

What is populism?

An institutional economics approach with reference to Hungary¹

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Abstract

This paper conceptualizes populism in an institutional economics context. Examining the literature on populism in political science, it subscribes to the view that populism is a degraded form of democracy that holds elections in regular intervals as rituals of popular legitimation, but undermines pluralism and diminishes effective political choice. Based on the theory of transaction cost economics, the paper argues that populism is a form of government that reduces political uncertainties inherently present in liberal democracies, and hence mitigates political transaction costs. At times of crises and a mismatch between formal and informal institutions conditioning political exchange, demand for such a restricted form of democracy rises. This is what happened in Hungary towards the end of the 2000s, in a period characterized by fiscal stabilization and the socially costly impact of the global financial crisis.

JEL codes: P10, P16, P48, P51, P52

1. Introduction

This paper examines populism from an institutional economics angle. Such an approach is not unprecedented but calls for some elaboration: Why do we need an institutional economics approach to populism? My answer is because we want to understand what makes populism a rational political choice for an increasing number of people in an increasing number of countries. I assume the underlying reasons have to do with the terms of political exchange in democracies, or to use an expression found in the institutional economics literature: with political transaction costs.

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Such an exercise may serve multiple functions. First, it can shed light on the mechanisms of populism, a political technique feared by a lot of devoted democrats, and supported by a lot of others. Second, it can help understand the institutional economics of democracy by revealing the social and economic circumstances under which democracy can be expected to thrive. Third, it may enable a meaningful differentiation among versions of populism: left and right, democratic and authoritarian.

Hence, this paper lies at the intersection of two different literatures in social sciences: (i) the political science research on populism, and (ii) the economics of transaction costs. In what follows, I first present a literature review on populism, drawing on contemporary political science research in section 2. Next I elaborate on political transaction costs and their applicability to populism in section 3. I attempt at situating my theoretical arguments into the empirical case of contemporary Hungary, using Viktor Orbán's praxis in power as an example of authoritarian populism in section 4. The paper concludes in section 5.

2. What is populism? A literature review

Populism is a political ideology that questions the legitimacy of traditional political elites by claiming to be the true, and the only true representative of people. In consequence, populists have a tendency for undermining political plurality by questioning the legitimacy of their rivals (Müller 2016). For populists, 'people' themselves represent justice and morality (Shils 1956), hence they claim to establish a direct, non-institutionalized link between government and the electorate.³

Technically speaking, populism is a modernized version of charismatic rule. In Max Weber's classic treatment, a charismatic ruler "derives his authority not from an established order and enactments, as if it were an official competence, and not from custom or feudal fealty, as under patrimonialism. He gains and retains it solely by proving his powers in practice. He must work miracles, if he wants to be a prophet. He must perform heroic deeds, if he wants to be a warlord. Most of all, his divine mission must prove itself by bringing wellbeing [emphasis in the original] to his faithful followers; if they do not fare well, he obviously is not the god-sent master" (Weber 1978 [1922], p. 1114). In this sense, populist politicians are modern-day charismatic rulers, who retain power as long as they are seen to work miracles: alter social and/or international hierarchical relations, change the economic system, bring about a true sense of 'social justice' for subordinated social groups often labeled 'the people' by undermining the authority of discredited 'elites' (also see Gurov and Zankina 2013, Hawkins 2003, Tismaneanu 2000).

Theoretically speaking, populism is a 'thin-centered' political ideology attached to a broader, more established ideological appeal (Stanley 2008). Populism typically uses more elaborate and politically better established ideologies to carve out a unique selling point in

³ Direct, non-institutionalized links include leader-dominated political movements and parties, referenda and other forms of direct participation in political life by people. In Venezuela, Hugo Chavez held multi-hour long public hearings broadcasted nationally (Ellner 2012). In Russia, President Putin hold publicly broadcasted meetings with cabinet ministers questioning their record in applying public policies (White and Mcallister 2008).

the political market. In cases of rightwing populists this is typically nationalism or another form of rightwing authoritarianism. In case of leftwing populists, this is most often a version of socialism (Mudde 2004).

Yet, populism also has its own ideological trademark. As Cas Mudde argued, populism is “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2004, p. 543). Hence, populisms are meant to represent the true views and interests of those sidelined and subordinated by selfish and corrupt elites. In other words, populism includes those who had been excluded by traditional elites.

