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Left authoritarianism and positional shifts of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

The key to understanding the emergence of left authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe lies in how populist parties alter their policy positions during times of crises. In response to the refugee crisis of 2015, these parties adopt extreme stances on cultural issues. Interestingly, the same parties did not appear to modify their economic policy positions when confronted with the financial crisis of 2008. The case studies of Lithuania and Hungary presented in this article add that the success of these shifts depends on party competition, the electoral system, corruption scandals, and political actors' commitment to voter-party linkage.

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1. Introduction

The current political landscape is dominated by numerous successful populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. These parties are characterised by the re-emergence of “left authoritarianism”, a blend of distributive economic stances with conservative cultural preferences (Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2020; Vachudova 2020). Notable examples include Fidesz in Hungary, PiS in Poland, and SDS in Slovenia. These parties successfully combine such positions, reminiscent of the “reddish” and “brownish” coalitions (communist successor parties and nationalists) from the early transition years (Ishiyama 1998). When in power, these party-appointed governments implement a unique form of economic nationalism emphasizing workforce activation, natalism, and sovereignty over generous welfare regimes and redistribution to the poor (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2022). However, less is understood about how and why they successfully transitioned from their highly liberal positions on both dimensions in the 90s and early 2000s.

The supply-side drivers of populism behind these positional shifts focus on structural factors like economic liberalisation or ethnic composition (Buštková 2019; Vachudova 2020), competition in the party system (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Grzymala-Busse 2019a; 2019b), and the role of tactics, ideas, and ideology of its leaders (Enyedi 2020;

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Hanley and Vachudova 2018). Recent studies suggest that policy competition, rather than competition in the party system, is the key determinant in cases such as Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary (Pirro 2015). However, what remains puzzling is the varying success of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe in adapting to deepening cultural and socio-economic divisions (Guasti and Buřtiková 2023). Questions arise about where and why support for these parties is increasing, what positions these parties are taking, under what conditions their adjustments (or lack thereof) are successful, and what other factors need to be considered.

In this article, I argue that the relationship between the policy shifts of the populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe and their electoral success is not straightforward. On one hand, contrary to the empirical findings of Tavits (2007), successful party strategies in CEE focus on shifts in the domain of cultural issues rather than economic policy. In times of crises, they employ a mix of ethnopopulism (Vachudova 2020) and policy innovations from an authoritarian toolkit (Enyedi 2020).

On the other hand, additional factors seem to be at play as well. Experience in government does not produce an incentive to moderate party positions in times of crisis. In fact, adopting a more sceptical position towards immigration helps parties to capitalise on votes by taking over issue ownership from far-right competition. They do so by imposing their narrative when the immigration issue is salient, and the voter-party linkage is strong. Structural factors, in the form of an accommodative electoral system and competition within the party system, may be of particular importance but are limited to unique circumstances and particular cases of populist takeover. This is exemplified in Orbán's Hungary, where the playing field has been tilted so that each successive election is less free and fair.

The article uses a mixed-method approach. First, using descriptive statistics I illustrate the positional shifts of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, discussing also whether these positional shifts (independent variable) on policy issues were successful (dependent variable). Second, I go further into my analysis to uncover additional factors behind the success of those shifts in the case of Hungary and the lack of it in the case of Lithuania. The article applies a unified approach of spatial and salience theories, using results from the study of the relevant election manifestos as well as Chapel Hill Expert Survey data (CHES) (Jolly et al. 2022).

The article¹ contributes to the debate of the success of populism in Central and Eastern Europe by engaging with the party politics literature specific to the region. Theoretically, this article contributes to the discourse on whether parties adjust their positions in response to shifts in voter attitudes, or if parties influence voter positions through party cuing and information campaigns. This is examined in the context of economic and refugee crisis of 2015, during which the political landscape inevitably evolves alongside the electorate.

Political parties may choose to align with voter shifts, presenting opportunities to adapt, maintain their current stance, or to "zigzag" – fluctuate in their policy positions between elections. This is particularly significant for populist parties, who claim to represent the "pure people" against a "corrupt elite", irrespective of their ideological positions (Mudde 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). These parties appear to have no option but to continually align with the preferences of the relevant electorate or highlight the importance of new issues in response to crises.

Empirically, the study focusses on the difference in success across Central and Eastern Europe by comparing the less-known case of Lithuanian populists (Labour) with the Hungarian Fidesz – uncovering the reasons behind the late arrival and the early success of populism across the region (Kotwas and Kubik 2019).

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces the theory and the conceptual framework used to frame the research questions. The third section discusses the methodology. The fourth section provides an empirical analysis of all populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe. The fifth and sixth sections offer case studies of Fidesz and the Labour Party, respectively. The final section discusses the findings and provides a conclusion.

2. Theoretical background

The enduring success of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe is typically attributed to structural factors such as economic liberalisation or ethnic composition (Buščíková 2019; Vachudova 2020), a lack of robust competition within the party system (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Grzymala-Busse, 2019a), and backlash against technocratic elites involved in the transition process in certain countries across the region (Stanley 2017).

On the other side of the debate, authors highlight the role of elite tactics. Some underscore the importance of balancing party strategy to manipulate opposition on economic dimensions and racialize immigrant threats (Vachudova 2020). Others discuss a top-down mechanism of party strategy that depends on the implementation of party leaders' ideas and ideologies (Enyedi 2020; Hanley and Vachudova 2018). The emergence of neo-feudalism – organisational innovations by the new authoritarian elite that have built a new populist establishment and enriched those within the patronal network around the core – has been key in both (Enyedi 2020; Kubik 2018; Magyar and Madlovics 2022).

Regardless of which side of the debate is correct, the literature agrees on two points: the success of populism in Central and Eastern Europe varies across regions (generally more successful in Visegrad countries and less so in the Baltics), and that parties evolve and change their positions over time.

However, altering party policy positions as outlined in their political programmes is risky, with unpredictable electoral results. Constantly switching positions might confuse voters who may perceive the party as opportunistically pandering to their interests. Both Pirro (2015) and Pytlas (2015) show that movements towards the centre or extremes can have complex effects with no predictable outcomes. Buščíková (2019) demonstrates that polarisation is affected by bilateral opposites (parties on extremes) and that movements of similarly positioned parties can lead to multiple outcomes in terms of policy shifts.

Based on voter-party linkage logic (Kitschelt et al. 1999), some parties might be highly responsive to their electorate's reactions to rapidly changing social and economic conditions or may simply ignore them (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Parties may take cues from mean voter shifts based on past election results or opinion polls, with opposition parties more willing to change their profile than those in government (Meyer and Wagner 2013). Parties that were successful in the last elections are likely to maintain their positions to avoid negative effects from changing their stance or being accused of pandering. Positional shifts within party systems

differ between Eastern and Western democracies. Marks et al. (2006) found that the fundamental structure of party competition differs significantly in how domestic dimensions of competition intersect on both economic and cultural issues. On one hand, the “triple” transition and post-socialist experience cause right-leaning parties to adopt distributive positions (Tavits and Letki 2009). On the other hand, in regions where pre-existing social cleavages are present, parties do not polarise on the economic dimension, an observation first made by Kitschelt et al. (1999) and later by Tavits & Letki (2014).

Competition over these issues relies on the historical legacies and contextual idiosyncrasies of post-communist path-dependency. Both pre-communist issues, such as irredentism and clericalism, and post-communist issues, such as the accommodation of ethnic minorities (Buščíková, 2019), corruption, and the EU (Pirro 2015), play a role in the positioning and success of populist and radical parties. The historical legacy of various communist regimes also has a long-lasting effect on party agendas. In countries with a legacy of national accommodative communism, early differentiation of major parties on socio-cultural issues curbed radical parties’ success. However, in highly polarised patrimonial regimes, the radical right thrived due to high inequality and dissatisfaction from the swift welfare state dismantling (Buščíková and Kitschelt 2009).

