Hungarian
Europe Society

THE RENEWAL OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Vision, Strategy, Competition, Parties and Civil Society

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SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL RENEWAL

István Hegedűs[1]:

INTRODUCTION

The protagonists of liberal democracy and open society – liberal-minded political actors, civil groups and citizens - face ongoing populist ideological attacks against the fundaments of our liberal political system as well as the erosion of shared universal and European values in big portions of the populations. Although an anti-liberal U-turn has not occurred globally, the emergence of authoritarian states, especially Russia and China, and the significant influence of illiberal political entrepreneurs within the international democratic community have recently made the serious challenge more salient. It is still not too late to conceptualise how a wide circle of stakeholders, who believe in the future of liberal democracy and the liberal world order – including the reform capability of the European Union - might and should react assertively to the major political threat of our current era. There are positive examples worldwide which give us hope about the resilience of liberal political regimes. In worse cases – just like in Hungary – the political renewal of pro-European and liberal-minded actors need much more intellectual, visionary, strategic, organisational and communicative innovations in order to regain their dominant role in the political arena and the public spheres.

We should mention that the brutal aggression of Russia against its neighbouring country, Ukraine, has created a new geopolitical reality. The Western democratic community had to reconsider its position towards the risks and dangers coming from semi-authoritarian and authoritarian political regimes worldwide. The reaction of the mainstream political elites and the general public has been encouraging: the unity of the European Union and NATO has been strengthened as a consequence of the threatening external challenge by Vladimir Putin. This positive shift made the life of the members of the illiberal political camp within the European Union much harder: especially Orbán's Sonderweg in the international arena, his special relationship to the Russian autocrat isolated him. The Hungarian government anti-Brussels rhetoric for domestic purposes remained strong, whilst the country's leader totally lost his influence even as a trouble-maker at European level and has sunk into a decision-taker position. Moreover, the realisation of Orbán's grandiose vision to create a Populist International of like-minded radical right wing parties has evaporated in the last year or so.

In this edited volume experts from Hungary and Central Europe focus on current hardships liberal and democratic public actors have to cope with in order to defend, strengthen and renew democratic political regimes at national and European levels. The authors map the relevant phenomena that made the unchecked advance of the right and left wing radical parties so powerful in many countries and to find and propose ideas, methods and know-how to undermine and

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push back their (relative) popularities. The old question, namely, what went wrong on "our" side is as relevant today as some years ago. In order to elaborate proposals for the renewal of liberal politics, the contributors to this collection of studies examine – beside other critical issues – the following topics which need to be analysed and better understood:

1. What are the main reasons of the shift towards anti-liberal political forces in big segments of the electorates? Is a fundamental change happening because of old and new cultural/symbolic antagonisms that came to the surface? Can we say that the confrontations between liberal minded elites and their critics are sharpened in consequence of an increasing polarisation on the battlefields of old and new identity politics? Or, can we explain current dividing lines mainly with - perceived or real - growing economic tensions and inequalities?

2. How can liberalism(s) and democratic philosophical-ideological thinking renew themselves? After some defeats, what sort of visions about the future would encourage and assist political as well as civil actors to convince and seduce more citizens to give their political and electoral support to the defenders of liberal democratic values and norms? Do we need to invent new overall narratives, to transform the language of political communication and to introduce smart methods in order to reach out to the broader public? What are the national and local specialities and where do we find good practices in this field?

3. Should a convincing "counter-attack" of liberal-minded public figures focus on big, historic themes like human and minority rights, rule of law, war and peace, inclusion and justice, migration, media pluralism, freedom of speech and information, climate emergency, green deal, and so on, or have economic and social issues become once again even more relevant problems for the public especially in times of multiple crises? How to handle the numerous political tribes in our societies with their diverging value preferences and life experiences? Do we find the number one cleavage nowadays between globalists and localists related to their education, age and gender? How to react to sovereignist-nationalist claims of the populists within the European Union? What if the Eurosceptic, radical and extreme right wing parties become more united in the European political sphere and globally?

4. What has to be done when populist-illiberal politicians have already grasped political power? What sorts of strategy can opposition and civil groups develop to change the outcome of history in their respective country? Can internal structural problems of the supply side at the party political level and the ongoing ideological or individual conflicts for leadership role inside the opposition groups as well as the lack of resources in an uneven race with the ruling party be overcome through co-operation, political talent and innovation? What is the task of the European institutions in case a member state starts to move on a slippery slope towards building an illiberal, semi-authoritarian political regime as it has occurred in Hungary in the last twelve years? How to react to the overwhelming state propaganda of the ruling party that regularly creates new external and internal "enemies of the people" raising fear and anxiety in the society? How to challenge strongman Orbán?

The authors of this publication raise these and similar questions in order to find new ways and means for successful strategic renewal and for necessary political and civil activism. In the past, intellectuals, politicians, analysts, professional communication experts – in different times different people – were able to develop big ideas, to put new policy proposals on the agenda, and to reinvent professional methods in order to stimulate wide social participation for their causes. Today, think tanks and NGO-s, together with like-minded political actors, have a responsibility to protect the legacy of the liberal democratic systems and reform them for the sake of our future. That is why the Hungarian Europe Society has constantly mobilised its domestic and international network bringing friends and partners together to do their best for the same historic objectives. This volume is part of our efforts.

Chapter 1

HUNGARY AND THE AUTHORITARIAN POPULIST CHALLENGE

András Schweitzer[2]:

HISTORICAL CAUSALITY AND THE PROSPECT FOR A HAPPIER HUNGARY

The Curse of Turan, according to an old legend, has the power to bring disunity and misfortune to Hungarians throughout centuries. The national hymn of the country paints the biblical portray of a golden age that ended, again centuries ago, when God became enraged by the sins of the people.

In the following essay, I will start from the assumption that the effect of these supernatural determinants, if once existed, has expired by now, and that nothing inherently hampers a happier time for Hungary. I will look for less inescapable causes for Hungary's current political-social state, with the aim of providing a basis to how it could be ameliorated.

What is it, in the first place, that should be ameliorated? Some people, let's call them sovereigntists, claim that the political course of the country does not need much correction. Hungary's freedom and independence, therefore its prosperity, is granted perhaps better than in any time in history. Analysts from a different ideological background argue, on the contrary, that there are grave problems, but they have existed for decades. According to them, the transformative year of 1989, the "Annus mirabilis" to many, did not bring any miracles but the well-known maladies of capitalism: poverty, unemployment, deprivation, and worsening conditions in education, health care, etc. Contrary to these views, my focus here is primarily liberty and democracy. I believe that 1989 brought an unparalleled opportunity to create conditions for a free, prosperous, democratic, and happy society, but at some the process went wrong.

"*For two decades Hungary, like the other Eastern European countries, followed a general policy of establishing and strengthening the institutions of democracy, rule of law, and a market economy based on private property. However, since the elections of 2010, when Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party came to power, Hungary has made a dramatic U-turn*" wrote János Kornai (2015). Such a U-turn can indeed be detected, also in areas, like the renewed eastern orientation of foreign policy or the re-centralisation of culture and education.

It may be added that the U-turn altogether did not produce a complete return to conditions that existed prior to 1989. An appropriate visual model of the democratic development of the past three and a half decades does not show an inverted "U" graph but rather a "J" turned around 180 degrees. This means that Hungary is not a totalitarian dictatorship, but it is not a democracy anymore either, nor is it a state where minority opinions or political interests are properly represented or protected by the rule of law.

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It is tempting to connect the downturn to international developments like the Covid-outbreak, the migration influx of 2015, or the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. These events certainly had an effect: they gave good excuses for the ruling regime to argue for the need of extraordinary measures, and to take them. However, having lived through the post-1989 history of Hungary, and a significant part of it as a journalist of a leading media outlet, my experience is that the downturn did not start with, and cannot be attributed to, these events.

Most political phenomena which are typical of the current "populist Zeitgeist" worldwide have been appearing a lot earlier in Hungary. Exclusionist ethno-nationalist rhetoric has long been present in mainstream debates. Fidesz, losing the elections in 2002, declared that the party will not be in opposition because the "homeland cannot be in opposition", thereby denying that the winning socialists and liberals are part of the nation. Other undemocratic elements include revolver journalism (smear-campaigns in the right-wing media in the run-off to the 2010 election), unfair voter-manipulation (pre-election temporary lowering of the VAT in 2006), tempering with political institutions (e.g. introducing a two-year budget in 2000) and attacks against democracy gatekeepers (sacking of the television and radio chairmen in 1993).

Still, according to a general argument, there is not much to look for in Hungary, the autocratisation phenomenon is part of a wider story: the global reversal of the Huntingtonian third wave of democratisation. In this narrative the Hungarian Prime Minister is just one figure alongside Erdoğan, Maduro, Putin, and Trump. So, the causes could perhaps be found outside of Hungary.

The international environment was clearly conducive for a reversal of the liberal democratic course. Financial market disturbances, the economic rise of the BRICS countries, especially the double-digit growth of China that was for decades annually predicted to soon end but without actual realisation. The re-emergence of Russian influence in the region made East-Central Europe a "geopolitical fault line" between great powers in the cautionary words of Robert Kagan (2009). Liberal democracy has been on the retreat globally for the last one and a half decades.

Nevertheless, alongside the international circumstances there must be local causes to explain why of all the members of the European Union, Hungary alone became a hybrid regime. Even if there are other new democracies where autocratisation tendencies have been detected, Hungary is the one that went the furthest by far, surprising political theorists who believed that after passing a certain economic threshold, such a profound backslide cannot happen.

So why is it that "we lost the way somewhere" again (as it was felt and expressed by Hungarian poet Endre Ady before the first world war, and by Gyula Szekfű during the second)? Has it been caused by someone or something? Was it agency or structure? Was it bad luck or could it have been averted by better policies? I believe that there were several, interrelated causes.

Already in the early 1990s, there were worrying menaces for the new Hungarian democracy. At that time, still as a university student, I drafted two articles pointing to two problems. One was about the extreme historical polarisation of Hungarian politics, which I described as a game for the whole nation where there are two opposing sides but no winners, only losers. The other one was about the need to change the electoral law to one based on a single party list, because the existing mixed system agreed upon in 1989 seriously distorts the outcome and could result in a two-third majority and a change of the democratic constitution. Then, later, in an essay written during my doctoral studies in 2012, and an article published two years later, I offered a more comprehensive analysis describing seven factors that caused the autocratic turn (Schweitzer, 2012, 2014).

The following were the causes: the talent, personality, and ambitions of Viktor Orbán; pre-election promise-contests, budget tricks, and the "lie-speech" of former Prime Minidter Ferenc Gyurcsány; the election system design with its potential to create a supermajority; growing anti-liberalism; the longue durée effect of Kádárism and Horthysm, and the lack of democratic political role models; further cultural factors like the striking pervasiveness of survival values, the general lack of solidarity, and individual and national isolated feeling. Most of these factors appeared in an article by Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi in 2018 as the causes for the declining democracy in Hungary (Krekó-Enyedi, 2018).

I will now summarise the factors in a more systematic way. The breakdown of a democracy and the rise of an autocratic power can be compared to other runaway processes that overturn balanced systems. Human population explosion at the expense of other species on planet Earth was caused by the extreme adaptability of homo sapiens with the use of intelligence. Economic balance of competition maintained by market forces is frequently overturned by the natural formation of a technological monopoly of one company. When it comes to a democratic system: party competition is often a well-balanced process, but, as could be observed in Hungary, sometimes one political powerhouse gets way ahead the others.

The balance of democratic competition has been overturned in many places around the world partly by the explosion of knowledge about how to win elections and stay in power. In the background there is a shadowy process, a quick accumulation of techniques and technologies to influence voters (á la Arthur J. Finkelstein, Cambridge Analytica, Russian-style disinformation, and possibly the use of AI and big data). Gaining popularity is less and less a bottom-up process of selecting the appropriate representative according to voter preferences, and ever more frequently a top-down process of political groups crafting powerful, usually hate-filled narratives to alter those very preferences into new ones to which they can offer easy-solutions. On the other hand, there is the diminishing counterweight of traditional democratic institutions, e.g., the decline of traditional press versus the growing popularity of social media, and with this, the exploding amount of uncontrolled information.

In Hungary, the political runaway, or the exceptional concentration of power in one elite circle, Fidesz and its leader, can be explained by this and some additional factors. Among them are historical coincidences and wrong democratic policy choices; longue durée and short-term causes.

First, there is the historical coincidence that in Hungary the pool of new politicians was very uneven from the democratic beginning. One politician, Viktor Orbán, stood out of the pack as being the smartest, most ambitious, and most talented by far. Coincidentally, again, he is also one without democratic or moral inhibitions. It is hard to measure how exceptional as a politician Viktor Orbán is, but based on anecdotal evidence about the experiences of three top experts of different fields who met him personally, he has a very quick grasp of reality and an almost mystical way of personal charisma. Compared to leading figures of another problem-nation of the region, the Kaczynski brothers, Orbán also shows remarkable ideological flexibility (Berend, 2020).

Second, there were serious problems with the initial democratic design that lacked the necessary tools for institutional checks and balances. In all the other Visegrad countries, moreover, in all East-Central Europe except three post-Soviet states (Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine), a proportional party list electoral system was introduced following 1989. According to some contemporary analysts the fact that the Hungarian political elite agreed on a much less proportional mixed system alone accounts for the failure of the Hungarian democratic transformation (Kozák, 2021). But other institutional counterweights were also missing, probably because the drafters of the new Hungarian constitutional design for were convinced that a strong parliament is the best guarantee for democracy. The president's powers were designed to be weak; there was no upper house of the parliament, no mid-term elections, no simple motion of confidence. (The Constitutional Court was perhaps the only stronghold that could resist a decision of the parliament, but only as long as its powers were not cut back by the two-third majority after the election of 2010.)

Thirdly, a suitable political counterweight was also missing. Up until 2010, Ferenc Gyurcsány was the only Prime Minister who politically survived for a second term. However, he also became seriously discredited as his lie-speech went public. As an additional coincidence, the global financial crisis soon hit.

The fact that there has not been any serious contender against Orbán ever since has to do with the above-mentioned quality asymmetry, and the fact that unpopular Gyurcsány still divides opposition voters. However, the miserable state of the democratic opposition is to a large extent already a cause of Fidesz-manipulation (the careful crafting of unfavourable rules for party politics and even more direct corrupting interventions) and of the counter-selective effect of choices of the electorate.

When looking for reasons why popular sentiment has not yet turned against Fidesz in Hungary it could be tempting to look for cultural characteristics. However, to say that Hungarians are "genetically subservient" is not just a terribly wrong and unacceptable wording by a Hungarian writer. Even if the expression is corrected to "culturally reluctant to rebel", the idea is still incorrect. "Just look at Jungman and Palacky and those others… All sitting down… All gout sufferers! Why don't we have any Kossuths in Prague, seated on rearing horses with their swords drawn?" said Bohumil Hrabal at the end of the 1960s according to historian Karel Bartošek (Bartošek, 1989). The quotation, even if the described Kossuth-statue is imaginary, questions the accuracy of the conciliatory description of the Hungarian historical spirit in an East-Central European comparison.

However, there are other specific Hungarian social-cultural traits shaped by history. The linguistic isolation of Hungary makes it easier to sell any political message about the outside world for home consumption. This is fortified by the century-long victim construction of national history, which also makes people sceptical for liberalism or democracy or any values in politics apart from what feels the expression of "the national interest". There is also a general lack of unifying democratic role models. The Hungarian 20th century is dominated by controversial figures like István Tisza and Mihály Károly, and especially Miklós Horthy and János Kádár, all of whom have staunch supporters but also bitter critics. (Why don't we have respectable Tomas Masaryks in Budapest?) The popular feeling is that essentially all politicians are bad and corrupt, and that they should support the one who is corrupt in their way, and to their benefit.

Liberal democracy has also been poorly marketed by the non-inclusivist nature of neoliberal economic reforms: it was not difficult to portray marketisation, privatisation, deregulation as liberal policies that hurt welfare of the people. This also has to do with a historical coincidence. 1989 happened to have been a global era of neoliberalism, when market was believed to have the magic power to profit everyone. There was no talk of Karl Polányi and the inevitability of counter-movements to protect society from market. Ralf Dahrendorf was also widely misquoted in Hungary as saying that there needs to be six years for economic restructuring (along with 6 months for constitutional change, and 60 years for social and cultural). But, what he really said was that an important condition for a bad-weather-proof democracy is the "general sense that things are looking up as a result of economic reform" and that that is "unlikely to spread before six years have passed" (Dahrendorf, 1990). In Hungary, after those six years, instead of the subscribed necessary optimism, serious austerity measures came.

What follows from all this? What can be done to bring back the balance, to re-establish Hungarian democracy? A logical way could be if Fidesz willingly exercised constraint on its power, but, just as with environmental damage or monopoly of corporations, there are no signs and no real hope for that. Nothing indicates either that it would be weakened by internal decay or by an erosion of popularity due to policy failures: at least its spin doctors could so far explain away major blunders like the dismal handling of Covid or of the rising inflation. So, the only possible option seems to be the formulation of an alternative political power block.

As I discussed earlier, I believe politics today is less about policy-ideas, and more and more about technical expertise of how to influence and convince voters in the age of big data, AI, and fake news. Clarifying the causes for the earlier democratic failure cannot be much guideline to this. Neither can it help in solving the political problem of how to defuse the endless amount of in-built anti-democratic traps that can prevent an election victory of the opposition, or that can easily bring down a new government by mobilising the institutions that were filled with Fidesz-partisans. Nevertheless, they can reveal some of the preconditions and necessary steps for a democratic transition.