Importantly, this is not necessarily a matter of democratic representation. Populists claim to be the true voice of people irrespective of the number of people they represent in terms of electoral results. After all, the *volonté générale*’s social and political status cannot depend on the sheer number of people realizing its true and inevitable manifestation. And who decides about what the *volonté générale* is of course are the populists.

In a similar vein, Federico Finchelstein places populism in a context of post-totalitarianism. He argues that modern Latin American populism, most saliently embodied in Peronism⁴, is the post-WWII version of totalitarianism, or “an electoral form of post-fascism” (Finchelstein 2014, p. 469). In his account, populism refuses to accept any institutionalized constraint on executive power but is reluctant to introduce explicitly totalitarian rule. Although populism embraces electoral democracy, “[i]n populism, the legitimacy of the leader is not only based in the former’s ability to represent the electorate but also on the belief that the leader’s will goes far beyond the mandate of political representation. [...] The elected leaders act as the personification of popular sovereignty exerting a great degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the majorities that have elected them. [...] As an authoritarian version of electoral democracy, populism invoked the name of the people to stress a form of vertical leadership, to downplay political dialogue, and to solve a perceived crisis of representation by suppressing democratic checks and balances” (Finchelstein 2014, p. 477).

In a similar theoretical fashion, Takis Pappas (2016) argued that populism is “democratic illiberalism”, or in other words “populism is always democratic but never liberal” (pp. 28-29). This is because populists, on one hand, need to rely on popular legitimation so that they can claim to be the true and the only true voice of people. Hence, they hold elections. On the other hand, they – as the true and only true voice of people – cannot accept losing elections. As there are no better (i.e. more credible, just, morally better entitled, etc.) representatives of the people than they are, any contradicting electoral results should be outright dismissed. Cases in point are Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump: Orbán questioned the legitimacy of both the 2002 and the 2006 Hungarian parliamentary elections that he both lost, whereas Trump called the electoral process ‘rigged’ before the 2016 US presidential election and declared before Election Day that he would not concede defeat in case Hillary Clinton won.

As Jan-Werner Müller (2016) put it, populism is “a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals (‘Let the people rule!’).” This is to say that populism seeks to gain electoral support for an anti-liberal political agenda that aims

⁴ Juan Peron was President of Argentina in 1946-1955 and in 1973-1974.

at reducing the effective choice that people can make in politics. The question is, however, if political regimes built and dominated by populists can be meaningfully called democracies. Müller's answer is an emphatic *no*: Populists are anti-pluralists and anti-pluralists cannot be democrats, as democracy is per se about pluralism. This answer appears to be in line with that of Kornai (2016), who claims that democracy cannot be illiberal.

Nevertheless, an influential part of the populism literature – and some important political actors referring to it – consider populism an important democratic force. Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues that populism is instrumental in mobilizing politically and economically oppressed masses against democratically unaccountable technocratic elites, multinational companies and international institutions. Newly emerging leftwing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain make explicit references to such views, but older, more traditional leftwing parties such as Die Linke in Germany can also be considered leftwing democratic or progressive populists. Other leading leftwing political actors such as Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK can be labelled – and at times are self-proclaimed – leftwing progressive populists.

Referring to their examples and emphasizing the structural weakness of democratic legitimation in capitalism, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) endorse populism as a potentially progressive political force. In the fashion of Laclau, they raise the problem of democratic legitimacy with respect to such politically influential but democratically not (or in their view not sufficiently) accountable actors as multinational businesses, central banks and international organizations as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

In this context and understanding, populism is indeed democratic – at time almost revolutionary so. The biggest populist success of past decades from this point of view has probably been the rise of Lula da Silva and his Workers' Party that had truly transformed politics in Brazil and lifted millions of Brazilians from poverty. However, neither Lula, nor Sanders, Corbyn or Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras are populists in the sense I use the term in this paper: Neither of them can be considered anti-pluralist, seeking to restrict democratic political choice. They may pursue populist economic policies in the sense of expansionary fiscal policies that at times may well prove unsustainable, this does not render them politically illiberal, however.

