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Countering National-Level Populism with Local Politics? Broadening Participatory Processes in Budapest in Illiberal Hungary

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how political opposition at the local level responds to national populism, focusing on Budapest's reactions to Viktor Orbán's government. It addresses the under-researched national-local nexus in populism studies by examining counter-populist strategies rooted in democratic values such as pluralism, inclusion, and solidarity. Through semi-structured interviews and analysis of documents and media, the paper maps how the lord mayor, district mayors, and their teams confront anti-democratic dynamics. By shifting the focus from local populist actors to local opposition, the study highlights the normative foundations of urban resistance to national-level populism.

Introduction

Research on populism has proliferated in the past decade (for an overview see Hunger and Paxton 2021), thanks to which we have gained substantial knowledge about the reasons, the forms, and even the implications of this political phenomenon. However, there are two aspects of populism that have been relatively understudied: responses to, and the role of local-level politics in relation to populism. Although Kaltwasser and Taggart (2015) tackled the issue of “dealing with populism,” their approach did not consider local- or regional-level politics in the process. Furthermore, response strategies were mainly embedded within a discussion of party politics (i.e. what to do with populist parties?), and the focus was less on actual procedures and policies that could counter populist tendencies at the decision-making level. While Schäfer and Hartleb (2021) go beyond analyzing actor-focused (i.e. party-level) reactions and also highlight the relevance of supporter-related counter-measures (among others, broadening participatory processes), the role of local-level politics is not considered for a systematic study of counter-populist political responses. In fact, much of the literature on “populist regionalism” or “populist localism” focuses on the *emergence* of populism at the regional/local level (Heinisch and Marent 2018; Ivaldi and Dutozia 2018), and does not consider local politics as a potential for counter-populist action. Yet, empirical evidence is growing which suggests that political success against populism often originates at the local, municipal level of governance. It is at this level that counter-populism is expected to return to democratic politics jeopardized by populist national governments. The cases of Istanbul, Budapest, or Warsaw (just to name a few) are cases in point where local elections put opposition

forces in power which then had to manage and function under a populist regime. In line with a research agenda hinted at by Chou, Moffitt, and Busbridge (2021) and an empirical study by Deets (2023), the aim of the paper is to study how municipal politics respond to national-level populist tendencies. Adopting the ideational approach to populism (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008), it is expected that local opposition will counter populism-induced policies and political processes reflective of the exclusionary “us” versus “them” approach by injecting pluralism, inclusion, and solidarity into existing structures. Focusing on the case of Budapest, it is shown how the new lord mayor and his cabinet, along with his allies among district mayors, have tried to neutralize and offset populism locally. The broadening of participatory and deliberative practices as well as the re-introduction of contestation and oversight mechanisms in decision-making, increased transparency and accountability, and the adoption of a pluralist, inclusive discourse all served to counter national-level populist politics.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a brief literature review is provided on the relevance of the local level in populism studies. Second, a theoretical framework is offered that combines the nature of local politics with expectations about responsive strategies to national-level populism. Third, a qualitative case study is provided based on an analysis of narratives, policies, and semi-structured interviews with municipal officials from Budapest to reconstruct the complex relationship between national-level populism and local-level counter-populism. The paper concludes with policy lessons and suggestions for future research. Beyond the theoretical (the role of local-level politics in countering national-level

populism) and empirical (qualitative data on local-level responsive strategies and measures) added value, the paper also has policy implications.

Populism and Local-Level Politics

Although populism may be studied as a political strategy (Weyland 2017), a discourse (Laclau 2005), or a political style (Moffitt and Tormey 2013), most studies consider it as a “thin-centered ideology” (Mudde 2017). Accordingly, populists (1) divide society vertically between “the honest people” and “the corrupt elite,” and often horizontally between “the deserving people” and “the undeserving non-people”; (2) adopt a socio-economic or cultural dualism (i.e. “us” versus “them”) beyond a moralistic division (Kim 2021); and (3) emphasize “the will of the people” – that is, popular sovereignty – as the main guiding principle in politics. The moralistic division between the in-group (i.e. the *honest* or *deserving* people) and the out-group (i.e. the *corrupt* elite, or the *undeserving* non-people) – as defined in ideational approaches – goes beyond the down/up structure identified by De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017), and brings with it a broader political logic. If one divides political subjects into legitimate and illegitimate actors (i.e. uses an *antagonistic* as opposed to *agonistic* differentiation), this has important ramifications for the polity (e.g. who may participate) and policies (e.g. who may benefit) as well. Given that this paper also looks into these features, the ideational approach of populism has been chosen.

While the extensive literature on populism has already mapped various aspects of the phenomenon, much of the literature focuses on the national level. As Kaltwasser and Taggart put it: “There is something often very ‘national’ about populism” (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2015, 206). Central questions focus on how populist parties and actors gain support (cf. Berman and Snegovaya 2019), govern, and influence existing institutions and processes of democracy (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020; Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020) and particular policy areas (e.g. on foreign policy see Destradi, Cadier, and Plagemann 2021). Comparatively less attention is given to the regional and the local, municipal level.

The literature on the link between regionalism and populism may be clustered into two main groups. First, we find studies that look at local/regional manifestations of national-level populism and factors that may influence it (e.g. Heinisch and Marent 2018; Ivaldi and Dutozia 2018). Second, there are studies that look into the regional emergence of populism *per se*, and how sub-state political actors combine a populist ideology with territoriality claims (e.g. Barrio, Barberá, and Rodríguez-Teruel 2018; Dostal 2015; van Haute, Pauwels, and Sinardet 2018). What is missing from the literature is a consideration of the local level in responding to the challenge posed by national-level populism.

