main ideological weapon in domestic politics. After the so-called illiberal turn (Rupnik, 2012), the newly emerging velvet dictatorships have been modernized. Hence, as Smilov and Krastev point out, instead of using physical violence, their main instrument of repression is the capture and abuse of soft-power: "There are certain long-term changes in the political process, which

⁴ This paper follows my recent publications on ECE (Ágh, 2015a,b, 2016a,b). I do not deal here with the socio-economic causes of increasing populism, I have written a series of papers on the triple crisis (transformation crisis in 1990s, post-accession crisis in 2000s and global crisis in 2010s) and ECE's failures in the catching-up process in socio-economic and competitiveness terms (see Ágh 2015c). Data on the general impoverishment in ECE due to the global crisis are available in IMF (2014, 2016) and ILO (2016). The democratic malaise in ECE can also be seen in Pew survey results (2009, 2014, 2016).

seem to facilitate the spread of populism. First, politics has become much more media-centred and personalized. The importance of loyalty to ideas and programs is diminishing . . . Populist parties, with their focus on communications and personalities, are much better suited for such an environment, than ‘traditional’ parties . . . it has almost made the concept of [a] ‘party program’ devoid of meaning” (2008, p. 10).

Even democracy itself has been included in the simplistic traditionalizing narratives incumbent ECE governments frequently abuse. The ruling politico-business elites have narrowly defined democracy as a government with free elections, despite the fact that the most recent elections in Hungary, in 2014, may have been free, but they were certainly not fair. At every step of the decision-making process, ECE’s governments seem to argue, “We are entitled to make this decision because we won the election and this is a democracy.” Therefore, ECE’s populations are understandably suspicious of democracy and may be thinking, “If this system of governance is democracy, I don’t like it.” It is no wonder that ECE’s populations have serious reservations about their experiences with such so-called democracies. These formal, electoral democracies, instead of have becoming substantial liberal democracies, have turned into facades of democracy.⁵

1. SOFT AND HARD POPULISM: PERIODS AND TYPES OF POPULISM IN ECE

ECE’s populism departs from general populism’s people-versus-elite dichotomy and Manichaeian approach to political contestation in a manner specific to the region’s historical trajectory and to the emergence of ECE’s facade democracies over the last quarter-century. The issue most specific to populism in ECE is the merging of political elites and business elites that resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of political actors, a narrowing of the very sphere of politics, oligarchization, and state capture. Accordingly, there are three forms and *periods* of populism in ECE—shy, soft, and hard-populism—following the reduction of politics. And there are three main *types* of populism, marginal, business-centred, and the politics-centred, which follow specific forms of oligarchization in a given country in ECE.

I apply the term *shy populism* to describe the ECE’s first period of populism in the 1990s when a naïve optimism dominated public discourse and populism was weak and marginal. The distinction between soft and hard populism in ECE dates back to the 2000s. “Soft populism is the challenge to the existing system of representation and mainly to existing party system Hard populism is characterized by more severe threats to the constitutional framework: it challenges not only the existing structure of representation but also some of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy such as the protection of individual and minority rights, etc,” (Smilov and Krastev, 2008, p. 9). Usually, the dividing line between soft and hard populism is rather fluid, the ECE’s parties move back and forth across the grey zone between populist and non-populist actions. Hence in general, all parties are populist to some extent.⁶

⁵ *The Journal of Democracy* has published a series of special issues on democratic backsliding, see 27(1), January 2016. The term *free but not fair* has been used to describe elections by experts (see Mudde, 2014), and also by official institutions, such as the Council of Europe (Muiznieks, 2014) and OSCE (2014).

⁶ I do not deal here with the early form of shy, marginal, and weak populism in the 1990s, when there was still belief in an upcoming horn of plenty, since the deviation from the EU mainstream basically began in the late

Before the global economic crisis, there was a wide range of grey, in-between positions instead of polar cases. But after the crisis, there have been clear, classic moves from soft to hard populism. Thus, soft and hard populism have to be distinguished not only analytically, but also historically. Soft populism emerged with its deep people-versus-elite dichotomy due to the narrowing of the political arena. This reduction in politics was due to the socio-economically based exclusion of the masses from politics, which also led to partocracy. Finally, the emergence of hard populism—in the region’s third period of populism—and the rise of an aggressive populist elite is strongly connected to the protracted global economic crisis, which contributed to the people’s deep dissatisfaction with an impotent political elite. In the Polish and Hungarian cases, hard populism has appeared in its classic form in response to the global economic crisis; whereas in the Czech and Slovak cases, soft populism didn’t harden until the 2010s. Altogether, since the early 2010s, mainstream analysts have pointed out a common tendency towards populism in ECE, a populism that shares a common essence but varies by individual country (EPC, 2012; EPC, 2016).⁷