The observation that parties have moved on the cultural axis is well established in the CEE party literature (Art 2020; Vachudova 2019). Moreover, authoritarianism and nationalism have been in alliance with pro-redistributive positions since the early 1990s through the “red-brown” vote (Ishiyama 2009) and the high level of ideological congruence between radical right and mainstream narratives (Pytlas 2015). Körösényi (1999) and Kitschelt et al. (1999) have also argued that parties in Hungary do not compete along the economic axis in terms of left (state) versus right (market), but rather by outbidding the opponent in economic promises – offering redistributive and other economic benefits to voters during electoral campaigns. Snegovaya (2018) finds that the centrist shift of the ex-Communist left parties along the economic policy dimension is what drives the electoral success of populist and radical right parties in the Visegrad region. In the observation by Engler, Pytlas, and Deegan-Krause (2019), most populist parties in the CEE region (same observation, but for nationalist parties in Kitschelt et al. [1999] and Buščíková and Kitschelt [2009]), already had a high preference for redistribution before the economic crisis.

When it comes to incumbency, populists in power appear to fulfil some of their promises, providing redistribution for those who belong to the “in-group” of “the pure people” (Benczes 2022; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Szikra 2018). Moreover, it is more a specific form of economic nationalism that emphasizes workforce activation, natalism, and sovereignty than competition on economic issues prior to elections (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2022). When seems to be lacking in the literature on Central and Eastern Europe is a systematic examination of how such pre-electoral shift function, how they empirically relate to implemented policies, and which shifts lead to success at the ballot box.

Positional shifts are particularly significant in the case of the Eastern region of the EU, where regime change and the emergence of a liberalised party system occurred following waves of citizen mobilisation through social movements, such as *Sąjūdis* in Lithuania or *Solidarność* in Poland. During the process of “triple transition” (economic, political, and national building), citizen inclusion into the political body preceded the phase of contestation. This prompted parties to behave substantially differently from those in established liberal democracies (Offe & Adler, 2004; Enyedi 2016).

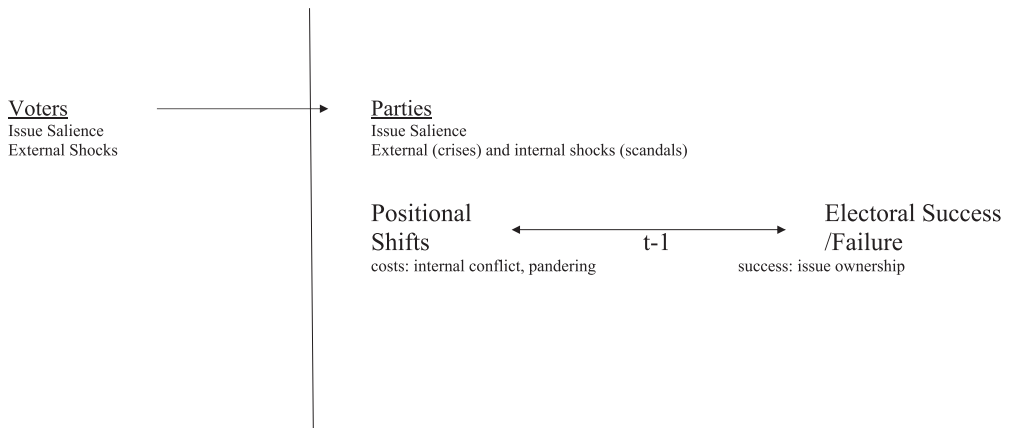


Figure 1.

The minimal² model (Figure 1) divides voters and parties into two domains. The voter-party linkage, extending from the left to the right side of the model (as discussed in Kitschelt et al. 1999) suggests that if an issue becomes salient for voters, it might translate over to parties who chose to emphasize certain elements in the electoral campaigns (Budge and Farlie 1983; Meguid 2005; Rovny 2012). As vote-maximisers, they strive for electoral success by pursuing votes and office (Downs 1957) as well as competing over issue ownership (Petrocik 1996). Parties also have an option to adapt and change their position, after performing a cost-benefit analysis. The relationship between positional shifts and electoral success or failure at time $t-1$ is endogenous, as it also depends on the results of previous elections, but this influence diminishes over time (Somer-Topcu 2009).

The minimal model outlined above enables the retesting of Tavits' (2007) empirical findings, specifically whether shifts in voter preferences that result in positional changes in party positions are associated with electoral gains over the same period. Given that populist parties purport to represent "the people" and are thus expected to be the closest and most responsive to mean voter shifts, the triggers of refugee and economic crises should elicit their reaction and indicate success or loss in electoral terms. Moreover, the expectation is that unlike in more established democracies in Western Europe, socio-economic crises, corruption scandals, and other shocks that occur relatively frequently are the primary drivers of ideological shifts.

The retesting of the empirical findings of Tavits (2007) on a sample of Central and Eastern European populist parties aims to determine how these findings apply specifically for Central and Eastern Europe. In this region, the legacy of the past, party competition (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015), and the level of party system institutionalisation (Casal Bértoa and Van Biezen 2014) create a significantly different dynamic of conditions for positional shifts. Parties in Central and Eastern Europe must consider various factors more intensively than their Western European counterparts. These include the threat of new party entries in fragmented party systems, the dichotomy of old/new elites, the socialist past, and the salience of socio-economic issues. Moreover, the case study comparison focuses on uncovering additional factors

that contribute to the electoral success of party shifts of the long-standing populists in the region.

Therefore, the main hypotheses this study aims to test are as follows:

H1: Policy shifts on the economic dimension are associated with electoral gains.

H2: Policy shifts on the cultural dimension are associated with electoral gains.

The rationale behind these hypotheses is that during times of crises, economic and cultural dimensions become prominent for voters. If parties adjust their policy positions to align more closely with the electorate, they should resonate better with voters. This alignment could then translate into additional votes during elections.

3. Methodology

The study is conducted using an analysis of issue and salience positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) and election results from the Parl Gov database. The primary outcome of interest is electoral performance, measured by the percentage of votes that yield seats in the respective country's parliament. This aligns with the literature on the consequences of positional shifts (Spoon and Klüver 2020; Tavits 2007). The main independent variable is the shifts themselves, measured by the differences in positions between time $t-1$ and t . This primarily refers to changes in party strategy and ideological shifts stipulated at the time before or between the elections. The shifts are quantitatively measured, using party positions on immigration and economic issues from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), consistent with major empirical works on the topic (Abou-Chadi and Orłowski 2016; Somer-Topcu 2009). A universe of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe is created using the established classification according to the *PopuLIST 2.0* database (Rooduijn et al., 2019), which applies the *ideational* approach to the definition of populism (Mudde 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

In the first part, the study examines positional shifts of parties using descriptive statistics and recoded data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey and Parl Gov database. The empirical analysis includes data on parties that have gained at least one percent at parliamentary elections and have been observed on two occasions in the expert survey.

The second part involves a paired comparison using the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD), focusing on cases with similar positional shifts (independent variable) that only differ in electoral outcome (dependent variable) (Tarrow 2010). The case study analysis addresses issues of unavailability of measurable empirical data (e.g. Political Manifesto Project does not contain manifesto data for Hungary from 2014 and for Lithuania from 2016 onwards, nor does Chapel Hill Expert Survey on salience of issues). Complementing expert survey data with context from the period before elections allows linking positional shifts with what happened within party competition or environmental incentives (shifts of other parties), as well as uncovering additional factors that contributed to success or failure in party strategy, beyond the dichotomous shift-success dimension.