Countering National-Level Populism with Local Politics: Theoretical Expectations

As the previous section demonstrated, the study of populism still lacks an analysis where local-level politics is conceived as

an “in-house” opposition to national-level populism, rather than a regional manifestation of the latter. However, this also necessitates a more thorough consideration of another, relatively understudied aspect, namely responses to populism. Previously, Kaltwasser (2017), and Kaltwasser and Taggart (2015) drafted a framework to this end. The latter analysis focuses on actors (who may react?), strategies (how do they react?), and timing (when do they react?). While the framework considers both demand-, and supply- side elements, it is rather descriptive in nature, and interestingly it does not consider the sub-national level as a standalone actor that may play a role in dealing with populism. Furthermore, the strategies regard populism as an opposition force that may be purged, coopted, or collaborated with. Little is said about political strategies vis-à-vis populism *in power*. This, combined with the local feature, could provide interesting insights in terms of political dynamics – that is, how local opposition forces are expected to counter national-level populism.

Schäfer and Hartleb (2021) differentiate among three dimensions of populism (technique-, content-, and media-related) that a response strategy needs to reflect upon. Accordingly, they separate actor-related and supporter-related counter-strategies. The first category is similar to the framework advanced by Kaltwasser and Taggart (2015), and less useful in cases where populist parties actually lead the government, and counter-strategies need to be considered from an “underdog” position. The second category, however, concentrates on combating the causes of populism from active confrontation with populist policies and discourses, through increasing political participation and enhancing media awareness, to boosting socio-economic and cultural welfare. Interestingly, this framework has no specifics in relation to local-level politics, although local governments possess certain characteristics that make them well positioned to counter populism. “Local politics regularly includes protest against the state, with the mobilization of rural and urban social movements alike seeking alternative and informal forms of politics” (Le Galès 2021, 348). Also, mayors, in general, are more popular than national-level politicians (Barber 2013), and given their more direct links with their constituencies, are much harder to be pictured as a shady, corrupt elite (cf. Csehi 2021). This is also due to their preference for a smooth delivery of public services locally over ideological discussions embedded in national-level populism. Additionally, local politics traditionally ensures more opportunities for democratic participation, deliberation, and other innovations (cf. Hurtíková and Souko, 2019).

With the exception of Deets (2023), we still lack an understanding of the nexus between local politics and countering populism. However, Deets’s study focuses more on network governance, and how mayors may disrupt vertical clientelist structures *per se*, and tells us little about how democratic alternatives are created locally to counter populism. Local politics may serve not only as a site of resistance, but also as a platform for democratic renewal offering a blueprint for counter-populism.

This study starts with the expectation that opposition-led municipalities are positioned well to offset the impact of national populist politics locally. Based on existing literature, which often equates pluralism as the antonym of

populism (cf. Mudde 2004; Müller 2016), it is expected that opposition to populism will push political narratives, institutional and procedural settings, and actual policy measures toward increased pluralism, also with the aim to neutralize or counter anti-democratic impacts (see Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020; Heinisch and Wegscheider 2020; Huber and Schimpf 2016). As Kaltwasser and Taggart observe, “Pluralism rejects the Manichean distinction between the people and the elite. It adopts a more universalistic view of human nature: one that takes for granted the diversity of ideas and interests in society and therefore sees the very process of politics in very different terms” (2015, 204). Accordingly, pluralism not only avoids a moral division of society, but it also aims to establish processes reflective of real consideration of the bottom-up, open-ended concept of “the will of the people,” as opposed to a more top-down understanding often characteristic of populists in power (Csehi 2021).

Given that populism in government has an impact on discourses, institutions, and political processes as well as actual policy measures, it is expected that local opposition could combine measures related to all these aspects. First, it is anticipated that local powerholders could lower culturally divisive discourses, and aim to establish anti-polarization narratives through lower levels of antagonism and moralism. Populism as an ideology relies on a moral distinction between a virtuous, imagined community of “the people,” and a corrupt “elite” or the undeserving non-people, which is often reached through a polarizing, antagonizing discourse. Wuthrich and Ingleby (2020) argue that successful anti-populist discursive strategies will focus more on openness and inclusion rather than polarization and moral division. In relation to Istanbul, Deets also argues that opposition strategies are expected to include a proactive depolarization where they aim at “(re)creating social solidarity on shared cultural norms” (Deets 2023, 5). It is expected that non-populist political actors will be likely to rely more on agonistic – that is, respectful engagement with political opponents as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies – as opposed to antagonistic differentiations, and emphasize inclusionary language stressing the relevance of solidarity and dignity. Local politics is best situated in this regard, as close-knit municipalities are expected to be more open toward solidarity.

Second, local opposition could increase representative capacities of existing institutions by establishing more inclusionary practices, limiting political centralization, establishing bottom-up and deliberative practices (e.g. local referenda), and changing the local media landscape. Populists generally constrain participation (cf. Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020), despite their claim about representing “the will of the people.” On the one hand, given their conviction that they, and only they, are the true representatives of “the people,” other political actors (parties, civil society and non-governmental organizations, special interest groups, etc.) as channels of societal interests are considered to be illegitimate. On the other hand, referenda and other direct participatory mechanisms, such as a “national consultation” in the case of Hungary (cf. Bátorý and Svensson 2019), are used to

support and strengthen populist narratives and policies without any meaningful participation. As a response, counter-populist measures are expected to offset these exclusionary tendencies and provide an opportunity for purposeful participation of different actors. They are expected to broaden the space for individuals (a type of a liberal response to populism) and also for different organizations (a government efficiency response to populism). On the one hand, increased autonomy – or greater decentralization – in decisions that have direct impacts, such as participatory budgeting, and a stronger reliance on deliberative processes are expected to enhance citizen participation. On the other hand, the (re)inclusion of civil society actors – and even political opponents – is expected to strengthen political contestation and contribute to a healthier balance, which is vital for making efficient and effective political decisions. Local politics offers a valuable laboratory for testing these measures.