As for one, there is the need for a talented, charismatic, and ambitious leader who is not involved in earlier political incidents and is clean from corruption. This candidate should be supported by democratic opposition parties and democratic intellectuals. This means first and foremost that the usual meaningless and crippling public debates should not begin (whether those politicians are traitors who are/aren't ready to cooperate with this-or-that political party, whether they are traitors if they are/aren't ready to take a seat in the parliament, etc.). Enough attack can be expected from Fidesz.

As for the musts when the conditions for a new democracy are there, the new constitutional system should establish strong mechanisms for checks and balances. A new government should promote liberty, equality, and fraternity, in other words it should be socialist, in that it should pursue an economic policy based on inclusion and solidarity, and it should be liberal, in that is should protect human rights and civil liberties, and it should be nationalist, in that it should re-unify the nation and create a happier and more democratically resilient society that is outward and forward looking, and ready to face the common challenges. What is required resembles to what Gyula Szekfű advocated in his series of articles 80 years ago: instead of the national phraseology and instead of unrestrained economic freedom, democratic institutions with a warm-hearted love of and care for every human.

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Zsuzsanna Boda – Ábel Bojár – Dániel Róna[3]:

DEFENDING LIBERALISM AND WINNING OVER THE LEFT-BEHIND IN HUNGARY'S ILLIBERAL REGIME

Introduction: The new spectre haunting Europe?

If right-wing populism is the new spectre haunting Europe in the 21st century, Hungary is surely the place where this spectre managed to crystallize into a coherent set of discursive formula, electoral strategy, a loyal if not subservient political and state apparatus, and last but not least, a stable electoral coalition that from time and again, can be reliably mobilized into action to make a stand against populism's imagined enemies: liberals, immigrants, sexual minorities, the domestic political opposition, the Brussels elite, and international organizations. For all the manifest logical flaws and internal contradictions of Hungarian populism, the formula works beyond doubt and it appears impervious to economic crises, a world-leading Covid-19 death toll, corruption scandals, orgies involving homosexuals, prostitutes, and drugs directly linked to high-level officials of a supposedly Christian-conservative political party[4], international isolation, Orbán's Putin-problem, a creaking education and healthcare system and a litany of other grievances by the liberal opposition that nevertheless fail to coalesce into an organized threat to Viktor Orbán's regime.

It is this failure that this essay uses as a point of departure. The central question we aim to answer is why, despite all the policy and moral failures of four consecutive Fidesz-led governments, the left-liberal opposition is unable to reach beyond around a third of the electorate and bring undecided voters and some of Orbán's more critical supporters under its electoral umbrella. We perfectly recognize that the uneven playing field that the Orbán governments have created deserves a prominent part of the explanation. However, there is only so much to be added to what has been said elsewhere (Magyar, Madlovics, 2022) and we find it analytically reductive to attribute Fidesz' consecutive landslides and the opposition's defeats to the institutional make-up of the regime. We find it more fruitful to build upon the premise that electoral victories are

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4 https://telex.hu/english/2020/12/03/jozsef-szajer-fidesz-scandal-manzheley-brussels-reactions

possible and have been delivered by opponents to incumbent regimes across the world, competing in similarly, if not more, tilted playing fields[5]. In this essay, we thus zoom in on the role that political sociology and electoral geography play behind Orbán's formula (and the opposition's failure) and we seek to propose remedies that the left-liberal opposition should use to counter right-wing populism's undeniable appeal.

In the first part of this essay, we present macro-level data on electoral geography and micro-level data from post-election surveys to describe the core electoral bloc that Fidesz owes its consecutive electoral victories to. Our central insight is that Fidesz's winning electoral formula is not all that different from similar right-wing populist parties in Europe and it is the economic and cultural "losers" of globalisation and European integration that constitute the core audience of populism's call (Kriesi et al, 2008). In the second part of our essay, we present a four-point plan on how the left-liberal opposition needs to counter this call by acknowledging that the socio-demographic and cultural profile that they need to target lies far away from the opposition parties' comfort zone around their Budapest-based headquarters.

Right-wing populism's siren call to the economic left-behind

Right-wing populist leaders exploit the growing importance of national identity and present themselves as the only political force concerned with defending the national interest, which is of course, always subject to their definition and interpretation of convenience. These narratives offer a natural fit with some of the underlying predispositions of populists' core supporters, such as the adherence to traditions more characteristic of rural areas, religion, and traditional ways of life. Also, surveys indicate that those who are less sympathetic to immigration are more likely to support right-wing populist parties (Norris-Inglehart, 2019). More broadly, research shows that ideological agreement with right-wing populist parties on issues of culture and identity is the strongest predictor of voting for them. In addition, in a European context, concerns about the European Union and the perceived loss of national sovereignty have led some people to become more attached to identity issues. Economic deprivation may increase support for populist parties if it triggers a sense of status anxiety, i.e. a feeling that one's social position is deteriorating compared to other cultural groups. When these groups feel threatened, individuals are more likely to vote for populist parties and leaders (Gidron-Hall, 2017). Research on the subject argues that the rhetorical distinction between 'the people' and 'the corrupt elite' makes populism in Western Europe a common stance, almost by default, among people who are overwhelmed

5 "Repel and Rebuild: Expanding the Playbook Against Populism," accessed April 18, 2023, https://www.institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/repel-and-rebuild-expanding-playbook-against-populism.

and disaffected by social change, who are disadvantaged and economically vulnerable, who feel that their voice does not count in politics, and those who have struggled to find a positive social identity (Spruyt et al., 2016).

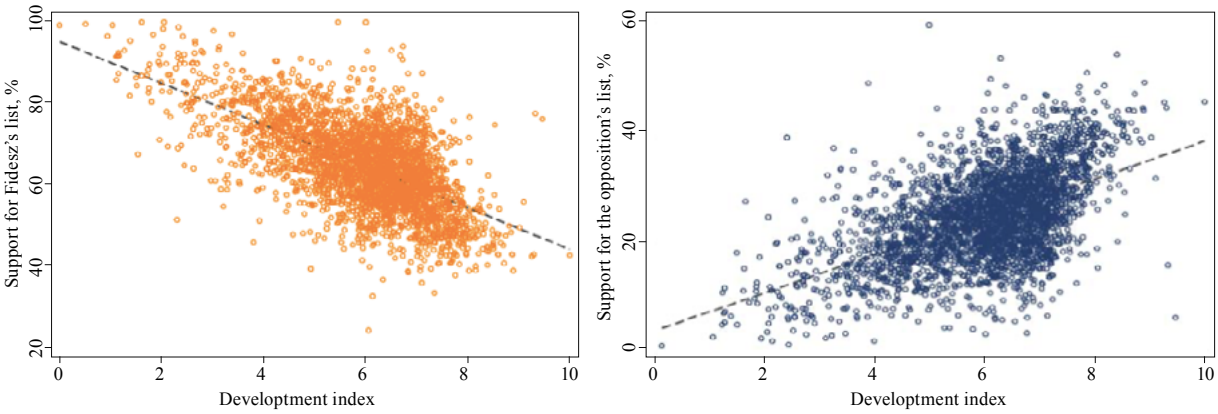
Many papers from recent years, including 21 Research Center's research after the election in April of 2022[6] echo these patterns in Hungary: voters coming from poorer areas are more likely to support Fidesz. The more marginalized a Hungarian locality, the higher the expected support for the governing party (and the lower the support for the opposition). This correlation, which already existed during previous elections, has only strengthened during the last election cycle. It is no exaggeration to say that in political terms there are now "two Hungarys", which goes far beyond the Budapest-countryside dichotomy that has become entrenched in public discourse.

To illustrate this pattern, we have constructed a development index of all Hungarian settlements based on the following variables: the share of the population aged 65 and over in the total population, the per capita income of the municipality in million forints, the share of job seekers in the population, the share of the population working in the public sector, the per capita tax base of the population, and finally and most importantly the level of education, measured by the gap between the share of university graduates and the share of the population with a maximum of 8 years of primary education. The data for these variables were downloaded from the KSH TIMEA database and refer to the most recent values from 2020. The only exception is the educational attainment data, which is only available from the 2011 census on a settlement-level basis.

While in our original study we also fit multivariate models to estimate the impact of the aforementioned variables separately, for the purposes of this paper we restrict ourselves to the development index to illustrate the economic development - electoral geography nexus. As it clearly emerges from Figure 1, the more developed a settlement is, the less popular Fidesz is likely to be there, and the higher vote share the opposition could expect (Figure 1.). In the most developed settlements, the two lists are expected to have comparable levels of support at around 40%, while in the most marginalized villages, there was no threat whatsoever to Fidesz's dominance. In those places, Fidesz's expected support was above 80% or even 90%, while the opposition barely reached double-digit figures.

6 https://21kutatokozpont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/valasztas_utan_elemzes.pdf

Figure 1: The development index of municipalities and the degree of support for Fidesz and the opposition in 2022. Source: Two Hungary: electoral performance between 2018 and 2022 - published by 21 Research Center, 2022



As scholars of electoral behaviour well know, however, macro-level relationships can only tell us so much about the individual level drivers of party preference (the infamous ecological fallacy). We thus also examined the relationship based on a post-election survey, specifically focusing on the social distribution of electoral support for Fidesz. Instead of the commonly used bivariate relationships, we fit a multivariate logit model where all the standard socio-demographic variables were simultaneously used as predictors of voting propensity for the ruling party. We also allowed for interaction terms in the analysis so that the estimated impact of a given socio-demographic variable was allowed to vary across different categories of the other variables.

Accordingly, the second figure illustrates the predicted level of electoral support for Fidesz (keeping in mind the 53% benchmark as their national vote share). We can clearly conclude that support propensities are lowest among those with a high level of education, especially among young people and those living in Budapest and county capitals. As a logical corollary, the highest concentration of Fidesz supporters is among the older age groups, especially among those who only have an elementary education. It is also important to note that the gap between high school graduates and university graduates is much lower than the gap between those with and without a high-school degree. The main message from this heatmap that we present below is clear: there are indeed two Hungaries as far as the social distribution of the electorate is concerned: an "orange one" concentrated among older, low-educated voters in the countryside and a "blue one" concentrated among younger, high-educated voters in Budapest and county capitals.

Figure 2: The Probability that a person with a given demographic profile voted for Fidesz (in %). Abbreviations: BP - Budapest, CCS - City with county status, VLG - Village. Colors: Orange - Fidesz supporters, Blue: Opposition supporters. Source: Medián's first post-election survey after the 2022's Parliamentary Election.

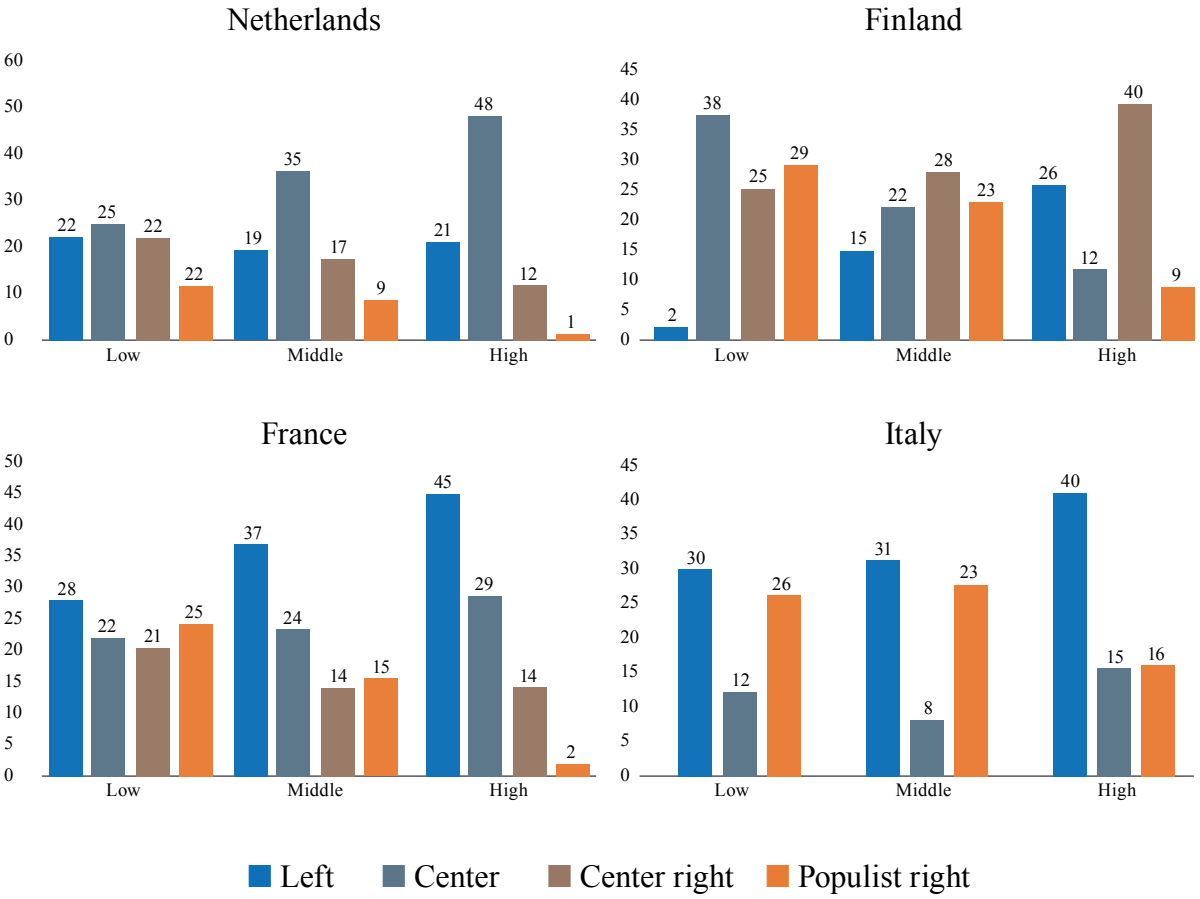
		Primary School or Less				Apprenticeship, Vocational degrees				High School degree				Higher education degree			
		VLG	City	CCS	BP	VLG	City	CCS	BP	VLG	City	CCS	BP	VLG	City	CCS	BP
18-29	Male	69	62	58	52	32	44	40	32	37	30	26	20	33	27	24	17
	Female	76	70	66	61	40	53	49	40	45	38	34	26	42	34	31	23
30-39	Male	71	63	60	54	33	46	42	33	38	31	28	21	35	28	31	18
	Female	77	71	68	63	41	55	51	41	47	39	35	27	43	36	32	24
40-49	Male	83	77	74	70	49	63	59	49	55	47	43	34	51	44	39	31
	Female	87	83	81	77	58	71	67	58	64	56	52	43	60	52	48	39
50-64	Male	81	76	72	68	47	60	56	47	53	45	41	32	49	41	37	29
	Female	86	82	79	75	56	68	65	56	61	54	49	40	58	50	46	37
65+	Male	82	76	73	68	48	61	57	48	54	46	41	33	50	42	38	29
	Female	86	82	79	76	57	69	66	57	62	27	50	41	59	51	47	37

How unique are these patterns to Hungary? Are there broader international forces at play to which Hungarian politics is merely a sideshow? What is certain is that the rise of populism in Europe and the United States is well documented. Similar transformations have occurred in the electoral space, not just in the UK during the Brexit process and in the US during Trump's presidency, but all across EU member states, albeit with less direct consequences for the respective polities.

The EU is not only challenged by Trump, Putin, and Brexit. Its own member states' political establishments are also hanging in the balance with right-wing populists seeking to upend the once stable party systems frozen along Rokkanian cleavages . In some places, the old party systems are already a thing of the past. The parties that ran Italy until the end of the cold war don't exist anymore and the country is now led by the right-wing populist government of Giorgia Meloni (who, herself, used to be an overt apologist of Benito Mussolini). Spain now has five national parties instead of two, and one of them hails from the far-right end of the spectrum speaking the language of an openly Francoist nostalgia, with a constitutional crisis constantly looming between the government and the regions. In France a new movement has emerged to displace some of the old mainstream parties of the 5th Republic: the Lá République En Marche, led by Emmanuel Macron, while the National Rally, the National Front's domesticated heir led by Marine Le Pen is patiently waiting in the shadows. Even in Germany, despite the weight

of history extending the lifespan of the cordon sanitaire against extremist forces, a populist right-wing movement achieved impressive election results in recent elections. All this has been facilitated by a deep crisis of identity inflicting traditional, long-reigning parties (Balfour, 2019). According to political scientist Peter Mair, "The age of party democracy has passed. Although the parties themselves remain, they have become so disconnected from the wider society, and pursue a form of competition that is so lacking in meaning, that they no longer seem capable of sustaining democracy in its present form" (Mair, 2013: 16).

Figure 3: Party support by highest educational qualification of voters in the Netherlands, Finland, France, and Italy (in %). Source: European Social Survey (ESS, Round 10)



The emergence of right-wing populist forces has gone hand-in-hand with the transformation of the electorate. Traditional class identities are eroding, with many working-class and low-educated people labelled by the urban cosmopolitan elite and professional classes as being irrational, closed-minded, and fundamentally unfit to cope with the challenges of the digital age. This can lead to a secondary source of vulnerability: a perception of insecurity and stigma of social identity. Electoral studies show that less educated people are much more likely to vote for populist parties. Those with lower levels of education also report higher levels of political dissatisfac-

tion, feelings of ineffectiveness in politics (i.e. the perception that one's voice does not count), and lower levels of political interest. As a result, there are considerable differences in support for populism by educational attainment, not only in Hungary but all across Europe (Spruyt et al., 2016). We used European Social Survey data to examine the distribution of party support across different levels of education (Figure 3.). This indicates that in each of the countries studied[7], lower educated people had higher propensities to support right-wing populist parties, and middle and mostly the highest-educated people had the highest proportion of left-wing support. Essentially, therefore, the socio-demographic profile of the average Fidesz voter is not unique by any measure.