Yet, authoritarian populism well might be leftwing. Classics in this brand include Juan Peron of Argentina and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, but Rafael Correa of Ecuador is also among lead representatives (Ellner 2012, Horowitz 2012). Evo Morales of Bolivia is hovering around the edge of the category (de la Torre 2016). Europe has not seen as many leftwing populists, but according to Pappas (2014), Andreas Papandreu of Greece and his Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), established in 1974, can be considered one. Papandreu was populist, argues Pappas, for three reasons: (1) He was a highly charismatic, unconstrained party leader, with a highly nationalistic agenda, mobilizing against established elites; (2) He advocated strong government involvement in the economy and pursued unsustainable fiscal policies; and (3) He heavily relied on clientele building and government-created rents. Yet, this occurred in an institutional context characterized by a competitive electoral system and the provision of basic political rights. Hence, Papandreu does not appear to be an authoritarian populists, even if he was highly charismatic and built a clientele.

Similarly, rightwing populists are not always authoritarian. Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, although also highly charismatic and relying on a clientele built around his personal authority, did not create an authoritarian regime for the simple reason that he could not overcome all the checks and balances Italy had been endowed with. Boyko Borisov of Bulgaria can be also seen as rightwing clientele-building populist, exercising unconstrained, personality-based rule within his own political party (Zankina 2016). Andrej Babis of the Czech Republic is yet another case of unconstrained personal rule within his own party, based on clientele building and charisma. Yet, neither Borisov, nor Babis have been able to dismantle the system of checks and balances in their respective countries, in contrast to what had happened in Peron's Argentina, Chavez' Venezuela or Orbán's Hungary.

Finally, another distinction has been made in the populism literature by Rogers Brubaker (2017) who differentiates between liberal and illiberal populisms. Observing that a significant number of North-West-European (NWE) right wing populist parties have recently shifted towards a distinctively liberal direction, Brubaker argues that a new type of individualistic, secular, enlightened populism appears to be emerging. This should be seen – he claims – to be derived from the 'Pim Fortuyn moment' that placed – first in the Netherlands, than across a large part of Western Europe – populism in a new social and political context. As opposed to traditional populists, Fortuynian populists stand up for individual freedoms, including those of women and sexual minorities, whereas depicting groups of society adhering to pre-enlightenment, traditional social values to be the enemies. These are, of course, typically immigrant communities with Muslim backgrounds.

This new populism is liberal and 'civilizational' in its social values, while it defends the liberties of 'enlightened' European societies against the 'anti-liberal aggression' of non-European immigrants. The protection of individual freedoms, however, do not apply for the latter, and those claiming them individual rights and adhere to multiculturalism are regarded part of an oppressive leftwing social, political and intellectual elite exhibiting the 'dictatorship of political correctness.' Rightwing civilizational populism considers oppressing the enemies of European civilization legitimate and indeed inevitable. Elements of this quasi-liberal populism, argues Brubaker, can be traced in the Freedom Party of Austria, France's National Front, the Netherland's Party for Freedom, the Swiss People's Party, Belgium's Vlaams Belang, or the Danish People's Party. They all subscribe to secularism, individualism, equality of women and homosexuals, and the values of western enlightenment in general, whereas all express markedly negative sentiments towards immigrants and especially those of Muslim backgrounds.

In contrast, East European rightwing populists such as Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and Lech Kaczynski's PiS, do not appear to join this club. They keep distancing themselves from individualism and the values of western enlightenment, while sticking to a kind of communitarian vision of politics in which individuals are expected to subordinate themselves to the community manifested in the 'nation.' Hence, East European rightwing authoritarian populism remains to be anti-liberal, not only vis-à-vis external enemies but also within their home societies. As opposed to the 'enlightened' liberal rightwing populism of Western Europe, East European rightwing populists use explicit religious references and identify themselves as protectors of Christianity. In the Polish case, this means a reference to a 'closed', illiberal version of Catholicism and an alliance with its representatives within the Polish Catholic

Church (Stanley 2016). In the Hungarian case, in turn, this has little to do with religious values or theological concepts of a good society. It is rather a secularized surrogate religion what Hungarian rightwing populism creates (Ádám and Bozóki 2016a), and hence it is also ‘civilizational’, although this is a considerably less individualistic, enlightenment-based and liberal civilization than the one referenced by Brubaker’s NWE populists.