Third, local opposition could establish fairer distribution in policy measures. Populist policies always have an exclusionary edge. Socio-economic measures passed by populist governments often omit certain groups from the beneficiaries based on “moral justification” rather than socio-economic rationality (e.g. directed financial support toward married, heterosexual couples with children at the expense of everybody else). Similarly, in areas of cultural policy, we often witness the channeling of resources toward actors in line with the thickening ideology of populist governments while excluding others from these material and non-material reserves, often culminating in “culture wars.” Furthermore, given that populists always aim to polarize society by referring to identity politics, a reaction thus could be either an alternative identity politics (e.g. solidarity with the identities under attack) or a redirected focus on voters’ everyday concerns. In the end, we expect counter-populism to be more inclusive in nature, showing more solidarity toward marginalized groups, and less identity-driven. Local politics allows mayors and city councils to be more generous with symbolic measures in this regard, which signals an alternative.

Overall, we expect local opposition to drive a counter-populist agenda at the local level to deflate the impact of illiberal¹ populism by intentionally shifting the tone of discourse, the nature of institutions and decision-making procedures, and the direction of policies. This counter-populist transformation is anticipated to be grounded in core democratic values – particularly pluralism, solidarity and inclusion. These principles function not only as normative counterweights to the exclusionary logic of populism, but also as practical drivers of alternative governance, shaping discourse, institutions, and policy outcomes. While opening up institutions and processes mainly reflects a pluralist and inclusionary approach, shifting the discourse and policies is more dependent upon solidarity and inclusion as fundamental markers.

Counter-populism is understood here in a manner similar to the way Moffitt (2018) used the term anti-populism: it describes different visions of how democratic decision-making should operate. In this sense, counter-populism deviates from the discursive approach of Stavrakakis (2014) and Stavrakakis et al. (2018), inasmuch as crisis is not a necessary feature here, there is no discursive frontier operated against the

populist national government, and also the democratic answer does not necessarily entail an elitist idea of anti-populism; quite the contrary, it is supposed to (re)empower the local citizenry. Also, counter-populism does not refer to an approach to populism as a political strategy (cf. Weyland 2017).

Case Selection and Methodology

The paper builds on a case study of Budapest. Using the Hungarian capital for the study was warranted on multiple grounds. First, the government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been in power for over a decade now, and is routinely described in the literature as populist (cf. Bátor 2015; Jenne 2021; Kim 2020). The populist impact is traceable in the political discourse, the constitutional and institutional reforms, and the policies initiated by the government (Csehi 2021). Although Orbán's party, Fidesz (along with its satellite party, the Christian-Democratic People's Party), has enjoyed a comfortable (even constitutional) majority in the parliament, the 2019 local elections showed some advancement of the opposition parties (Kovarek and Littvay 2022). This was most vividly reflected in the victory in Budapest of Gergely Karácsony, who defeated the incumbent lord mayor as a candidate of the joint opposition, having previously won the opposition parties' primary election in the capital. Additionally, a majority of the districts in Budapest have been led by opposition mayors since 2019. It may be expected that these past few years provided ample time for a non-populist political agenda to crystallize at the local level, which may be worth studying. Although the Covid-19 pandemic has in many regards overwritten "normal" politics, most of the cases addressed in this study are concerned with unrelated institutional and policy decisions. The analysis covers a period running from 2019 to 2024. While the interviews were carried out before 2022, the document analysis ran to 2024, and discourse has been studied throughout this period.

The analysis relies on a qualitative research method, which includes the study of official documents, media coverage, secondary resources, as well as seven semi-structured, in-depth interviews (reaching a saturation point) with key local decision-makers. These include: the lord mayor, several district mayors or deputies, and cabinet members of the lord mayor with party-belongings to the national-level opposition. Interviewees were asked about their general approach to governance, the principles driving their policies and institutional agendas, and their objectives in democratic practices. Furthermore, they provided information on specific counter-narratives, and on counter-measures they felt it was necessary and just to introduce to offset the populist measures of the government. During the period of 2019–2024, district mayors were also members of the city council, so they worked in close collaboration with the lord mayor on major issues.

Pluralism was traced through the acknowledgment and accommodation of diverse perspectives in discourse, institutional settings, and policy practices. These included efforts to ensure multiple voices were represented in public debates and policymaking. In relation to that, inclusion was

operationalized as access to decision-making mechanisms, and was assessed through interviewees' accounts and official documents describing how decision-making has changed. The inclusion of previously excluded stakeholders was taken as a key marker, but decentralization and an emphasis on deliberative and participatory features in decision-making were also significant indicators. Finally, solidarity was identified through references to political or policy efforts that actively supported marginalized or stigmatized groups. We looked for explicit mentions of empathy, recognition of social vulnerability, and efforts to provide equal treatment or protection.

Empirical Analysis

The Municipality System in Hungary

When the communist regime collapsed in 1989–1990, a two-tier territorial self-government system (municipal and county level) was introduced in Hungary. In line with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, Hungary provided newly created local municipalities with significant autonomy in local affairs (Hoffman 2018). Municipalities became the most important administrative units in Hungary, their organization was mainly council-centered, and their economic rights were recognized. This placed Hungary in a group of countries that were referred to as "decentralization champions" (Rajca 2020).

