



Do Populists in Power or the Economy Impact Civic Culture?

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This paper empirically tests whether populists in power or economic well-being influence civil society and civic culture. It conceptualizes civic culture broadly by focusing on citizen mobilization and evaluation of both national and supranational political institutions. The longer populists hold government positions, the stronger their control over civil society organizations, affecting participation in civil society initiatives. However, a higher GDP per capita is associated with increased participation in civic society initiatives. Both the duration of populist rule and economic factors shape civic culture across Central and Eastern Europe. On the country level, the length of governance under populist elites correlates with a decrease in individual social connectedness, growing dissatisfaction with democracy, and diminished interest in politics. Country-level economic development correlates with higher levels of institutional trust, social trust, social connectedness, and satisfaction with democracy but negatively with trust in the European Union, election turnout, interest in politics, and participation in trade unions. Higher levels of civic culture are most consistently driven by one's income at individual level. Citizens appear to be evolving into allegiant citizens—those who maintain some level of trust in governmental institutions also support the principles and practices of democracy and exhibit a general increase in apathy toward politics. Evidence from the European Social Survey and the V-Dem database supports these conclusions.

Keywords: *populism; civic culture; political economy; populists in power; civil society*

Introduction

Populism, a thin-centered ideology pitting “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite,” has surged in Central and Eastern Europe, with populists now in governments in many countries in the region.¹ This is a “new wave” of democratic backsliding in a region that has experienced constant transformation over at least the past 250 years. The societal conditions of this new wave differ from those of the political and economic transition the region underwent during the 1990s. Societal attitudes that foster demand for populist support (impatience, disappointment, and a general lack

of “sense”) might resemble those of the 1990s, but the economy is improved now.² Unfortunately, economic prosperity does not prevent (mostly) right-wing populist parties from gaining influence and power, a trend underscoring the importance of political supply.

The region’s experience with ruling populists is not homogenous. In Hungary and Poland, populist incumbents have used the deconstruction of the system of checks and balances and the deterioration of the rule of law as their main political strategies since the 2010s.³ In contrast, in Estonia, Latvia, and Romania, populists came to power later and had to form coalitions with other parties to assume power. While scholarship has explored the political factors that determine such differences in the supply and demand of populism, less is known about the effect of populist incumbency on civic culture.⁴

Civic culture, defined as a combination of citizens’ allegiance to state authority and participation in civic duties, is an important but often overlooked factor mediating the populists’ success in maintaining power.⁵ A strong civic culture may constrain populism, but populism might prevail if civic culture is weak. Civic culture might also determine the extent to which populists in government can influence the general population, its freedoms, political and civic culture, and trust in institutions. Certain institutional conditions and the populists’ control over civil society organizations may affect the demand for populism. Alternatively, economic triggers might be responsible for a flourishing civil society and a democratic political culture, as a by-product of economic well-being.

My argument posits that both the economy and the ruling populists influence civic culture and civil society, but they do so through different mechanisms and to different degrees. While ruling populists assert control over civil society organizations, this control only partially translates into a decline in civic culture. Evidence suggests that citizens across Central and Eastern Europe are becoming allegiant. They maintain trust in institutions and support the principles and practices of democracy, but their general interest in politics wanes. This is an allegiance more than an assertive stance, characterized by low institutional trust, high support for democracy, and infrequent democratic practices.⁶ In addition, stronger economic development, such as high GDP per capita and high income, is associated with higher participation in civil society and active involvement in democracy.

This article examines the influence of ruling populists and the economy on civil society and civic culture, employing a quantitative research design. By using the European Social Survey (ESS) and the V-Dem datasets, I analyze variation in civil society in Central and Eastern Europe, considering the impact of ruling populists and the economy. This analysis encompasses over 40,000 respondents across nine countries, using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions.

