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23. Hungary. Home of Empty Populism

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Introduction

In recent years, Hungary has attracted international attention due to the country's backslide into an "illiberal" model of democracy under the leadership of Prime Minister Orbán. Orbán's right-wing party, Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance, won the parliamentary elections in 2010 with 52% of the votes, but because of the electoral system, it got more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament. This majority has allowed Fidesz to rewrite and to recurrently modify the constitution in the name of "the people."

Since then, Fidesz has been the hegemonic political force in Hungary (Pap, 2014). Today, there are reasons to fear that the populist current of Fidesz's politics has washed away important features of the rule of law and threatens basic human rights in Hungary (Müller, 2011). Democratic checks and balances, parliamentary representation, independent institutions such as the courts, and, in the last round, the "liberal" civil sphere have all greatly suffered under the Fidesz government's pressure and the permanent revolution that it has fought in the name of "the people".

Research on Populism in Hungary

There is a certain irony that in Hungarian discourses, by the time populist politics became the rule, the notion of populism had passed its zenith as a conceptual tool to make sense of politics. Academic and intellectual circles used populism as an ultimately negative key phenomenon to explain the ills of Hungarian politics in the 2000s, the decade preceding the Fidesz takeover. In this respect, an article by two well-known political analysts is evocative; in the 2006 Yearbook of Hungarian Politics, they called 2005 the "year of populism" (Juhász & Szabados, 2005, 2006). In the online database of social science publications, we found 18 articles about populism in the period between 2000 and 2004, 45 between 2005 and 2009, and 35 in the last five years. Even among publications since 2010, only a few articles refer to the post-2010 Fidesz government. The extreme right-wing opposition to Fidesz, the Jobbik party, is not referred to as "populist" or "more populist" than other parties in the Hungarian literature. Most academic articles about populism are theoretical, interpretive, or historical. Only a few empirical studies exist that would offer a systematic analysis of populist communication.

Since Hungarian academic and intellectual reflections on populism originate in the experience of the 2000s, the following overview will refer primarily to this context. Hungarians generally believe that the 2000s represent a lost decade, the period when the country—in spite of its accession to NATO and the European Union—was derailed from its historic track of catching up with Western capitalist democracies. This context explains why most publications reviewed in this paper have judged the populist behavior of (some or all) political actors critically. Scholars, often not independently from their political stance, have criticized the populism of establishment political parties, and the blame has fallen on all parties that have

governed the country since 1998: the socialist party (MSZP) and the liberal party (SZDSZ), which together led the country between 2002 and 2010, and the right-wing party Fidesz (governing between 1998 and 2002, and since 2010). New anti-establishment parties—the extreme right-wing party Jobbik, which won about 17% of the vote in 2010 and 20% in 2014, and the green eco-socialist party [LMP], which took eight percent of the vote in 2010 and five percent in 2014—are much less often characterized as “populist.”

Most of the phenomena that have been associated with populism in Hungary would fall into the category of *empty populism* in the taxonomy of Jagers and Walgrave (2007). Accordingly, populist politics have mostly been associated with direct references to the will of the people, opportunism, the construction of a moral majority, and the promise of state defense against insecurity. Most scholarly references to populism in Hungary document the various forms in which mainstream political parties’ empty populism may present itself. It is important to note that while Jagers and Walgrave consider empty populism a neutral term, in the Hungarian literature, it is more commonly considered as dangerous and undesirable.

Some authors have referred to Fidesz’s combination of the above basic populist traits with strong anti-elitist rhetoric. Indeed, Fidesz has relentlessly attacked the post-communist elites, heirs of the communist party state who, according to the Fidesz narrative, converted their political power to economic wealth right after 1989 (Szabó, 2003). Thus, Fidesz could also be classified as an *anti-elitist populist* actor in the terms of Jagers and Walgrave. In some studies (Debreczeni, 2006), Fidesz is blamed for nationalist mobilization against surrounding countries and Europe and for anti-communist propaganda. In these cases, the party’s populism corresponds with the notion of *complete populism* (combining anti-elitism with the degradation of ethnic or national out-groups). Finally, we should note that the concept “populist” is only rarely applied to the Jobbik party, which is instead regarded as extreme right or radical.