These three periods of populism have been closely connected with the types of populism in ECE. Abby Innes’s analysis of the various types of populism in ECE contributes to descriptions of the present period of populism. Specifically, Innes identifies two types of political developments in ECE. In a corporate state capture, economic motivations dominate and powerful corporations and almighty oligarchs appear on the political scene rather directly—as they did in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia—and produce business-centred populism. In this model, neither party politicians nor oligarchs endeavour to make long-term ideological changes to the state machinery as an expression of their values and expectations, but instead strive to institute short-term, rent- or profit-seeking changes driven to the fore by business oligarchs active on the political scene. In Innes’s opposite model, party state capture, political motivations drive the new elite. In this scenario, parties want long-term control of state machinery in order to transform the state according to their values and expectations. Poland and Hungary have produced politics-centred populism. In Slovakia, the ruling Social Democratic party, Smer-SD, tried to build a closer version of the “political” populism, but this attempt failed at the March 2016 elections. In this model, oligarchs are less prominent and less likely to play direct political roles, but they enjoy the privileges of state capture nevertheless. Rent- or profit-seeking drives appear first in domination over the state. Therefore, “the EU’s leverage is necessarily limited in the cases of party state capture” (Innes, 2014, p. 101).

In my view, the common denominator shared by party state captures and corporate state captures is *democracy capture*, which occurs when the dominant parties in the hegemonic

1990s with soft- and hard-populism. I have analysed the ECE countries here using the term *facade democracy*, which has been widely used in international political science, and I have introduced the term *Golem parties* to describe political organizations that extend into or capture large parts of the economy and the media.

⁷ Increasing populism in ECE has been analysed extensively, see Meseznikov et al. (2008), in which the authors treat ECE’s populism as a region-specific political issue, rather different from that of other regions and continents. There are some recent papers on the populism written by Bugarcic (2008) and Enyedi (2015, 2016a,b). The Policy Solutions Institute has also published a general report on ECE (2015). Bertelsmann’s report on the Czech Republic (pp. 2,4) points out that “the increasing public disenchantment with political parties” leads to “the fluidity of party system.” The report describes President Zeman as the main figure of populist politics. See also, Klíma (2015).

party system abuse their majority to legally transform the democratic polity into a facade democracy. This democracy capture has recently appeared in ECE as a form of populism from above. In these appearances, strong elite rulers transform the basic social, economic, and political structures and colonize civil society in a “society capture.” The current governments in ECE have been based on tight networks formed by a joint politico-business elite, a privileged political class with tough party discipline and high incomes. These joint politico-business elites have organized statocracies. The statocratizing of populist democracy has been based on nativist state capitalism, state capitalism combined with a parasitic national capitalism created by drastically intervening with the market economy. There have been many detailed analyses on the oligarchization of market economies and emerging negative informal institutions comprising a large clientele for joint political and business networks, resulting in the uncontested rule of a power-hungry politico-business elite. This nationalist anti-elite ideology, in fact, represents and defends its own elite rule with unlimited power, as checks and balances have been reduced to a mere facade. There has been a wide variety of populist parties and movements, populism has increased in all countries in ECE. All in all, populism has been a megatrend in ECE, accompanied by its twin process, Euroscepticism.⁸

In general, the deepening socio-economic crisis has led to “populist polarization” in ECE (Enyedi, 2016a,b). One objective of populism is to provide a strong, charismatic leader with unquestionable authority with an enemy—the incumbent elite or foreigners—for political exploitation in black-and-white populist narratives. ECE’s countries’ failure to catch up in the EU has become clearer given global crisis management in these countries and has been the driving force of populism nowadays. Consequently, serious conflicts between the EU and domestic ruling populist elites in ECE have surfaced. Hence, the new politico-business elites have found images of an enemy inside the country and also outside the country: the EU. Again, populism and Euroscepticism are twin phenomena, since it is particularly true in ECE that “populists can easily project these problems onto ‘Europe,’ which in this case merely represents fear of the outside world in general . . . What has taken the form of an anti-EU vote constitutes in reality a protest against socio-economic problems at home” (Gros, 2014, pp. 2-3). Populism has emerged basically, although not exclusively, as Eupopulism, an anti-EU movement and mentality: “On both sides, an increasing national focus and a rise in populism as well as anti-EU sentiment are evident in all parts of society. The EU is more and more perceived as a problem. The weakest hold that the EU, and especially core countries in the euro zone, are imposing too much on them and asking too much from them.” (Emmanouilidis, 2011, p. 13).