This article builds on two strands of literature that discuss the role of the economy and of populists in power on the political culture of citizens. First, I consider the debate on the evolution of civil society, civic culture, and anti-politics in Central and

Eastern Europe and the impact of the economy on them.⁷ By switching the independent and dependent variables, from resilience of civil society in the face of democratic backsliding to the influence of ruling populists on civil society and civic culture, the article tests a reverse relationship between variables. Second, I explore the influence of ruling populists on citizens. Since the literature on the influence of a particular regime on citizens in Central and Eastern Europe is scarce, I apply the scholarship on the contraction of political freedoms in Russia to Central and Eastern Europe countries that are part of the European Union (EU).⁸ To do so, I expand the definition of civic culture to include citizen mobilization, citizens' evaluation of formal, informal and supranational institutions, and participation in workers' unions.⁹

The article is structured as follows. The next two sections introduce the theory used to motivate the research question and present my hypotheses and methodology. The following sections present the analysis. The final section discusses the results and draws a conclusion.

Theoretical Background

Comparative research emphasizes the role of civic culture in democratic performance, while institutionalists argue that economic growth can benefit only democratic systems with a strong state and a strong society.¹⁰ Less is known about how democracies fare when populists are in power. The successful consolidation of democracy hinges on the adoption of shared ethical values and norms by citizens.¹¹ These values and norms guide citizens' interactions with each other and the state, assuring that citizens maintain interest in politics and demonstrate rationality in political activity.¹² Such societal characteristics are more frequently found in stable democracies, where civil society organizations are more active.¹³ However, such activity can become problematic when it transforms into excessive loyalty toward the regime, especially during the transition from communist dictatorship to liberal democracy, which can be hampered by allegiance to the previous regime, strong distrust of politicians and the political system, and modest political participation.¹⁴

Some argue that the weakness of civil society and civic culture in post-communist countries is a legacy of mandatory participation under communism.¹⁵ In these countries, the levels of trust and participation in social programs are considerably lower.¹⁶ At the same time, active social movements, protest mobilization, and democratic consolidation offer institutional opportunities for the development of democratic freedoms.¹⁷ The demographic profile of post-communist societies, the exposure of individuals to communism during their early formative years, and weak economic performance also play significant roles.¹⁸

Citizen evaluation of institutions and the government and dissatisfaction with the ruling populists might exert pressure on the responsiveness of governing elites. Active citizen participation, manifested through engagement, voting, and protest,

and a robust civil society can constrain power, hold it accountable, and protect individual rights. “Intermittent and potential” participation is pivotal to democratic development because through it, civic culture, viewed as a culture of democracy, and institutional and interpersonal trust integrate individuals’ orientations toward the political system.¹⁹ This form of participation fosters a diverse and dynamic democratic environment.

Whereas in communist times a strong state presided over the citizens, in the young post-communist democracies, the state has relations with a mix of social organizations that interact with each other.²⁰ Not only political parties but also free and active civil society organizations and non-ruling elites mobilize the citizens. Consequently, the state is in constant flux. Empowered by civil society organizations, citizens can “steer” the state in the desired direction.²¹ Their connection with civil society groups can fuel civic mobilization, particularly in times of crises. The struggle for power and resources between the society and the state can influence, even alter, societal preferences, but a robust civil society can reinforce constitutional limits on the power of public officials in a stable liberal democracy.²²

We know significantly less about the extent to which populists in power affect civic culture. Civic culture is heavily influenced by traditional norms, socioeconomic conditions, and networks of social relations; cultural change occurs very slowly.²³ We know that ruling populists attempt to control the civil society or to create alternative civil society organizations, but we know less about the influence of populism on civic culture. Modern authoritarian states are often presented as “spectator democracies” with a unique form of Cesarean politics, characterized by party state capture, identity politics, and the systematic denial of political pluralism.²⁴ A few empirical examples show that civic culture declines alongside the contraction of political freedoms.²⁵

The question then is: Are the EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe protected by the EU’s *acquis communautaire*, which is supposed to safeguard the principles, norms, and commitments of the rule of law and democracy in the face of democratic deficit? The *acquis*, at its core, aims at protecting citizens by preventing the ruling elites from monopolizing political power. This study tests two hypotheses which link populist incumbency with a decline in civil society and civic culture:

Hypothesis 1: Longer periods of populist rule are associated with a weaker civil society.

Hypothesis 2: Longer periods of populist rule are associated with lower levels of civic culture.