While both Lithuania and Hungary have similar initial conditions and have seen significant shifts in positions of populist parties (also seen in growing discrepancies between populist and non-populist voters in Annex A, B and C), the variables which are controlled for include EU membership, post-socialist experience, tri-polar party competition and presence of long-standing mainstream populist parties (Ramonaitė 2020). However,

outcomes in these two cases differ, with the Hungarian case resulting in a successful shift, whilst the Lithuanian was less successful, almost falling out of Parliament in 2016. Both parties are populist and fall within the realm of “exclusionary populism” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). However, there are ideological differences between them in their embodiment of populism. While Fidesz aligns well with *paternalistic populism* definition (Enyedi 2020), following a clear discourse of the “us” versus “them” divide and nativist claims, the Labour Party’s ideology is more ambivalent. It is populist primarily in its policy positions on economic redistribution (overpromising on social payments) and communication style of its leader. The Labour Party portrays “the economic have-nots” as those who belong to the nation and pure people, while in Hungary’s case, ethnic principle is key.

4. Shifts of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe

The expert survey data indicates that positional shifts may not be necessarily correlated with electoral success, and some of these patterns contradict expectations.

Figure 2 examines the electoral gains of populist parties in all Central and Eastern European elections from 2006 to 2019, in relation to their shifts on the issue of immigration. The graph reveals that most parties have moved towards favouring a stricter immigration policy (higher values on the y-axis) during the period from 2006 to 2019. This period encompasses the time before, during, and after the refugee crisis of 2015. Overall, a strong correlation exists between electoral success and shifts in position on the anti-immigration scale ($r = 0.703$).

The parties can be categorised based on their positional shifts and electoral outcomes. Some parties have significantly shifted their positions (by more than 2 points) and have experienced electoral success (such as Hungarian Fidesz, Czech ANO and Polish PiS).

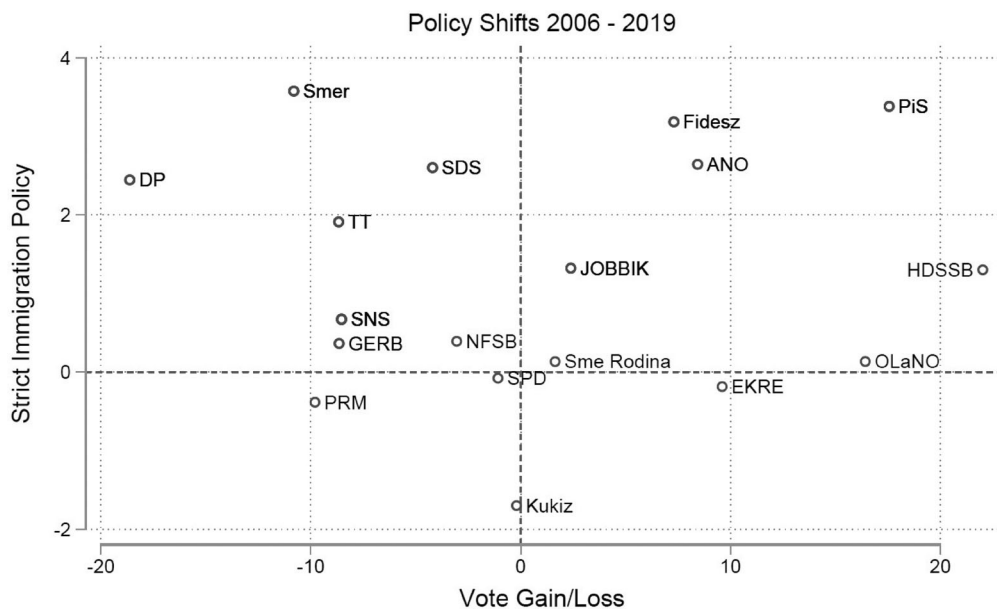


Figure 2.

Others have shifted, but lost votes at the elections (like Lithuanian DP, Slovak Smer and Slovenian SDS). Similar heterogeneity is observed among those who benefited during periods of medium-level shifts, while some benefited (like Hungarian JOBBIK and Croat HDSSB), other parties did not manage to do so (such as Lithuanian TT and Polish Kukiz). Certain parties chose to maintain their position (± 0.5) during this period, which coincided with a loss of votes (such as Bulgarian GERB and NFSB, Czech SPD, Romanian PRM). Conversely, for some parties, not shifting on the immigration dimension correlated with electoral gains (like Slovak SNS, Sme Rodina, OLaNO, and Estonian EKRE). These results align with the shifts in the salience profile of these issues (as shown in Annex D). However, they do not indicate the nature of party positions and policy stances, which could favour either strict or loose immigration policies. Instead, they highlight the degree of these shifts during times of crisis.

For many successful populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, which often align with the ideological mainstream and express mostly centrist views on most issues (Engler, Pytlas, and Deegan-Krause 2019; Hanley et al. 2007; Hanley and Sikk 2016; Pop-Eleches 2010; Učeň 2007), these positional changes are significant. Moreover, for at least half of these parties, such shifts have occurred alongside electoral gains. This is in line with expectations in the hypothesis that shifts in the cultural domain for populist parties are associated with electoral gains. In the aftermath of the 2015 refugee crisis, these parties reacted to the heightened importance of the migration issue, adopted highly restrictive positions on immigration, and simultaneously gained votes during the same period. Figure 3 examines the electoral gains of populist parties in all Central and Eastern European elections from 2006 to 2019, based on their shifts on the economic left-right positions. The graph shows no general trend in the shifts (the availability of data also reduced the number of parties). Nearly half of the parties on the y-scale

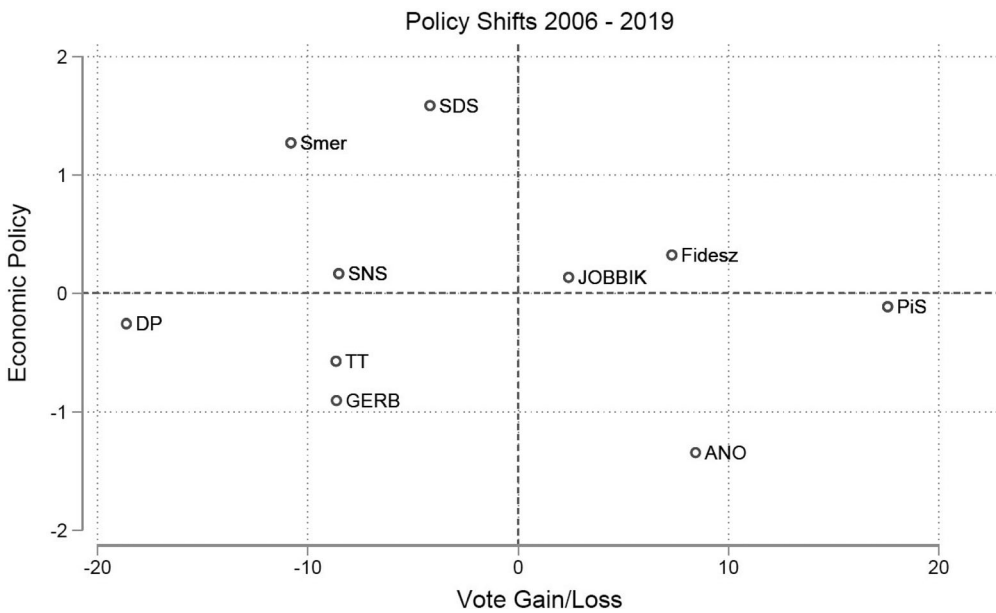


Figure 3.

prefer an active role for government in the economy (below zero), while the other half favour a reduced role for government (above zero). There is a weak correlation between electoral gains and positional shifts on the left-right scale ($r = 0.1525$). The magnitude of these shifts is much smaller than those on the immigration dimension. Parties can be categorised based on their significant positional shifts (more than one point shift) and corresponding electoral success (like Czech ANO) or loss (such as Slovak Smer and Slovenian SDS). Some have benefited during periods of medium to low-level shifts (like Hungarian JOBBIK and Fidesz, as well as Polish PiS) while others did not (such as Lithuanian DP and TT, Slovak SNS, Polish Kukiz and Bulgarian GERB). These results generally align with the salience profile of these issues (as shown in Annex E), but do not indicate the nature of the positions and their policy stances. Instead, they highlight the degree to which parties shifted.