Since, in the Hungarian scholarly literature, populism is primarily associated with mainstream political forces in the first place and not anti-establishment parties, there is no single party or parties that would be commonly regarded as “populist” and distinguished from the more conventional, non-populist parties. Therefore, Hungarian political reality and scholarly research do not fully fit the understanding of populism as something different from mainstream politics, nor do they distinguish populist forces from non-populist ones, associating the two poles with different rhetoric and different symbolic or communication genres.

The three most influential political leaders in the last 15 years have been Orbán (Fidesz), the current prime minister; Gyurcsány (socialist), who was prime minister between 2004 and 2009; and Vona, current leader of Jobbik. They have all used populist mobilization techniques equally against national out-groups like the Romanians. The most infamous case of anti-Romanian populist mobilization relates to the socialist leader Gyurcsány who, in the lead-up to a 2004 referendum on granting citizenship to ethnic Hungarian minorities in surrounding countries, raised the specter of 20 million Romanians pretending to be Hungarians for the sake of better living conditions and flooding Hungary’s labor market. In a political environment so polluted by populism, most scholars have refrained from contrasting populism with mainstream normality.

Populist Actors as Communicators

Reviewing the literature on populist actors as communicators, it is obvious that there is very little systematic research that focuses on communication strategies and tactics. The focus is rather on the interface between communication and the character of the parties. Given this emphasis in research and the particular Hungarian situation discussed above, there is very little systematic knowledge on whether a specific and unique style of communication can be defined as populist, whether leaders of parties identified as populist differ in charisma and communication skills from leaders of other parties, whether political actors use different styles, strategies, and language when approaching different media, whether unique communication strategies and tactics distinguish populist parties from mainstream parties, and whether there are systematic differences in the style of language used by mainstream parties and populist parties.

Instead, the Hungarian scholarly literature has taken two approaches that broadly correspond to the categories of populism that Jagers and Walgrave (2007) label “empty populism” and “anti-elitist populism”. The empty populism approach identifies populism as a systemic failure in Hungarian politics itself, rather than an attribute of particular political actors. The “anti-elitist populism” approach focuses on Fidesz’s anticommunist rhetoric, which distinguishes it from the rhetoric of post-communist contenders. The common key idea of both approaches is that populist politics is communication-driven and irresponsible.

The empty populism of mainstream parties is conceived as a structural ill of today’s democratic politics, which is increasingly obsessed with the logic of the hunt for short-term popularity via popular media communication. Accordingly, populism in politics implies sacrificing political substance on the altar of successful political communication and campaigning. This notion of populism associates populism with fearmongering, demagoguery, manipulation, and an irresponsible race for popularity. A commonly held opinion is that populism is an answer to media pressures on politicians (Ripp, 2006). Similarly, scholars have tended to treat populism as an answer to electoral demand for simple and straightforward answers to various problems (Bayer, 2002; Hamberger, 2007). In this view, populism is the “natural” mode of politics in a country where the post-communist electorate represents the largest voter segment. Szabados and Juhász (2005) have thus argued that the second social-liberal government (2002–2006) used populist political communication and image-based politics designed to suit the preferences of the targeted anti-communist groups. Accordingly, populist parties in Hungary are said to use “clear, understandable, and overstretched” messages to “address electoral groups who are highly sensitive to social issues but are less interested in politics and lack a stable party preference” (Juhász & Szabados, 2005, p. 303).

This use of the term has been the most common. Populism is equated with short-term popularity hunting and is contrasted with responsible political statesmanship that engages in long-term structural reform and modernization, even if changes are unpopular in the short term (Bayer, 2002; Juhász & Tóth, 2008; Ripp, 2006; Schlett, 2006). Seen from this perspective, any political effort that would cater to the immediate preferences of the people is denounced as populist.