The Role of the Economy

The role of the economy in nurturing civil society and promoting a participant civic culture might be stronger than the impact of populism in power. A participant civic culture and strong civil society organizations are known to reduce transaction costs in the economy, promoting the associational life needed for modern democracy

to succeed.²⁶ High levels of civic culture are related to economic development and the accumulation of social capital, both of which are boosted by economic growth and welfare policies.²⁷ There is a strong correlation between aspects of social structure (income, education, religion) and democracy.

The economic system is important for the post-communist EU countries for three reasons: the embeddedness in state–society relations during times of crisis, the lack of separation from other spheres of action, and the role of the economy in transition. First, while the state dictates the rules of the market, society abides by them but also revolts against them during economic hardship. Citizens rely on government support in times of crises and do not oppose the economy as long as state–society relations are reciprocal and symbiotic.²⁸ In liberal democracies, these relations provide a direct source of popular influence on political or economic developments. Second, the lack of separation among social, political, and market activities distinguishes Central and Eastern Europe from the West, embedding the economy more deeply in societal life.²⁹ Central and Eastern European politicians often have connections with, and unofficial roles in, the cultural or economic spheres. Since these spheres are intertwined, the state of the economy might affect a person's perception of other spheres of life, including trust in national and supranational institutions. Third, the post-communist EU countries still undergo political and economic transition. Past decisions impact the transition from communism to capitalism, but the main current concern is raising living standards to Western levels. Therefore, economic concerns are more pressing and salient for the public than other concerns.

Thus, the alternative explanation for civic culture in the region links the evolution of the economy with civic culture, civil society organizations, and economic well-being:

Hypothesis 3: Higher economic well-being is associated with a stronger civil society.

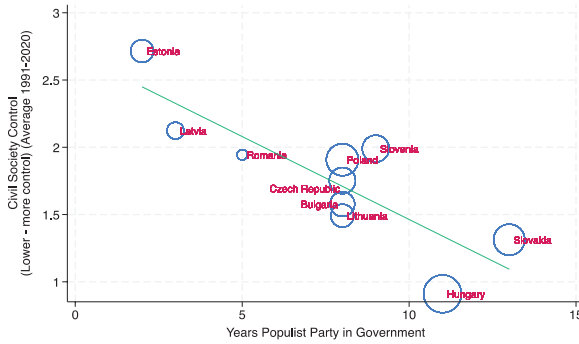
Hypothesis 4: Higher economic well-being is associated with high levels of civic culture.

Almond and Verba's definition of "civic culture" emphasizes a balanced mix of participant, subject, and parochial political cultures as essential for a stable democracy. This definition also links to populism and is broad enough to incorporate institutional trust and active citizen participation. In addition, their seminal work is based on extensive surveys conducted across five nations, providing a robust cross-country analysis of political attitudes and behaviors.³⁰ Their approach, which has been frequently used and revisited by the authors themselves, employs quantitative data to measure democratic stability.³¹

Methodology

This article presents an analysis of the country-aggregated data from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database and on individual-level attitudes from the ESS

Figure 1
Civil society control and populists in power



(2002–2016).³² The first independent variable is the period during which policies limiting civic culture were implemented. This is measured via the length of tenure of the government (formed by one party or a coalition of parties) and the time citizens lived under populist rule, defined as cabinets in which at least one member is appointed by a populist party. The rationale behind this coding is that participation in cabinet deliberations enables them to implement policies that affect civic culture. In line with previous works, the length of authoritarian rule is used as a proxy measure for the time needed to adapt to new conditions.³³