As usual, the ruling populist parties try to divert the political agenda from vital socio-economic issues to nationalist-nativist narratives about refugees and international conspiracy theories. Above all, the populist governments thrive on international crises, times when it is

⁸ Policy Solutions (2015, pp. 26-30) counters that in 2014 and 2015 support for populist parties increased and explicitly named ECE’s relevant populist parties: HU 72% (Fidesz and Jobbik); CZ 48.2% (Czech Communist Party, Party of Free Citizens, Dawn-National Coalition, Freedom and Direct Democracy, and ANO 2011); PL 51.18% (Law and Justice, Congress of the New Right, Kukiz, Coalition for the Renewal of the Republic), SK 7.1% (Slovak National Party, but Smer is not included).

easy to find enemies. Recently, new issues have come up such as anti-refugee rhetoric in a campaign allegedly defending a country—or sometimes more generally, Europe as a whole—from Muslim arch-enemies or from inevitable invasions due to the declining West’s inability to protect a country or Europe. It proves that, even in the present period, the governments in ECE have been successful in getting popular support by opening or closing new issue niches, by entering issue niches into the political arena or by supporting niche actors with the ownership of resonant frames.⁹ Lubomir Zaorálek, the Czech minister of foreign affairs rightly notes:

In today’s jarred climate, no member state is immune to the temptations of inward-looking populism, though it may feed off different sources and manifest itself in different forms. In Central Europe, the legacy of communist rule casts a long shadow— but so do the mistakes of the transition period, with its overreliance on technocratic modes of change, often at the expense of social cohesion, inclusive development and democratic accountability. It has left too many of our citizens on the losing side of economic transformation, alienated from what they perceive as a closed system shot through with corruption. In today’s time of distress and uncertainty, past failures are coming back to haunt us, empowering far-right extremists, polarizing our societies and undermining trust in Europe’s liberal order” (2016, p. 2).

In the political turmoil in east central Europe, populists often win elections easily by mobilizing public support with simplistic populist slogans. The people, enchanted by messianic populist appeals, distance themselves from parties that do not use populist slogans. A closer analysis of the periods and types of populism in ECE leads to a discussion of the weak and volatile party systems in ECE; Eupopulism as a megatrend has penetrated the political system as a whole in ECE, although it characterizes the ECE countries to different extents and in various ways. This common populist disease can be seen in oppositions to the EU mainstream in the refugee crisis, such as the V4 Prague Declaration (2015).

2. CRITICAL ELECTIONS AND VICTORIOUS POPULIST-PROTEST PARTIES IN ECE

The countries in ECE had not fully completed their process of adjusting to EU membership when the global economic crisis struck. Because the crisis closely followed their EU accessions, the global crisis hit ECE’s countries harder. There, the crisis provoked popular dissatisfaction, giving populist parties an edge in ECE. In the last decade, increasing populism has also led to the rise of Eurosceptic parties. In the three European Parliament (EP) elections held in ECE—in 2004, 2009, and 2014—five countries in ECE sent a total of forty-three parties to EP seats. ECE’s representation of mainstream party members in the European Parliament (MEPs) is relatively small, only about half (123 of 237) mainstream MEPS hail from ECE. These numbers reveal a tsunami of small populist-protest parties winning EP elections and clearly show a Eupopulism trend. The basic issue, from a bird’s-eye view of ECE’s historical

⁹ The protracted social crisis has created a high level of xenophobia in ECE. Two Hungarian institutes, Political Capital (see www.politicalcapital.hu) and Policy Solutions (see www.policysolutions.hu), have been deeply involved in international research on DEREK (Demand for Right-Wing Extremism, see www.derexindex.eu) and published many papers on extreme-right parties, including Jobbik.