A different strand of conceptualizing mainstream populism highlights its economic character. Two important positions have arisen; one addresses an etatist, protectionist style of populism, and the other points to an emerging form of economic populism.

The notion of an etatist Latin-American style of economic populism is best defined in a paper by Bartha and Tóth, who “use the term welfare populism in line with the tradition of Hungarian social science—referring to the phenomenon when political elites increase social privileges in a way that definitely decreases the chance of fiscal sustainability” (2013, p. 178). Here, populism is linked to the unfunded and politically motivated expansion of social programs. This notion of populism has gained its relevance from the exposure of the Hungarian economy to expansive populist politics during each and every election campaign, when governments create artificial growth and wealth from debt. Every four years, this abundance has been followed by heavy cutbacks, right after the new government starts its term in office. Both mainstream parties, the socialist party and Fidesz, have pursued this type of populism equally (Bartha & Tóth, 2013).

The concept of *macroeconomic populism* by Csaba (2009) offers a different viewpoint that supplements the understanding of an etatist and protectionist economic populism. According to Csaba (2009), the new type of macroeconomic populism among the new EU members represents a policy of non-action. It consists in avoiding any kind of state engagement that the politician judges to be too controversial or unpopular. This non-action is partly fed by politicians’ distrust of national state powers as well as their proneness to entrust their countries’ fate to international forces (the EU, global markets) that they believe to guarantee security. The key condition that new populists believe gives access to the benefits of the above-envisioned European/global safety net is macroeconomic stability, which they seek to maintain. This approach is usually combined with a doctrine emphasizing tax cuts. “If traditional populism is statist and interventionist, with complex ideological references, current populism is free marketer, favors a minimalist concept of the state with a disarmingly simple ideology mirroring introductory textbooks: lower taxes will solve everything” (Csaba, 2009, p. 112). Macroeconomic populism embodies a compulsive avoidance of any risk-taking—which stems from the prioritizing of short-term communication gains over long-term reforms.

Another conception of populism as a political communication–led, opportunistic form of politics comes from Körösnéyi and Pakulski, who theoretically contrast this concept with the personalization of politics. The theory of leader democracy (Körösnéyi, 2003; Pakulski & Körösnéyi, 2012) asserts that the personalization of politics counteracts the above-described populist degradation of politics, rather than being a part of this process. Pakulski and Körösnéyi argue that the emerging model of “leader democracy” may be the cure for irresponsible, popularity-hunting populism and may even re-democratize today’s politics. More precisely, they argue that “the shift toward more leader-centered elites may strengthen, rather than undermine, democratic political regimes. Leader-centeredness may enhance the consistency, coherence, and therefore long-term effectiveness of political action” (Pakulski & Körösnéyi, 2012, p. 12).

Another approach to populist political actors in Hungary has suggested that Fidesz’s anti-elitist, anti-communist politics makes this party more populist than its competitors (Bayer, 2002; Debreczeni, 2006). Fidesz represents a certain popular revolt against the existing order of things (the heavy influence of multinational firms, the integration of Hungary into the European Union, etc.). Due to popular resentments about the unsuccessful post-communist transition, Fidesz has successfully positioned itself as an agent of anti-communist revolt. Szabó (2003) thus argues that Fidesz could build its anti-communist identity on the living tradition of the “Volkisch” (popular/ populist) oppositional movement among the Hungarian intelligentsia. This movement powerfully articulated anti-communist sentiments during the last two decades of socialism.

Regarding political communication strategies and tactics, when Szabó (2003) examined “the people” and the communist and post-communist “elite” as populist communication frames in Hungary before and after 1989, he highlighted five elements of right-wing anti-communist populism: (a) holding an anti-establishment, anti-elite, anti-*nomenklatura* orientation, (b) siding with the people (civil society and national, rural, and ethnic communities against the “alienated aliens,”) (c) blaming electoral and parliamentary institutions for distorting the “popular will,” (d) building “Citizen Alliances” with the people in which national and religious symbols play significant roles, and (e) dissolving the party’s organizational infrastructure by giving momentum to the spontaneously developed civic initiatives.