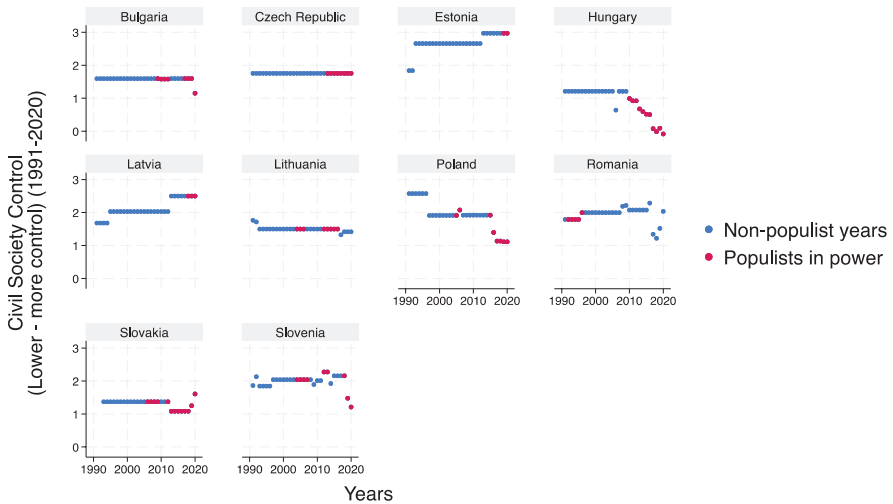
The second independent variable is the impact of the economy, measured as GDP per capita. Additional controls in OLS regressions include age, gender, education, and income quintiles based on the income bracket information from the ESS. The populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe are identified based on the *PopuLIST 2.0* database, which applies the *ideational* approach of thin-centered ideology based on the “us” versus “them” ideological divide to define populism.³⁴

The dependent variables are civil society indicators (control over civil society and civil society participation index) drawn from the V-Dem database and civic culture indicators from the ESS. I use a wider conceptualization of civic culture that includes citizen mobilization and evaluations of formal national and supranational political institutions, which I relate to the path dependency originating in the global economic crisis of 2008.³⁵

Populists in Power versus the Economy and Civil Society

Do populists in power affect civil society? As seen in Figure 1, there is a strong correlation (0.7) between the duration of a populist party in the government (represented on the x-axis) and the degree of control over civil society organizations

Figure 2
Civil society control under populists in power



(indicated on the y-axis, measured as an average of the expert survey question in V-Dem with the values: 0 = monopolistic control; 1 = substantial control; 2 = moderate control; 3 = minimal control; 4 = unconstrained). The “bubbles” represent the applied weights, incorporating data from the average election scores as documented in the ParlGov database in 1991–2020. At one end of the spectrum, we observe Hungary and Slovakia, where the most enduring and successful populists exert significant control over civil society by usurping the autonomy of the civil sphere.³⁶ We see the opposite in Estonia, Latvia, and Romania, where populists had less electoral success. In Estonia, populists did not gain government entry until 2016. There, civil society is the least controlled. Changes in the index value have also been driven by the years when populists were in power, especially in Hungary and Poland (Figure A1 in the Appendix).

Figure 2 moves beyond yearly averages to offer a nuanced understanding of the relationship. The horizontal axis represents the years, while the plotted points illustrate the difference in the index measuring control over civil society organizations in populist and non-populist years. For the most part, a clear association is evident between the duration of populist rule and the degree of control over civil society. This is particularly noticeable in the exclusionary populist practices of long-standing governments in Hungary and Poland. In these countries, most control over civil society was exerted during the second Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland and throughout the entire duration of Fidesz rule in Hungary. Slovakia and Slovenia

Figure 3
Civil society participation and populists in power

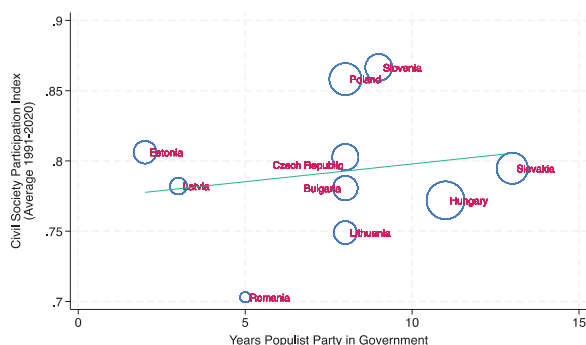
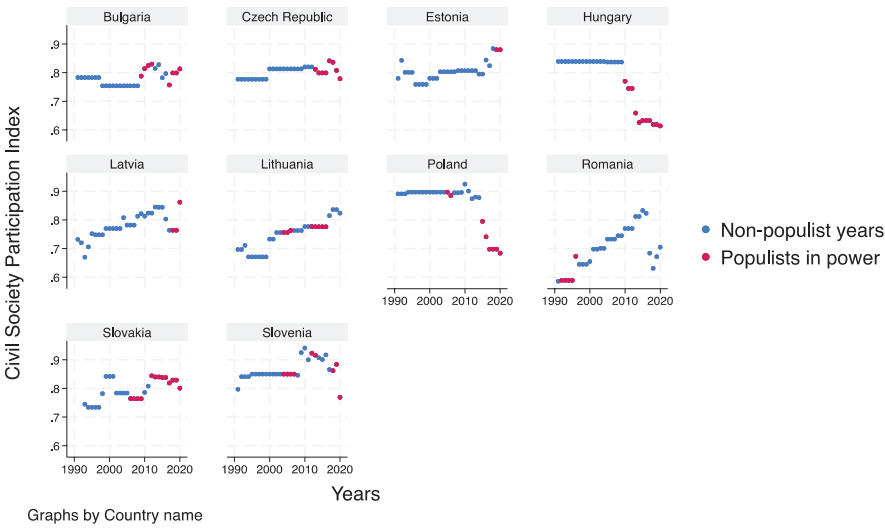