trajectory is the decreasing popularity of political elites and low participation in elections with very high party volatility.¹⁰

The West's usual typologies of parties and party systems do not work in ECE, and a formal-legal approach to the region's narrow political history does not help either, since the historical trajectory of countries in ECE has been determined to a great extent by the socio-economic history of the region. It is important to identify the special role parties and party systems have played in ECE during its quarter-century of systemic changes. After the first decade of EU membership, countries in ECE had still not effectively institutionalized parties as the main actors of both representative and participative democracy. All of the eastern central European countries' formal-legal institutions have been built like sand palaces—without solid social backing or patterns of civic culture. When these countries failed to achieve unrealistically high expectations, of some kind of welfare society, national-social populism offered the population a mirage of a new age and ideological drugs as recompensation. Thus, in ECE, the population's perceived reality differs very much from the genuine socio-economic reality, and this contrast between dream and actuality grew during the region's first decade of EU membership. In the EU, a deep democratic malaise has appeared in both the so-called East and in the West, but in very different ways. ECE has been haunted by the nightmarish and increasing gap between the core and the periphery and by the threat of deepening peripheralization. Hence, the region's disappointment over not being able to easily and rapidly catch up during the global crisis has led to much deeper democratic malaise in ECE than in the West.

EU membership in ECE brought a series of achievements, but it also caused region-specific negative externalities. First of all, the eastern enlargement developed dependency by closely integrating ECE's production structures to the West. The East has become an economic semi-periphery of the near West, especially of Germany and Austria (Galgóczi, 2016). This semi-peripheral status has produced marked underdevelopment by creating islands of poverty within eastern central Europe's countries. The countries are deeply divided internally between their developing, modern regions and their backward, declining regions. A crucial issue for ECE is internal and territorial social cohesion; these countries need to be closely integrated not only with the EU, but also to unite their own modernized and backward regions. The rise of national-social populism as a megatrend in ECE is based on deepening social-vertical and national-horizontal splits within ECE. Simply put, ECE's democratic malaise has been caused by the profound social malaise of the last quarter-century.¹¹

Thus, in the new political geography, ECE's countries have been splitting into two groups: the west of the East and the east of the East. The former achieved some kind of western

¹⁰ I provide only a rough estimation, since it is rather difficult both to identify the long-term mainstream parties in ECE—given that there has been a drastic change among the leading parties—and to qualify the short-term, smaller parties getting EP seats. Yet, this changing party landscape shows the fragility of the EP's representation of mainstream parties and the relatively large representation of changing, smaller populist parties.

¹¹ Many policy institutes—Bertelsmann (2016a,b), European Catching Up Index (2014) and FH, 2016—have analysed this contrast between the formal and substantive democratization in ECE. Ten years of EU membership has been evaluated in the introduction of Rupnik and Zielonka's work (2013). See also Banac (2014). There are also some analyses emphasizing the lack of participatory democracy in ECE, see the chapter by Cabada and Demetriou (2013), and see Bugarcic (2008).

development, and relatively speaking, is catching up. The latter group, however, has absolutely declined. The east of the East has lost its competitiveness, experienced high unemployment, and witnessed a worsening standard of living. Furthermore, national statistics relate wide territorial polarization there. Therefore, a distinction is needed to identify the relative and fragile—precarious—satisfaction of ECE’s populations in the west of the East and the deep dissatisfaction of eastern central Europe’s populations in the east of the East. Nonetheless, given this political geography, the general disappointment of ECE’s populations after ten years of EU membership has determined domestic party landscapes. This basic domestic territorial and social divergence has also been responsible for the distinctions between the soft and hard social movements, parties, and ideologies in the west of the East versus those of the east of the East within ECE’s countries. These differences can be easily detected on the countries’ electoral maps through the varieties of populism and Euroscepticism at national and EP elections. The hard populist and Eurosceptic parties have found popular support in the east of the East among the region’s so-called absolute losers, the unemployed. The soft populist and Eurosceptic parties in the west of the East are supported by the so-called relative losers: the declassed middle strata. This can be seen best on the electoral maps of Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, which are completely partitioned between East and West. All in all, due to the global crisis, ECE’s populations have generally been living in a state of permanent insecurity in these precarious countries and there is an increasingly real precariate class or strata in the middle (ILO, 2016).