Although the Jobbik party has characteristics similar to Fidesz, not much research has dealt with this party’s communication. The exception is an article showing that Jobbik was successful in setting the agenda for Hungarian politics with its bombastic slogan, “Twenty Years (of prison–PC, NM) for the Twenty Years (since 1990–PC, NM),” — which forced some sort of reaction from all parties (Kéri, 2010; Bozóki, 2010).

The Media and Populism

In our review of the literature, we found only one article explicitly dealing with the media representation of populist politics. We start with this article and will then present three studies on the media presence of the extremist party Jobbik (these studies do not use the term *populism* but are relevant to this book).

Boda, Szabó, Bartha, Medve, and Vidra (2014) analyzed the media and political representation of *penal populism* in Hungary. This term has gained ground in Eastern and Central Europe. The study examined two hypotheses, claiming (a) that left-wing parties reject penal populism, whereas rightwing parties support it, and (b) that the (tabloid) media representation of crime helps to spread penal populism in the public sphere (Boda et al., 2014, p. 73). The study addressed the news media and communications by politicians to unravel the following frames that support or challenge penal populism: the malfunctioning of justice, unstoppable crime and media violence (supportive frames), and the critique of racism and of social inequality (critical frames). While the first hypothesis proved to be mostly right (most right-wing and only a few left-wing politicians supported penal populism and its tough response on crime), the second hypothesis was not supported. Even the tabloid media was more moderate and neutral than right-wing politicians. The only exception was the right-wing daily *Magyar Nemzet*, which supported the three-strikes law (Boda et al., 2014, p. 88). The final conclusion is thus that penal populism is mainly promoted by right-wing political actors but not by the tabloid media in Hungary.

Aside from this, Bernáth (2014) interviewed 24 leading news editors to discover how they see their own role, and the responsibility of media in general, in spreading or fighting extremist views. There was some agreement among the editors about what could be considered as extremism: the politics of exclusion and the threat of use of force were named as the two key nodes. Several editors mentioned racism. The statement *Jobbik is extreme* was clearly supported by 15 interviewees, and 4 supported it with reservations. Five editors—including those from the public service media—avoided using this label. Most editors noted that in Hungary, not only extremists use extremist rhetoric; it is a new phenomenon in the mainstream, where simplistic, coded explanations are gaining ground (Bernáth, 2014, p. 104). Most editors think that Hungarian public discourse and the media are prisoners of the radical right’s political language (see also Kéri, 2010; Bozóki, 2010).

These findings make Bernáth conclude that the media's quarantine of Jobbik did not hinder the spread of extremist rhetoric and ideology. Together, both the simplified presentation of problems and the stereotypical selection of topics helped spread extremist narratives (Bernáth, 2014, p. 113).

Another content-analytical study examined the relationship of mainstream media to Jobbik during the 2010 election campaign (Bársony, Gyenge, & Kovács, 2011). The study analyzed the media coverage of Jobbik-related scandals and journalistic allegations about Jobbik's identity (that is, about which forces stand behind the party and whose interests the party serves). The coverage of Jobbik's proposed policies was also analyzed. The study came to the conclusion that all the mainstream media displayed a negative attitude toward Jobbik and that the party has commonly been denounced as anti-democratic and extremist. Critical discourse about Jobbik, however, surfaces only rarely. During the 2010 elections, Jobbik was presented as an extremist party that was laughable and unserious (right-wing press), representing a rising dark power (left-wing press). But this distancing rhetoric was never anchored in a more substantive discussion of why exactly Jobbik deserved this rejection and what parts of its policies were objectionable (Bársony et al., 2011). The mainstream media's response to Jobbik was outright rejection without argumentation.