exhibit a similar pattern, but the evidence is not consistently robust across all time periods. In the remainder of the region, especially the Baltic states and the technocratic populist Czechia, changes are not particularly noticeable. This suggests that exerting control over civil society organizations, and the system of checks and balances, is a strategic move by populists in power that is more prominently implemented the longer they retain power.

Figure 3 presents a weak correlation (0.17) between the civil society participation index (V-Dem-based composite index that combines national/local candidate selection, consultation, participatory environment, and women participation in civil society organizations) and the length of populist rule.³⁷ Most countries cluster around the mean index value of 0.8. Romania lags behind, while Poland and Slovenia outperform the other countries. The variation in civil society participation could result from recent developments or different initial conditions at the onset of transition. For instance, participation in the *Solidarność* trade union in Poland is a positive factor, whereas the influence of the Securitate, the secret police in communist Romania, is negative. There is no general correlation with the length of populist rule, although in countries with the most successful populists in power, Poland and Hungary, the years of populist rules are associated with lower value in civil society participation (Figure A2 in the Appendix).

Figure 4 provides a breakdown of participation in civil society organizations, distinguishing between years of populist and non-populist rule. In almost all countries, the arrival of populists is associated with fluctuations in civil society participation. In Hungary and Poland, civil society participation decreased 20 percent during years of populist rule. This equates to a reduction of 0.2 points on a scale of 0 to 1 in the years when populists held government positions. In contrast, there was no change in the index for Lithuania and Estonia, and only for one year in Romania and Latvia. The

Figure 4
Civil society participation under populists in power



Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bulgaria experienced fluctuations as well—ups and downs under populist rule. Populists in power seem to affect civil society organizations by exercising tight control over them which leads to fluctuations in participation in civil society. To what extent do economic conditions affect civil society?

As depicted in Figure 5, there is a weak correlation (0.2) between the control of civil society and GDP per capita in the region. The economic well-being of citizens divides the region into three groups: (1) Estonia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic; (2) Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which have the most successful populists and an average GDP per capita of 17,000 USD; (3) Romania and Bulgaria, which lag behind with an average GDP per capita of 12,000 USD in 1991–2020. These diverse economic outcomes do not correlate with the degree of populist control over civil society.

Figure 6 details control over civil society organizations over time and the increasing GDP per capita across the region. The disaggregated data do not indicate an association between economic development and control over civil society. The global financial crisis of 2008 resulted in a downturn in economic development across all countries, but the subsequent recovery and economic acceleration align roughly with the groupings in Figure 5, with the Baltic and Visegrad Four countries leading and Romania and Bulgaria trailing behind. Control over civil society,