Although the evidence seems to contradict the second hypothesis, it's perhaps not surprising that there's a lack of widespread shifts on the economic dimension towards a preference for redistribution. This observation has already been made regarding a lack of competition on economic issues. However, as Kitschelt et al. (1999), Buščíková and Kitschelt (2009) and Engler, Pytlas, and Deegan-Krause (2019) point out, most populist parties in the CEE region already had a high preference for redistribution before the economic crisis. Therefore, many of these parties simply did not need to shift significantly to offer a social buffer for their population. Moreover, in the context of populism, redistributive economic policies fit well into the "us" versus "them" cultural divide if they benefit the "in-group" of "the pure people" (Benczes 2022; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). The relatively high stance on redistribution, combined with authoritarian/nativist stances (including issues of immigration), appears to be a successful formula for the successful re-emergence of left-authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe (Lefkofridi, Wagner, and Willmann 2014; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2020; Vachudova 2020).

When combining these shifts with their relative success, the following Table 1 is produced:

The multifaceted nature of the dimensions, particularly the complexity of shifts and their not-so-straightforward connection to electoral outcomes, suggests caution when drawing causal conclusions. There is a need to further explore these mechanisms through comparative examples of two parties within the same party system, but with differing outcomes. The successful case in Hungary and unsuccessful one in Lithuania provide opportunities to uncover additional factors at play.

This case study serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it aims to demonstrate that populist parties across the ideological spectrum, regardless of their position in government,

Table 1. Classification of party strategies.

Strategy	Successful	Unsuccessful
"Zig-zagging" (significant shifts in both dimensions)	Czech ANO	Slovak Smer and Slovenian SDS
"Adapting" (significant shift in one dimension)	Hungarian Fidesz and JOBBIK; Polish PiS; Croat HDSSB*	Lithuanian DP and TT, Bulgarian GERB, Slovak SNS, Polish Kukiz*
"Staying put" (no significant shifts)	Slovak Sme Rodina*, OLaNO*; Estonian EKRE*	Bulgarian NFSB*; Czech SPD*; Romanian PRM*

*Data available only on immigration dimension.

exhibit ideological shifts on the cultural dimension during times of crisis. Secondly, it seeks to reinforce the argument regarding the common additional determinants that contribute to the success of such shifts. These include voter-party linkage, the salience of the issue at hand, and competition within the party system.

5. Hungary. The three positional shifts of Fidesz

Fidesz, under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has been the sole party in power at the national level in Hungary since 2010. It is most commonly characterised as a national-conservative right-wing political party that has shifted towards far-right politics in recent years (Greven 2016). However, since its establishment in 1988, Fidesz has undergone at least two more ideological shifts, each of which can be associated with distinct time periods.

5.1. The first shift – from liberalism to conservatism

The initial period following its establishment in 1988 was characterised by Fidesz's liberal orientation. As an activism-oriented political party, it openly espoused anti-communist rhetoric. The party's campaign centred on a programme that emphasized economic liberalisation, advocating for the restructuring of the state and minimal state involvement in the economy.

In the first free and competitive elections of 1990, Fidesz encountered stiff competition from a highly fragmented party system, with a multitude of parties participating, six of which gained seats in Parliament. The liberals of SZDSZ and the centre-right conservatives of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) emerged as the main victors. The latter responsible for appointing the coalition government with two other parties. The Round Table Talks led to a consensus on creating a mixed electoral system, with half of the deputies elected by proportional representation and the other half by a majoritarian system, thereby not favouring any particular party. A strong reformist mandate from the voters, evidenced by the fact that ex-communists from the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) received only around ten percent of the vote, suggested a robust voter-party connection. Almost all leaders of the democratic opposition had ties to various grassroots movements or reformist factions within the communist party.

The conservative shift began at the fifth party congress in Debrecen in 1993. The party's leadership structure was reorganised from a seven-member *választmány* (board) to a more hierarchical structure, with Viktor Orbán elected as party chairman. In the same year, many members of MDF, a conservative competitor, joined Fidesz, replacing the liberally minded party members who began to leave the party *en masse*.

In the political programme leading up to the 1994 elections, although still self-identifying as liberals, Fidesz already claimed to be in the centre, ideologically. In addition to the economic programme, dimensions of freedom and security were incorporated into the campaign, underscoring the need for a new social contract. Ideologically, Fidesz gradually began to occupy the conservative space in Hungarian politics, edging out other parties such as MDF, while continuing to attract its members to switch sides. The year 1995 marked the official start of the conservative turn for Fidesz, following a less-than-anticipated score in the elections. It was during the seventh party congress in Budapest that

Fidesz expanded its name to include “the Hungarian Civic Party” (*Magyar Polgári Párt*) and adopted a programme statement titled “For a Civic Hungary” (*Polgári Magyarorszáért*). Interestingly, during this period, the party deviated from the typical populist narrative of an “us” versus “them” ideological divide, a dualistic Manichean outlook often associated with populist parties. This shift signalled a significant ideological transformation within the party.³

5.2. The second shift- strengthening voter-party connection via civil society

The period from 2002 to 2010 was characterised by Fidesz spending two terms in opposition, while the governing coalition, composed of the Hungarian Socialist Party and the Alliance of Free Democrats, assumed office. This era was also marked by significant upheaval within Hungary’s political system, which was rocked by both an exogenous shock in the form of the 2008 economic crisis and an endogenous shock triggered by a corruption scandal stemming from leaked conversations within the MSZP. These events had profound implications for Hungary’s economic and political landscape, demonstrating a complex interplay between external and internal factors.

Under the socialist government in the 2000s, Hungary pursued a reckless policy of deficit financing. Rather than bolstering the competitiveness of its small, medium, and state-owned enterprises, the country amassed debt and increased public-sector wages in a short-sighted strategy (Benczes 2011). This approach led to a significant economic downturn, with the economic crisis of 2008 causing a 6.7 percent contraction in Hungary’s GDP between 2008 and 2009, 2.9 percent of which was attributed to the industrial sector. The crisis caught Hungary off-guard, leaving it in a structurally and financially vulnerable position. Coupled with a sharp depreciation of the local currency, this resulted in job losses, widespread household insolvency, and heightened feelings of insecurity about the future.

In the aftermath of the 2002 and 2006 elections, Fidesz embarked on a process of regrouping. As the political system mobilised in preparation for the upcoming elections, Fidesz sought to strengthen its connection with voters by politicising Hungarian civil society. This was achieved by leveraging the party’s civic activism and courting an educated conservative middle class through its Civic Circles Movement (*Polgári Körök*). As Greskovits (2020) points out, between July 2002 and April 2006, the movement organised, co-organised, or sponsored approximately 4800 events attended by its members. These events primarily consisted of discussions, newsletters, and protests centred around issues of identity and socio-economic grievances. By deeply embedding itself within conservative grassroots networks and hierarchical organisations such as churches, Fidesz not only transformed civil society but also managed to displace the left and liberals (Greskovits 2020). By the time of the 2010 elections, Fidesz had evolved into a “catch-all people’s party”, appealing to a wider spectrum of its electorate through nativism. By reinventing Hungarian holidays and heroes, it successfully catered to the interests of Hungarians residing in the broader Carpathian basin region.