The way forward

Against this backdrop, we propose a set of recommendations that liberal democratic forces should follow in order to mount a serious challenge to populism in Hungary. Our starting point is that if the opposition were to pose a credible electoral threat, they must find a way to connect with the core of Fidesz' electoral base: the economic and social left-behind. We must emphasize, at this point, that we do not claim that a strict adherence to these recommendations would have ensured a tight electoral race in the 2022 parliamentary elections, let alone an outright opposition victory. We rather see these recommendations as a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a successful political alternative to Orbán's regime.

In the next part of our analysis, we discuss some of the methods that the literature considers useful in reducing the impact of populist communication. Most of the opposition's communication was vague and distant for ordinary citizens, revolving around issues that did not directly affect their lives, such as the introduction of the euro, political accountability, or the creation of an independent ministry of education[8].

7 Finland, France, Italy, Netherlands.

8 "Can They Ever Win? The Past and Future Prospects for an Opposition Victory in Hungary's Competitive Authoritarian Regime. Review of Democracy," April 30, 2022, https://revdem.ceu.edu/2022/04/30/prospects-for-an-opposition-victory-in-hungarys-competitive-authoritarian-regime/.

Issue selection and central message

Populism is harmful to democracy because it reinforces political polarisation, hindering an effective aggregation of social groups' interest and finding resolutions to zero-sum games and allocative dilemmas. Liberal democratic actors should pursue strategies to reduce political polarisation, including by shaping people's perceptions of norms and avoiding an over-reliance on 'educating' the other side. Research shows that efforts to simply present people with "facts", or to break down echo chambers by introducing them to views that contradict their pre-existing beliefs, can be counterproductive and actually increase rather than reduce polarization[9]. Parties should seek to mobilize citizens to disrupt populists' efforts to exploit the gap between citizens and parties. Party leaders also need to aspire to integrate programmatic policies into a broader narrative about society. Through explanation, political parties can make people less vulnerable to populist promises to preserve the status quo and more willing to support policy change. The key when choosing issues is for parties to select topics that affect the lives of a wider audience, rather than distant and abstract issues, such as foreign policy, or the rule of law. Issues affecting everyday life - the so-called "kitchen-table issues", such as the economy, healthcare, and education - should thus take centre-stage. An additional consideration in issue selection is the notion of issue-ownership: liberal forces are likely to be more successful with issues that they enjoy a natural association with in voters' minds (such as education), rather than in issues that populists are seen to be better able to manage (such as immigration or crime).

Right-wing populist parties appeal to the values of their voters, for example in Viktor Orbán's anti-immigration narrative, where he often contrasts "European Christian values" with "migrant crime". Likewise, liberal actors need to anchor their message in core values or enduring beliefs that orient the attitudes. For example, framing migration policy in terms of acceptance and the long-term outlook is more effective than framing it purely as an economic issue or talking about it in technical terms, such as how many migrants to allow in or what border-control practices are the most effective. Likewise, discussions of economic issues should be anchored in core themes of solidarity and social justice rather than repeating disappointing economic data over and over again.

Moreover, liberal forces should also try to avoid the trap that constitutes one of populism's greatest weaknesses. Populist parties define most problems as urgent crises but rarely offer solutions to solve them. Liberal actors thus need to transcend problem definition and propose solid and effective solutions. The literature suggests that people are most moved by actions "that they see themselves participating in". Solutions should include a call to action that is feasible for the target audience. The narrative of populist parties often includes conspiracy theories or

9 "Combating Populism. Center for a New American Security (En-US)," accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/combating-populism.

manufactured conceptions of the enemy, and it is important for liberal actors not to fall into the trap of reacting to these. If responses do become necessary, the most important thing is to avoid repeating the fact that they wish to refute. Studies show that the more times people have been told something, the more likely they are to believe it. It is important to disprove accusations without repeating them. When liberal democratic actors resort to blame attribution, it might reinforce the populist idea of a "corrupt elite", underscoring the right-wing populist narrative. Blame should not be ruled out entirely, but efforts should be made not to use it too broadly. Research has shown that such blame-strategy works best when specific actors are identified for a particular action, rather than when the government is blamed in general[10].

The use of language

Second, an appropriate choice of the central message needs to be delivered in a language that is accessible to liberal democratic forces' target audience. A typical populist strategy is to use the rhetoric of "the people" to emphasize a radical break with previous governmental styles. In the struggle against illiberal populism, the way liberal democratic actors talk about contemporary challenges - the words and the frames - will also play an important role. Liberal democratic actors should aspire to create unifying and ambitious narratives, use accusations sparingly, deliberately demolish myths, highlight solutions and emphasize their effectiveness, and avoid adopting the language of right-wing populists. Candidates who mimic populist rhetoric are likely to lose according to studies (Nietsche-Cirillo, 2021). Essentially, liberals need to find a language of "us" in order to create a sense of community and identity without reproducing the adversarial and oftentimes militant vocabulary of populists.

Unnderpinning all this should be a deliberate effort to use simple language, borrowing from the populists' best practices. Liberal forces must remember that their target audience is citizens without a high-school degree, far-removed from the intellectual bubbles of Budapest and some of the larger prospering cities of the country, such as Győr, Pécs, or Szeged. The language they choose must, accordingly, reflect this reality. Simple word choices, simple and short sentences, are therefore crucial. They are not there to win the battle of ideas. They are there to win the battle for hearts and the battle of likeability and affinity. An example to illustrate this point would be to use of the word "justice" and its commonly used synonyms rather than abstract notions of rule of law. Similarly, when choosing to discuss economic issues, technical terms (even as commonly known ones as "economic growth") must go and notions relating to people's pay-packets (poverty, salaries, prices, affordability, jobs) must come to replace them.

10 "Combating Populism". Center for a New American Security (En-US).

Finally, liberal actors need to use words sparingly in their communiqués, especially the written ones. When one looks at an opposition social media post today, one cannot help feeling that its intended target is the own intellectual peers or maybe just one stratum below. Liberal democratic actors need to aim for a much less privileged segment of society that is largely alienated from politics and is, accordingly, exposed to political content only a few minutes a day. Social media posts that exceed one, maybe two short paragraphs thus likely also exceed their attention span. Likewise, political slogans and billboard content with multiple clauses and sub-sentences are likely to sink in much slower than ones with a simple message that can be conveyed in a few words. As a positive example, regardless of the merits of its substantive content, Szeged Mayor László Botka's "Let the rich pay" campaign was a step in the right direction.

Last but not least, for voters to be receptive to political alternatives, first they need to feel that they are no longer looked down upon or rejected by the opposition. By being receptive to all voters, regardless of whether they support the government, the opposition can undermine the populist's claim to be the sole embodiment of the will of the people. When the opposition avoids being confrontational and instead focuses on responding to the expressed concerns of voters, it defuses populist polarisation tactics, such as branding members of the opposition as "traitors" or "enemies of the nation"[11]. The use of language in how liberals talk about underprivileged citizens is thus crucial. A subtle balance between respectfulness, lack of condescension and empathy must be found which at the same time comes across authentic rather than fabricated by Budapest-based PR agencies.

Consistency of communication

Third, a carefully selected and limited set of kitchen table-issues, simple use of words and sentences and short written communiqués need to be weaved together under a consistent communication strategy. To win back voters, liberal democratic parties need to reclaim the initiative in the public debate instead of responding to the solutions offered by right-wing populists[12]. Liberal actors need to focus on their own political agenda. This implies that politicians need to put forward a proactive agenda, rather than reacting to the agenda of right-wing populists.

A pro-active agenda mostly concentrates on a selected few issues rather than trying to counter the government's approach in all issue areas. It is of course tempting to follow the government in the salient issues of the day because that is what presumably most people and the media

11 "The Pushback Against Populism: Running on 'Radical Love' in Turkey," Journal of Democracy, accessed April 17, 2023, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-pushback-against-populism-running-on-radical-love-in-turkey/.

12 "How to Beat Populism," *POLITICO* (blog), August 25, 2016, https://www.politico.eu/article/how-to-beat-populism-donald-trump-brexit-refugee-crisis-le-pen/.

care about. But liberals must resist this temptation and stick to a disciplined course of selective communication instead. What the issue area might be largely depends on the particular party at hand and the particular audience that party tries to address (for instance, the central message may be very different for a liberal-minded party, such as Momentum than for a more left-leaning party, such as DK, or LMP). The point is that rather than talking little about many things, they need to talk a lot about a few things. This seemingly trivial advice was largely ignored in the 2022 campaign. In a constricted media space where opposition actors have much fewer opportunities to get their message out than their government counterparts, the strategic focus on a few selected issues becomes all the more important.

Even within that narrow set of issue areas that liberals address, the communication strategy must try to create as many discursive linkages between them as possible. The main objective here is to avoid overwhelming the audience with seemingly disparate issues and try to tell a story that ties them all together. For instance, the dire state of the healthcare sector should be linked as closely as possible to economic underperformance (and corruption). Likewise, the severe shortage of teaching staff in public schools needs to be related to inflation, the erosion of the value of wages in the public sector and the increasingly hopeless financial prospect of teachers as a result. The point here is that voters do not want to hear many stories from politicians. They want to hear one compelling one.

Politicians' profile

Verbal communication, of course, is only a part of the story that a politician tells its audience. Equally important are symbolic traits, personalities, and networks of local politicians. Most voters look to politicians for competence and a sense of control. The limits of mainstream politicians have become increasingly clear to voters, trying to explain unpopular policies on the grounds of the irreversibility of globalization and the lack of alternatives. This did not work in economically difficult times, creating economic anxiety in voters that populists could turn to their advantage[13].

In the Hungarian context, it is crucial for a politician to expose the parts of his or her profile that will not only win the sympathy of the Budapest elite but will also transform the image of the politician who may have been perceived as too 'intellectual' and too distant from the rural population's problems. The ideal candidate is close to their constituency and does not noticeably "stand out" from it. As a positive international example, Rafał Trzaskowski, Mayor of Warsaw and a candidate in the 2020 Polish presidential elections has shown that an "urban

13 "How to Beat Populism."

elite" politician can connect with rural voters and came very close to defeating PiS' candidate Andrzej Duda. He has campaigned across the country, with messages tailor-made to the needs of the specific region, targeting the problems there (Nietsche-Cirillo, 2021). An example closer to home is the landslide re-election of Jászberény Mayor László Budai running under an independent civil society banner but de facto supported by opposition parties. The candidate was widely seen as deeply embedded in the local community and as a sitting mayor he had both the competence and the credibility to represent local citizens' interest. Of course, the liberal opposition is severely limited in fielding suitable candidates across the country. However, they must make a conscious effort to nurture local candidates who are embedded in local communities and prioritize them in the allocation of party resources.

Conclusion

The rise in support for right-wing populist parties should not be attributed to people necessarily favouring extremist policies and leaders over their mainstream and moderate competitors. Instead, it should be viewed as a response to a growing perception of social and economic insecurity. Looking ahead, despite limited chances of electoral success, electoral competition and broad opposition cooperation remain the most effective recipe against illiberal regimes[14]. As a part of this cooperation, defenders of liberal democracy must find a way to connect with voters who have drifted into the embrace of right-wing populists in recent decades.

Liberal actors must also provide a vision for tackling future challenges such as artificial intelligence and the future of work. Addressing these fundamental challenges will be crucial for the long-term resilience of democracy. Today's populist parties have succeeded in turning things on their heads and creating conditions that favor their illiberal ideas and agendas. Liberal democratic forces must regain the initiative at this point[15].

In the Hungarian context, we tried to put forward a 4-point plan on what "regaining the initiative" might mean in practice. A large part of the plan concerns communication. We argued that the liberal opposition to Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime needs to adopt a consistent and coherent communication strategy that is focused on a very limited set of so-called "kitchen-table" issues conveyed in an easily accessible language. Moreover, this communication strategy needs to be delivered by politicians who are locally embedded and are widely seen as authentic and credible voices of the community. Whether this proves sufficient for defeating Hungary's illiberal regime is an open question for the future. But uncertain prospects for success are no excuse for not trying.

14 "Can They Ever Win?"

15 "Combating Populism | Center for a New American Security (En-US)," accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/combating-populism.

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Andrea Virág[16]:

WHERE IS THE OPPOSITION?

In parliamentary democracies politics is mostly about the competition between the forces in government and the forces who are in opposition. In my opinion, in that regards Hungary is not a classic parliamentary democracy as none of the important political conflict is between Fidesz-KDNP and the opposition parties. Unless the opposition is able to change this they will continue to struggle at elections. Fidesz-KDNP has been in government in Hungary with a two-thirds supermajority since 2010. One might think that the government, which is increasingly isolating the country from the European Union and pulling it more and more towards the East, is experiencing a steady decline in popularity, but this is not the case. The last election, in 2022, was won by Fidesz-KDNP with the largest margin of victory in its history, despite the opposition parties running united against it. For the opposition, too, a historic defeat led to a disintegration of unity, further slimming their chances of a future victory. With Fidesz's unique stance on the war in Ukraine and the rising inflation, it might have been in the cards that Fidesz-KDNP's support would start to fall, but, while there was some decline, it was nowhere near the level that would have been expected in such a situation. The reason behind this phenomena is exactly the fact that the opposition is not able the challenge Fidesz, instead lets Fidesz to blame every economic problem on outside factors like the war and "Brussels".

The bystander opposition

One of the biggest failures of the opposition in Hungary today and in the last decade is that it is not proactive in politics, it is not a real alternative to the current system. It does not present itself as a real and united front against the Orbán regime, but as a spectator political group, always reacting to the government's new and sometimes quite shocking moves, but very rarely offering a real solution against it. For this reason, the government does not have to confront the opposition, but can instead attack groups that are much less capable of defending themselves. In the past twelve years, the government has targeted civilians, George Soros, LGBTQ people, teachers, the European Union, immigrants, and so on. It is important to see that from the beginning, from 2010 onwards, Fidesz had external enemies, and in a way, they had no other realistic choice: they were faced with the fact that after the first two-thirds

16 Strategic Director, Republikon Institute, Budapest.

victory, the opposition was devastated by the electoral defeat, opposition politics lost its focus and substance, and there was nothing for Fidesz to react to. They were to weak to be real challengers. Thus began the search for external enemies, even importing Western enemy images unknown to Hungarian voters less familiar with politics, starting with the IMF, then immigrants, George Soros, Brussels and the list goes on.

It is important to note that there have been moments when the opposition has managed to be proactive and dominate public life over the past 13 years. After the 2019 municipal elections, the opposition achieved significant successes, especially in 'reconquering' Budapest, and gained public power in several other, major Hungarian cities too, thus gaining the attention of the government, and especially the government's propaganda media. Later, in 2021, the opposition primaries led to a massive mobilization of voters by the opposition parties, unprecedented in the Orbán regime, and in that moment the mood for change skyrocketed, which was strongly reflected in opinion polls. In those moments, Hungarian politics hit the democratic minimum: the governing party reacted to the opposition, thus there was interaction between the two sides. This is further proof that, however difficult the situation of

the opposition, if they can give their messages substance and mobilize their own camp, they can become a force capable of shaping public discourse. In countless cases since the 2022 elections, the opposition could have played such a role. The new tax law, the issue of teachers and education, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the economic crisis, were all issues that the opposition could have helped frame, but on none of these important issues has there been any discourse or debate between the government and the opposition, and the government has always projected onto external opponents. However, none of those issues became a conflict between the opposition and the government, instead the government fought with teacher's unions, civil organisations, "Brussels", the United States and other European leaders. None of them are running against Fidesz in Hungarian elections.

Unfortunately, the practice is that instead of the opposition focusing on shaping the political agenda, there seems to be much more infighting within them, a battle over who should be the leader of the opposition, who's the greenest, the most (or least) liberal, and how one can discredit the other. This has a lot of negatives for two reasons: on the one hand, the real substance of opposition politics is lost, and on the other hand, infighting provides the perfect chance for the ruling party to prove that this opposition is incapable of running a country. After all, if someone cannot even keep order in their own party, their own coalition, how can we put a country in their hands, right? That said, taking step zero, cooperation of opposition parties is not enough.

Substance over form

An important lesson of the 2022 election is that although in the autumn of 2021, for the first time in Hungary's history, the opposition parties were able to hold a national primary election, and on this basis, nominate an opposition candidate in each single mandate district, prepare a joint candidate list and to choose a joint candidate for prime minister, the emphasis did not go beyond this technical step. The opposition was able to attract political attention when the primaries were held, and it was clear that their support was growing during this period[17], but once the primary process was over, this attention faded because they could not come up with coherent proposals for solutions to the problems that were affecting everyone, they could not come up with policy innovations in a timely manner, and they could not be proactive in shaping political discourse. The government didn't have to react to opposition movements, or compete with them, but continued to do what it had been doing: playing politics based on fear.