Figure 5
Civil society control and GDP per capita

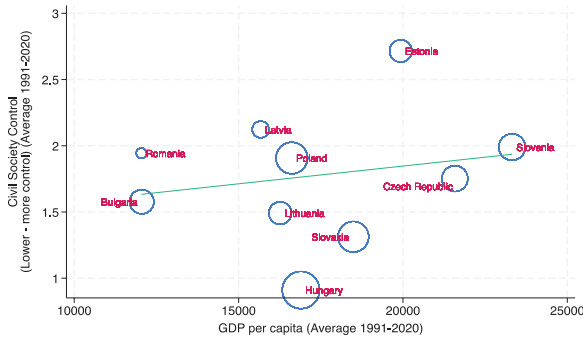
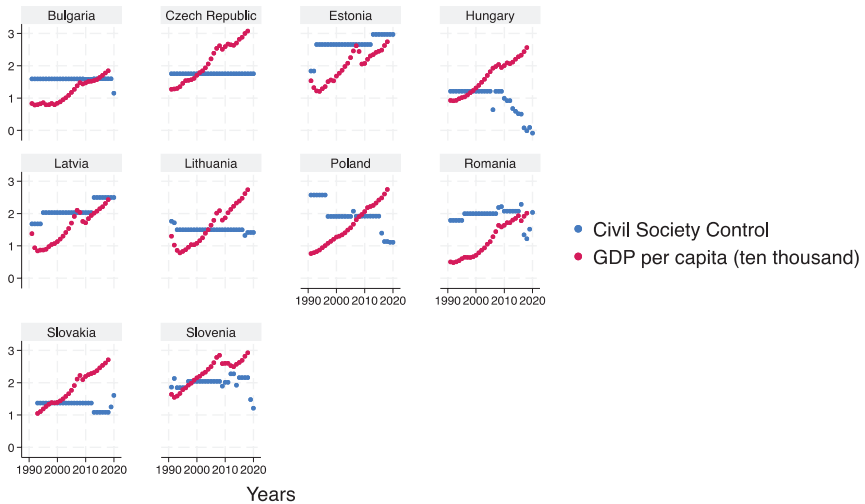


Figure 6
Civil society control and GDP per capita in the cross-country perspective

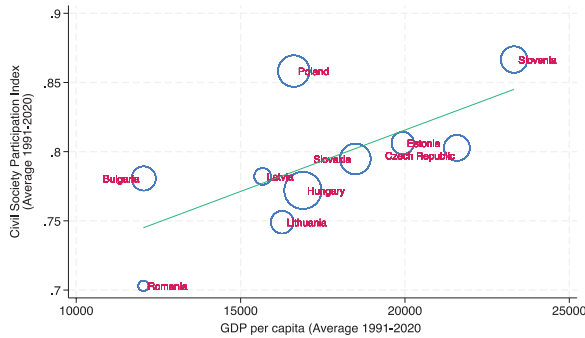


Graphs by Country name

measured by an index value between 0.5 and 1, does not correlate with the overall improvement in the economic situation of specific countries (except Estonia and Latvia).

Figure 7 shows the average GDP per capita after the regime change in the early 1990s. Instead of exerting influence over civil society organizations, it reveals a

Figure 7
Civil society participation and GDP per capita

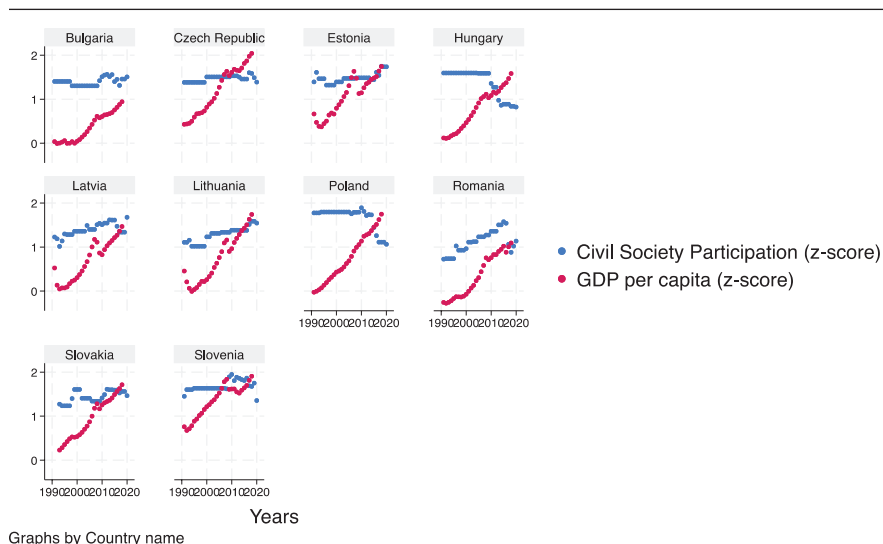


strong correlation (0.78) between economic conditions (GDP per capita) and the civil society participation index. The larger the country's GDP per capita, the higher the index values for civil society participation. This suggests a more representative environment, improved consultation levels, a more participatory environment, and increased participation of women in non-governmental organizations. The regional variety underscores the strong association between higher GDP per capita and a more participatory environment. Slovenia leads at one end of the spectrum, with Romania lagging behind at the other. This pattern indicates that economic conditions may significantly influence civil society participation.