3. Populism and political transaction costs

The notion of transaction costs in institutional economics refers to the costs of economic exchange. These include (i) search and information costs, (ii) costs of bargaining and contracting, and (iii) costs of policing and enforcing contracts (Coase 1937, Williamson 1985). Not all types of economic transactions carry significant transaction costs, though. Recurring market transactions typically do not imply substantial uncertainties and hence neither impose large transaction costs on transacting partners (Williamson 1979). That is to say, one can buy or sell a loaf of bread in the shop around the corner with facing practically no information, bargaining and enforcing costs. Efficient financial markets also carry very low transaction costs: Information is symmetric, market participants are numerous, transactions are standardized, and completed fast and transparently.

Societies develop formal and informal institutions to mitigate transaction costs. Formal institutions include laws and mechanisms of sanctioning unlawful behavior. Informal institutions are norms and customs transacting partners adopt and obey to. The breach of informal institutions does not entail formalized sanctions yet it typically brings about severe financial and/or non-financial disadvantages (North 1991). Institutions in modern economies are capable of handling complex exchanges keeping transaction costs sufficiently low. In other words, economic quality is closely associated to institutional quality, whereas the latter depends on both formal and informal institutions and their mutual compatibility.⁵

Governance is about the management of transaction costs. In the classic treatment of Coase (1937), firms are conceptualized as organizations producing institutional mechanisms handling transaction costs of complex production processes. As producing cars, skyscrapers and collateralized corporate loans typically require the cooperation of numerous individuals who need to work together in a disciplined manner, they engage in collective action carried out in hierarchical organizations called firms. In other words, vertical integration tend to be more efficient in complex production processes than horizontal market relations. Yet, even this has been changing as new information and production technologies transform industries and loosely integrated networks become increasingly competitive vis-à-vis hierarchical firms (Hámori and Szabó 2016).

Political governance is also about the management of transaction costs. It is meant to maintain, regulate and control political exchange at reasonably low transaction costs.

⁵ North famously referred to the potential mismatch between formal and informal institutions. Privatization can be done overnight, but the informal institutions within which private property and other core institutions of capitalism rest takes much longer to develop, he said with reference to the process of post-communist transformation in his Nobel lecture (North 1994).

Political exchanges are social interactions influencing the allocation of power, wealth and prestige in society (cf. Downs 1957). They occur both at national and local levels, and even within particular organizations, such as political parties, parliamentary factions, ministerial bureaucracies, NGOs, sport clubs, and – for that matter – firms.⁶ Political transaction costs depend on the efficiency of formal and informal institutions determining political exchange and their mutual compatibility. These institutions constitute political regimes.

I said in the last sentence of the previous section that populism seeks to establish ‘de-institutionalized political regimes.’ What I meant was governance without the constraints of formal institutions: a direct, informal way of political exchange between rulers and the ruled. However, such a form of governance is also based on institutions, of course.

Any routinized, recurring human interaction is based on institutions, and political governance necessarily does so. Yet, instead of formal, transparent and accountable institutions, it can rely on informal, non-transparent and non-accountable ones, in which agreements on legitimate actions are tacit and – at least to some extent – fluid, while subordination to unconstrained power-holders remains the rule. In other words, it is government not based on laws (i.e. legally defined, formal rules) but on customs, cultural preferences and the personal authority of leaders (who may or may not have Weberian charisma).

When does such a populist form of governance become socially dominant and accepted as a legitimate form of government (i.e. socially institutionalized)? My answer is whenever formal and informal institutions of political rule do not match, and the formally institutionalized course of actions by governments are not any more embedded in a web of informal, culturally defined norms and convictions. In other words, when liberal democracy with its entire apparatus of mutually constraining, formalistic, impersonal rule breaks down, and political transaction costs of democracy rise too high. Then the moment of populism arrives, and authoritarian populists can start slashing political transaction costs by reducing political choice. They do this various ways, among which I present two widely used political techniques: the left—right divide and ingroup-outgroup mechanisms.

3.1. Left- and rightwing populisms

Populism is about slashing political transaction costs by reducing the number of effective political alternatives. It is a degraded version of democracy because it constrains genuinely free democratic choice. This can be done in distinctively different ways, and populist, depending on their ideological orientation and institutional environment, offer different political alternatives.