Actually, to discover the secret history of ECE, one has to identify the political actors and define the parties and party systems in ECE in a manner that diverges from the standard definitions in the West. This history can be described as a negative tendency towards the emergence of Golem parties in hegemonic party systems. These strong parties have been the most relevant actors in the young, declining democracies in the last quarter-century of ECE’s history. The particular features of the parties, and their hegemonic party systems dominated by the strongest—by Golem parties—have structured political and social life as a whole. They have appeared in different ways in ECE’s countries as dominant actors of party landscapes. The biggest eastern central European parties, as monopolistic political actors, have become almighty, comprehensive social actors with large, strong, informal networks. These parties have also embraced the economy and media in a close merger between politics and business (see Rupnik and Zielonka, 2013). Golem parties have created well-working country-size corruption networks based on public procurement and EU transfers. In this way, Golem parties have to a great extent controlled paralysed societies. Moreover, in systems of crony capitalism (The Economist, 2014a), Golem parties have organized their own special pseudo-civil society from above as well as a domestication of civil society. The social embeddedness of all of ECE’s parties has been very weak, hence socially and ideologically “unanchored political elites” have emerged and been controlled, to a great extent, by business oligarchs (Herman, 2015).

The large formal institutions—including parties as far as membership and relations to civil society and its organizations is concerned—have been organized without social support and participation. Therefore, paradoxically, the most institutionalized party systems are the most unstable. As Golem parties neglect support of their membership more and more, the

formal stabilization of party systems into huge parties actually means the cumulative social destabilization of party-political systems in ECE. From the outside, party hegemons or Golem parties look like big, strong, well-organized parties; in fact, they are cadre parties appointing only loyal followers to public posts and they lose public support at critical elections due to undelivered promises and high levels of corruption. In general, there has been an increasing alienation of the common people from the world of political promises and a growing lack of confidence in public institutions, parties, parliaments, and governments. As a result, due to cumulated social tensions, new parties appear abruptly in the old party systems. These critical parties—as deviations from mainstream parties—now represent a political reaction to the management of the global economic crisis, they express the masses' suffering from the full, long-term effects of a triple crisis. The low levels of trust in the new democratic institutions—and above all in the parties—have generated their long-standing, cumulative negative effects.¹²

Although populists usually appeal to “the people” as a whole, as opposed to the corrupt and impotent elites, the populist parties do not appear only in oppositional roles. Populists offer an alternative to representative democracy in the form of strong-handed majoritarian rule and they propagate the belief that supporting the majority at elections gives government a free hand in decision-making. Therefore, populists oppose minority rights and interest intermediation. Paradoxically, populism, as an anti-elite movement and ideology, tries to establish an exclusive elite rule with a strong leader and a disempowered population. Populist parties and leaders refer to the people's opposition against an impotent and corrupt elite, but actually they want to become the new elite and consolidate a new elite position. Thus, “central European populism is a longing for *new elites*.” (Smilov and Krastev, 2008, p. 10). Since populist parties also attract some traditional left-wing voters during periods of austerity, they have been very successful in ECE in gaining power with large-scale victories and have formed a new political elite.

From the late 2000s onward, the outbursts of populist protest and the rise of anomic movements have, more and more, taken the form of demonstrations led by extreme-right organizations. This negative tendency reached its peak in the 2010s with the emergence of all sorts of populist and extremist organizations and the volcanic appearance of protest parties. In the 2010s, the socio-economic shock of the global crisis contributed to a prolonged party-political crisis in ECE with these Golem-type parties. Under the pressure of crisis management the first party system eroded in the 2000s and due to the large popular dissatisfaction, it finally collapsed in the 2010s. But efforts to organize hegemonic, Golem parties have continued after ECE's critical elections, and the new, second party system emerged. This recent political crisis has been based on the worsening social crisis—impoverishment and social exclusion has led to social populism—from below and has culminated in the deepening identity crisis—renationalization

¹² The rankings of public trust in politicians in ECE are among the worst globally (of 144 countries): CZ: 138, HU: 113, PL: 101, SI: 133 and SK: 121 (WEF, 2015: 409). Accordingly, there was very low turnout in ECE at the 2004, 2009, and 2014 EP elections, the participation was 27.9-28.2-18.2; 38.4-36.2-28.9; 20.8-24.5-23.8; 28.3-28.3-20.9 and 16.9-19.6-13.0 per cent in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia respectively.