Figure 8 shows the civil society participation index over time and the rising trend in GDP per capita across the region, standardized for a better visual comparison. The disaggregated data reveal that, except during the global financial crisis, the GDP per capita steeply increased in all countries. At the same time, the civil society participation rate also improved, albeit at a slower pace in nearly all countries. The participation index in Poland, Romania, and Hungary declined in later years, while in Slovakia and Bulgaria, it fluctuated considerably. Despite these variations, the strong correlation observed in Figure 7 does not seem to be driven by fluctuations or a steep increase in index values. Instead, it appears to be influenced by the average values of economically developed countries such as Estonia, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia, whose civil society participation index is closer to two standard deviations. This is followed by the middle-income group (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Latvia, and Lithuania). Romania and Bulgaria, which lag behind both economically and in terms of the civil participation index, close the spectrum. This pattern suggests that economic conditions and the level of civil society participation are closely intertwined.

The distribution of resources in economic development (GDP per capita) correlates with civil society participation. In contrast, the number of years populists form

Figure 8
Civil society participation and GDP per capita (z-scores)

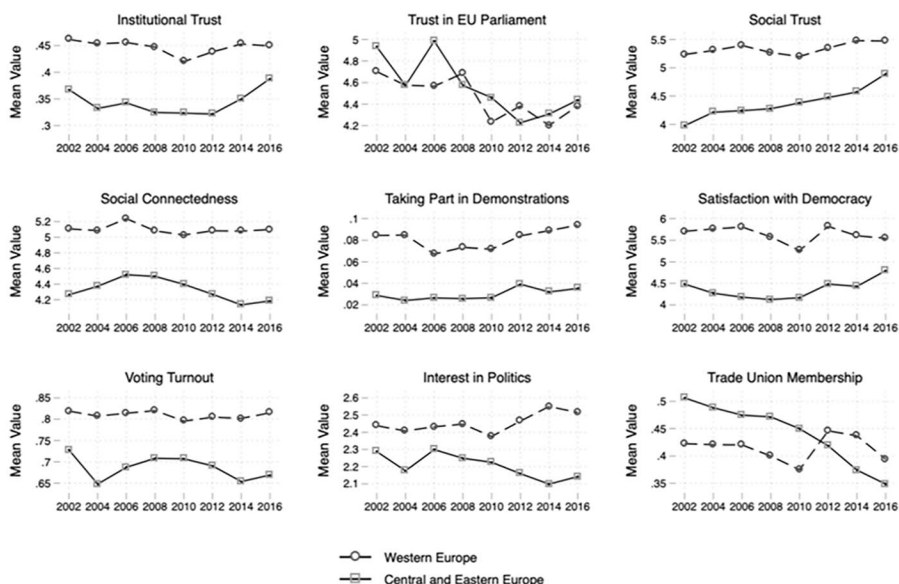


the government is associated with increased control over civil society organizations and heightened fluctuations in the civil society participation index. While populists in power assert control over civil society organizations, robust economic performance fosters their organic growth. However, the longest-serving populists in power maintain a firm grip over civil society organizations, thereby suppressing liberal democratic norms. The extent to which this influence permeates the citizenry remains a question. Is civic culture impacted by such control? I propose a more detailed examination of the individual-level mechanisms governing the interaction between the state and its citizens.