One common distinction is the left—right divide. The camp of leftwing populists consist of Juan Peron of Argentina, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Rafael Correa of Ecuador and Evo Morales of Bolivia in Latin America (de la Torre 2016, Ellner 2012, Horowitz 2012). In contrast, Europe has not seen too many leftwing populists, but according to Pappas (2014), Andreas

⁶ The institutional economics literature conventionally refers to the costs of setting up and maintaining social and political organizations such as political parties and state bureaucracies as political transaction costs (Furubotn – Richter, 2005, pp. 55-57). On the other hand, very few political scientists use the notion of political transaction costs in their scholarship. One notable exception is Zankina (2016).

Papandreou of Greece and his Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), established in 1974, can be considered one.

Pasok was populist, argues Pappas, for three reasons: (1) Papandreou was a highly charismatic, unconstrained party leader; Pasok advocated strong government involvement in the economy and pursued economic policies characterized by unsustainable fiscal provisions; and (3) Papandreou heavily relied on clientele building and the creation and stabilization of an us—them social cleavage.

Other European parties that can be potentially considered leftwing populist are Die Linke in Germany, Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, but neither of them are leader-dominated and rely on clientele building and the creation of social cleavages as much as Pasok did. Regulating markets and redistributing to the benefit of the poor does not in itself constitute populism as it does not necessarily imply an illiberal approach to power. Hence, Jeremy Corbyn of the UK and Bernie Sanders of the US are not populists either in this sense: They might be labeled democratic or progressive populists, and they well might be skeptical of capitalism, but they cannot be accused of political illiberalism.

Rightwing populists typically employ authoritarian policies, such as infringing on media freedoms and building clienteles through the usage of public resources, and they also tend to form leader dominated parties. In contrast to leftwing populists, they typically do not pursue pro-poor policies, and a large part of their vote is recruited from the middle classes, whom they assist in retaining their social and economic status. Carlos Menem of Argentina, Victor Paz Estenssoro of Bolivia, Alberto Fujimori of Peru, and Carlos Salinas de Gortari of Mexico are Latin American examples of such policies (Stein 2012, Weyland 1998, Gibson 1997). European rightwing populists often exhibit a pro-middle class bias, create leader-dominated parties, and seek to deepen social cleavages. Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen of France, Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi of Italy, Geert Wilders of the Netherlands, Albert Rösti of Switzerland and Nigel Farage of the UK are examples in Western Europe. Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jaroslaw Kaczynski of Poland are both rightwing populists in the Eastern part of the EU. In a sense, Vladimir Putin of Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey can be also considered rightwing populist as they both rely on democratic legitimacy while pursuing distinctively illiberal policies, although their conduct of power appears significantly more oppressive than usual in authoritarian populism, and hence their respective political regimes gravitate towards outright dictatorship.

3.2. Exclusion and inclusion by populists

Both left- and rightwing populists seek to reduce political transaction costs by undermining the viability of their opposition, hence limiting effective political choice. This way, they create political and economic rents that mutually reinforce each other. As such government-sponsored rents are difficult to cut back, populist leaders may stay in office for protracted periods, in some cases for decades. Populists in power tend to become increasingly authoritarian, as the cases of Orbán, Putin and Erdogan demonstrate. However, there is an inevitable trade-off all authoritarian leaders face: The less democratic their political regime becomes, the lower the genuine popular legitimation they can claim. Although political exchange gets simpler and hence political transaction costs decrease as the regime gets increasingly authoritarian, the

costs of oppression rise and long-term economic performance tends to deteriorate (Acemoglu and Robinson 2000, 2012). Populists, just as any other autocrats, employ ingroup-outgroup mechanisms to mitigate this problem.

In fact, governance always includes and excludes. Political actions in general and public policies in particular inevitably prefer some groups in comparison to others. Given the relative lack of institutionalized constraints on their rule, populist governments are inclined to employ ingroup-outgroup mechanisms by which they build political clientele and insure the political support of their favored electorate.