and xenophobia leading to national populism—from above. Indeed, the political science on ECE's party developments is a dismal science as this short overview of ECE's party systems clearly demonstrates.¹³

3. THE WORST CASE SCENARIO: THE HUNGARIAN DISEASE OR POPULISM FROM ABOVE

This course from aggressive opposition to a newly entrenched political elite is clearly demonstrated by the Hungarian case, in Hungary the global crisis led to a complete populist victory during the second and third Orbán governments. Hungary has been a worst case scenario, not only in illustrating democracy's decline in general, but particularly in establishing an enduring and fake populist democracy. Hungary's socio-economic crisis caused lagging confidence in the political elite and the mainstream's lack of trust in Hungary's democratic parties when these parties proved they were unable to manage neither the situation nor the global crisis and failed to deliver on their promises. Accordingly, Hungary's triple crisis brought three populist waves in Hungary. In the first period, in the 1990s, the transformation crisis produced widespread social shock and dissatisfaction with the new democracy, which—in the early years—resulted in only shy or marginal populism in Hungary. However, by the second period, at the end of the decade, Hungary's failure to achieve unrealistically high expectations brought the first Orbán government to power, resulting in an authoritarian attempt at light or soft populism. Because Orbán formed a coalition government, that from 1998 to 2002, had only a relative majority with limited power, he could not transform the constitutional order. In the 2000s, however, the post-accession crisis contributed to a much larger populist mobilization during the Socialist-Liberal coalition governments of 2002 to 2010. Fidesz was in opposition, but this stage of populist mass mobilization was a very important preparation period for a *complete* populist takeover orchestrated through both social referendum, street violence, and the organization of so-called civil circles as mobilization devices directed against the incumbent government.¹⁴

In the late 2000s, due to post-accession and the onset of the global economic crisis, Hungary's large, formally well-institutionalized, but socially weak, democratic parties collapsed. Thus, Hungary demonstrated clearly the ECE paradox: the most institutionalized party systems become the most destabilized political systems. On this period, Renata Uitz notes: "What makes the Hungarian case interesting is that populist devices are not used by newcomers or fringe parties to mobilize support in order to gain entry to mainstream politics. Rather, in the present day Hungary populist rhetoric is a means of communication for a large parliamentary party which resorts to this instrument not simply as a campaign device but also as a technique replacing—at least at one level of communication—the usual arsenal of opposition in everyday

¹³ The cases of politics-centred hard populism in Poland and Hungary are parallel developments according to the international media. See the discussion on the Orbán-Kaczynski meeting and of a counter-cultural revolution against old Europe in *The Financial Times* (Foy and Buckley, 2016), or see Pytlas (2016) on Polish populism. I recently dealt with the parallel developments in Poland and Hungary (Ágh, 2016c,d).

¹⁴ Here I summarize briefly the Hungarian developments. It is not by chance that Pappas (2014, 2015) has made a parallel analysis of the Hungarian and Greek populism, both cases are outstanding. As I have mentioned in my former papers, many analysts consider Hungary the worst case of populism in ECE.

parliamentary parties” (Uitz, 2008, p. 69). In this decade of aggressive populist mobilization, Fidesz—as an allegedly centre-right party—embraced and supported Jobbik by absorbing the narratives and slogans of the extreme right. Characteristically, Viktor Orbán and Gábor Vona, the presidents of Fidesz and Jobbik, come from the same cradle, from the same civil circle of populist organizations of the 2000s.¹⁵

As a result, in the third period, the velvet dictatorship has emerged as a full-fledged, hard-populist democracy. Nowadays, Hungary has a quasi one-party system, and as Fidesz has over-institutionalized, its party institutions are almost direct state and government institutions. All of Hungary’s other parties are weak and hardly institutionalized at all. The turning point for Hungarian populism occurred in 2010 when Fidesz received a two-thirds supermajority and the second Orbán government ruined democratic and constitutional checks and balances. This historical turning point can be modelled according to distinctions between soft and hard populism. Usually, the dividing line between soft and hard populism in ECE is rather fluid, but this transition between the second and third waves of populism in Hungary in 2010 destroyed the liberal democracy. Because Hungary experienced the region’s deepest social crisis, which resulted in the largest populist victory in ECE, the Hungarian case demonstrates the strongest populist course to power. Fidesz controls a large part of the economy through voluntarist legislation and by increasing state property, Fidesz also controls the economy by wielding hard political power and by using soft power in the media. Orbán—and the Fidesz regime in general—claim to be centre-right national-conservatives, but these terms do not fit Orbán or his regime. In fact, centre-right conservatives, preferring some kind of the West’s Christian-democratic line, were shocked by Orbán’s second government in 2010. These centre-right conservatives, referred to in the Hungarian media as “orphaned conservatives” (Lantos, 2011), turned more and more against the Orbán regime before they finally publicly denounced Orbán’s populism (Dull, 2016).¹⁶