A month and a half before the elections, the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out, and all the government had to do was to say that the opposition would send Hungarian soldiers to the Ukrainian front. Make no mistake, the government did not have a policy program for the post-election period, but it had a very well-established and much-tested communication (propaganda) machine that has never let them down. The opposition, while they had funds and media presence, it came nowhere near to what the government had available. They could not respond to it, they could not overcome it, they could not break through it with their own message. Maybe partly because they didn't have one. Fidesz-KDNP won the election without prime minister Viktor Orbán ever once mentioning the name of his main challenger, Péter Márki-Zay[18]. Yet, it's clear that the Orbán government's approach to Russia's war has failed at European and global level. Yet in Hungary, we see that a significant part of the population has bought into the government's communication on war[19] and still sees Hungary as a victim, ostracised by the countries of Europe and the world. This phenomenon is not surprising, however, as authoritarian and populist regimes are characterized by employing the tools of gaslighting and post-truth, based on manipulation that appeals to emotions. The government's gaslighting effect on the war was that the opposition would take the country to war, while the post-truth was that the Ukrainians were abusing the rights of Hungarians in Ukraine and killing Russians in droves in the breakaway territories, so essentially, they provoked the war and everything that is happening now is their fault. It is an interesting question whether the opposition can be held accountable for failing to break through this wall of (sur)reality, but perhaps it is worth wondering whether the consequence of their inaction over the last 12 years is that the truth has been replaced by perception and fears.

17 http://republikon.hu/elemzesek,-kutatasok/21-10-08-szept-kvk.aspx

18 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQMt9j1wdv0

19 https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=3107

Visibility must be found

The opposition is not in an easy position when it comes to getting messages to the people, that's a fact. The media market in Hungary is clearly tilted in favor of the government, and the so-called "Facebook warrior" Megafon also spends forint billions a year discrediting the opposition, so it's clear that the narrative of the governing parties reaches the electorate from many more directions than the opposition. Yet, I have to think that this is not the main problem, but the aforementioned lack of proactivity, common, well-constructed messages and unity.

For the opposition to have any chance against the government in a next election, even in the municipal elections due in 2024, step zero is for the opposition parties to unite, that's a hard reality. But that is not enough, the opposition cannot stop at technical steps, opposition politics cannot be just about who steps down where and for whom. Opposition politics must be politically charged, not just anti-government, but also pro-electorate. They need to address issues, whether locally or nationally, that are not part of the government's communications, issues that are important but not given enough prominence. These can be very diverse, social as well as economic issues, issues affecting minorities, issues affecting young people, the elderly, women, men, in fact it doesn't matter what the issue is (although opposition parties need to be careful in selecting their agenda), but it needs to be made a matter of public discourse and solutions need to be proposed. In this case, it may be worthwhile for the opposition to work with NGOs to amplify a message, even gaining media attention.

The other case is when we are talking about a country-wide problem that is part of the government's communication. There have been countless cases recently where the opposition parties have had some kind of reaction to these, but they have been weak and not united. We can think here of record inflation, the new tax law, the targeting of teachers, the suspension of EU funds, the war between Russia and Ukraine, Finland and Sweden joining NATO and a whole range of other things that would have caused a huge outcry in other European democracies, but in Hungary were sufficient for just a few demonstrations. In none of these cases has the opposition been able to put forward any communication on the subject that would have got people's attention. They all made their points, but as soon as there was another move by Fidesz, they moved on to criticising the newest thing. There are no issues that are given enough prominence and sustained for a long enough time. It is as if the next problem comes along and the previous one goes away. Of course, it does not go away. However, in this case, the opposition has to be selective and highlight the most important issues, the ones that affect the most people.

Who are they really?

So, what the opposition lacks most is its own identity. The opposition cannot make a living by saying that they are the challengers of Viktor Orbán, the "Non-Orbán". People need to see what 'non-Orbán' looks like. They need to develop a positive self-definition that includes a common goal, a common ground, and a promise to the voters that they all agree on and can identify with. It is a scientifically accepted fact that negative campaigning is bad for democratic functioning[20] and has a demobilizing effect[21], which is not what the opposition, which already struggles to mobilise its voters, wants. Therefore, being anti-Orbán in itself does not serve the interest of the parties or the citizens. Instead, one must ask, what is it that voters can identify with? Obviously with proposals and objectives that make their lives better.

At the moment, the opposition has no common image, voters have some idea about all the parties, but it may not reflect reality, and if they think about the general opposition, they see only a confused political mass in which they do not know what the direction, the objectives or the message is, and therefore they cannot see it as a real alternative. There is no real political character to the opposition parties, they have no core issues, they have no positive messages, they have no universally visible plan for what they would do with the country if they came to power, after the 2021 primaries, they wasted so much time producing a colorless, odorless policy program (which mysteriously disappeared from their website two weeks after the election) that their voters forgot how uplifting it was to see after the primaries that something could be done, together. It is not enough to say that the health care system or the education system is bad, it is not enough to say for the umpteenth time that there is an incredibly high level of corruption in Hungary, you cannot win elections with that, because such a campaign is always about Fidesz and Viktor Orbán, not about those who the opposition voters are expected to root for.

20 https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00233.x

21 https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/does-attack-advertising-demobilize-the-electorate/1C63CF214B59466F29FA08E4ABB69292

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Enikő Albert[22]:

RURAL HUNGARY

In my presentation, I will discuss in detail the types of political affiliations that can be found among rural governing party voters, and what characterizes their worldview and media consumption habits. I will examine what narratives, if any, they encounter that differ from pro-government propaganda, what kind of relationship they have with opposition politicians, and whether they are receptive to worldviews that differ from propaganda. I will present in detail the arguments of voters I encountered as a journalist travelling the countryside, and, finally, I will seek answers to the question of whether there seems to be a successful counter-strategy to the Fidesz narrative.

Composition of the electorate

As a reporter for a national weekly newspaper, I often go to the countryside to do interviews and reports, so I have some insight into the political preferences and worldview of people living in the countryside. In the course of my work, I often visit disadvantaged regions and encounter a lot of extreme poverty. On several occasions, I have seen that the most ardent supporters of Fidesz are like the fans of a football team: they form an emotional community. Because what is a hard-core supporter like? He sticks by his team in all circumstances, not just when it's winning, but also when the news is bad. Success brings them together but they also stick together in the bad times.

If we project this picture onto the electorate, we can say that these persons are the Fidesz fanatics, the hard core. The confidence of this political camp is not shaken by corruption, a crisis in livelihood or a deteriorating standard of living. Whatever bad news they get about the leader or his team, they will find an explanation. As in the stands, they form an emotional community to which they want to belong, even if there are occasional problems. Their bonds are strong and unbreakable, being part of their identity. They will not be disappointed in the party even if their standard of living deteriorates, and I have observed that many people explain deteriorating conditions by saying that they themselves are to blame. I have met many people in disadvantaged areas who praise, for example, the government's family policy, while the upbringing and care of their children is a daily problem for them. They say that the government is not to blame for

22 Journalist, Magyar Hang, Budapest.

their disadvantaged situation that they are trying to help, but that they cannot take advantage of it because of their own mistakes. Similarly, there are many in these areas who, in the context of the teachers' protests, are berating teachers or Brussels, when they cannot see that their children are receiving an increasingly poor education.

Their attachment is often personal, specifically to the Prime Minister. They do not even question whether Fidesz's current message is true and credible: they accept everything without criticism. If Viktor Orbán said it, it can only be true. What confirms it? Clearly, it is the propaganda that the government is constantly broadcasting.

Through the Fidesz-dominated media empire, various successes are broadcast non-stop, be they sporting successes, international scientific successes (although usually achieved by a scientist who has moved away from Hungary because of the difficulties) or simple, stupid platitudes. They help the electorate feel that, despite the difficulties; they can hold their heads high and be part of a successful community.

What about outside this bubble? The crowd that comes after the core voters is more loosely affiliated, they don't take the affiliation to Fidesz for granted, they always need a reason, which they typically find, or propaganda offers them on a platter, regularly developing central messages and then targeting them with well-constructed campaigns. They are the ones who say, "I'm not a blind Fidesz voter, but let's face it, the government has handled the migrant issue, the corona virus issue, so well!" The cuts in rents are also an important part of their argument. They add that the opposition has not come up with any good ideas during the crises, they are just clowns, they could not have handled these situations.

Then come the so-called fringe voters of Fidesz. They are typically low-educated, apolitical people living in small rural villages, often young, who are not engaged in public life. They only raise their heads when it seems that an important event could have a direct impact on their lives. Such as the outbreak of the war or the epidemic. Given that they are not involved in politics or public affairs, they only hear the messages in the political noise when loud, strong messages are sent to them directly. How do we know when the government is targeting them? It's when hearing campaign messages that seem unacceptable, primitive and simplistic to the extreme. For example: 'If you vote for the opposition, they will take your son or husband to war' or 'The opposition would supply weapons to the Ukrainians and thus drag Hungary into war'.

Their view of the world, their media consumption

Their party preferences and their worldview are extremely influenced by past family traumas, especially under communism. As my interviewee, a retired teacher from a small town in Northern Hungary, mentions in a series of articles published in the weekly Hungarian Voice: *"My family was at the mercy of the communist regime. My intellectual father could only get a job in the mines. Neither my brother nor I were allowed to continue our education, both of us having grown up and graduated while working. I would be dishonouring my parents' memory by voting for the left."*

Among rural voters, Christian-conservative values and a desire for order are also strong. One young interviewee said she felt the opposition lacked a solid set of values and simply liked to focus on what they thought were fashionable issues, such as gender issues.

„They are stretching the boundaries of order", he mentioned. It is important to stress that the expression of Christian values is not the same as religiosity, church attendance, which is decreasing in Hungary. However, the government's policy has nothing to do with real Christianity, not even cultural Christianity. One only has to think of the way it stigmatizes and attacks certain social groups (refugees, members of the LGBTQ group) from time to time. This is in stark contrast to the Church's teaching on human dignity.

Fidesz has completely encroached on the Hungarian national sentiment, on the traditional Hungarian symbolism, saying that they alone represent the national interest. In the countryside, this has a particularly strong cohesive force, to the extent that it is difficult to counter it. My experience is that the myth of sacrifice also works well in rural areas. A recurring element in Viktor Orbán's speeches and communications is his emphasis on the fact that we Hungarians are special, no other nation has suffered as much as we have in the course of our history. I often hear elements of this myth echoed by people I talk to in the countryside, and it is also an excellent foundation for our battles with Brussels. Why should we cooperate with the West when we have been abandoned throughout our history!

As far as representing values is concerned, I often hear: 'Fidesz has a solid set of values and a vision for the long term. What is the opposition doing? They take up issues that they think are fashionable, such as gender issues, and their vision is simply to replace Viktor Orbán." As I mentioned, even corruption is considered acceptable. A rural intellectual once told me that he is not favourable to the Lőrinc Mészáros (oligarch/courtier) phenomenon either, but if through his wealth, Hungarian capital is kept in the country and can be used to finance families. Why not? It is worth it. Or another frequent comment: 'what corruption? You don't hear much about anyone being prosecuted for corruption. But in Brussels, there are corruption cases, just think of the clothes and jewellery worn by MEPs!"

Many people point out that that Fidesz has the ability to create a community. Beyond the capital, the former spaces of community life have been broken up, people are looking for points of connection, and the community offered by Fidesz, although it sometimes proves virtual and fleeting, seems to offer a solution of a kind.

In rural areas, for many people regime change meant a loss of living standards and security, there is little individual experience of success. Crises create uncertainty, which people find hard to bear. In such situations, traditional values tend to be the mainstay, and they become more conservative, and right-wing populism takes advantage of this.

Media consumption

In many rural homes, especially among older people, M1 or Kossuth Radio, dominated by propaganda, is a constant background noise, and these people spend a significant part of their time listening to the radio and watching TV. They have been socialized to believe that what is said on TV must be true. If someone comes forward with information that differs from the centrally broadcast narrative, the response is, “But it’s on TV!”

They are reassured by simple, clear messages, a coherent explanation of the world. When I ask them if they switch to other channels, they say that if they do, it confuses them. They get confused: how do they know who to believe? For decades, their main source of information has been the television. Even those who try to get information from several places read the county newspaper, watch M1, listen to Kossuth Radio, and they think they get the full picture. They are not aware that all these media are at the service of Fidesz propaganda.

Consequently, there is often a generational divide, typically between parents and grandparents who stay in the countryside and their children and grandchildren who move to the capital or to larger towns and cities and have a broader perspective: the older ones often believe the propaganda rather than the negative experiences of their own children. Their thinking is dominated by propaganda to the extent that it overrides their experiences. They only hear arguments that agree with their own views - even their children cannot convince them. According to an expert interviewed in one of my articles for the Hungarian Voice, this is due to a phenomenon called social cognition. “This means that TV and other media override reality. In such cases, our opinions are determined more by what we hear about the world than by what we actually experience.” - said Dr. Laura Faragó, Assistant Professor at the Department of Social Psychology, ELTE Institute of Psychology.

What are the most common arguments against supporting the opposition in rural areas?

During my interview in a disadvantaged village in Northern Hungary, people said that they knew a Fidesz member (a member of parliament or his deputy, or possibly his assistant) who regularly visits the surrounding villages. A few times a year, he even distributes donations of second-hand shoes and clothes to the most unfortunate people, claiming that Fidesz sends these to the people. They leave no doubt: when it comes time for parliamentary or municipal elections, these donations must be repaid by "voting well". And the people who live there will do so. "Why not vote for them? At least they give us something! We never see the rest!"

A recurring comment is that apart from the politicians from the governing party, they do not meet any other opposition politicians; they do not even know them. As they say, during election campaigns, some opposition candidates do appear in small rural villages, they hold a few forums but few people attend and, as the election results afterwards show, they are of no measurable use. If opposition forces are to have any serious influence with rural voters, a continued presence is essential. This means that local opposition candidates should be regularly present in the lives of local people, talking to them about the issues.

It is important that opposition politicians do not try to make a breakthrough on abstract issues, rather on everyday problems, typically related to livelihoods. One of the interviewees in my series of articles attributes her support for Fidesz to the fact that the governing party has given her a lot in economic terms. She wanted to make a living, like many of her contemporaries. "I started my adult life in the first Fidesz government. My parents could not support me financially. It was a great help that Orbán introduced home purchase loans and tax rebates. It was a way for me to start my life after I got married and started a family." The state of democracy, freedom of the press and corruption are hardly the things that can sway voters. Many have resigned themselves to the fact that corruption is inevitable and goes hand in hand with politics. As one young man put it, being free of corruption is like male-female friendship, there is no such thing.

What are the lessons learned from the governing party's winning strategy and what should the opposition focus on?

A strong emotional community, a sense of belonging, traditional values, the expropriation of national feeling - these are essential elements of Fidesz's policy, and cannot be challenged. Free, ever-present propaganda (especially on television and radio) for the rural population maintains the appearance of success.

At the same time, people in rural areas often do not know any politician who is not from the governing party. It would be very important to go to these people, if someone would listen to their problems, offer help in solving difficult situations. This is not necessarily about money - often, especially in disadvantaged communities, people are left to fend for themselves, with no social safety net and no one to help them find their way.

What could make a difference?

I think education could be the key to change. Although there are many people who are functionally illiterate and unable to think critically, everyone wants a more secure and better future for their children.

In rural Hungary, there are many places with dedicated professionals who do a lot to help children from disadvantaged families keep up in school. They tutor them, they run art schools for them. Through these schools they also reach out to the children's families. I have seen many examples where they have not only helped children to achieve better academic results, to go on to higher education that previously seemed unthinkable, but through them they also help to solve the problems of the families, and sometimes they can even give them jobs. For example, in South-Eastern Hungary, the school of Nóra L. Ritók and its related organisations in and around Berettyóújfalu, the Igazgyöngy Foundation.

Chapter 2

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATS IN SEARCH OF POLITICAL RENEWAL

Nathalie Brack- Ramona Coman[23]:

HOW AND WHY IS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY CONTESTED IN THE EU[24]

Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century could have been expected to be the era of the democratic triumph after a long period of international instability, including the Cold War as well as internal pressures coming from the crisis of representation and voters' apathy. The democratisation waves of the 1980s and 1990s seemed to give some credit to that expectation, with many states becoming democratic for the first time (Diamond, 2021). Instead, a new page opened with a global democratic crisis: the two first decades of the 21st century have been characterised by democratic stagnation and setback, with old and new democracies being confronted to a range of internal and external challenges (Carothers and Donahue, 2019; Eckes, 2019).