This shift is evident not only in Fidesz’s political manifestos but also in data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey. As depicted in [Figure 4](#), the vote and seat shares of Fidesz are plotted against two policy dimensions: the economic left-right dimension (a scale

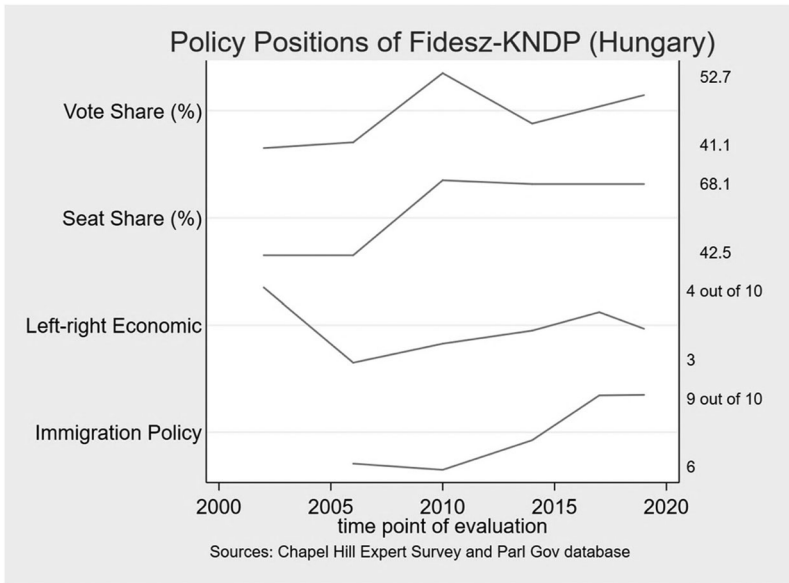


Figure 4.

from 0 to 10, with 0 representing a left economic position favouring less state involvement) and immigration policy (a scale from 0, indicating an open immigration policy, to 10, indicating a restrictive immigration policy). Beginning with the earliest available data from 2004, Fidesz's economic position on the left-right spectrum has generally remained in the lower half of the 10-point scale. There was a slight decrease from 2002 to 2006, followed by an increase until 2020. However, these fluctuations are not significant, falling within one standard deviation, and Fidesz has maintained a position around the midpoint for the entire period, including the post-crisis years. While there has been some movement on the economic dimension, it is neither significant nor substantial enough to correlate with Fidesz's electoral success in 2010. Instead, it appears that the economic difficulties and mismanagement by the incumbent government paved the way for Fidesz's electoral victory.

Fidesz's shift towards a stricter immigration stance is particularly noticeable since its return to power in 2010. As illustrated in the previous figure, this shift accelerated around 2015 and remained steady until 2020, reaching near-maximum values of 9 out of 10 (with a standard deviation of 1.67). The year 2015 marked a pivotal moment when the refugee crisis moved from television screens to the streets of the Hungarian capital. The situation reached a boiling point when thousands of Syrian refugees, who had been camped outside Budapest's Keleti train station for weeks, were suddenly allowed to travel to Austria and Germany without visa checks.

This development at home fuelled anti-immigration sentiments and led to open attacks on EU immigration policy and refugee relocation schemes. Orbán's discourse played a significant role in this shift, replacing the term "refugees" with "migrants" (*migráns* instead of *bevándorló*) and framing the issue as an "us versus them" scenario – Europe's Christian identity against an external threat, namely the influx of Muslim refugees (Vidra 2017). The media controlled by Fidesz echoed Orbán's rhetoric, filling prime

time broadcasts with images portraying dark-skinned and Muslim refugees as threats. This indirectly fuelled Islamophobia and racism.

5.3. Third shift: becoming the far right

Anti-immigrant and xenophobic discourse was present in the Hungarian political system even before Fidesz's rise to power and the 2015 refugee crisis. Jobbik, a party that successfully maintained issue ownership over nationalist discourse concerning Hungarian Roma and Euroscepticism, championed the nativist division of "us" versus "them". In appealing to its nationalistic support base, Jobbik used the slogan "Hungary belongs to the Hungarians" (Magyarország a Magyaroké!) in the lead-up to the EU Parliament elections in 2009 and the general elections in 2010. This campaign strategy proved successful for Jobbik, enabling them to secure 47 seats in the National Assembly with 16.7 percent of the vote share. Their success continued with 20.2 percent of the vote share in 2014 and 19.1 percent in 2018. Jobbik's success in adopting this stance prompted other parties to follow suit, thereby bringing xenophobic discourse into mainstream.

The party system and the success of far-right competitors, such as Jobbik, had been instrumental in driving Fidesz's third shift post-2010. As depicted in Figure 5 (based on CHES data), both parties consistently held stricter immigration policy positions than the rest of the party system from 2010 to 2017. Moreover, there is a noticeable trend of convergence between Fidesz and Jobbik on the issue of immigration, with both parties moving along this dimension in unison and Fidesz eventually surpassing Jobbik by 2019. As indicated by the party names preceding the year (highlighted in bold), the gap between Jobbik and Fidesz on immigration began to narrow in 2014 compared to other parties. Economically, both parties presented almost identical positions during this period.

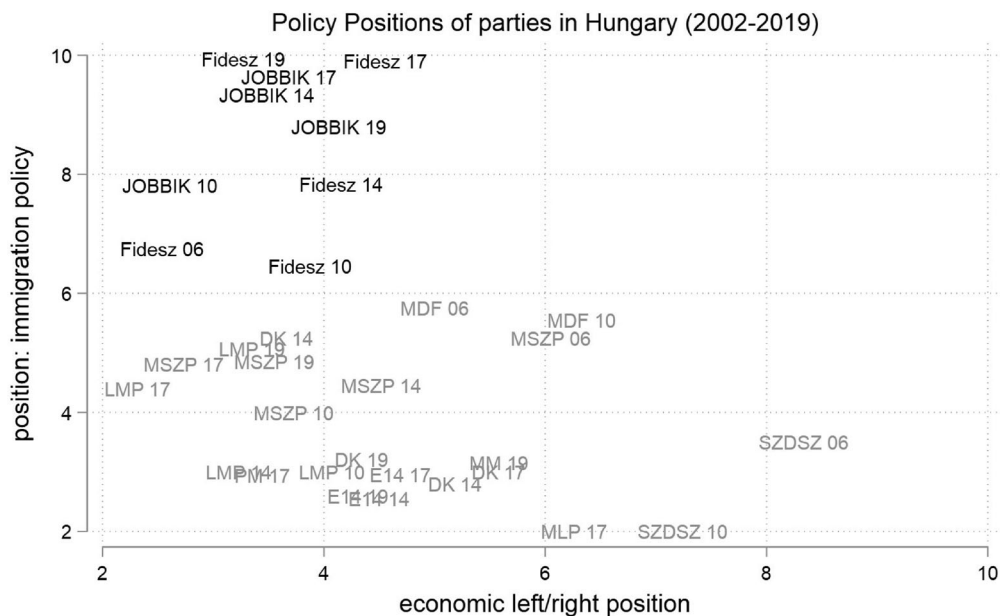


Figure 5.

Fidesz's leadership strategically positioned the party to usurp Jobbik's place in the party system, aiming to prevent being outflanked on the cultural right dimension. This shift further to the right by Fidesz prompted Jobbik to re-elect its leadership, restructure its organisation, and eventually moderate its positions in relative terms. While Jobbik remained at the end of the spectrum on immigration, by 2017 it was no longer the issue owner. Instead, Jobbik began to gradually relinquish its policy stance in an attempt to differentiate itself and reclaim at least a fraction of its former supporters who had shifted their loyalty to Fidesz.

Fidesz's landslide victory in the 2010 elections and subsequent return to government provided an ideal opportunity for the party to fulfil its electoral promises. This period was characterised by both conventional and unconventional economic reforms. Conventional reforms included macroeconomic stabilisation and extensive utilisation of EU cohesion funding. Unconventional measures, on the other hand, involved the imposition of an extra tax on foreign banks and the proposal of a controversial internet tax.