Whereas the parties have nationalized local politics to a great extent, the urban–rural cleavage remained especially salient in Hungary. Conservative parties tend to perform better in rural areas and smaller settlements while the liberal, left-wing, and center-right opposition is more successful in urban areas (O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022). Budapest was dominated by the liberal SZDSZ² between 1990 and 2010 (Gábor Demszky, mayor), then by the right-wing populist Fidesz between 2010 and 2019 (István Tarlós, mayor), and currently by a green–social liberal former member of parliament³ (Gergely Karácsony, mayor since 2019). While the city council has been dominated by opposition parties since 2019, its composition changed after 2024.

Along with the new Fundamental Law passed in 2011, the local government system has undergone significant changes with the restriction of local autonomies (cf. O'Dwyer and Stenberg 2022). The Hungarian government deliberately weakened local municipalities, and local political autonomy became part of national, top-down hierarchical power structures. The new Fundamental Law claims that local self-governments are not institutions organized on a social basis, but rather they are a form of decentralized state administration. Competences of municipalities are no longer "fundamental municipal rights," which has weakened the legal protection of municipalities (Hoffman 2018). The process of re-centralization (Cseh and Fazekas 2020) had become even more prominent by 2013 with the allocation of most local competences to the state administration. The subsidiarity principle was hollowed as the state interfered within local functions, and undermined local authorities' executive powers. The government nationalized public education and hospital care almost completely and, in addition,

it concentrated public administration at county-level government offices and subordinate government district authorities. An average local government has lost one-third of its public servants, and municipal assets were often nationalized. The fiscal autonomy of municipalities was also weakened as borrowing at the local level now requires government permission.

Centralizing trends have further accelerated since 2019, when the governing party lost half of its mayoral seats, most notably in Budapest, to a united opposition. Under the guise of Covid restrictions, opposition-led municipalities often received less funding from the central budget than those led by representatives of the ruling party. In addition, the central government imposed financial restrictions on local municipalities, in particular on Budapest. Local business tax revenues were halved and priority (foreign) investments were taken over by the government – both of which represented a vital source of income for local municipalities. What's more, special aid was allocated based on the party affiliation of the municipality (cf. Vasvári 2022). At the end of 2020, big cities led by Fidesz received 3.5 million euros in aid, while pro-opposition cities did not have access to such one-time support (Pinna 2021). Along with the financial deprivation, the government shifted the responsibility onto local governments to manage their energy consumption during the energy crisis. Amidst rising prices, a governmental decree conferred on municipalities the power to decide when and to what extent to provide public lighting.

It is indicative of the level of centralization that local municipalities carry out only 27% of public investments, which is less than half the OECD average.⁴ Hungary became by far the most centralized country in Central and Eastern Europe, with the central government spending in localities more than five times more than what local governments can do (Volintiru 2021). Practically, local governments are only responsible for the day-to-day operation of settlements at this time.

Responding to Populist Narratives with Inclusion, Pluralism, and Solidarity

Given that the populist ideology always contains a strong moral narrative that divides society into groups of “good” and “evil,” the expectation is that opposition local-level politics would aim to establish a more inclusionary language. Populists often target marginalized groups of the society: sexual and racial minorities, or people living on the periphery – the “underdogs.” Within the past few years, the Orbán government has systematically built a populist narrative against homeless people and people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. In the case of the former, an interviewee argued that “the aim is really to change the discourse. Politically we have to fight against homelessness, not the homeless. We need to show that this is a heterogeneous group of people from poor pensioners to mentally challenged people” (Interview #1). This statement reflects a deliberate reframing of the discourse around homelessness as a political strategy rooted in solidarity, aimed at humanizing marginalized groups and rejecting the moralistic exclusion inherent in the government's populist rhetoric. Another official also stressed that there was a need

to counter the victim-blaming narrative of the government (Interview #2). Yet another official described the discourse of the government as one building around the notion of order. Nevertheless, it was also admitted that the previous, government-backed lord mayor did not fully follow the government's strict policies either. For instance, he did not lock the underpasses against the homeless at night (Interview #3). In relation to the LGBTQ+ community, a district mayor pointed out that instead of criticizing pro-government media outlets for their anti-LGBTQ+ position in the local papers, they deliberately used positive examples of the attacked community to counter the government's populist narratives (Interview #4). The same district used a billboard campaign as well with the slogan “I am a human too,” to raise awareness of sexual discrimination.⁵ Another district mayor put a sign on the city council building during “pride month” that joined the coat of arms of the district with the rainbow symbol along with the message: “everybody's local government” (Interview #6). The lord mayor himself gave a speech during the Pride thanking the members of the community for having contributed to greater acceptance in Budapest,⁶ stressing the relevance of social plurality and representation.⁷

Another issue concerning discourse has to do with the media landscape itself. There are numerous studies that show how the Orbán government managed to re-structure the media market, and what impact a populist ideology has had on journalism itself (Csehi 2021). The past few years occasionally featured news reports that described how local district newspapers within Budapest functioned under the strict control of district mayors and served as part of the propaganda machinery of the government.⁸ Consequently, when these districts were won by opposition candidates during the 2019 local elections, it was expected that journalism and the media landscape might change. Most of our interviewees talked about the “liberation of local newspapers” from a propaganda-like approach where the mayor and the ruling party had to feature on every page of the local papers, while the opposition had no chance to voice their opinions. As a deputy district mayor explained, “To undercut the logic of the previously anti-pluralist approach in the local media, we made sure that the local representatives of Fidesz, especially the ones holding governmental positions, have access to shaping the content. These people can write an op-ed anytime or pursue a Christmas greeting in the local press” (Interview #7). This move reveals a deliberate embrace of political pluralism, even extending media access to ideological opponents – something rarely practiced at the national level. A district mayor – who also worked as a journalist for thirty years – shared a story where the local newspaper forgot to interview him on a major issue, and he then wrote a letter-to-the-editor to voice his views on the issue (Interview #6). However, as an official put it, “although in many districts local newspapers were transformed, and they are more in line with public broadcasting standards, the capital still lacks access to media” (Interview #2). More often than not, the communication of the municipality does not reach the targeted audience. According to an official, this is due, on the one hand, to a structural problem, namely that the municipality lacks a proper communication department, and on the other hand, to the overwhelming pro-

government messages featured in the media. The aim is to broaden civic fora and townhall formats, and to increase publicity of certain measures (e.g. participatory budgeting) (Interview #2).