If democracy is in permanent transformation, for some decades it seems to be in crisis in different parts of the world and the European Union is no exception. Claims that democracy needs to "democratise" (Offe, 2003) through direct, participatory, deliberative, or even radical forms of political participation have flourished, in particular in the 1980s, amid the crisis of party democracy that marked Western Europe. The collapse of communism and the global transformations that followed in the 1990s have given rise to/or created the illusion of a global consensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law. As noted by Wolff (2023), the struggle over the meaning of democracy diminished, resulting in a convergence around a decontested liberal democracy. Today, this so-called consensus looks more like a myth. Not only are rights contested (Lacroix and Pranchère 2019) but so is the rule of law, this old normative ideal that has shaped political regimes and supranational polities to avoid arbitrary power and to guarantee individual

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24 This paper presents some preliminary theoretical reflections on the concept of dissensus over liberal democracy and the rule of law in the EU prior to final publication. It is a deliverable of the WP1 of the Horizon Europe Project RED SPINEL coordinated at the Université libre de Bruxelles and the Institut d'études européennesby Ramona Coman, professor in political science.
About RED-SPINEL: RED-SPINEL analyses the changing nature of dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and its implications for EU supranational policy instruments. It will unpack the inter-connected drivers of contemporary dissensus surrounding liberal democracy. It is a 36-month long, 3.2 million euro, interdisciplinary, international and intersectoral Horizon Europe project involving seven higher education institutions: Université libre de Bruxelles, Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, HEC Paris, Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu and the University of Warwick. They are joined in the consortium by four non-academic partners: Peace Action, Training and Research Institute in Romania, Milieu Consulting, Magyar Helsinki Bizottság / Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Stichting Nederlands Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen Clingendael across eight European countries. It was selected under the call HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01 – Grant agreement n°101061621.

rights (Tamanaha, 2004; 2009). On the one hand, the rise of populism has put some democratic principles into question (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2021). Political actors claiming that democracy can be also "illiberal" or "anti-liberal" are gaining ground and contest its "liberal" dimension, traditionally understood as a set of limits of the power of "who rules". Today, political parties win elections in reaction to this model of democracy, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe although the phenomenon is not specific to this part of the continent (Blokker, 2022: 305). On the other hand, since 2010s onwards, the "decade of crises" in the EU has only added more stress on democracy (Fasone and Fromage, 2017; Christiansen et al. 2021) both at the EU level and in its member states. The Eurozone crisis were mostly managed through austerity measures presented as the only way out (under the slogan "there is no alternative"), resulting in a depoliticisation of the debates, a lack of responsiveness from mainstream parties and fueling the rise of radical actors. The 'messy compromises and contentious outcomes' that define the very meaning of liberal democracy are under criticism (Urbinati, 2014), while its effectiveness and fairness face mounting scepticism (Katznelson, 2015). The global Covid-19 pandemic further contributed to this depoliticisation, with many governments bypassing parliaments to take measures and elected politicians "hiding" behind experts and non-elected institutions (Bickerton, 2023; Schmidt 2020). At the same time, in many countries, we have been witnessing a process of de-democratization as well as a renewed success of radical right, authoritarian and populist parties, which, when in government, have further undermined liberal democracy.

Whether there was a consensus over liberal democracy in the 1990s, a value taken for granted or merely an illusion, it seems to have been shattered. The rules of the polity - its core principles and values - are now a source of conflict in the EU and its member states. Being a supranational polity, whose democratic nature has been often questioned, but bringing together old and recent democracies, the EU is a compelling field to shed light on the confrontation of different conceptions of democracy disputed at the national and supranational levels.

Against this backdrop, we argue that the current stage of European integration has reached a point in which liberal democracy is not only politicized but also a polarising issue; opposition and contestation have flourished, and they target core principles of liberal democracy such as the rule of law and rights. On the one hand, radical parties rise up against core pillars of liberal democracy, fuelling discontent and polarisation. On the one hand, there is a mainstreaming of the critique towards liberal democracy, with a more diverse group, including governing actors, claiming that democracy needs to be reinvented. As Weinman and Voorman (2021) underlined, there is a crisis of conviction at the centre. Not only do claims against liberal democracy come from different ideological corners (Enyedi, 2023), they are also supported by a wide range of social actors. While conflict is at the core of democracy, the institutions that are supposed to channel social, political and legal conflicts over core principles of liberal democracy into the political game seem to be failing and the aim of this paper is to understand how, why and by whom liberal democracy is contested.

Populism, autocratisation and undemocratic liberalism: turning points for European democracies

We live in a world in which the hopes of the 1990s that democracy and rights would triumph everywhere are crumbling, in some contexts like a sandcastle, in others in more incremental and elusive ways and the EU is no exception. Not only its foundations –institutions, norms and values – are eroding, but also the belief in the efficacy and the responsiveness of liberal democracy has declined (Berman, 2019). Different factors are disputed to explain the global crisis of democracy. Some of them are recent, such as the Great Recession of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis, the rise of populism and of undemocratic liberalism (Mudde, 2021), amplified by the global health crisis. Others are older and go back to the domestic transformation of the Nation States after the WWII but also to the emergence of polities beyond the state, including the EU (see Bickerton 2012).European integration has indeed constrained member states to reshape their institutions, democratic norms and practices (Bickerton, 2012; Schmidt, 2006).

The most outspoken and virulent criticism of liberal democracy has come from "exclusionary populists", i.e. authoritarian and nativist populists or anti-establishment parties, as they blatantly attack - with different arguments - the core pillars of liberal democracy. As noted by Pappas (2016: 33-35), the main danger for political liberalism comes from populists and they thrive where institutions are weak and majoritarian tendencies are strong. Marginal in Europe in the 1980s, populist parties have flourished in recent years everywhere in several member states of the European Union (Mudde 2021). There has been an extensive academic debate as to whether populism is a threat or a corrective to liberal democracy (Bugaric, 2022; Galston 2018; Kaltwasser 2012; Vittori 2022). Populists accept the basic principles of democracy (i.e. popular sovereignty and majority rules) (Mudde 2014: 14) but they embrace "a vision of democracy which is not tied to liberalism or to constitutionalism" (Plattner, 2010:88). Indeed, populism challenges the essence of contemporary liberal democracy as it inherently challenges pluralism, mediated forms of political representation as well as checks and balances (Pappas, 2016; Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2013; Vittori, 2022). But populism can also be seen as a corrective for democracy: while it constitutes a threat to public contestation, it can foster inclusiveness and put the emphasis on issues neglected by mainstream actors (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Scholars usually distinguish authoritarian from libertarian versions of populism (Norris and Inglehart 2019): the former embraces security and obedience as values; the latter is against multinationals, corruption, and mainstream parties, but in favour of progressive social policies and participatory styles of political engagement. Authoritarian populism leads to democratic backsliding; democratic populism can foster democratisation (Bugaric, 2022: 28), in particular soft populism when it "remains in the boundaries of liberalism" (Corso, 2022: 76).

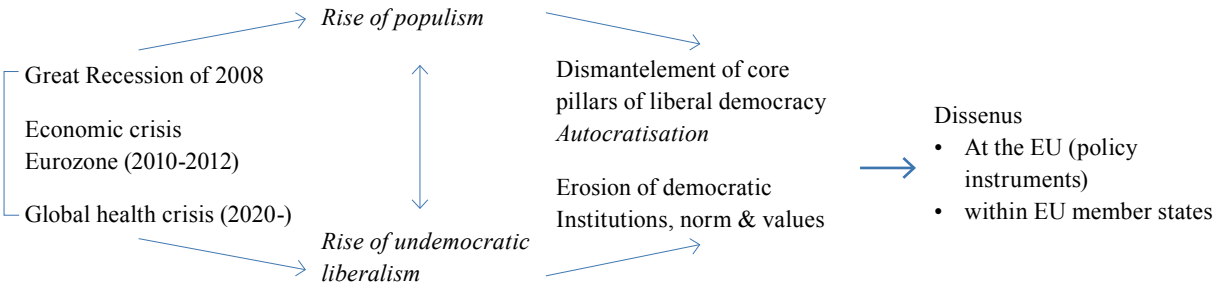
Although not all populists share the same agendas, recent examples show that once in power, authoritarian populist parties have targeted the transformation of norms and institutions of liberal democracy, through abusive constitutionalism (Krygier, 2022: 6), autocratic legalism (Scheppele 2018), constitutional coups (Sadurski, 2019) or abuse of the constitution (Blokker, 2014) paving the way towards autocratisation. The explicit aim of several elected governments is to separate democracy from liberalism, in the name of a certain conception of democracy and of the people which exclude the intermediation of liberal democratic institutions (Schmidt 2023). Against this backdrop, since 2010s, elected officials have undone check and balances through a wide range of interventions in the judiciary, limiting the powers of Constitutional Courts as well as the independence of judges, "twisting and turning of the rule of law" (Krygier, 2022: 6). The "bad" elite has been replaced by the "good" elite (Bill, 2022), the one supposed to represent the interests of the true demos. Pluralism and multiculturalism have been also under attack, as well as rights and freedoms, all in the name of the people and against supranationalisation. Only elections seem to remain "competitive", but, as Krygier put it, in a context in which freedoms are eroded (2022: 7). Changes in terms of polity have been followed by new policies (Coman and Volintiru, 2020) in a variety of fields from education to immigration and from social to economic measures, supported by new actors entering the field of politics to legitimise and support such trends (Bohle et al., 2023). In a nutshell, the pillars of liberal democracy, characterised by electoral regimes, political and civil rights, as well as accountability and the structure of power (Merkel, 2004), have been dismantled one by one, in some contexts in an incremental or more abrupt way (Coman and Volintiru, 2020).

But the crisis of liberal democracy goes beyond the rise of right-wing populist movements (Milstein, 2021: 27) and has roots in the economy and society as well (Przeworski 2019: 206). In recent years, "emergency politics" or "governing by the principles of necessity" (White, 2022) has also eroded liberal democracy, determining many actors to "take back control", in particular in the context of the economic crisis first and then of the global health crisis. Mainstream political parties have deplored the rise of undemocratic liberalism in Europe, which has expressed itself in different ways over the past decade: either by critical political decisions taken away from representative bodies or by legislation put in the hands of experts or constitutional judges (see also Czarnota, 2022). As noted by Schäfer and Zurn (2021), the rise of non-majoritarian institutions also feeds the crisis of liberal democracy. The Eurozone crisis as well as the attempts of the EU to sign new trade agreements are good illustrations of these debates. What is targeted here is the emergence of a form of undemocratic liberalism or "authoritarian liberalism" (Wilkinson, 2018), expression increasingly used in reference to the European Union itself: while some contend that this was already at the basis of European integration after WWII (Wilkinson, 2021), most agree that such an authoritarian liberalism which privileges the power of experts, lawyers and non-elected actors has amplified since the Maastricht Treaty along with the depoliticisation of the EMU and then, throughout the decade of polycrises. Indeed, although concerns

about the EU's democratic deficit predated the succession of recent crises and has partially been imputed to its technocratic and free-market bias (Caramani 2017; Follesdal and Hix, 2006), the EU's response to them has had a significant impact on the decision-making process of the EU, its nature and policies. The executive branch has emerged as the main leader of these crises, with increasing oversight and extended powers to technocratic institutions such as the ECB, the Commission and the ECJ, while parliamentary debates and parliamentary authority have been bypassed (Schmidt 2023).This way of managing crises with major implications for the people but without the people (Schmidt 2020) has casted a shadow on democracy and has fuelled waves of discontent, in particular in response to austerity measures decided behind closed doors. Both EU and national leaders obscured the political nature of measures taken to deal with the various crises, be it austerity, recovery plans or responses to the pandemic, with more or less success (Bourgeaux, 2023; Borriello 2017; Donà 2022). And these measures were mostly justified on the basis of the need to return to the 'market conditions' of competitive economic practices and presented as the only alternative. They also have given rise to questions about "who governs" (Schmidt 2021) in the end and the relationship between politics and economy, or the coexistence between capitalism and democracy (Wolff, 2023). As noted by Dahrendorf three decades ago, globalization and crises create perverse choices for liberal democracy as governments have to square the circle of ensuring economic competitiveness, social cohesion and political freedom (known as the Dahrendorf Quandary).

For political scientists, the question of whether it is the economic crisis that has given rise to populism or whether it is undemocratic liberalism that explains the great success of populist parties is still open to interpretations. Scholars like Cas Mudde argue that populism is a consequence of undemocratic liberalism (Mudde, 2021), that economic liberalism has failed but political liberalism is held responsible (Weinman and Voorman, 2021: 11).In contrast others would contend that populism is a threat to democracy (Galston 2017). The polarising effect of global markets and economic insecurity might lead to authoritarian temptations, as governments try to ensure social cohesion and economic competitiveness at the expenses of some aspects of liberal democracy (Dahrendorf, 1996; Anheier and Filip, 2021). Regardless of causality, these interconnected trends – on the one hand the rise of populism, and on the other undemocratic liberalism - have provided fertile ground in some cases for the dismantlement of core pillars of liberal democracy and paths towards autocratisation and in others to the erosion of democratic institutions, norms, and values, and forms of undemocratic liberalism stemming from "there is no alternative" or "emergency politics", as we summarise in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Situating dissensus over liberal democracy in current academic debates



Other elements characterize this phenomenon. First, what is "new" compared with debates about liberal democracy in the 1990s and 2000s is the mainstreaming of the critique of liberal democracy, which has expanded beyond the fringes of society. Liberal democracy has always had been contested by anti-system parties. But what is distinctive now is that the stances and claims against liberal democracy are no longer located at the extremes of the political spectrum but have become mainstream. Populist and illiberal parties in many countries are large enough to play a governing role (Bourne and Rijpkema, 2022). In addition to that, we are witnessing not only an assault on liberal democracy coming from populists from different ideological corners, but also a crisis of conviction in the centre (Weinman and Voorman, 2021), leading a wide range of actors – less studied in the literature– to contend that liberal democracy has become an "empty shell" and needs to be reinvented (Berman, 2019; Vormann and Weinman, 2019; and Mudde, 2021). Second, forms of contestation and opposition have flourished targeting the core principles of the political game, which for long have been taken for granted. Third, conflict around liberal democracy possesses an inherent conductivity, effectively transferring discord between the social, legal, and political arenas. Although politics remains a fertile ground for conflicts on aspects of liberal democracy, it is no longer the only starting point and there are more and more cases of conflicts starting in the social or legal spheres which then spread to other spheres and enter political debates, leading to concomitant debates across fields and reaching new heights.

Different conceptions of democracy and its core pillars are disputed within the EU, at the domestic and supranational levels, with implications for a wide range of national and European policies and this new phenomenon, that we call dissensus, is a pressing issue for contemporary democracies. Nation states and the EU compete in safeguarding and upholding democratic institutions, thus, dissensus is triggered both by European and national actors, from the tension between them and their understandings of democracy and its main core pillars.

Defining the concept of dissensus

Democracy is only an old idea. It is also an ideal, whose meaning has been coined over several thousands of years (Dahl, 1989: 2), since the Athenian democracy (Parekh, 1992: 160) until the French Revolution, that Berman (2019: 284)regards as the starting point of liberal democracy's consolidation process as a struggle in Europe. Yet, it is only in the second half of the 20th century that democracy in its modern understanding "has gained almost universal force" (Dahl, 1989: 213) as a unique mix of individual rights and popular rule which has long been a dominant type of government in North America and Western Europe (Mounk, 2018: 14).

Democracy is a contested concept (Collier et al 2006; Dahl, 1989: 2). The term has been defined in many ways, drawing on different conceptions rooted in conservative, social-democratic, liberal, neoliberal, radical ideas (Wolff, 2023). Their confrontation is the essence of democracy (Mouffe, 2016: 100). Beyond ideological roots, in recent years scholars have identified seven varieties of democracy (Coppedge et al., 2022), each centred on a distinctive value: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian. In this respect, Mouffe reminds that modern democracy derives its specificity from the articulation of two different traditions: on the one hand the liberal tradition - based on the rule of law, the respect for human rights and individual liberties and, on the other hand, the democratic tradition based on equality and popular sovereignty (2016: 14). If democracy historically speaking is about "who rules" which requires the people to be sovereign, the adjective "liberal" encapsulates less the idea of how rulers are chosen and more the limits to their power (Plattner 2021: 44). As the saying goes, democracy is work in progress everywhere, or as Dahl (1989: 6) put it, a regime that "fall considerably short of the ideal". Despite the diversity of traditions, democracy, the rule of law and human rights are intimately related. As Lacroix and Pranchère point out (2019), there is no democracy without rights. In the same vein, the rule of law outside a democracy is simply the most effective instrument of authoritarianism and worse, as underlined by Weiler (2021).

Democracy requires also a diversity of opinions (Dahl 1971) and therefore rests upon both contestation and opposition which is unavoidable, as modern societies are characterized by a remarkable diversity of opinions about how social life ought to be organised (Latham-Gambi 2020). Opposition, as Dahl underlined, is the essence of democracy. The expression of contestation and opposition has been institutionalised in different ways in national and supranational political regimes (as discussed in the next section). But we argue that dissensus is different in nature from opposition and contestation.

The concept of dissensus has been discussed in political theory and occasionally used in other fields. The most advanced discussion of the concept of dissensus finds its origins in political theory. In EU studies it has been used rather metaphorically in reference to the "end of the permis-

sive consensus" and the beginning of the "constraining dissensus", as discussed by Hooghe and Marks (2009). A rapid review of the literature of other fields of research shows that this notion, compared to others, has not yet established itself as central, neither in political science nor in European Studies. If scholars of political theory have conceptualized dissensus as a normative/ theoretical concept (in relation to a certain understanding of democracy) as discussed in the next section, our aim here the other is to capture the meaning of dissensus looking at real-world phenomena (drawing on empirics).

Dissensus as a normative concept: the essence or a pre-condition for democracy

Dissensus is the quintessence of democracy. Or as Rancière argues, "the essence of politics is dissensus" (2010: 37). Since the late 1990s, this term has been at the centre of philosophical reflections, discussed by the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1996; 2016), the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2010) and the American political theorists John A. Dryzek (2000) among others.