Preferential treatment can include various policies related to jobs, incomes, wealth or prices. As leftwing populists tend to constrain markets and intensify government involvement in the economy, this can manifest itself in job creation and price regulation. Those preferred by such policies can be considered ingroups vis-à-vis the regime. Rightwing populists, in turn, typically cut taxes on wealth and/or income, and provide beneficial public procurement contracts to their business cronies.⁷

Populists redistribute for those included and extract from those excluded. Most typically those included are politically associated with the 'people', but their socioeconomic characteristics depend on the left—right character of the regime. Leftwing populists tend to include the relative poor (although not necessarily the poorest who typically lack any form of politically relevant social capital) and exclude some of the rich. Rightwing populists typically apply an ethnic and/or religious criteria in their ingroup-outgroup distinction, often provide beneficial treatment for middle classes organized into their clienteles.

Inclusion by the regime always mean a deal. Operation of formal political institutions is of secondary importance only, as being member of the clientele is more important than norms and actions of an impersonal democratic rule. Those who accept informal rules of the regime (that at some point might actually be formalized) typically will not protest even if they perceive the mechanisms of redistribution unfair and normatively problematic. That is why corruption scandals do not work in populist regimes: all those included are 'corrupted' in some sense. Corruption is not the normatively unacceptable exception but the socially implicitly or explicitly approved way of survival in an informally governed, authoritarian regime. Hence, it simply does not necessarily make much sense to draw attention to its existence. Of course, it exists; this is how the entire society gets by.

Exclusion and inclusion help cut political transaction costs as they reduce effective political choice. Those who vote and make other political decisions are controlled through reallocation of resources, including information, money and power, by those above them in the power pyramid. Hence, society gets re-feudalized, although rituals of mass-approval of power remain in place.

⁷ Political practices of leftwing and rightwing populists are of course not mutually exclusive but well might be mixed by actual populists, whether on the left or the right.

4. The Orbán regime

A prime example of current populist governance is Viktor Orbán's Hungary. Having served as prime minister in 1998-2002, Orbán took over government in 2010 for the second time. As his rightwing populist Fidesz party took two-third of parliamentary seats, Orbán could alter the entire constitutional system as an unconstrained populist leader (Ádám and Bozóki 2016b). Note that a two-third majority was relatively easy to attain in the individual constituency based Hungarian electoral system, in which the majority principle has dominated since 1990. In consequence, a majoritarian approach to power, generally characterizing populist parties and leaders, has been present in Hungary since the regime change, and prevailed both within individual political parties and the entire political system (Ádám 2018).

In 2010-14, Orbán made the constitutional system even more majority-based, effectively dismantling all checks and balances on government power (Tóth 2012, Kornai 2015). In 2014, Fidesz was reelected, and Orbán continued to govern. At the time of writing, he is set to gain yet another overwhelming electoral victory at the spring 2018 general elections, and Hungary is expected to remain governed by him for at least four more years. His success was based on a characteristically authoritarian populist policy mix: He has centralized power, made government economically more active, built an extensive clientele, and heavily reallocated resources to the benefit of his supporter base. State ownership expanded, income inequalities grew, while fiscal redistribution stayed as high as it was before, with significantly less redistribution from the rich to the poor, though.

4.1. Left- or right? Right

Although their policies have exhibited a number of leftwing characteristics, Orbán's governments have pursued an explicitly rightwing version of authoritarian populism. Ideologically they are nationalistic and define the political community on an ethno-cultural basis. Their self-identification has been manifestly rightwing, allegedly standing up for conservative and religious values, even if in actual terms this has rather been a secular pseudo-religion than Christianity and religious conservatism (Ádám and Bozóki 2016a).

Orbán's policies explicitly prefer middle class economic interests. First, this is again a manifestly declared policy goal: Strengthening an ethno-culturally defined Hungarian middle class that supports national interests embodied in local (as opposed to global or foreign) political initiatives carries a high priority in Orbán's political discourse. Second, redistribution policies, including policies on taxation and social benefits, have been also characterized by strong middle class biases.