Another study explored the Jobbik hinterland in the online media realm (Jeskó, Bakó, & Tóth, 2012). The burgeoning of a whole culture of extremist and nationalist websites may be regarded as the key to Jobbik's stunning success in 2010. Exploring the network of websites, based on the hyperlinks that connect them, the study revealed that the online media hinterland of the radical right consists of several hundred sites that are interconnected by around 1000 hyperlinks. The central nodes of the network, the key websites, are all directly connected with Jobbik. Two of these are news portals (kuruc.info and barikad.hu), one is the site of a radical youth movement (hvim.hu) one is the site of a huge radical cultural festival called Hungarian Island, and the last key site belongs to a radio station (Holy Crown Radio). The last key site belongs to a radio station, Holy Crown Radio. The richness of the radical online media field shows that Jobbik has a large-scale social and cultural backup that is not predominantly political (Jeskó et al., 2012, pp. 85–91). In the online media network, the largest subgroup consists of music-band sites, most of which belong to the genre called "national rock." There are also a tremendous number of online service sites and online commerce sites, ranging from organic food commerce, merchandise shops, and designer shops, to festivals, a "national" dating service, and even a "national" taxi service. This huge, cultural cocoon surrounding the more explicitly political online media sites (news platforms, radios, and many dozens of thematic sites) ensures a stable inflow of online visitors to Jobbik's site.

Aside from this, there is virtually no systematic knowledge of how populist actors and their communicative strategies resonate with journalistic media, of the typical content features of media discourse on populism, of how individual media outlets deal with populist discourse, and of whether there is a decoupling of online versus offline discourse and journalistic versus citizen discourse as indicated by the varying presence of populist actors and communications.

Citizens and Populism

We have not found any empirical study about the communication effects of, or the susceptibility of electorates to, the empty populism of mainstream parties. Existing research on political attitudes or campaign effects do not refer to populism. Most of the critical studies

on populism tend to take for granted that citizens, particularly those of lower social status living in insecurity, are susceptible to populist rhetoric. It has been rather common to suggest a mutually corrosive interplay between populist supply and populist demand. As Bartha and Tóth (2013, p. 165) have argued, “the Hungarian political community has been socialized in the atmosphere of ‘welfare populism’. The legitimating function of socially expansive policies has not only become a key orientation point for the post-socialist elite, but it [has] also made the population susceptible to the social promises of politicians.” Gál (2011) explained populist demand by the large numbers of state-dependent people in Hungary. The proportion of private sector employees to the inactive section of the population receiving social transfers (pensioners, students, the ill, and the unemployed) is highly pertinent here. In Hungary, Gál argues, the latter outnumber the former by 50%. Similar to Bartha and Tóth, Gál (2011, pp. 162–163) associates populist attitudes with paternalist and statist expectations, distrust in the market, preference for state ownership, and economic protectionism.

In research on popular support for Jobbik, we have only found two empirical analyses of citizen attitudes and populist politics. The first study explained the rise of Jobbik and, in more general terms, right-wing populism’s takeover in Hungary with the steady growth of public demand for authoritarianism in the 2000s (Krekó, Juhász, & Molnár, 2011). Based on European Social Survey data, the authors constructed an index measuring *demand for right-wing extremism*, and from the sharp rise of their DEREK index, they concluded that the number of voters openly susceptible to right-wing extremism has doubled in Hungary from 10% to 21% between 2002 and 2009). What calls for caution, however, is that the growth of extremist demand in this model can mostly be explained by the growth of resentment toward the political elite—which, in itself, can hardly be regarded as a form of extremist thinking (it could also be seen as fully justifiable and reasonable in light of the elite’s performance during those years).