The theoretical debates around the notion of dissensus have taken shape in the context of the 1990s, when consensus has become "the gold standard of political justification" and "an ideal to secure political legitimacy" (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; Dryzek 2000). Scholars like Manin (1987) or Elster (1987) have all in different ways focused on the virtues of consensus understood as "deliberation" (Manin, 1987), an "aggregative model of democracy" (Elster 1998) or as an "outcome" of the democratic process, "democratically legitimate if and only if" consensus can be "the object of free and reasoned arguments among equals" (Cohen 1989: 122 – quoted by Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). It is in this context that most of the seminal books of the advocates of consensus had been published in the late 1990s, including A Theory of Justice by John Rawls (1993) and Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy by Jürgen Habermas (1996). In reaction to the deliberative turn in the study of democracy, a more critical approach developed in the 2000s - bringing together a wide range of scholars, critical pluralist democrats as they call themselves – expressing arguments in opposition to consensus and more specifically in response to Rawls's concept of "overlapping consensus". This critical approach put forward by pluralist scholars contends that the deliberative understanding of democracy proposed by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas to overcome conflicts in democracy (conflict between rights and liberties, on the one hand and egality and popular sovereignty, on the other) creates the illusion of a pluralism as power relations are erased (Mouffe, 2016). Thus, the books by Dryzek (2000), Rancière (2010) and Mouffe (2016) respond to scholars of

democracy who deplore consensus, arguing in favour of a "more robust pluralism" (Drysek and Niemeyer, 2006: 634). Not only "liberal democracy looks neutral but supports the powerful", while "the experience and perspectives of marginalized and oppressed groups are likely to be very different from dominant groups" (Drysek and Niemeyer, 2006: 636). According to Chantal Mouffe, "the real threat to democracy is "to negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and aim at a universal rational consensus" (1996: 248).

While Dryzek, an advocator of discursive democracy as opposed to deliberative democracy, focuses his understanding of dissensus with a focus on the ways in which dissent can be expressed in a liberal democracy and the underlying constraints, Mouffe devotes attention also to the substance of liberal democracy and the nature of the conflict. While the former criticizes the "the accommodation" of the latter "with liberal and constitutional thinking" (2000: vi) Mouffe argues that the essence of democracy lies in the struggles between different conceptions rooted in conservative, social-democratic, liberal, neoliberal, radical ideas, and their confrontation is (Mouffe, 2016: 100). Or in her view, the prevailing tendency today is to view democracy in such a way that it is almost exclusively identified with the rule of law and the defence of human rights, without regard to popular sovereignty (2016). In her understanding of dissensus, Mouffe distinguishes between antagonist conflicts (conflicts between enemies) and agonist conflicts (conflicts between adversaries). The essence of democratic politics in her view is to transform antagonism into agonism (2016: 100). As she explains, agonistic conflicts do not imply eliminating passion or conflict, but mobilising such passions towards democracy (Mouffe, 2016: 101), perhaps as a form of politicisation. Mouffe allows that "pluralist democracy requires a certain amount of consensus" (1999: 756).

Dissensus as an empirical concept: core dimensions

Concepts come from different horizons. Some of them are first used in popular or political discourses in the public sphere to be thereafter defined in a more systematic way by academics. Euroscepticism is an example. Other is used by international and regional organisations, such as governance. And others still are introduced by academics; see for example the concept of Europeanisation, to depict new developments in our social and political life. Some concepts describe processes (globalisation, Europeanisation), while others describe action (opposition, contestation, participation, resistance). Some concepts are static, others are relational or dynamic.

Dissensus has been used sporadically in different fields of research, including political science and EU studies, yet as a metaphor rather than a well-established concept. The etymological meaning of the word is quite explicit. As a concept, it is directly or indirectly related to what

defines democracy, as a precondition or the quintessence of democracy. But dissensus has rarely been studied per se. To put dissensus at the center of academic discussions in order to understand current pressing debates about the nature of liberal democracy and its core pillars. As the previous section showed, dissensus still lacks a proper definition, needed for empirical research and this is precisely the aim of this section.

How to build a concept is a complex exercise and often takes the form of a snowballing process. Some concepts are defined on an abstract basis; others are defined though observations as empirical concepts or drawing on a combination of both. Defining a concept is a gradual process, an interactive one between theory and empirics. As Max Weber said: "progress of cultural sciences occurs through conflicts over terms and definitions" (in Gerring, 1999: 359), as concepts mean different things to different people.

The seminal work of Sartori is often referred to when it comes to concept formation. He introduced the ladder of abstraction to refer to the number of properties that define a concept (Sartori, 1970: 1052). If the concept is defined by a limited number of properties, it can include a large number of cases. In contrast, "the more concrete the concept, the narrower the range of cases" (Mair, 2008: 178). Drawing on these insights, we identify the main components of the concept (Goertz and Mahoney 2012).

Indeed, as Mair (2008: 190) put it, every concept must have a core or minimal definition, shared by all users. With our definition, we seek to go beyond the implicit meaning of dissensus as quintessence of democracy. In the current context of global crisis of democracy in which its core pillars – the rule of law and rights – are under strain, we define dissensus as the clash between diverse forms of contestation and opposition which pit against each other contrasting views of liberal democracy and its core pillars. They oppose actors who are no longer situated at the margins of the political regime but at its core, changing not only the nature but also the patterns of contestation and opposition as traditionally expressed in any democratic regime.

In other words: dissensus is understood here as the expression of social, political and legal conflicts which take place concomitantly in different institutional and non-institutional arenas (parliamentary, constitutional, public sphere, technocratic and expert arenas…) driven by political, social, legal actors, including state and non-state actors, seeking to maintain liberal democracy, to replace liberal democracy or to restructure liberal democracy.

In this tentative definition, dissensus has three components:

The actors and their goals

Political parties, especially populist ones, have mobilized around the notion of liberal democracy and its core pillars, attacking legal constitutionalism and political liberalism alike. This has led to tensions across the political spectrum, in public debates as well as in parliament and to a crisis of conviction amongst some mainstream parties. But the critique of liberal democracy goes beyond populist parties, as discussed in the previous section. Other actors have politicised liberal democracy to reform it or "democratise" it, by adding other means of representations or to defend complementary models. And it has also flourished within civil society where these conflicts have found a fertile ground. If the 1990s has given rise to a wide range of civil society organisations either to promote democracy or to play a role in EU decision-making, little attention has been paid to "non-democratic civil society", alternative actors, conservative or illiberal actors (see Bluhm and Varga, 2019), which flourished in recent years, with the support of populist governments. In some contexts (Poland and Hungary), new organisations emerged seeking to "reinforce the party's political narratives through support of the broader right-wing cultural narratives that underpin them" (Bill, 2022: 120). An alternative civil society is emerging (Dabrowska, 2019), whose aim, according to the Polish Minister Glisnki quoted by Bill (2022), is "pluralisation". Pluralisation is understood in this context as an attempt to counterbalance the "imported" dimensions of civil society with a focus on gender and minority rights, and more concretely the "promotion of organizations with right-wing profiles and amplification of the "thickened" cultural narratives", moving towards "national and Christian values", as promoted by the main radical populist parties (Bill, 2022: 122). Church and religious organisations play a major role in this process (Bluhm and Varga, 2019: 7; Gherghina and Miscoiu, 2022). The role of intellectuals is also key, as they are also actively engaged in think tanks, foundations and even academic institutions (Buzogany and Varga 2021; Behr 2021; Bohle et al 2023). But here again, the contestation does not come only from new conservative and populist radical right parties and actors. In recent years, a wide range of protests erupted in different EU member states, directed against neoliberal policies (for example protests related to the TTIP or CETA see Oleart, 2021; Crespy and Rone, 2019), not to mention the disobedience movements in reaction to emergency politics or "There is no Alternative" (see Borriello, 2017). Ultimately, the critique of liberal democracy has found some forms of expression also in the legal sphere, among legal actors, courts, judges, lawyers, academic professions, and experts. Courts are an embodiment of liberal democracy (Sadurski, 2022: 521). They have been under attack in recent years (Bugaric and Ginsburg, 2017; Pech and Scheppele, 2017; Scheppele 2018) with consequences for their independence (François and Vauchez, 2020; Vauchez 2021), yet at the same time populists use courts and the law to bolster their rule.

Beyond the goals of the actors, a further crucial element relates to their actions and strategies and more particularly, their attempts at or actions of politicizing liberal democracy, through raising awareness and mobilizing on this issue. Indeed, dissensus presupposes politicisation of liberal democracy, understood as transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics, making previously non-political matters political (De Wilde and Zürn 2012: 139; Zürn 2019: 977-978). For dissensus to happen, liberal democracy needs to be frequently discussed and contested by a wide range of political actors in public debates, leading to the formation of diverging preferences and public mobilisation (on politicization, see De Wilde et al., 2016; Zürn et al. 2012). Politicisation, as actors' strategy, is therefore seen here as a key condition for dissensus.

The nature/substance of the conflict

The decade of crises has given rise to various conflicts between political, social and legal actors - both between the EU and domestic actors and within nation states between domestic actors. Some of these conflicts are purely institutional and inherent to any democratic regime. Others have taken new forms, expressed as conflicts of sovereignty (Bickerton, Brack, Coman and Crespy, 2022) about who has the last word when traditional channels of conflict resolution are not only contested but also weakened. The Eurozone crisis has given rise to conflicts opposing political and economic liberalism. The rise of populism and the paths towards autocratisation in some EU member states have opposed political and legal constitutionalism. The relationship between political and legal constitutionalism has become tense. Political constitutionalism is perceived as democratic; legal constitutionalism is perceived as elitist and constraining form political constitutionalism (Czarnota, 2022). Which one should prevail? Some political and legal actors have argued that political constitutionalism should prevail (understood as parliamentary rule and weak judicial review), whereas others, in contrast, deplored political attacks on legal constitutionalism. Within the EU, this question – who has the last word - has remained unsolved, as an expression of constitutional pluralism, understood as the co-existence of multiple autonomous and overarching constitutional sites, each claiming ultimate authority and yet each respecting and accommodating the others (Scholtes, 2022: 401). On the other hand, political and economic liberalism are also in tension, amplified by undemocratic liberalism to design neoliberal solutions. The crisis of liberalism is not only related to challenges coming from domestic right-wing populists or external authoritarian or illiberal regimes. It is, at the same time, political liberalism's own crisis (Weinman and Vormann, 2021: 21-22). That is, liberal democracy in its current form, is contradicting its own principles. Weinman and Vormann (2021) argue that

markets alone failed to bring social peace and stability, and neoliberalism has led to this contradiction. In their words, "economic liberalism has failed but political liberalism is being held responsible" (Weinman and Vormann, 2021: 21).

Within the wider nature of the conflict (political, social, legal), one also needs to take into account which components of liberal democracy is at the core of the conflict. Put it differently, which dimension(s) of liberal democracy gives rise to dissensus, and which basic rules of the game is contested. Actors can focus on one specific aspect, such as judicial independence or civil liberties, or they can politicize several aspects, giving rise to a broad dissensus on the rule of law, civil liberties, legislative independence.

The expression of the conflict

The conflict on liberal democracy can take place at different levels and in different arenas. It can either take place at the European level, opposing Member states and supranational institutions. It can take place at the national level, opposing key political actors or key institutions. At the same time, dissensus can also occur in different arenas. It can be restricted to parliament for instance or involve the streets and civil society, or pitch the courts against the government or the parliament. The levels and arenas in which dissensus takes place is crucial to understand the institutional power of actors as well the potential resolution of the conflict. An actor might have a stronger institutional power at one level (for instance the executive at the national level) than at another level (in the multi-layered EU) and the nature of the debate can also change depending on the level and arena. These three components – the actors, the nature of the conflict and the expression of the conflict – are therefore key and need to be considered together theoretically and empirically to understand dissensus on liberal democracy.

Conclusion: a new research agenda

The study of dissensus is a call to launch a new research agenda that aims to enrich the already well-established literature explaining how and why democracy is in decline or even dying. Amid this preoccupying social and political context, our objective is to go one step further and see how the confrontation of different visions on democracy and alternative models can lead to its refoundation, its maintenance as it is or its replacement.

Although this phenomenon is present on a global scale, special attention is devoted here to the EU and its member states, to its internal and external policies and to its instruments that aim to support or promote democracy. The key questions at the core of the RED SPINEL project here are:

- What is the nature of dissensus in the EU polity and its member states?
- How is the EU responding to growing dissensus? How have EU institutional actors responded to increased dissensus?
- How is dissensus shaping the EU's capacity to act in its internal and external policies? Or what are the implications of dissensus for the EU's policies and instruments?

To provide a comprehensive response to this set of interrelated questions, RED-SPINEL will not only develop an original understanding of dissensus but also analyze its nature and implications empirically. Through its different qualitative case studies of various EU instruments, RED-SPINEL will illustrate how internal and external challenges to liberal democracy have (re-)framed EU instruments and what this means for the EU's capacity to act as well as the longer-term implications for European multi-level democratic governance. It examines how policy instruments and legal mechanisms at the EU level have evolved in response to dissensus surrounding liberal democracy and its constitutive dimensions.

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Mikuláš Minář[25]:

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE. LESSONS FROM THE CZECH EXAMPLE: HOW CIVIL SOCIETY AND PARTIES UNITED AGAINST POPULISTS

„It's not just for us. I have been resisting using strong words all my life. But this time I'm going to say it in strong words. We have entered the stage of world history. This is a world event. Because in many countries, on all continents, populism is emerging as a political style. And it leads to an authoritarian society, that is, a strong leader. And in many places that rising populism was suppressed, then it came up again, typically France, Italy, in America it even won. And here in Central Europe the situation is quite critical, because in Poland and Hungary it looks like it could be forever. So they changed the rules of the game, the electoral system... well, and we were also... the Czechs are also broken. And now what has happened is that populism as a style of government has been beaten to the punch. And that's what the whole world will be interested in. Is that possible? This style that's so catchy? Is it possible to defeat it? Yes, it is. The Czechs did it. We really made world history. (...) There's going to be a lot of interest. All the world's media in the next few days will want to understand how it happened... is it even possible? It is possible."

These are words of famous and wise dissident, historian, lawyer, writer and first Czech Prime Minister after 1989, Petr Pithart. He told them on 30 January 2023 to Czech TV, two days after newly elected President Petr Pavel defeated populist Andrej Babiš, as an answer to a question: „What is the main message of this presidential election?"

I´m not sure, whether there was or will be expected media interest. Nevertheless, the questions are here and they are important. What exactly happened in Czech Republic? Is Petr Pithart right? If so, why and how were Czechs in their fight against populists succesful? Is this a once-and-for-all victory? Is it possible to defeat populism – and how? And are there some lessons other countries can take from Czech case study? These are questions I would like to analyse in the following summary of last 6 years in my country. My paper will be divided into three parts: 1. The Story, 2. Theory, and 3. Application (lessons learned)

Disclaimer: I personally played specific role in whole story, so my words should be taken rather as an educated, engaged opinion, not as a scientific study.

25 Founder and Former Chairman, Million Moments for Democracy, Prague.

The Story

Czech Republic 2017 - Democracy in crisis

2017 was a turning point for Czech politics. The October elections to the Chamber of Deputies were overwhelmingly won by Andrej Babiš, a prosecuted billionaire, owner of a third of the Czech media, former communist police agent, liar and populist in a conflict of interest.

His ANO party won 30% of the vote but almost 40% of the seats. The other party, the right-wing ODS, won only 11%. Together with the Communists (KSČM) and the extremists of Tomio Okamura (SPD), Babiš won 115 seats out of the 200-member House - almost a constitutional majority. A total of 9 parties made it into the lower house, two of them - TOP 09 and STAN - crossed the 5% threshold by just a few tenths of a percent. Had it not been for this coincidence, Babiš's power would have been even greater. In summary: the illiberal/populist parties got 48% - 2.52M votes, the liberal/non-populist parties got 38% - 1.95M votes and the left-wing ČSSD (somewhere in between) got 7% - 370k.

Why did Babiš get so many votes? There are three main reasons:

The traditional democratic parties have lost the trust of the voters. They have discredited themselves in the past with various scandals and have failed to offer enough interesting and credible personalities or a convincing vision of the future.

Babiš had enormous financial and media resources at his disposal and the best marketing team in the country, which - as finance minister - was able to skillfully give him credit for a prosperous economy (Babiš has been finance minister since 2013).

Babiš is a strong, charismatic personality offering the people a strong hand of government that will rid them of uncertainty. He is famous for slogans such as „It gets better", „We'll just get it done", „Work hard and don't fool around" and „I'll run the state like a company." He accompanied everything with a folksy demeanor and promises not to lie or steal - because he didn't need to.

It was clear that democracy in the Czech Republic was in deep crisis. That the next four-year period will be a stress test, which democratic institutions will either be able to withstand, or the trend of strengthening populists will continue and we will witness their gradual dismantling in the Hungarian way. In short, there is a lot at stake.

In addition, in January 2018, Miloš Zeman, a pro-Russian and anti-liberal ally of Babiš, became Czech president for the second time, and twice in a row he entrusted Babiš with the task of forming a government. Although it took Babiš almost 200 days to gain confidence for his government, this did not prevent him from making extensive changes in the public administration

and security forces, which he began to staff with his own people. Eventually, a government composed of ANO and the left-wing ČSSD was formed in the summer of 2018, with the tacit support of the Communists. However, the biggest attack on democratic institutions was yet to come.

Million moments for democracy

Nothing seemed to be able to stop Babiš from taking off. However, his life began to be complicated by an unexpected rival - the civic movement Million Moments for Democracy (Milion chvilek pro demokracii). This initiative first began as a group of students who, after the elections, appealed to Babiš to keep his pre-election promises, not to abuse power and to respect democratic rules. However, when it became clear that Babiš was not keeping his promises, the students, led by Mikuláš Minář, launched a simple petition for Babiš's resignation, with a brief statement that he was unacceptable as the head of the country and that we were not going to pretend that this was normal.