Overall, local opposition counter-narratives have put a great emphasis on openness and acceptance (Interview #5), and tried to offset the exclusionary and antagonistic tone of the national political discourse. There was a clear intent behind this. In an interview,⁹ the current lord mayor contrasted Orbán's populism with his *populist* approach. According to Karácsony, the former refers to an abuse of the "will of the people" to fulfill personal and material interests, whereas the latter is about providing the same opportunities for everyone while recognizing basic principles such as human dignity, solidarity, and partnership. Nevertheless, he did acknowledge that the opposition shared a responsibility for the prevalence of populism as they often employed a similar polarizing rhetoric, only by interpreting them in their "own context."¹⁰ Still, one of our interviewees claimed that "breaking 'the software' of populism is possible through good practices, examples, and civil mobilization" (Interview #6). This also included a shift from more ideological debates to practical issues. As another interviewee framed it: "The main goal was to address the most pressing, daily problems of the people instead of engaging in the polarizing mud fight of the government. We intended to employ a constructive, more inclusive approach, deliberately following the campaign strategy of the mayor of Istanbul regarding 'radical love'" (Interview #7). Karácsony's official program even had the slogan "Budapest is for everyone," where solidarity, acceptance, and diversity were fundamental values.¹¹

Another issue that district mayors talked about was a change in billboard messages. They were used to advertise local social assistance programs as opposed to conveying the political messages of the government and the ruling party (Interview #6). This practice became extremely relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic (Interview #5) when there was a heightened need for a social safety network.

Re-Instituting Democratic Pluralism in Decision-Making

Given its anti-pluralist nature, populism is expected to culminate in an exclusionary way of decision-making with certain stakeholders, and often the electorate itself, being kept away from meaningful participation. As Jakli and Stenberg (2021) showed, Fidesz-led municipalities have limited opportunities for political contestation by the opposition and reduced oversight of their own power while running the municipalities. As one of our interviewees summarized it: "Fidesz has created a deformed public institutional structure which only served the interests of the party" (Interview #6). As a response, counter-populism is expected to (re-) open decision-making mechanisms that strengthen both participatory and deliberative processes.

As for the pre-2019 period, one of our interviewees claimed that "there was no open governance during the previous administration. They simply did not let structurally external opinions in; it was more about 'city-management'" (Interview

#3). "However," the same official argued, "we were set to do more than simply city-management, we wanted to establish new behavioral patterns" (Interview #3). A similar opinion was voiced by a district mayor who stressed that "we did not want to only change the substance of politics, we wanted to alter the methods of making politics" (Interview #6). Another official summarized the new approach in a more elaborated manner:

We wanted to change the way the municipality functioned, how decisions were made, which was based on three different grounds. First, we knew outright that we would not be able to carry out huge infrastructure development projects [due to expected financial tightening], so all we could alter was the in-house political culture. Second, we realized that – given also the professionalization of politics – the gap between the electorate and the elected officials has steadily increased, and we could only decrease a legitimacy deficit through a guarantee of meaningful participation of the citizens. Third, by 2019 it became clear that we had to deal with an authoritarian system, and we were convinced that governing through illiberal ways wasn't effective. (Interview #2)

This articulation reveals an intentional reconfiguration of municipal governance along pluralist and inclusionary lines, aimed at restoring citizen trust and building democratic legitimacy through participatory practices. Also, it was pointed out by interviewees that the previous lord mayor of Budapest and the city council had indeed emptied the relevance of the existing tripartite fora and instead relied heavily on non-formalized exchanges with "hand-picked" stakeholders, which effectively made these institutional venues useless (Interview #2, #3). As a response, the new administration established a different approach. For instance, instead of the government and previous lord mayor of Budapest identifying who is supposed to represent the elderly within the metropolitan council for the elderly, the new administration changed the rules, and allowed all organizations that are active in at least three districts in Budapest to participate in exchanges on issues concerning them. In a similar manner, they revitalized the work of the conciliation board with associations of employers and employees, and established the Budapest Global Forum to institutionalize cooperation with multinational and transnational companies. Furthermore, they started an anti-drug conciliation board where they are collaborating with civil society organizations, professional bodies, and even religious groups (Interview #2). In this spirit, the lord mayor of Budapest also established the Pact of Free Cities with the mayors of other Visegrád countries in 2019. The explicit intent of this cross-regional cooperation was to protect progressive, inclusive values and act against nationalist populism.¹² At the district level, while most of our interviewees talked about the lack of formal institutional channels with key stakeholders, they all introduced new forms of exchanges, either as an annual roundtable (Interview #4), a for-now informal working breakfast in every quarter (Interview #6), or an issue-based cooperation model (Interview #5).