The second empirical study, by Karácsony and Róna (2010), suggested that the openly racist campaign of Jobbik against the Roma proved decisive to the party’s success in activating the previously inactive radical electorate. Based on a panel survey collected in 2008 and in late 2009, after the first big success of Jobbik in the European elections, the study rejected the hypothesis that the rise of Jobbik resulted from people’s increasing nationalist, anti-establishment, or authoritarian attitudes. These attitudes have existed for a long time in Hungary. The authors also rejected the explanation that Jobbik profited from the resentment of people of lower social status living in insecurity. In 2009, Jobbik was predominantly a young people’s party with nationalist and anti-Roma sentiments, not an economic protest party (Karácsony & Róna, 2010). According to these scholars, the party’s success should rather be explained by the concentration of media attention on Roma-related crime, which had been a non-issue before 2008. However, by 2009, the issue had hit the spotlight both in the media and in political debates, triggering huge public attention on Roma-related conflicts. Since Jobbik was the only party to prioritize the “Roma question” and “Roma criminality,” it could profit from this current of media attention to Roma-related crime (Karácsony & Róna, 2010). It should also be noted, however, that in many cases, the Roma were victims suffering majoritarian aggression (e.g., in the case where several Roma people, including a child, were slaughtered by fascist serial killers) rather than perpetrators of crime. The study by Karácsony and Róna has unearthed convincing evidence, despite offering no explanation why such an intense moral panic over the Roma issue should break out in 2008 and 2009.

A third study, by Tóth and Grajczár (2010), examined whether and how socioeconomic transformations lead to the rise of extremist political attitudes. Starting from a 2003 study (Tóth & Grajczár, 2009) on the voters of the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) (the main extremist party of that era), the authors tried to estimate the causal links between people's preferences for Jobbik, objective changes in their families' social status after the post-communist regime change (loss of workplace, sense of security, and wellbeing), people's reflections on these effects (the social Darwinism of the "winners" versus the sense of deprivation of the "losers"), and various attitudes related to extremism (nationalism, xenophobia, anti-elitism, authoritarianism). In 2003, the authors constructed a linear regression-based path model and found that the support for the radical right-wing MIÉP was triggered by two different social-psychological processes: Among the winners, the ideology of social Darwinism led people to a sense of national and authoritarian superiority and to an extremist political preference, whereas among losers of the economic transformation, a sense of collective deprivation drove a longing for justice and redemption, propelling the MIÉP votes. However, the same research design applied to Jobbik in 2009 led to different results. The importance of collective deprivation decreased and nationalist-authoritarian attitudes became predominant explanatory factors behind radical right-wing mobilization.

Aside from this, there is not much systematic knowledge on the voters of populist parties, inter-individual differences in reactions to populist messages, or the effects of populist messages on citizens' emotions, knowledge, perceptions of reality, opinions and attitudes, or political behavior.

Summary and Recent Developments

Hungarian research on populism deviates from canonic models in the international literature in the sense that it relates populism to establishment parties rather than to their anti-establishment challengers. When the main populist parties are the establishment and the ruling political elite, it simply does not make much sense to think of populism as something opposed to the political establishment.

Thus, in Hungary most research on populism defines it as a systemic feature of mainstream establishment politics. This might explain why research on populism focuses more on systemic tendencies than the concrete communication features of some particular populist parties and why there is such a paucity of research on populist political communication per se. The other side of the coin is that there is plenty of scope for systematic research investigating populist actors as communicators, the media and populism, and citizens and populism.

In some respects, Hungary could be called the home of *empty populism*. What research on mainstream or empty populism in Hungary demonstrates is the anti-democratic nature of excessive and unchecked populism, empty or otherwise. What distinguishes Prime Minister Orbán from his predecessors is not his anti-democratic populism in itself but the uncontrollable lure by which his populist politics transform the state into an admittedly "illiberal" regime. The chronic presence and rich variety of mainstream populist politics that have been documented in our review signal that Hungarian democracy in the 1990s, and particularly in the 2000s—with its elitist parties—suited Mair's model of *populist democracy* (2002). This undemocratic status quo has changed for the worse in the 2010s, during which decade Fidesz won a qualified majority in parliament and the Hungarian political system entered its aggressively illiberal, autocratic phase.

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