During this period in power, the Public Work Scheme (PWS) was introduced with the aim of "offering temporary employment to individuals, generally living in disadvantaged districts and settlements" (Ministry of Interior 2015). The scheme, managed by local governments, saw a significant increase in participation during its first five years. The number of participants rose from 75 thousand to over 200 thousand workers per year, primarily from Hungary's most economically disadvantaged regions. Most of these temporary workers, who qualified for the programme, were engaged in activities that did not necessitate specific qualifications. The programme's primary objective was to alleviate immediate concerns related to job loss and unemployment among these individuals. However, it did not focus on long-term professional requalification or on providing adequate pay and long-term contracts.

At some point during their tenure in government, Fidesz capitalised on its unique position of holding a Constitutional majority. This allowed them to enact significant changes to the electoral rules in 2012. The reform of the electoral rules resulted in an unbalanced system that disproportionately favoured the election winners.

Fidesz's second victory in the 2014 elections (Figure 4) marked a period when the party received a smaller share of the popular vote compared to 2010. However, due to the newly implemented electoral rules, they were disproportionately rewarded with the same number of seats. In addition to benefiting from these changed conditions, Fidesz also gained an advantage from a fragmented opposition. Only five parties united under the left-wing political alliance, *Összefogás* (Unity), while the Greens (LMP) and Jobbik ran with their own separate lists. Fidesz's subsequent term in government from 2014 to 2018 was characterised by the successful application of populist rhetoric and a full embrace of the "us" versus "them" ideological divide. This period saw the continuation of policies favouring economic redistribution, coupled with an openly anti-migrant, anti-Brussels stance, and nativist appeals on the cultural front. The elections that followed in 2014 and 2018 further underscored the success of this populist party and its complete adoption of far-right politics. It was during this time that Fidesz redefined its use of the Manichean outlook, vilifying out-groups, and opposition. The party also launched attacks on the system of checks and balances, pushing Jobbik from the far right towards the centre. These events unfolded under revised electoral rules that maintained Fidesz's constitutional majority through legal overcompensation for the election winner.

The Fidesz case demonstrates three shifts of the party across the ideological spectrum. While economic shifts are less apparent, aside from increasing social spending and providing entry-level, low-wage jobs to supporters in rural areas, it is challenging to confirm the expectations in the first hypothesis. Most of the movement has been observed on the cultural dimension, which is also associated with success at the elections, aligning with the expectations in the second hypothesis. However, Fidesz's success relies on additional factors. The party managed to outmanoeuvre the opposition within the party system and secure votes. This was achieved both by manipulating the electoral system and effectively leveraging voter-party linkage, ingraining itself into civil society as a strategic advantage.

6. Lithuania. The use of nativism as an electoral tool- *Darbo Partija*

Compared to Hungary, the case of Lithuania has received relatively less academic scrutiny. The Labour Party (*Darbo Partija*), a centre-left populist party, bears some similarities to Fidesz, particularly in its association with a charismatic leader. This leader is the Russian-born Lithuanian businessman Viktor Uspaskich, who is best known for his eccentric antics and appearances on TV shows. He has even organised events such as ice-cream runs, where he threw coupon vouchers from a helicopter, leading some to label him a political "troll". However, unlike Fidesz, the ideological shifts of the Labour Party since its establishment in 2003 are more challenging to pinpoint. These shifts are primarily associated with the aftermath of various crises both within and outside the party.

6.1. From the project of newness to the mainstream

The Labour Party made its debut in the political arena by winning parliamentary elections on a platform centred around political and economic renewal. Initially emerging as a challenger party in 2004, it eventually transitioned into a mainstream party, participating in government coalitions on two separate occasions (Sikk 2012). Much like Fidesz, the Labour Party achieved significant success following an endogenous shock to the Lithuanian political system – the impeachment of the newly elected president, Rolandas Paksas in April 2004 (Jastramskis 2021). This event sparked widespread disappointment with establishment parties and politics in general, leading to an all-time low in voter turnout. The ensuing crisis created an opportunity for the Labour Party's anti-establishment populist rhetoric to resonate with voters. The party's novelty and ideological ambiguity (aside from anti-establishment sentiments) distinguished it from other parties. This led to its landmark victory in the 2004 campaign, where it secured 28.4% of votes and 39 out of 141 seats, marking the largest single-party win (Jurkynas 2004).

From 2004 to 2006, the Labour Party was part of the government, serving half of the parliamentary mandate in a leftist coalition. This coalition included the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania (LSDP), the Lithuanian Popular Peasants' Union (VNDS), and the New Union (social liberals). However, the latter party splintered off during a reshuffle of the government coalition. The Labour Party spent the remainder of its term, from 2006 to 2008, in opposition after losing its place in the coalition to its short-lived splinter group, the Civic Democracy Party (PDP). In its early stages, the Labour Party centred its political discourse and electoral manifestos around social security issues. These included

raising pensions, increasing minimum wages, and enhancing unemployment benefits. The party's focus on economic issues, coupled with the charisma of its Russian-born leader, seemed to symbolically echo the era of full employment during the Soviet past. The party's emphasis on social security, which involved calls for higher public investments, securing social rights, and job creation, signalled its centre-left allegiances (Jurkynas 2004). Additionally, the party's willingness to participate in various types of coalitions following elections further underscored these allegiances.

Apart from the evident populist style of its long-standing chairman and other leading figures, the Labour Party, in its early stages, was primarily populist in its economic dimension. The party's "us" versus "them" division was largely economic. It positioned itself as a representative of the economically insecure or "the left-behinds", targeting the elite and those at the top of the wealth distribution.

6.2. Corruption scandals in opposition – staying put during the crisis

Under the continued leadership of Uspaskich, the Labour Party spent the subsequent term in opposition. During this period, the party focused on rebuilding its leadership and strengthening its voter-party linkage. This was achieved through efforts to institutionalise its structure, a component deemed crucial for electoral success (Ibenskas 2014).

However, the Labour Party's electoral success has been on the decline since its victory in the 2004 elections, with a disappointing performance of just 9 percent in 2008. This poor showing was further marred by corruption scandals, a court case involving illicit party financing, and the subsequent flight of the party leader to Russia. In the end, after a decade-long process, the party leaders were convicted of fraudulent bookkeeping and were penalised with a mandatory fine. Despite this, the damage to the party's reputation was already done. Subsequent election campaigns consistently reminded voters of this episode in an attempt to undermine the party's claim of competence. As a result, the party shifted its focus towards a more pragmatic policy offering, primarily concentrating on economic issues.

In the 2008 elections, the Labour Party campaigned on a platform focused on protecting small and medium enterprises, aiming to capitalise on the support of small towns in Lithuania. However, this strategy proved to be rather unsuccessful. The party struggled to distinguish itself in the highly fragmented party system and eventually had to cede power to its competitors.

While maintaining a limited number of MPs in parliament and remaining in opposition, much like Fidesz, the Labour Party managed to weather one of the most economically challenging periods – the global financial crisis. By mid-2008, inflation had soared to double digits, and the government, led by the conservative Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats coalition, began grappling with an escalating budget deficit amidst an economic recession.

Much like Hungary, Lithuania also experienced the crisis on a massive scale. However, in contrast to the policy response implemented in Hungary, Lithuanian policymakers adopted a more long-term oriented approach. The Baltic country narrowly avoided Latvia's fate of having to secure a loan from the IMF, but its GDP plummeted by 14.7 percent in 2009.