The Hungarian population tolerates a high level of cognitive dissonance; Hungarians are proud of being European and support Hungary’s EU membership, but they are also ready to blame the EU for the country’s socio-economic and political malaise. Fidesz has produced Janus-faced narratives attacking the EU and defending Europe. Calls for a “freedom fight against the EU” defined populists’ slogans in Hungary during the Orbán governments, which have become the model cases illustrating the increase in populism in ECE. In the speech Orbán delivered on Hungary’s national holiday, 15 March 2016, Orbán—in the spirit of Eupopulism—extended

¹⁵ Actually, in the 2000s Fidesz and Jobbik were close allies. Jobbik organized aggressive and violent street demonstrations, and Fidesz tacitly, behind the scenes, and indirectly supported them: “While street violence in the evenings was at its height in Budapest, Fidesz was calling mass demonstrations in Budapest during the afternoons . . . Throughout these days the reluctance of Fidesz to distance itself from rioters or from street riots was prevalent, with a well pronounced right-radical-right leaning” (Uitz, 2008, pp. 61-62).

¹⁶ Viktor Orbán has been the central figure of Hungarian populism and his most resonant declarations have voiced his support for “illiberal democracy” and “the decline of the West,” (2014,2015). After autocracy was elected, there was a great deal of reflection on Orbán in the media, see for instance Benner and Reinicke (2014), Bouillette (2014), Müller (2015), Nowak (2014), and *The Economist* (2014b). Orbán has been presented in the international press as the most important anti-EU actor in the refugee crisis, as “dictator light”, and as the model of divergence from European solidarity (on Orbán’s role as a “troublemaker” in the refugee crisis see EPC, 2016).

a black-and-white populist model of the deep divide between the interests of the innocent people and the interests of the impotent elite, from the domestic level to the EU level. Orbán emphasized that the European population had fallen victim to the irresponsible EU elite's mishandling of the refugee crisis, and he offered himself as a protector of the victimised European population (Orbán, 2016).¹⁷

Populist strategies are working well in elections and usually opt for slogans over programs; for instance Fidesz's so-called electoral program, conceived in 2010, was a populist holy trinity: "work, family and order" (Fidesz, 2010). After winning the 2010 and 2014 elections, according to the operational logic of ruling populist elites, Fidesz drastically restricted the legitimate participation of political rivals in the public and political sectors by using legal-political, economic-financial, and media instruments to strictly limit the actions of other political parties, political actors, and civil organizations. After the "octroy," imposed upon the constitution in 2011—given manipulated electoral law and a captured media, Fidesz neglected to even concoct a populist electoral program. Instead, in 2014, the party simply declared "we continue." The soft power of populist narratives had worked very well during the party's governance. Fidesz's narrative technique served to deepen the polarization of society, in which the socio-cultural frames of identity issues have replaced or derailed economic arguments about the pauperization of Hungarian society in the early 2010s.¹⁸

In the Hungarian case, the traditional return-to-history scenario instead of a modern return-to-Europe scenario represents a basic populist soft-power narrative technique: reinventing the past. As the title of the article in the *Financial Times* by Norwegian minister Vidar Helgesen (2014), indicates, the Orbán government's rule is indeed "Hungary's journey back into past." ECE's common narratives are best illustrated by Fidesz's national-nativist and anti-European narratives. The narratives reveal how public discourse is blanketed in historical myths that point to Trianon (the peace treaty signed after WWI in which Hungary lost two-thirds of its territory) as the main source of Hungary's national trauma. Fidesz—and the even more the extreme-right Jobbik—is warning the people of a second Trianon, instigated by Hungary's domestic and international enemies in the EU. This age-old nativist narrative, retold by Fidesz, is a politicized myth—a fairy tale of *Great Hungary* and a history that never was—based on a nineteenth-century type of national mythology (Ádám and Bozóki, 2011). In the international arena, Fidesz's narratives try to create a nativist-nationalist collective identity of Hungarians countering their strong European identity. At the same time, Fidesz wages value wars domestically; by redefining

¹⁷ In his speech on 15 March 2016, a national holiday celebrating the 1848 revolution, Orbán called Hungarians to defend the sovereignty of Hungary against the EU. Nonetheless, according to Eurobarometer, 69 per cent of Hungarians declare a European identity, a number above the EU average of 64 per cent (2015, p. 32).