Since 2010, Orbán has introduced a flat income tax that brought about a large reduction in tax burden of average and higher incomes whereas it increased the tax burden on low incomes. In addition, generous income tax holidays after children made tax burden of middle class families particularly low. In contrast, lower income big families simply do not have enough revenues to claim these benefits. In the meantime, child benefits, paid after children regardless of family income, have not risen but lost part of their real value, particularly hitting low income big families, many of them being Roma (Inglot et al. 2012). Generous housing finance schemes have been also introduced to the benefit of high income families, able to buy

or build new houses. Finally, the polarization of state-administered pensions, started in the pre-2010 period, continued as a high replacement ratio and undifferentiated pension hikes made middle class pensions grow faster than pensions of lower income earners (Ádám and Simonovits 2017).

Some of Orbán's policies have exhibited a less explicit pro-middle class bias. Importantly, utility prices have been administratively cut by the government in 2012-14, significantly boosting the popularity of the regime and the reelection chances of Orbán in 2014. Cutting utility prices at first sight appears a pro-poor measure, and to some extent it indeed is. However, middle classes also enjoy lower utility prices, especially those having a large house. Moreover, the utility price cut was part of Orbán's scheme of redistributing markets of utility industries: These were privatized in the 1990s for large foreign firms by the then governing Socialists and Liberals, whereas Orbán partly renationalized them after 2010. Cutting utility prices was an incentive for foreign firms to withdraw from the market and relinquish their previous investments in a formerly friendly, recently hostile-turned business environment (Ámon and Deák 2015, pp. 95-96).

Orbán also levied special industry-specific taxes on banking, energy provision, telecommunication and food retail trade. Apart from raising additional budgetary revenues, these taxes also gave incentives for large foreign companies to leave the Hungarian market, and let the government control it directly through regulation, nationalization and – in some cases – re-privatization to friendly businesses. The policy goal was to strengthen local capital accumulation and support government-sponsored business clienteles through the allocation of market shares and preferential government provisions, often at – or beyond – the edge of legalized corruption (cf. Fazekas and Tóth 2016, CRCB 2016).⁸

4.2. Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

Successive Orbán governments – like any other authoritarian populists – have always made explicit who were 'us' and who were 'them' from their perspective. Orbán has always placed a great political emphasis on creating deep social divisions between his camp and their opposition. He has acted like a feudal landlord among his subjects, always appreciating loyalty and punishing individualism. Traditionally, the dividing characteristics he used were attitudes to the communist past, to the outside world, to national identity and to Christianity.

Ideologically, Orbán's 'us' were the non-communist, ethno-culturally Hungarian, Christian, 'civic' (i.e. non-proletarian) Hungarians. Upon losing the 2002 elections to the Socialists, however, he revised this basis of identification by incorporating more plebeian-populist elements. He changed his dress-code and, to some extent, even his language, to appear and sound more authentically identical with the people. Eventually, in the wake of the global financial crisis and the ensuing fiscal stabilization by the then governing center left, Orbán made this kind of inclusive 'us', consisting both plebeian and aristocratic elements, victorious.

Another important economic and social policy measure playing a major role in creating ingroup-outgroup dynamics has been the expansion of public work programs. In these,

⁸ Another form of providing government secured rents for friendly businesses was the creation of local tobacco retail sales monopolies that were typically allocated among Fidesz-friendly local businesses.

hundreds of thousands of people have been included who otherwise would have typically stayed economically inactive. They have earned miserable wages but still enjoyed some degree of income stability. To make the program more attractive, the government reduced social benefits of those out of work, including both the unemployed and those who had been out of the labor market on a permanent basis.

Public work programs seldom make participants economically more competitive. Instead, participants often get stuck in these programs (Cseres-Gergely and Molnár 2015), making them dependent on government policies and, in particular, local authorities who directly employ them in most public work scheme. Especially in villages and small towns this can contribute to the re-feudalization of power relations, while at the same time responding to the negative stereotypes of the public about the scores of 'lazy inactive' people, among whom the Roma are overrepresented (Kertesi and Kézdi 2011). Hence, public work programs have been instrumental in making the distinction between included and excluded sections of society salient and tangible, and creating a hierarchical relationship between the two.

Nevertheless, inclusion-exclusion dynamics have been restructured by Orbán since the last general elections. The 2014 elections were to a significant extent won by Orbán through utility price cuts that symbolized the regulation of markets and the emphasis on living conditions. The message was that ordinary people were not any more at the mercy of businesses but were protected by the government, delivering tangible financial gains to them at the cost of foreign investors.