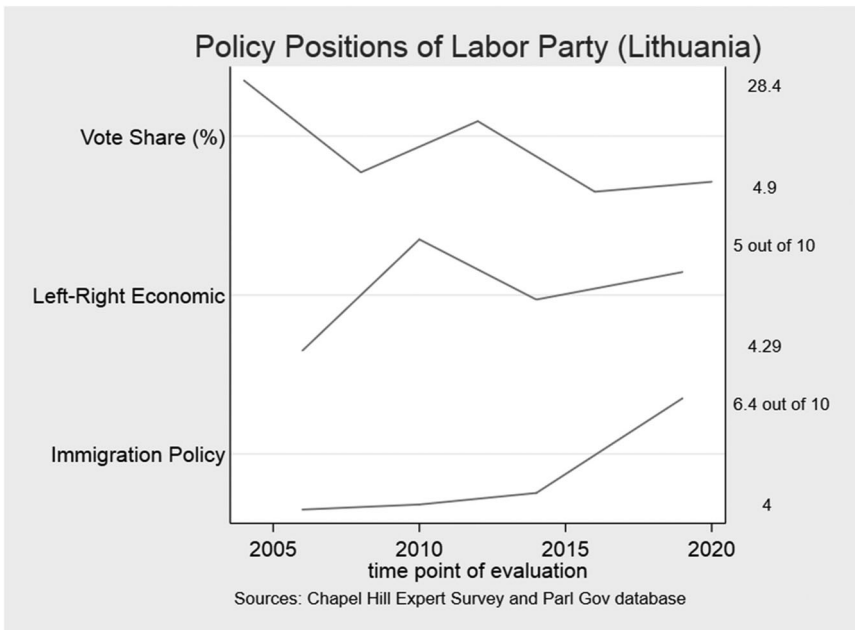


Figure 6.

During this period, the conservative coalition pursued highly unpopular austerity measures. These included long-term macroeconomic stabilisation policies and short-term increases in value-added and income taxes. The measures also encompassed salary cuts for state-owned employees, reductions in pensions, and decreases in social benefits, all of which had been inflated during the pre-crisis years of rapid economic growth. These solutions were extremely unpopular among the general population. Although they paved the way for economic recovery post-crisis, they cost the conservative government the subsequent election. This turn of events propelled the Labour Party forward.

Figure 6, depicted below, presents a combination of vote share, left-right economic positions (on a ten-point scale), and stance on immigration policy (also on a ten-point scale) in a single graph. As can be seen from the graph, the Labour Party achieved its greatest success in its inaugural national elections in 2004. This was followed by a decline in 2008 and a return to government in 2012. Although the party failed to reach the 5% threshold in 2016, it rebounded with seven percent of the popular vote in the most recent 2020 elections. The pattern of shifts on the economic dimension appears to zigzag between elections. However, these fluctuations are not significant (ranging between one to two standard deviations of 0.37) and generally hover around the mid-point position, typical of a score of five out of ten. On the issue of immigration, the Labour Party generally scored low, falling in the lower half of the ten-point scale until 2019. However, its anti-immigrant rhetoric intensified following the refugee crisis in 2015 (four standard deviations). In summary, while the Labour Party's stance on economic issues remained relatively stable, its position on immigration evolved over time, increasingly favouring stricter immigration policies in later years.

6.3. Back into government coalition, capitalizing on anti-austerity 2012–2016

Following the handling of the economic crisis by its right-wing competitors, the Labour Party made a comeback with an electoral campaign that emphasized the same issues of unemployment, minimum wage, and pensions – the very issues that propelled it to victory in 2004. While the prominence of economic issues was heightened, the party's political programme also incorporated a degree of populism in terms of its implementation strategies.

In the aftermath of the crisis, Lithuanian left-wing parties that favoured left-leaning economic positions experienced strong electoral results. This success enabled the Labour Party to form a left-of-centre coalition government. The coalition included the election winners, the Social Democrats (LSDP), as well as two other parties: the national-conservative Order and Justice (TT), and the Electoral Action of Poles of Lithuania (LLRA).

Labour Party's time in government was marked by mismanagement in the regulation of the agricultural sector and the infamous "golden spoons" scandal. The latter involved a public procurement of cutlery for the army, which resulted in the state paying up to eight times the market price. On the other hand, the introduction of the euro, strategic energy diversification projects, and subsidies for housing renovation were high on the government's agenda and represent its main successes. However, significant structural reforms in education, health, and public administration were notably absent. Furthermore, challenges related to Lithuania's long-term competitiveness were not addressed. Social benefits did not return to their inflated levels prior to the austerity measures implemented by the previous government due to concerns about overheating the economy. However, as economic growth gained momentum in post-crisis Lithuania, issues related to economic insecurity, which were promised to be addressed by the previous government, lost their salience.

6.4. The shift on anti-immigration in 2016

Much like the case in Hungary, the 2016 electoral campaign saw an attempt to capitalise on anti-immigrant sentiment. In addition to its usual emphasis on unemployment, minimum wage, and pensions, the campaign introduced rhetoric against refugee relocation quotas. A proactive billboard, video, and written op-ed campaign urged potential voters to remove the "pink glasses" of preferential treatment for refugees. It warned that a possible "invasion" of Lithuania by refugees was "not a theory, but the reality" (Vireliūnaitė, 2016).

The overt opposition to immigration, prompted by the refugee crisis of 2015, led the party to adopt a more extreme and clearly defined identity position that it had previously lacked. While the economic crisis did not trigger a shift towards greater redistribution, the party's already relatively high policy stance on this dimension allowed it to maintain its position. Apart from its openly anti-immigrant electoral campaign, the party had not established a clear ideological stance.

The shift towards a strict immigration policy, which was a central piece in its electoral manifesto, occurred from 2014 to 2019 (the Labour Party is marked in bold as DP on [Figure 7](#)). This shift mirrors the situation in Hungary, where it converged with the

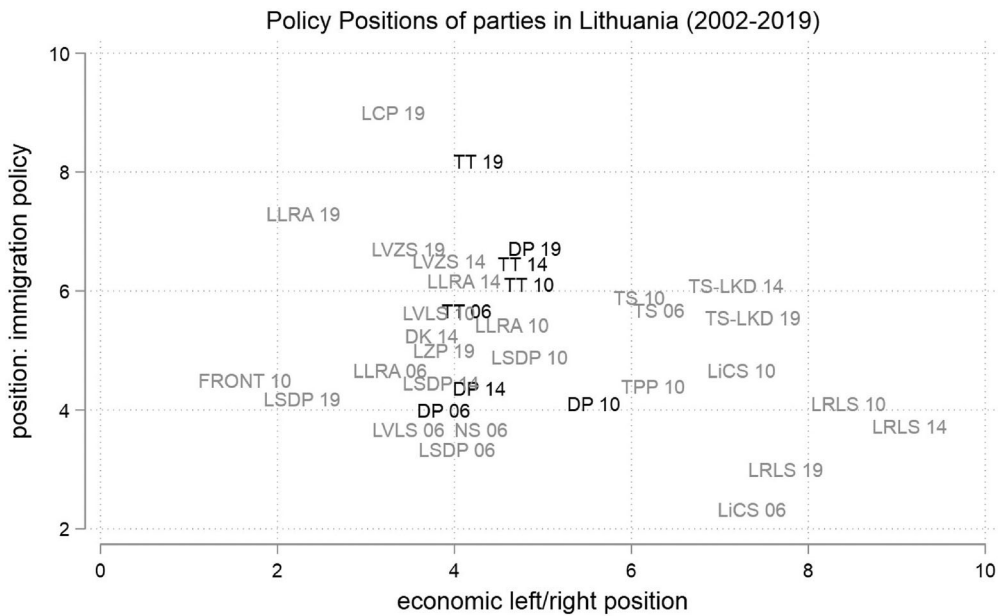


Figure 7.

national-conservative Order and Justice party (marked in bold as TT on Figure 7). Much like the Hungarian Jobbik party, before the 2015 refugee crisis, Order and Justice held issue ownership over anti-immigration and nativism, maintaining a constant presence in parliament. However, unlike Fidesz in Hungary, which governed alone, Order and Justice served as a minor coalition partner to the Labour Party in the Butkevičius governments from 2012 to 2016.