¹⁸ There has been a strong continuity in Fidesz's political discourse since the 2000s: "The party which has consistently relied on populist rhetoric . . . is Fidesz . . . Hungarian public discourse has been captured by issues and rhetorical methods produced by populist-issue manufacturers. As a result, serious deliberation on other matters of public concern is replaced by rhetorical fireworks, display of symbols and empty slogans" (Uitz, 2008, p. 40). As an illustration of empty democracy, Fidesz has presented the results of the national consultations in the media as vox populi, although the return rate of letters has been very low and these processes have been neither transparent nor independently controlled.

social divisions as cultural divides, the party creates two groups: 1) loyal followers, cast as true believers and patriots and; 2) enemies and political opponents, cast as traitors.¹⁹

Within this polarized Orwellian world of simplistic answers, Fidesz has successfully staged a democracy capture, and to a great extent, a language capture, by dominating public discourse with its slogans and terms. All public institutions have been named *national* and fake so-called national consultations have replaced the democratic decision-making process. So far, the soft power of words—a childish, oversimplified language in politics such as “Only Fidesz,” “One camp, one flag,” “Hungary is successful,” and “Hungary performs better”—and the soft power of manipulating or manufacturing data has worked well. The fragmented democratic parties have been unable to fight either the hard or soft power of Fidesz. Both mass intimidation, as a proxy for hard repression in an emptied democracy without checks and balances, and soft repression, with its aggressive agenda setting in the government-manipulated media, has worked well so far with the so-called Hungarian patient (Krasztev and van Til, 2015).

CONCLUSION: INCREASING POPULISM IN ECE POSES A SERIOUS CHALLENGE TO THE EU

The present success of populist parties in ECE refutes the idea that populists can only be successful in opposition and refutes the notion that populists cannot govern and are bound to fail when they are in power and have to deliver. At least, in this transitory period of the EU’s “polycrisis” (Juncker), ECE’s populist governments are not only successful, they demonstrate the systemic failure of a cohesive Europe by highlighting Europe’s increasing core-periphery divide. Orbán’s populist regime has contaminated the EU and contributed to “the rise of dystopian nationalist regimes . . . The recent victory of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party in Poland confirms a recent trend in Europe, the rise of illiberal state capitalism led by populist right-wing authoritarians . . . the popularity of populist, anti-EU, anti-migrant right-wing parties is on the rise” (Roubini, 2015, pp. 1-3). In Hungary’s latest wave of mass demonstrations, a popular student slogan announced on the molinos, “We are the first generation brought up in democracy. We do not want to be the last.”

Former EU High Representative Catherine Ashton declared on 15 September 2011, the International Day of Democracy, “While democracy is the cornerstone of the European Union, it is clear that there is no single model for democratic government” (Ashton, 2011). But where are the borders of democracy’s variations? Populist facades of democracy and their changing forms, from soft populism to hard populism with the emerging velvet dictatorships, certainly do not fit with any variation of European democracy. Just to the contrary, populism is the main enemy of European democracy and should be defeated in ECE.²⁰

¹⁹ The hegemonic position of Fidesz in the media has been one of the most discussed topics in Hungarian populism. According to experts’ estimates, Fidesz controls about 90 per cent of the media, with some free islands in Budapest and other main cities, but it has complete control of the media where the large part of the population lives. In a 2015 special issue of *The Journal of Democracy*, Kagan makes a special reference to Hungarian leaders who “crack down on press and political freedom” (2015, p. 29).

²⁰ The fact that after the failed catching-up process, and under the pressure of the refugee crisis, the Visegrád Four (V4) states united in an unholy alliance in the EU to form a new kind of regional cooperation in ECE could be the topic of another paper (see Ágh, 2016c,d).

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