This receptive mentality was also reflected within the formal decision-making process. New organizational and operational rules were passed which have restored some of the rights of opposition party members within the city council (e.g. the right to be given the floor before the order of the day, the right to interpellate the lord mayor,¹³ the right to establish

committees of inquiry,¹⁴ etc.). The new city administration also proposed a revision of the legislative process whereby civil society organizations are foreseen to be mandatorily active participants within working groups. Similar trends were highlighted in district practices by our interviewees. A district mayor pointed out that they included the local opposition (i.e. the national ruling party) in the reforms of the organizational and operational rules of the city council (Interview #4), as a result of which representatives gained more time to question the city cabinet. This move was not merely procedural; it was a conscious step to restore inclusion in governance by empowering adversarial voices and reinforcing accountability through institutional design. Additionally, as one of our interviewees pointed out, “While we allocated positions so as to reflect the electoral outcome, we also handed the strategically most important positions, including the supervision of the budgetary committee and the supervision of the committee of economic properties, to the opposition. Our goal was to strengthen the financial supervision in the name of horizontal accountability” (Interviews #7). While districts differed in whether they gave opposition members the chairman position in key committees (Interviews #4 and #6), even where this did not materialize, they ensured key positions for the opposition in local company oversight (a right that was returned to the council from the mayor in some cases – Interview #6). A district mayor’s 2019 program explicitly promised collaboration with critical civil society organizations as well.¹⁵

However, such opening efforts did not stop at the level of organizations and institutions. The new city cabinet was also determined to make decision-making accessible to the local people. They established new institutions, such as a participatory budgeting program where inhabitants of the capital could decide about the fate of public funds (Interviews #1, #3, #4 and #6). Additionally, they introduced new institutions. The “Budapest dialogue” allowed inhabitants of the capital to share their opinions on various issues,¹⁶ while the citizens’ initiative allows people to collect supporting signatures on behalf of a particular issue, which then – depending on the support it gained – has to be debated in the city council. District mayors talked about an overall more open and transparent approach to local citizens. Some introduced regular town hall meetings, meaningful consultations on key issues (e.g. asset management) (Interview #6), and greater access to decision-makers (Interviews #4 and #6). As a district mayor pointed out, “this ‘open-door policy’ is not only a result of re-democratization but is also driven by personal and political interests: as a mayor one needs to build direct links with the electorate” (Interview #4). In general, increased transparency of decisions is practiced now in public procurements (Interview #5), city council meetings (Interview #4), and anti-corruption issues (Interviews #6).

Additionally, the lord mayor held a so-called Budapest townhall meeting (*Budapesti Lakógyűlés*), which was yet another participatory democracy activity where local citizens’ opinion was asked on four topics concerning the city (whether the city should withhold increased government payments to protect local services, maintain public transport funding despite national cuts, demand the promised state contribution

to the Chain Bridge renovation, and preserve the car-free traffic regime on the bridge). While many critics likened this exercise to that of national consultations, the townhall meeting (essentially a local opinion poll) raised valid questions (mainly on the finances of the city), built on real information, and did not rely on exclusionary sentiments. Nevertheless, answers were rather suggestive (and not open-ended) and did not provide the participants with enough alternatives. Another participatory event was the Budapest climate assembly in 2020, determined by the combination of election pledges, ideological match, and the desire to pursue environmental sustainability at the local level (Oross, Mátyás, and Gherghina 2021).

Overall, opposition-led districts and the lord mayor in Budapest tried to establish and strengthen the idea of an “Open Budapest” concept, although the lord mayor claimed that “municipalities cannot serve as counterbalances to the central government (...) the aim is to deliver a cultural change both in political discourse and in administrative activities” (Interview #1). As an official argued, “they [the populists] cannot really oppose these participatory mechanisms, as it would mean that they oppose an idea their politics is allegedly based upon” (Interview #2). Participatory and deliberative innovations were also aimed at boosting a sense of belonging to the local community. This was reflected by the lord mayor who argued that populism thriving on social anxiety and fear is stemming from “loneliness and the feeling of exclusion, of stagnation – in other words, from the disappearance of the communal bond.”¹⁷

Strengthening Inclusion in Policy Decisions

Populist policies are always expected to be exclusionary in nature as the ideology is based upon a horizontal division of society between “the deserving and honest people,” and “the undeserving non-people.” This separation is then often reflected in policy benefits redistributed according to this division. Those deemed not belonging to “the people” are expected to suffer socio-economic and/or cultural policy losses. For instance, passing a moral judgment on the ideal citizen as heterosexual, married, with children can have an impact on social benefits. In a similar manner, arguing that one needs to follow certain values and principles to be part of the cultural canon can easily lead to labeling artists as part of “the non-people,” or even “the corrupt elite.” So, were there any policy areas where the new city cabinets in Budapest pursued a counter-balancing strategy?

Although their options remained quite limited, the new administration did try to counter the exclusionary policies of the national government through local-level regulation and politics. One such issue concerned the criminalization of homeless people. While a previous attempt by the former lord mayor had been nullified by the courts,¹⁸ the issue was re-introduced in the seventh amendment to the Fundamental Law in 2018.¹⁹ It basically gave the right to local/municipal governments to deem homelessness illegal by decree. As the current lord mayor explained, “the government used a populist rhetoric which has built upon the frustration of the lower-middle class. Vertically they had negative feelings towards

a globalist elite, while horizontally towards marginalized groups of society, such as the Roma and the homeless” (Interview #1). In order to respond to this polarizing policy, the city tried to increase the capacities of the social safety network in this area. During the Covid-19 pandemic when schools were closed they tried to open them up to let the homeless in, and when one district signaled its objection, the mayor decided to open the gates of the building of the municipality. Also, as an official claimed, “besides increasing programs of affordable living for the homeless, we would like to establish an accommodation agency in Budapest which could serve as a guarantee to minimize the risk of defaulting on a rental apartment by homeless people” (Interview #2). Already, there have been over 160 people who gained access to affordable housing with the help of the municipality.²⁰ Additionally, there is an attempt to increase collaborative channels between different institutions active within the social policy area (e.g. with elderly homes where homeless persons with pension payments could be placed) (Interview #3). At the local level, one district mayor argued that “even if we cannot change public opinion [on the homeless] we can crack it through positive examples” (Interviews #6). This quote illustrates a proactive strategy of solidarity, signaling an intentional attempt to shift public sentiment through everyday practices of dignity and recognition for marginalized individuals. In the same district, they also initiated a program called “adopt a public square” where homeless shelters may apply for funds in exchange for keeping a public square clean. Additionally, they recruited homeless into the reformed city maintenance corps, and are actively working on a Budapest-wide homelessness strategy. In another district they introduced a point-based system, and reformed the housing policy to provide the homeless easier access to a place to live (Interview #4). Additionally, they also supported the creation of a homeless shelter for women. Last, but not least, the lord mayor also managed to save the “homeless hospital,” a medical institution that focused on the care of homeless people, when the government announced that they would like to transform the building for another purpose.²¹ These measures represent more than policy changes: they embody a solidarity-driven counter-populist ethos that aims to care for and integrate vulnerable groups systematically excluded by national policies.