Importantly and interestingly, Orbán has formulated a new message since then. With the start of the European migrant and refugee crisis in 2015, he gained an opportunity to redefine ingroup—outgroup dynamics along ideologically determined ethno-national lines. Fencing Hungary both ideologically and physically, Orbán was able to offer ingroup membership to all prepared to accept the boundaries of 'us' he proposed, and recognize him as the leader of the nation. He went against the EU and identified Hungary as a no-refugee zone, refusing to adhere to the principles of international human rights and EU law. This way, an ethno-culturally constructed ideological differentiation became the basis of new ingroup-outgroup dynamics.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I argued that populism is a degraded form of democratic politics that seeks to eliminate its political rivals while maintaining popular legitimation through multiparty elections. Whether on the left or the right side of the political spectrum, populism is always illiberal. It projects a unidimensional political space in which populist contenders represent themselves as the true and only true representatives of the people, rejecting the legitimacy of any other claim to power. This way, populists simplify complicated social and political reality, and seek to reduce effective political choice. Hence, they reduce political transaction costs.

Political transaction costs, I argued, are the costs of conducting horizontal political exchange among autonomous political actors. Being the legitimate representatives of their own convictions and interests without being institutionally subordinated to any other political actors, members of democratic societies impose significant political transaction costs on

each other by making political exchange unpredictable, situated in a multidimensional social space. As societies cannot always afford to bear these costs, populism appears to be in need from time to time even in rich, developed, first world countries.

I also argued that leftwing populists tend to redistribute to the benefit of the poor and use socialism or Marxism as an ideological basis. Rightwing populists, in turn, typically redistribute less, and place political emphasis on ethno-cultural nationalism. Both left- and rightwing populists tend to be anti-liberal and authoritarian, as a number of examples in Latin America and elsewhere suggest. A new type of North-Western European rightwing populism tends to exhibit an increasingly liberal worldview with respect to individual freedoms – as long as the freedom of migrants and refugees are not concerned.

Apart from the left-right political divide, populists – as many other anti-liberal political regime – apply ingroup-outgroup dynamics to structure political space. Members of ingroups are preferred by redistributive policies (and often also by symbolic politics). They are part of the official ‘us’, and they are meant to be the social core of the regime. Their interests are served by the regime and their systematic advantages are presented as legitimate politically. That is why corruption charges often remain non-effective against populist regimes: They are of course corrupt in the sense of systematically preferring particular groups of society, but this is a quasi-legitimate political pattern as long as they prefer members of the ingroup.

Both the left-right divide and the ingroup-outgroup divide reduce political transaction costs by conditioning political exchange and reducing effective political choice. This way, redistributive patterns get stabilized and the allocation of power may remain unchanged over a protracted period of time. Importantly, this is not to say that predictability of political actions increases from the point of view of individual political or business actors.⁹ The rule of law, in fact, deteriorates. What becomes more predictable and hence eliminates a considerable amount of uncertainties surrounding political exchange is the survival of the regime with its patterns of redistribution and allocation of power. In societies characterized by a limited capacity of people to hold their government accountable and impose checks on power, such political stability appears attractive as opposed to its alternative, which is essentially anarchy.¹⁰ In other words, societies that lack formal and informal institutions and their mutual reinforcement necessary for maintaining liberal democracy, populism becomes a viable political option of maintaining a ‘degraded form of democracy’ – and hence avoiding outright dictatorship.

I argued that this is what precisely happened in Hungary after 2010. Having experienced a deepening political and economic crisis of liberal democratic governance in the late 2000s, Hungarians identified Viktor Orbán’s illiberal approach to power as a promising alternative of a more stable and predictable political regime. Orbán’s reign well might be corrupt, redistributing to the benefit of a business clientele at a mass scale, yet it provides a sufficient amount of benefits for a sufficient number of people in a stable and predictable manner so that it has a fair chance to survive the 2018 elections.

⁹ I am grateful to the participants of the departmental seminar of CEU’s Department of Political Science, especially Zsolt Enyedi, for drawing my attention to this point.

¹⁰ Weingast (1997) associate the capability of people to hold their government accountable and curb governmental transgressions with the existence of ‘focal solutions’ to the problem of collective action.

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