Within a short time this petition was signed online by a quarter-million people (eventually 440,000 in total = 4% of the population), making Million Moments the most influential civic initiative in the country. Behind the name "Million Moments" was the key idea of the movement: there is a huge number of people in the Czech Republic who care about democracy and are determined to defend it. All that is needed is unite these people together and for each of them to start doing at least something small for democracy, i.e. to find a moment for it from time to time - to sign a petition, to go to demonstrations, to become a volunteer or donor, to talk to people in their neighbourhood. Because if a large number of people persistently do something small for democracy, their efforts will add up over time and eventually show up visibly in elections.

There was a huge response to this idea. The greater Babiš's subsequent rule-breaking, the greater the civic backlash. The movement began to organise peaceful protests that aptly, urgently and clearly named Babiš's problems and were attended by tens of thousands of people who gained hope that they were not alone and that change was possible. More importantly, perhaps, the movement simply created a nationwide network of civic action cells. Anyone who wanted to could easily join the protests in their city as an organizer. Million Moments thus became an important catalyst for civic engagement at the local level. Thanks to its recognition and brand, it connected locals who often did not know each other - and gave them the opportunity to work together to defend democracy.

The power and potential of Million Moments was fully demonstrated in 2019, when Babiš attempted to take control of the independent judiciary. The day after the police proposed to prosecute him, he replaced the justice minister. The new minister was his supporter and friend of the president, Marie Benešová, who aimed to reform the law on prosecution and strengthen the influence of politicians over the judiciary. This attack on the judiciary, however, kicked off a two-month series of massive protests by the Million Moments Movement, which culminated in demonstrations first in 313 municipalities in June and then in a giant demonstration on Letná Plain in June, attended by around 300,000 people.

Although the demonstrations did not lead to the immediate fall of Babiš's government, which had the support of the President, Marie Benešová did not succeed in pushing through judicial reform, nor did she succeed in removing the chief prosecutor. In November 2019, on the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the communist regime, Million Moments called people to Letná plain for the second time. Once again, around 300,000 people took part, with the organisers now calling not only for Babiš to step down, but also for the opposition parties, which they urged to open up to new people, come up with an appealing vision of the future, and start working together to limit the influence of an electoral system that strengthened large parties at the expense of small ones.

The top politicians, Prime Minister Babiš and President Zeman, were visibly frightened by the mass civil protests and began to be careful not to make a second similarly big misstep. At the same time, however, they also tried to gradually tame other institutions - they targeted, above all, the publicly owned Czech Television, whose Control Council they systematically staffed with their own people.

These steps were facilitated by the coronavirus pandemic, which led to a ban on mass actions and blocked the most powerful weapon of the Million Moments - the possibility of mass mobilisation and protest.

Two unions of opposition political parties

Given that Babiš's preferences have not declined and the opposition parties have not shown any plan for reaching the 300 000 or so voters they must win over to their side to have a chance of victory, nor was it clear whether they would cooperate effectively at all, the movement's founder, Mikuláš Minář, decided to leave Million Moments and try to start a new political party. As a condition for its formation and candidacy, the new party, People FOR, set itself the task of collecting 500,000 signatures, so that it would be clear that there was a great demand for new party and that the political spectrum would not be fragmented by another small party that could also weaken the existing democratic parties.

By the end of 2020, things finally got moving. After much pressure from the public and the media, the opposition democratic parties announced that they would go into the next elections in two united blocs - a more right-wing-conservative one (TOGETHER) and a more centre-liberal one (Pirates + Mayors). Yet it seemed that even this would not be enough. Mikuláš Minář with People PRO failed to collect enough signatures, and so the party withdrew from the 2021 elections in the spring of 2021 in favour of the democratic parties. A week before the new parliamentary elections, according to the polls, it looked like Babiš would again win sovereignly, whereupon in the next election period he would definitely control the public media and a large part of the state administration. Perhaps only a miracle could prevent this scenario.

This miracle has happened. Surprisingly, Babiš's ANO finished a close second. However, even more significantly, several of Babiš's potential allies, the Communists, the left-wing Social Democrats (ČSSD), and the new parties Oath and Tricolor, narrowly failed to make it into the House. A total of 16% (one million votes) for Babiš's allies were lost, resulting in a comfortable majority of 108 seats (54%) for the two blocs of democratic parties, TOGETHER and Pirates+Mayyors. While the number of populist and extremist voters did not decrease compared to the 2017 election (in fact, it increased by 100,000), what decided the election was the incredible mobilization of pro-democracy voters, 320,000 more of whom turned out to vote than four years ago. This unexpected mass decided the election with their participation and removed Babiš from power.

The election of new president Petr Pavel

However, Andrej Babiš did not lay down his arms and attempted a major political comeback in 2023. He ran for the presidency of the Czech Republic. If he had succeeded, he could have dominated Czech politics for the next 10 years, because the scenario of one man taking over the presidency and his movement holding the prime minister's seat again in the next term would have threatened.

Fortunately, this black scenario did not come true. Babiš lost overwhelmingly to the former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, General Petr Pavel, who was voted for by 58% of the people. There were three main reasons behind his convincing victory:

The unacceptability of Andrej Babiš - who had become a very polarizing figure reliably mobilizing a part of society against him - through his past, his chaotic nature and his mistakes, including an overly aggressive and manipulative campaign.

The personality and qualities of Petr Pavel - who radiates strength and calm. He is reasonable, good-looking, can say unpopular things and unpleasant truths in a pleasant way. With his personal story, personality and demeanour, Petr Pavel has managed to reach out to the rural population, including former voters of Miloš Zeman.

Petr Pavel's professional marketing team, whose performance outshined even the renowned marketers of Andrej Babiš. While Babiš tried to scare the citizens with war in his campaign, Pavel's team bet on promising peace, order and competent, non-populist solutions.

It turned out that Pavel's personality profile, combined with the excellent work of the communications team, made him immune to traditional populist attacks that suddenly seemed ridiculous. Interestingly, in a contest between the hardest populism par excellence and a moderate, realistic non-populism, populism lost all the way. Petr Pavel's success may become an important inspiration for countries coming to terms with populist leaders.

In 2023, after a long period of co-government by Andrej Babiš and Miloš Zeman, the Czechs will have:

- a pro-Western, non-populist president with great respect and a mandate from the citizens
- a pro-Western, democratic government that has taken an exemplary stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war, but which is also very unpopular because of its economic and social policies and poor communication.

This is why the usually cautious and sceptical Petr Pithart has now chosen big words to highlight what an extraordinary thing has happened in the Czech Republic. It is certainly not a once-and-for-all victory. It even seems quite likely at this point that Babiš could return to power again after the next election. At the same time, however, we have now - certainly with a great deal of luck - managed to avoid the greatest danger, and the new president is an important guarantee of stability and a strong counterweight to populism for the years to come.

Theory

The causes of populism

Treatment of any disease requires the most accurate diagnosis. It is necessary to know not only the symptoms of the disease, but also to understand its causes. The world's democracy is visibly declining, and at an ever-increasing rate. The traditional strongholds of democracy are being shaken by populism, "half the world's democratic governments are in decline, while authoritarian regimes are deepening repression." Since this is not an isolated problem of a few countries but a worldwide trend, it is necessary to reflect on the global and systemic reasons that make populism as a style of rhetoric and governance so attractive and electorally successful. A thorough analysis of these reasons is beyond the scope of my competence and the possibilities of my paper. However, before I summarise the main lessons we can take away from the Czech story, I would like to list at least a few of these reasons.

Why are populists gaining strength everywhere in the world?

An increasingly complex, changing and unpredictable world is creating chaos, uncertainty and social inequality. Hence the need for certainty, simplicity and protection. The easiest rhetorical figure is to find an external or internal enemy to blame - and unite the electorate against it. Offer easy solutions and a strong saviour figure. Just give me power and don't care, I'll protect you, I'll just make it happen.

The transformation of the media world, the rise of the internet and social media. There is massive growth of information and misinformation, information chaos and flooding emerges. Social networks have many negative and polarising effects. The posts on the networks and media headlines are becoming more and more heated, peppery and negative. The media world is fragmenting and with it the disintegration of public space and public opinion.

The dominant feature of our times is the increasingly intense struggle for the most precious commodity: human attention. Populism can be seen as a very effective technology for hacking into the workings of the human brain and psyche, namely, how to use conflict, shortcuts and emotional intensity to win people's attention and sympathy at any cost - regardless of facts, truth, morality or the destructive social consequences of this power and rhetorical strategy.

The failure of elites to govern and communicate, the corruption scandals. If traditional democratic parties fail to address economic and social problems, if they fail to communicate effectively, and if they too often fail morally and in values, it is water for the populist mill. All too often populists win not because of their own brilliance but because of the weakness of their opponents.

A decline in democratic values and a willingness to sacrifice own comfort for the greater whole, a lack of interest in public affairs. Without the willingness to put one's own comfort, time, energy, money, name, or even career on the line for the public interest and goals that transcend our individual life project, democracy cannot survive. The key question, then, is how to get people excited and engaged in politics and civic engagement, how to maximize the number of people who care about democracy and the state of the country.

In summary: an increasingly complicated and uncertain world, the technological transformation of information and communication flows, the fierce struggle for people's attention, the failure of elites and political parties in terms of morality, competence and communication, and the decline of grand narratives that make sense of engagement for a higher purpose.

We are not yet sufficiently adapted as a society to these rapid changes and new social conditions. In the words of the first Czechoslovak president Tomas G. Masaryk: „So, now we have the democracy, but where are the democrats?" It is clear that being a competent citizen in the 21st century requires even more than it did a century ago. If democracy is to survive in the 21st century, society must be able to equip its citizens with a new mindset and skillset, which includes the ability to think critically, to understand the world of media, to communicate effectively, to deal with uncertainty, to know modern history or to understand how democracy and society works. Therefore, the only long-term effective strategy to reduce the influence of populism is to invest in continuous education, which does not have to be formal. Education happens all the time, and schools can be very effectively replaced by civil society, influencers, public figures, the media or politicians.

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A good strategy requires good analysis. Without a thorough understanding of the situation and the reasons for the appeal of populism, it is impossible to find effective solutions. Therefore, any effort to defeat populism must start with an accurate diagnosis of the problem. In doing so, analytical work should be complemented by concrete examples of success in countries where such efforts have succeeded.

Having recounted what has happened in the Czech Republic over the past six years, I would like to conclude my paper by summarising the main lessons that Czech society can take away from this story. Most of these lessons are, in my opinion, universally valid and transferable to other countries.

The application – lessons learned from the Czech example

The following factors, among others, help to defeat populists: strong pressure from civil society, a good strategy of political parties, a good political offer (competence + credibility), resilient institutions, the best possible communication. I will elaborate on each of these factors in a little more detail in the form of theses/recommendations. The following are my lessons learned.

Civil society - Million Moments

Civic initiatives can have great power to dynamise society and get people up from the couch.

The Million Moments idea works. Society is full of people who are afraid of populists and who care about democracy. The key to success is to bring these people together for a simple common goal. If a million people (10% of society) come together to defend democracy, that is a huge force. But even 1% of society is a huge force. Even 0.1% of society is a huge force. Even 0.01% of committed, competent, coordinated people is still a huge force. 10, 100 or 1000 people can change the world. You don't have to get everyone. You just need to get and involve those who care. Then increase their numbers and impact.

Don't be afraid of big visible actions. They have enormous power to attract attention, they become a catalyst for social debate.

Three roles of civic initiatives are essential: 1) watchdog - guarding the rules of the game, barking and biting, 2) gardener - nurturing civil society, activating and educating citizens, 3) medium - mass spread of important information, values and attitudes.

Combine big ideals with practical steps. Start with WHY, but never forget to connect the HOW. In the end, what matters most to people are values and their own identity. But they also need a clear roadmap.

Swearing over a beer is not enough. Give everyone a very concrete and practical agenda - small steps they can easily take to get on the right side, connect with others and support a good cause. People want to be part of something bigger than themselves. The more people connect, the more everyone's voice grows. Take advantage of the synergy effect.

Stay non-partisan. Define yourself primarily by what you are AGAINST and what you reject. This will allow you to form the most widely acceptable platform and coalition. If you have good reasons to negotiate with or engage politicians, always reach out to all acceptable ones, not prefering one particular party.

Don't want to solve all the world's problems. Focus on defending democracy, its institutions and rules. Leave specific problems to specialized organizations. Be neither right nor left, conservative nor progressive. Focus on the meta-level of the basic rules of the game and the fight against lies, corruption, fear business and abuse of power.

Political parties - Role, Responsibility, Strategy

The success of populists is often due to the weakness of their competitors.

When the survival of democracy is at stake, petty disputes must be put aside and democratic parties must reasonably unite. But their merger must be organic, strategic, sensible. In the Czech case (proportional electoral system), two opposition blocs were clearly better than one. Voters must still have a choice - don't discourage them by combining too many opposing elements.

Democracy cannot survive without strong and high-quality political parties. Encourage as many successful, competent and decent people as possible to enter politics and take responsibility. Push parties to open up to new people and actively try to win them over.

Think about why people vote for populists in the first place. Don't beat their voters with a stick, but address their needs. Understand who they are and what they care about. Have a better agenda and a better future for them than the populists offer. At all costs, find a language and a way to reach these people. Listen, be clear and do not be afraid of emotions. People need to feel that you care about them, that you are thinking about them, that you are offering them support.

Great personalities - Competence + Credibility

Populists benefit from uncertain situations and from the incomprehensibility or incompetence of their opponents. The example of Czech President Petr Pavel shows that populism does not need to be fought with more populism, but with a leader who embodies competence, truth, calm, inner strength and great communication. This combination can make populists look ridiculous. Study Petr Pavel.

What works is nonviolent power. Democratic politicians should give people certainty and a sense of stability, but without manipulation and without trying to rewrite the rules and take all the power.

Marketing is important, perhaps necessary, for success. But without high quality content and credible personalities it will be empty and inauthentic. Marketing is an amplifier. Let it have something valuable to amplify.

Institutions

If populists are not to easily dominate the state, there must be as many checks and balances against them as possible: good laws, an independent media, a strong civil society, honest businessmen, an independent judiciary, a smart electoral system, a constitutional arrangement (bicameral parliament), a restrained president, and rule of law-defending international institutions.

Prepare your institutions for bad times, for the stress test will surely come. When it comes, defend them before it is too late. The sooner you stop the populists, the easier it is and the less damage they will do.

Some things are not worth saving on. Like two houses of parliament. If the Czech Republic didn't have a Senate, we might already be on a Hungarian trajectory (there have been attempts to change electoral laws in favour of the strongest parties here, also). But even if Andrej Babiš had won a constitutional majority in 2017, he still wouldn't have been able to change the Constitution and electoral laws without the consent of the Senate (which is elected by majority vote, unlike the Chamber of Deputies).

Communication and education

What ultimately determines success is communication. You need to explain, explain, explain. Clearly, credibly, interestingly. Democracy is based on the level of interest and involvement of citizens and their democratic mindset + awareness. Make it clear to all that and how it relates to them.

Invest, therefore, in developing the communication skills of leaders of civic initiatives and political parties, in communicative persuasiveness and creativity, in appropriate and clear framing of issues, in consistency and high impact.

If you want to achieve change, you need to 1) know what you are up against, 2) know what you want, 3) communicate it well, and 4) expand your circles smartly, recruiting people for change and involving them in your efforts.

But what if it's too late to do all this? Finally, I add a few points to the question that the situation in Hungary has raised in me.

10+1 things that opposition and civic groups can do when illiberal populists have already taken power:

Communicate the PROBLEM and its CONSEQUENCES accurately, concisely and interestingly. Continuously educate the widest possible public.

Don't be afraid of big public events that will help you attract attention and expand your circles.

Be inclusive. Make it absolutely clear exactly how anyone can get involved. Make it appealing. Make it easy. Make it satisfying. Study + apply the book Atomic Habits.

Agree on a shared minimum (e.g., defending the ground rules of the game) and build broad coalitions for them. Petty wars aside.

Don't limit yourself to the capital. Connect with and support active local leaders. Have both a head / center that addresses brand and strategy and a decentralized system that encourages creativity and grassroots initiative.

Work smart. Sustainable. Save energy, find leverage. Follow the 80/20 rule.

Get attention and scale your message. Your communication needs to be sexy and have a big reach. Study marketing and storytelling. Use the power of social media, newsletters, YouTube, influencers and celebrities. It's not just about money, it's also about passion and ideas. Truth and wisdom without great marketing are sadly mute today. No one will be interested in the most brilliant content or product without good packaging and communication. That's the world today. Take that as fact.

Formulate a positive vision of what you are aiming for. You don't have to be absolutely specific about everything, but you need to constantly communicate that things can be different, better - not just spot what's wrong.

Position yourself as the David against Goliath. Because you are.

Learn every day. Take risks, do experiments, learn from your faults. Find what works. Improve your strategy and performance continuously. Become 1% better each day.

Hope. Endure.

Conclusion

The best barrier against growing populism and extremism are active and educated citizens on one hand, and trustworthy plus competent politicians on the other. If we want to defeat populism, we need both. The main question therefore is, how to sparkle courage, interest and imagination in a critical number of people, so they're willing to sacrifice their own comfort in order to serve public interest.

The answer offered by the Czech Million Moments for Democracy movement lies in key observation: there are many people who see it the same way, who care for democracy, but the key is to bring these people together and focus their collective efforts in one clearly defined direction.