The scale of the refugee crisis in Lithuania was entirely different from what the Labour Party had anticipated. Lithuania only received 315 and 425 refugees in consecutive years, with a commitment to resettle a total of up to 1105 additional refugees from other EU member states until 2017⁴ (Eurostat 2020; IOM 2016). As the numbers decreased, discussions around refugee quotas gradually faded and did not become a significant concern in Lithuanian domestic politics. Furthermore, the issue also lost its prominence as a societal concern, even among the voters of populist parties (Annex B, also in Ivanov [2023a]).

Unlike the direct experience with refugees in the Hungarian case, the Labour Party's miscalculation proved costly. This misstep contributed significantly to the party's losses, leading to it losing its parliamentary fraction and securing only two seats through the multi-member party system in the 2016 general elections. Unlike Fidesz in Hungary, the Labour Party lost its momentum to become a large, dominant "catch-all" party.

This comparative case study has identified at least three factors that should be considered to update the minimal model (Figure 1) determining the success of policy shifts: corruption scandals, competition within the party system, and the role of the electoral system. The party system refers to the systematic interaction between parties, the number of relevant parties, and the degree of fragmentation. Meanwhile, electoral

rules pertain to a set of regulations governing how elections are conducted and their results determined (Mair 1997). The role of institutional changes in the electoral system is crucial to the stability of the party system. These changes condition, rather than directly affect, electoral success (Kitschelt et al. 1999). Hence, the right combination of positional shifts, along with corresponding changes in electoral rules (i.e. the system), could either amplify or limit the electoral success or failure of a positional shift. Simultaneously, a positional shift under favourable conditions in the party system – such as the level of institutionalisation of the party system or the patterns of party competition over issue ownership – can also have a mediating effect.

Moreover, the failure of the shifts in the case of the Labour Party was largely due to the inability of its politicians to establish and maintain a strong voter-party linkage. Their participation in talk shows and political “trolling” seemed to be aimed at deflecting accusations of corruption, but these tactics proved ineffective in the long run. While there were some attempts to institutionalise the party and renew its leadership, the Labour Party did not manage to establish a strong interaction with civil society or convert a portion of it into supporters, as Fidesz had done in Hungary. Such a linkage could have provided Lithuanian populists with responsiveness to crises: how to modify their long-term strategy according to voter preferences and societal dynamics regarding the salience of certain issues.

7. Conclusions & discussion

The relationship between policy shifts and the success of left authoritarianism in Central and Eastern Europe is complex and not easily discernible.

Structural factors, such as competition within the party system (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Grzymala-Busse 2019a; 2019b), as well as the role of tactics, ideas, and ideology of its leaders (Enyedi 2020; Hanley and Vachudova 2018), play a significant role. However, the magnitude of the crises experienced, the leverage in voter-party linkage, and the ability to provide jobs when in government emerge as key additional determinants of the success of positional shifts. These factors underscore the complexity of the relationship between policy shifts and the success of populism.

Contrary to the empirical findings of Tavits (2007), the correlation between the success of policy shifts, which were exacerbated by the economic and refugee crises, is more evident in shifts within the cultural domain rather than in economic policy. There has been minimal movement along the economic left-right axis. Instead, populist parties have a tendency to make grand promises before elections, as seen in the Lithuanian case, or to implement a form of economic nationalism. This form of nationalism emphasizes workforce activation, natalism, and sovereignty (Orenstein and Bugarič, 2022). These parties adopt a left authoritarian profile if they had previously supported left-wing economic policies prior to the crisis and then adopted authoritarian or nativist stances after 2015.

The comparative cases of Lithuania and Hungary underscore the necessity to analyse positional shifts beyond the simple dichotomy of shift versus electoral success, thereby revealing additional influencing factors. During times of crisis, *ethnopolitism* is utilised as an electoral tool in Lithuania (Vachudova 2020), while policy innovations from an authoritarian toolkit are employed in Hungary (Enyedi 2020). When both parties ascended

to become dominant mainstream entities with governmental experience, they were not incentivized to moderate their positions. Instead, they adopted a “niche party profile” (Meyer and Wagner 2013), opting for a more extreme stance on immigration and emphasizing this in their campaigns. The comparative case study further corroborates what has been established in other Eastern European democracies: the competition aimed at taking ownership over radical right narratives on salient issues such as the refugee crisis of 2015 (Pytlas 2015). The main purpose behind the shift was to leverage the established voter-party linkage to wrest control of issue ownership from successful far-right challengers, whether they were coalition partners (as in Lithuania) or the main ideological competitor (as in Hungary).

The comparison between Fidesz and *Darbo Partija*, political parties in Hungary and Lithuania respectively, reveals that both attempt to racialize the perceived threat of immigration (Vachudova 2020), albeit with varying degrees of success. Adopting a more sceptical stance on immigration enabled Fidesz to capitalise on votes by usurping issue ownership from far-right competitors. Conversely, adopting a hardliner stance on immigration did not prevent electoral losses for the Labour Party, which coincided with a decrease in the salience of the issue. Future research would need to retest the same hypotheses in the context of a different refugee crisis, such as the influx of primarily women and children in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and its implications for cultural shifts.

The voter-party linkage, as described by Kitschelt et al. (1999), serves as a key element and determinant of the differing levels of success in Hungary and Lithuania. Fidesz, in Hungary, made substantial investments in the voter-party linkage, institutionalising itself through active engagement with civil society. As a result, their three positional shifts were successful. On the other hand, the Labour Party of Lithuania invested less in the voter-party linkage, largely hindered by corruption scandals. Instead, it attempted a pre-emptive shift on the immigration dimension but significantly overestimated the magnitude of the refugee crisis in Lithuania, leading to electoral losses.

In terms of compensation by the accommodating electoral system and the party system, both are particularly crucial for Fidesz’s third shift. This shift occurred under the complex conditions brought about by changes in the electoral law, which compensated the party for the loss in popular vote. In Lithuania’s highly fragmented political system, the mediating effect of its parallel mixed electoral system is less pronounced, but it was sufficient to prevent *Darbo Partija* from being completely ousted from Parliament by 2016.

Finally, this article enhances our understanding of populism. It underscores the necessity to distinguish nativism from populism when analysing the evolution of political parties, thereby highlighting the significance of Art’s (2020) proposal. Some parties become populist by fully embracing the thin ideology of the “us versus them” divide, while simultaneously altering their ideological positions or shifting across the ideological spectrum towards the radical right. Conversely, other parties may merely use appeals to nativism as an electoral tool, leaving their true ideological stance ambiguous. The scope of this study is primarily limited to the external validity of the two cases within Central and Eastern Europe. However, the potential for future research is vast. The emphasis could be placed on multiple crises with external shocks, such as those experienced in Latin

America, Western Europe (including shocks in gas prices and cost of living), as well as the conflict in Israel. This would serve as a more comprehensive extension of the study and provide a more holistic understanding of the ideological shifts across different regions and circumstances.

Notes

1. Parts of the work presented in this manuscript are derived from my doctoral dissertation in Ivanov (2023b).
2. The minimal nature of the model omits many other systemic factors (a non-exhaustive list includes: regulation of media, campaign and party financing, and institutional variable) may have either direct or mediating effect on the electoral result. This is being done on purpose in order to keep the model as simple as possible for the cross-country analysis, but uncover other factors, as the result of the comparative example in the second part.
3. As highlighted Köröseyi (1999), since the emergence of the new cleavage based on the communist-anti-communist dichotomy, Manichean outlook was still present in Fidesz discourse in blaming the political opponents and blurring the lines using the label of “communist” on left political parties (MSZP and DK).
4. The total number of asylum applications in the EU: over 1.3 million in 2015 and further 1.2 million in 2016.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are publicly available at the Chapel Hill Expert Survey website at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>. The data that supports the findings in the additional materials section are publicly available at the European Social Survey depository: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

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