Another issue concerns the LGBTQ+ community. The Hungarian parliament passed a controversial new legislative package in 2021 that has overwhelmingly been labeled as homophobic as it blurs the lines between sexual orientation and pedophilia, while also banning the sharing of content with minors considered to be promoting homosexuality or gender

reassignment, and the depiction of LGBTQ+ topics from daytime television. Once again, while the opportunities of the local government to counter national-level policies are rather limited, we do see some measures that aimed to dull the edge of these rather harsh policies. One official argued that there was no need to institutionally offset any decisions yet (Interview #3), while another highlighted that the issue is less relevant in Budapest as there is a rather inclusionary mentality within the capital (Interview #2). Nevertheless, there are some existing and planned policy measures that are more progressive and pro-active in nature. For instance, one of the districts has extended the one-time family support scheme for newlyweds to homosexual couples as well (Interview #4), while there are plans to introduce a new, quasi-ombudsman for equality within the municipality. Also, as mentioned in the section on discourse, there was a strong counter-identity built around the LGBTQ+ issue. It wasn’t simply a show of solidarity and human dignity toward this marginalized group, but also a counter-narrative, such as the sixth district’s campaign “I am a human too” about sexual discrimination.

Overall, a pluralist and open approach is followed in policy decisions to counter unitary and exclusionary solutions. An official explained this attitude in relation to historical remembrance as follows:

We are pursuing a project which would commemorate women who suffered sexual abuse in the various wars, in the form of a statue. We are organizing a number of different events around the project: commissioning academic studies, conferences, public project proposals, etc. We are openly supporting the idea that public remembrance is pluralist in nature. This stands in sharp contrast to the interpretation of the government, which simply states: “one nation, one remembrance,” which may be defined in a top-down manner. (Interview #2)

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the analytical linkage between local politics and counter-populism, with a specific focus on how opposition-led municipal actors in Budapest have responded to the exclusionary tendencies of national-level populism under Viktor Orbán’s government. Our framework builds on the expectation that counter-populism manifests in three key dimensions – discourse, institutional and procedural arrangements, and policy decisions – and that it is driven by normative commitments to solidarity, inclusion, and pluralism.

The empirical findings confirm that this triadic expectation is not only conceptually plausible but also traceable in practice (see Table 1). First, in terms of discourse, we observed

Table 1. The Dimensions of Counter-Populism

	Populism	Counter-populism
Discourse	Antagonistic and moral division of the society	Agonistic differentiation and less moralism
Institutions and processes	Exclusionary language	More emphasis on inclusion and solidarity
	Centralization	Decentralization
	Constrained access to decision-making	Increased access to decision-making
	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
Policies	Little contestation	More deliberation
	Exclusionary	More inclusion and solidarity
	Reference to identity politics	Alternative identity politics
		Focus on voters’ concerns

a marked shift from the populist antagonistic rhetoric to a more inclusive language. This included affirmative messaging around marginalized communities (e.g., homeless individuals, LGBTQ+ citizens), as well as symbolic and communicative efforts aimed at reducing polarization and humanizing the “other.” These discursive strategies signal a re-narration of political identity centered on solidarity and pluralism, aimed at reconstructing the political space as one of diversity and mutual recognition rather than moral opposition.

Second, on the institutional and procedural front, counter-populism was reflected in the re-opening and democratization of decision-making mechanisms. Initiatives such as participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, open council meetings, and the reintegration of civil society into governance structures all worked to institutionalize inclusion. These changes were not merely symbolic or rhetorical; they redefined the rules of engagement between citizens and municipal authorities, reestablishing deliberation, oversight, and contestation as core principles of local governance. The result is a form of institutional pluralism that explicitly contrasts with the centralizing, monopolizing tendencies of the national populist government. As one interviewee put it:

Populists claim that representative democracy has deconstructed and they promise to deepen democracy and start a new democracy discourse (...) from a particular perspective. I consider myself a left-wing populist as I am also well aware of the weaknesses of representative democracy, but I see two answers to those weaknesses: a destructive and a constructive one, the latter focusing more on inclusivity. (Interview #1)

Third, policy decisions also reflect a counter-populist orientation. Where national populist policies rely on moral hierarchies to exclude certain groups from social or cultural goods, the municipal government emphasized redistributive justice and symbolic recognition. Housing initiatives for the homeless, inclusive welfare schemes for same-sex couples, and efforts to pluralize historical memory are examples of how solidarity and inclusion were operationalized at the policy level. These measures serve not only as reactions to exclusionary policies but also as proactive strategies for normatively reshaping the political order at the local level.