Further, it is possible to persistently increase number and collective power of these people by communicating the problem in attractive way, and by offering them a simple program of easy steps, small moments they can take to defend democracy, that is, to defend democratic institutions.

There must be hope that all these actions for democracy are meaningful in themselves, regardless of the situation of the moment or the calculations of how it will turn out.These tiny moments have value in themselves, because they make us a better version of ourselves. They bring us closer to the ideal of a true democrat. In the end, it's a matter of identity.

As Václav Havel put it: „Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Can we still believe and convincingly tell stories about democratic values and the beauty of democratic identity? Can we ignite passion and get attention for these? Can weexplain the problem and its consequences in simple and convincing way? And can we still sacrifice a piece of our comfort for values that transcend us? If not, I fear it will come down to the words of Plato 2400 years ago:

„In the end, you will be ruled by the most incapable (or all-capable) among you. That is the penalty for unwillingness to participate in politics.“

But it doesn't have to be that way. Even if that could seem very unlikely: Miracles do happen. Change is possible. As Margaret Mead put it: „Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.“

And as Barack Obama put it: „Change will not come if we wait for some other person, or if we wait for some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."

So, analyze thoroughly, plan boldly, communicate attractively and widen the circles. Step by step, moment by moment, it can be accumulated, until sudden breaking point occurs.

Be patient and work for that moment.

Tomasz Sawczuk[26]:

RESPONSES TO ILLIBERALISM. LESSONS FROM POLAND

The following article presents a brief analysis of the state and prospects of illiberal democracy in Poland half a year before the 2023 parliamentary elections. Firstly, I propose an overview of the Law and Justice (PiS) years in power (2015-2023). Secondly, I discuss the most popular political strategies of the liberal-democratic opposition in this period. Finally, I conclude with some closing remarks.

PiS in Power: 2015-2023

The Rule of Law

Since 2015 PiS has appointed a majority of judges in the Constitutional Tribunal, whose function is constitutional judicial review. In 2015, 3 of 15 judges have been appointed illegally, to seats which had already been occupied. This raised doubts about the legitimacy of CT's future verdicts. It is currently clear for all political actors in Poland that the CT's role has become to support the government. Accordingly, the activity of the Tribunal has been consistently in decline. In 2014 the CT has reached 71 verdicts, down to 31 verdicts in 2019 and only 14 verdicts in 2022[27]. In fact, the Tribunal has been paralysed recently, as some of the newly appointed judges would not agree on who should be the legal president of the institution. Since some of them refuse to participate in proceedings until this issue is resolved, the CT has been unable to reach a quorum for decisions requiring the presence of a full chamber in 2023.In effect, constitutional protections in the Polish legal system have been severely limited.

A story concerning the Supreme Court would sound alike. In 2017, there was an attempt at a total overhaul of the institution. At the time, PiS moved to retire all the judges, who would be then appointed by Zbigniew Ziobro, the leader of a coalition party Solidarna Polska, formally Minister of Justice and Attorney General. President Andrzej Duda, a former PiS politician who has been in office since 2015, decided to veto the bill. Nevertheless, subsequent laws were

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27 https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/trybunal-konstytucyjny-za-czasow-julii-przylebskiej-sie-nie-przepracowywujestatystyki-pokazuja-trend-6615800

passed through the parliament that was intended to lead to comparable results. In effect, over half of the SC judges are newly appointed. The institution is deeply divided, mostly over the legal status of the new judges. However, the president of the Court is considered to act in line with the government's political positions.

As for the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), which works to appoint the judges and protect the independence of the judiciary, there has been a total political takeover of the institution. In 2018, a so-called neo-KRS has been formed, with all new members selected by the ruling party. In 2021, the Polish KRS has been expelled from the European Network of Councils for the Judiciary, due to lack of political independence. The disciplinary system for the judiciary has become dependent on the ruling party and worked to limit the independence of the judges. In 2020, a newly created Disciplinary Chamber in the SC has been suspended by the Court of Justice of the European Union, due to concerns over independence and impartiality[28]. New legislation has also been introduced regarding the ordinary courts, which would limit the independence of the judiciary[29].

These developments triggered a series of rulings by the CJEU, with respect to the violations of the rule of law in Poland. In 2017, the European Commission initiated a procedure under Article 7 in response to the risks to rule of law and EU values. Since 2021, the European Commission has withheld the money for Poland from an EU pandemic recovery fund, conditional on certain improvements in the rule of law legislation[30].

The State

As of 2023, the institutional checks and balances in Poland have been severely weakened. To put it bluntly, there is almost no independent institutional control of the government, with the qualified exceptions of the Ombudsman and Supreme Audit Office. PiS has politicized the civil service and the General Attorney's office. There are procedural breaches during parliament proceedings on a regular basis. State institutions and public funds are frequently and openly used for partisan purposes. Millions of Euros of public funds are being transferred to people and organisations affiliated with the ruling party. New information on such practices is revealed in the media almost every week. In a recent scandal, NGOs related to the ruling party received money to buy expensive real estate in Warsaw[31].

28 https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2020-04/cp200047en.pdf

29 For a comprehensive discussion of the rule of law crisis in Poland, see Sadurski, W. (2019), *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown*, Oxford University Press.

30 https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-andrzej-duda-eu-recovery-fund-throws-polands-eu-cash-plans-into-turmoil/

31 https://tvn24.pl/premium/willa-plus-pytania-o-miliony-od-czarnka-bez-odpowiedzi-6759299

At the same time, the public media broadcast the ruling party's propaganda and target the opposition. In a striking recent story, a journalist from a public radio service disclosed information which allowed to deanonymise a teenager son of an opposition MP, a victim of sexual abuse. The child has committed suicide a few weeks after having been ousted by the public media[32]. The journalist who disclosed the information has been subsequently promoted to an executive position. More generally, one could observe arising political rhetoric of nationalism and anti-pluralism, as people opposed to the government were depicted as acting for secret private reasons or as agents of foreign powers. Donald Tusk, the former Prime Minister (2007-2014) and currently leader of Civic Platform (PO), the largest opposition party, has been regularly described as a "German politician", as the public TV information services would reportedly show a clip of him saying the words "für Deutschland" over a hundred times[33]. In accordance with The Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2022 report, the elections in Poland should be viewed as free but not fair[34].

Against this background, I would propose some more general remarks about the system of government. It is important to note that PiS never won a constitutional majority, so they were not able to change the Constitution. Instead, they had to exploit the legal and political opportunities arising from the existing institutional setup, sometimes thorough what András Sajó has called ruling by cheating (Sajó, 2021). PiS's mode of governance could be summed up in terms of two tendencies. First, the concentration of power. Second, the radicalisation of political conflict. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of PiS, would often stoke fear in society and then draw a grand political division, in which he depicts the opposition as being untrustworthy and allied with the sources of insecurity, so he can present himself as bedrock of security in times of conflict, thereby justifying a more powerful central government. These sources of fear could largely be of a symbolic nature, as has been the case with regard to refugees (2015 parliamentary campaign) or LGBT people (2019 parliamentary campaign and 2020 presidential campaign). Most recently, PiS would claim that the EU will force Poles to eat insects instead of traditional meat – and that Rafał Trzaskowski, the Mayor of Warsaw and PO politician, is among the leaders of this cultural revolution.

Although PiS has a reputation for being a traditionalist and conservative party, it seems important to note that ideologically and operationally they are modern through and through – and in some respects, if you will, postmodern, blurring the distinction between the virtual and the real for political purposes. In an interview for a German newspaper, Kaczyński said that the philosophers who inspired him most were Niccolò Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt[35]. In the 1990s, while explaining his political philosophy, he would point to "empiricism and, by extension,

32 https://oko.press/po-smierci-mikolaja-filiksa-ale-hejtu-prorzadowych-mediow

33 https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/wiadomosci-fuer-deutschland-donald-tusk

34 https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/nations-transit/2022

35 *Es gilt, dass Frau Merkel für uns das Beste wäre*, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/kaczynski-wuenscht-sich-fuer-polen-einen-sieg-merkels-14859766.html

pragmatism, that is, the rejection of excessive a priori theses" (Kaczyński, 1993: 179). Ideas are not irrelevant to PiS's policies and actions; strategic thinking informed by norms and values is to be seen on many levels of governance, from local politics to national security. But Kaczyński has been successful precisely because he has built the most ideologically flexible party in Polish history – a mix of post-Marxist conservatism and political pragmatism.

Parliamentary Campaign in 2023

The main theme of PiS's politics within the past months has been a clash between the protection of the people vs. neoliberalism. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, a former private bank CEO, would usually say that before 2015, during the post-2008 financial crisis, but also during the economic transition in the 1990s, people were left alone and often in poverty. In contrast, after 2015 people are protected by the state, when there is a crisis. This refers to the social policies of the government, especially the "Family 500+"social benefit of 500 PLN for every child, but also 13th and 14th additional pensions for the elderly. Since the time of the pandemic, the government would frequently announce so-called Shields. For example, PiS announced a financial "COVID-Shield" to protect jobs during the pandemic. Recently a number of "Anti-Inflationary Shields" has been announced, designed to ease the burden of the current economic turmoil, for instance by lowering the prices of electricity and gas. Consequently, PiS would depict the opposition as the party of austerity, which does not protect the people and is not to be trusted – elitist, antisocial and heartless.

The Opposition

In this period, there were three most widely discussed questions with regard to the liberal-democratic opposition.

Question 1: Should there be one united opposition or many opposition parties?

In fact, in the years 2015-2022, this was the only seriously discussed question within the mainstream opposition. The largest opposition party, Civic Platform, which was in government before 2015, wanted to unite, but the other parties did not want to do this, with the exception of

the elections to the European Parliament in 2019, when most of the opposition parties decided to unite, apart from the centre-left Wiosna (Spring), which was a political start-up at that time and wanted to try out their strength.

In effect, the mainstream opposition has wasted the years 2015-2022 politically to a large extent. Of course, in principle there is nothing wrong with the idea that the opposition should unite in a serious political situation, such as clear and present danger to the rule of law and a democratic political order. But there was a practical problem, in that the opposition did not do much else politically. Such an attitude was guided by what I call the strategy of a moral opposition, in contrast to the notion of a political opposition. Such a way of thinking was surely inspired by the years of Communism before 1989, when the important thing a democratic opposition could do was to resort to the politics of a moral protest. But in contemporary circumstances this strategy was politically catastrophic because most voters did not believe that PiS constituted a grave danger to their general well-being. In effect, the opposition did not work on a systematic strategy and agenda designed for political success; it was not able to produce a proper analysis of why it had lost elections; it could not acknowledge that it needed to rebuild credibility which it had lost before 2015; and it could not see that simply defending the rule of law and the old political system might not lead to a desirable electoral outcome.

This strategy was changed in 2022. Donald Tusk, a former Civic Platform PM, has returned to Polish politics in 2021 and once again became PO leader. At first, he would claim, as did his predecessors, that the opposition does not even need to have elaborate policy positions, ot000her than being anti-PiS, an excellent agenda in itself. But in 2022 he proposed a different view and Civic Platform started to produce a more comprehensive policy agenda, which would now be more socially oriented and focus on the economic needs of the voters.

In 2023, the opposition will likely not unite for the upcoming elections. There could be three electoral lists of the liberal-democratic opposition: broad centre Civic Coalition (PO and their allies, such as the Green Party; 27-30% in the polls), centre-right coalition of Polish People's Party and a newcomer Poland 2050 by a former television personality Szymon Hołownia (13-15% in the polls), and centre-left Lewica (The Left, featuring two parties:Nowa Lewica - New Left; and Razem – Together; 8-10% in the polls).

Question 2: If anti-PiS should not be the only goal, what should be the agenda of the opposition?

In my 2018 book "New Liberalism: How to Understand and Respond to the Crisis of the Third Republicof Poland" I argued that Polish liberal-democratic politics should advance by addressing its three greatest weaknesses: anti-political character, ideological conservatism, and free-market dogmatism (Sawczuk, 2018).

In short, PiS portrayed themselves as the party which represents the will of the people by exploiting the shortfalls in democratic politics, cultural divisions and responding to the economic needs of the citizens. To this end, they presented themselves as the party of empowerment and sovereignty. Accordingly, they portrayed the opposition as the party of "nothing is possible", subservient towards special interest groups – a party of political disorder, cultural insecurities, and social injustice; of the elites that benefit from normal people's misery. In effect, if the opposition were to build a new stable instance of liberal democracy in Poland, they could not just work to restore the past order. Instead, they would need to take a leap forward, intended to produce a new political situation. I will return to this point later.

Question 3: How to win elections? What are PiS's weak spots?

I outline here some theories and ideas on the most important political risks for PiS, which were popular in Polish political debates within the past few years.

First risk: With time people would get bored or frustrated with PiS and they will demand a political change – then the opposition could return to power. This has not been the case so far. The main reason is that PiS is politically highly active and strategically-oriented – they have built a quite stable coalition of voters, which is primarily based on people living in rural areas and older sections of the population, which constitute a large number of votes. Therefore, it is possible that PiS wins the parliamentary elections in 2023.

Second risk: In time, people will "wake up" because they will see the political scandals and violations of the Constitution by PiS. Political commentators would often propose that there will be some decisive political scandal that would overturn the government – a political explosion which would awake the voters. But this idea has not worked either. I would propose the following rule of thumb: no number of political scandals could overthrow the current government. The reason is the existing structure of the political situation, which is more fundamental to any political scandal. Roughly, as long as PiS plays the systemic role of "the party of the people," voters will not change their political affiliation due to secondary considerations. As the reason for the distribution of votes is primarily structural, it is mostly the change in the structure of the political situation that could produce a new game.

Third risk: Internal tensions and divisions. Just as political sciences literature would suggest, hybrid regimes could fall due to internal conflicts within the power elite[36]. In fact, Jarosław Kaczyński has lost a stable majority in parliament due to internal divisions. Since the elections in 2019, the opposition controls the higher chamber (Senat), which is elected in single-member districts, though it cannot block legislation. However, PiS's majority in the lower chamber (Sejm) is shaky after a coalition partner Porozumienie Jarosława Gowina (Jarosław Gowin's

36 Levitsky, S., Ziblatt, D. (2018), *How Democracies Die*, Crown.

Agreement) left the coalition in 2020. After that PiS resorted to political corruption to buy the support of a number of MPs. This secured the majority but the other coalition party – Solidarna Polska by Zbigniew Ziobro – refuses to support some major bills to build their own political position. Internal divisions were also significant in the context of President Andrzej Duda, who was a PiS candidate for president in 2015 and 2020. As he developed bad relations with Kaczyński, they have reportedly not spoken face to face for a few years now. On occasion, Duda threatens to veto a bill that he does not approve.

Fourth risk: PiS's unforced mistakes. In fact, the only serious and enduring decline in support for PiS in the polls was self-inflicted. The reason was a decision by the Constitutional Tribunal, upon a motion by right-wing MPs,which almost bans abortion in Poland. This provoked huge social protests, known as The Black Protest. Another example: in 2020, Jarosław Kaczyński angered farmers, largely his own electorate, as he proposed legislation to strengthen the protection of animal rights. He then backed down and the bill did not pass. In fact, popular resistance is usually the only case in which PiS would back down. However, resistance does not always work, because in some instances PiS considers conflict beneficial to them. Therefore, a conflict needs to be well-framed for PiS to back down.

Final Remarks

There are a few important circumstances, which should be noted before the upcoming 2023 parliamentary elections. Firstly, the political polarisation in Poland has been real and strong. This means that that statistically speaking there does not exist a group of voters likely to change political camps: people who voted for PiS and would now consider voting for the liberal-democratic opposition, or the opposition voters who could vote for PiS. In such context, the political play has been to mobilise one's voters and demobilize the opponent's voters. In any case, there is no realistic chance that any side could win a constitutional two-thirds majority.

Secondly, some of the objective circumstances may favour the current PiS government. If it is the case that we live in a time of many simultaneous crises which need to be dealt with: this requires an active state, which provides security against the conditions of instability. This kind of politics is more natural for PiS, as the mainstream opposition has a legacy of ideological economic libertarianism or Thatcherite conservative liberalism. Interestingly, PM Morawiecki has written an introduction to the Polish edition of Mariana Mazzucato's "Entrepreneurial State."

There seems to be a lesson here for the opposition, which needs to show beyond all doubt that it is not at all a party of the elites, and indeed it is the party of the people – in that it will protect the whole of the population in times of crises. This is the case for two main reasons. By doing

this, some of the PiS voters who may have gotten frustrated with the government could refrain from voting because they would feel safe in case the opposition wins elections. Also, by demonstrating a decisive attitude in time of crisis, the opposition may strengthen confidence in their efficacy and thus incentivize their own voters to go to the polls. However, there is a balancing act to be done here, as the opposition needs to offer social security in such a way as not to discourage their stronglyfree-market voters, who constitute around 15% of the electorate, and may otherwise turn to the economically libertarian and politically far-right Konfederacja.

Finally, even if the opposition wins, the struggle for liberal democracy in Poland will only continue. President Andrzej Duda will remain in office until 2025 and he has veto power. PiS will entertain considerable social support and will set out to block any meaningful reform with all available means. Many officials affiliated with the party may remain in their positions in a number of public institutions. Some institutions, such as the Constitutional Tribunal, may be notoriously difficult to reform. It is possible that the opposition would resort to para-legal means with the intention of restoring a constitutional order, but this may be viewed as a performative contradiction: it is not clear whether one can restore the rule of law with the use of means which do not look entirely by the book. Whatever the outcome of the 2023 elections, intense political conflict will continue for the foreseeable future.

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