While the findings of this study are relevant, there are a few known shortcomings that may be addressed in future research. First, although knowledge about responsive strategies is valuable, the analysis may be further theorized to discuss circumstances under which such strategies may prove to be more or less successful. What are the structural and political contextual features that may influence the process? Is it the personal orientation and political capital of individual mayors, the socio-demographic composition of the constituency, the administrative capacity and financial resources of the district, or the institutional history and prior level of openness in governance structures that determines this? Future research could better tease out the micro-foundations of counter-populism further. This leads to the second point, namely the need to extend the case-study selection. Different countries may witness different response strategies, especially given the different levels of power a populist national government may possess. The impact may be different across different regions,

or based on different characteristics of the local government. Here, the urban–rural division may be of importance, given that city-dwellers, and more specifically those that live in the capital, tend to hold pluralism as a value in comparison to rural denizens. Additionally, there is a need to better separate the populist and the thickening ideologies. Here, we have focused more on the (counter-)populism element: although left-wing policies (e.g. the inclusionary element) may prove to be difficult to separate from a counter-populist attitude, institutional and procedural responses are clearer derivatives of the latter, not the former. However, a broader comparative study with different thickening ideologies present could help determine the ideological underpinnings better. Third, the counter-populist measures could be categorized differently. A future typology could be developed to distinguish between compensatory, transformative, and hybrid strategies of municipal resistance, depending on the extent to which they aim to neutralize populist damage versus proactively create new democratic norms and structures, which could also help separate deliberate and coincidental measures.

Acknowledging these shortcomings, however, the added value of the research should not be underestimated. It demonstrates the relevance of local politics in countering populism. After all, credible local candidates may neutralize a populist discourse about unresponsive political elites, and could serve as the basis upon which a true democratic movement may be constructed.

Notes

1. While there is a lively debate about the notion of “illiberalism,” this paper does not want to open up this conceptual debate. Rather, “illiberal” is understood here as a synonym for anti-plural. After all, liberal democracy is often regarded as plural democracy in practice, and populism is often described as anti-plural (see Müller 2016). Consequently, “illiberalism” is equated here with populist “anti-pluralism.”
2. Alliance of Free Democrats, Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége.
3. Párbeszéd Magyarországért, Dialogue for Hungary.
4. Information may be found in the OECD report Regions and Cities at a Glance 2018 – Hungary. <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/HUNGARY-Regions-and-Cities-2018.pdf>.
5. See a district mayor’s criticism of the government’s anti-LGBTQ+ policies. <https://ezalenyeg.hu/helyben/soproni-tamas-az-artalom-a-gyulolekten-van-nem-a-massagban-68388>. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
6. The lord mayor held a speech in the press conference of the Budapest Pride. <https://444.hu/2020/08/22/karacsony-gergely-beszedet-mondott-a-budapest-pride-sajtotajekoztatojan>. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
7. The lord mayor welcomed the Pride month in Hungary. <https://444.hu/2020/06/01/karacsony-gergely-koszonti-iden-a-juniusrol-augusztusra-halasztott-pride-honapot>. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
8. The issue was discussed in some online media, e.g. <https://media1.hu/2019/12/16/e-mail-buktatta-le-jozsefvaros-volt-fideszes-vezetoit-hogy-beleszolphattak-a-helyi-ujsg-tartalmaba-kocsismate-megsem-tartja-aggalyosnak-a-level-tartalmat/>. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
9. Find the interview. <https://ezalenyeg.hu/orszagszerte/karacsony-orban-legnagyobb-bune-a-tudatosan-szitott-megosztottsag-31701>. Last accessed: March 14, 2025.
10. The lord mayor held a statement on a national holiday and talked about the fight against right-wing populism. <https://444.hu/2022/>

08/19/erkolcsi-normak-szerint-kell-donteseket-hozni-a-jobbol-dali-populizmus-helyett-mondja-karacsony. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.

11. https://parbeszedmagyarorszagert.hu/files/public/budapest_mindenkie_1.pdf. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
 12. The European Council on Foreign Relations published a statement by the V4 capital mayors. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_grassroots_democracy_can_cure_the_ills_of_central_europe/. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
 13. 33/2020 (VI.26) local government decree. <https://einfoszar.budapest.hu/list/fovarosi-kozgyules-nyilvanos-ulesei?id=108227;type=5;parentid=12111;parenttype=2>. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
 14. 4/2022 (I.28) local government decree. https://budapest.hu/fovarosikozlony/Documents/2022/Fovarosi_Kozlony_2022_2_alairt.pdf. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
 15. See the district mayor's program. <https://sopronitamas.hu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Soproni-Tamás-Terézváros-programja-2019.pdf>. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
 16. 9/2021 (II.26) local government decree. https://budapest.hu/fovarosikozlony/Documents/2021/Fovarosi_Kozlony_2021_26_alairt.pdf. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
 17. The lord mayor held a new year speech where he talked about the sentiments driving populist attitudes. <https://444.hu/2025/01/01/karacsony-gergely-a-kocsmai-szint-nem-kivetel-hanem-strategia>. Last accessed: March 13, 2025.
 18. The previous lord mayor's decree was annulled by the court. See <https://index.hu/belfold/2014/11/01/megsemmisitetek-tarlos-hajlektalan-rendeletet/>. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
 19. "In order to protect public order, public safety, public health and cultural artefacts, an Act or a local government decree may, with respect to a specific part of public space, provide that using a public space as a habitual dwelling shall be illegal" (Article XXII(3)).
 20. The lord mayor and the city council provided housing for a number of previously homeless people. <https://www.szeretlekmagyarorszag.hu/kozossegi/karacsony-gergely-ujabb-13-idos-budapesti-hajlektalan-jutott-sajat-otthonhoz/>. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
 21. The lord mayor fought against the closure of the 'homeless hospital'. <https://hu.euronews.com/2021/04/01/a-budapesti-fopolgarmester-nem-engedi-kilakoltatni-a-hajlektalan-korhazat>. Last accessed: June 2, 2024.
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