Post-Communist Cultural Trajectories

This analysis tests the hypothesis on the impact of populism in power and economy on civic culture. Figure 9 illustrates the evolution of the nine components of civic culture (institutional trust, trust in the EU Parliament, social trust, social connectedness, participation in demonstrations, satisfaction with democracy, voting turnout, interest in politics, and trade union membership) for 2002–2016. The y-axis shows the mean values of civic culture (higher values indicate higher levels of civic culture), while the x-axis shows years when individuals were surveyed. Figure 9 illustrates a significant gap: high levels of civic culture in Western Europe and a low

Figure 9
Variation of civic culture between Western and Eastern EU members

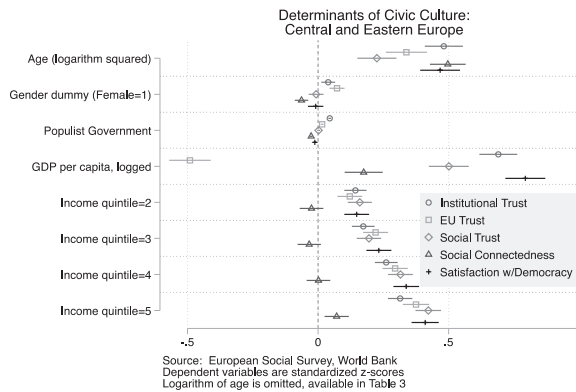


Source: European Social Survey.

level of civic culture in Central and Eastern Europe in nearly all indicators. This gap follows an almost cyclical, horizontal S-shaped pattern, except in the case of trust in the EU Parliament. Trade union membership has reversed since the economic crisis of 2008. While bi-annual fluctuations between adjacent data points are not particularly pronounced, the economic crisis emerges as a critical juncture in almost all indicators. There are lower values in all trust indices, interest in politics, satisfaction with democracy, and trade union membership. After the crisis, trust in national institutions, social trust, and satisfaction with democracy increased, while interest in politics, social connectedness, and trade union membership decreased.

The disparities between Central and Eastern European and Western democracies are most pronounced in national institutions, informal institutions (social trust), and some aspects of political culture (satisfaction with democracy, voting, participation in demonstrations, and interest in politics). Western European democracies consistently score higher than Central and Eastern Europe, whose citizens are much less socially connected, have a declining trade union membership, and participate in demonstrations less frequently than their Western counterparts. Trust in the EU is similar across the two regions but has been declining since the global financial crisis.

Figure 10
Coefficients of the main determinants of civic culture (ordinary least squares)



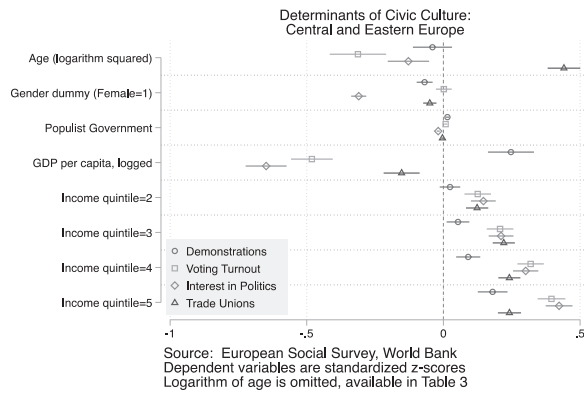
The stark difference between the regions could be attributed to the variance in initial conditions. Central and Eastern Europe endured forty years of communism, which undermined civic culture and curtailed voluntary participation. This historical context and a general lack of tangible results of transition may explain its lower scores than its Western counterpart, even thirty years after the regime change.

Civic Culture across Central and Eastern Europe

These trends in civic culture could be correlated with the length of a populist government’s time in power or the state of the economy. In addition, individual characteristics such as income and age might be associated with certain views and attitudes, irrespective of society-wide trends. To explore this issue further, I estimated multiple OLS regression models for the pooled dataset, which includes all available ESS waves from 2008 to 2016. The models use individual components of civic culture as a set of standardized dependent variables (z-scores) and a set of independent variables derived from the literature reviewed earlier. The basic set of individual control variables includes the logarithm of respondents’ age and the square of the age logarithm (to allow for possible non-linearity of the age effect), gender, and income brackets. The description of the main variables of interest, which compose different components of civic culture, and the full regression output in Table A3, are reported in the Appendix.

Figure 10 presents the regression output of the first five models that represent the outcome variables of elements of civic culture such as institutional trust, trust in the EU, social trust, social connectedness, and satisfaction with democracy. The results

Figure 11
Coefficients of the main determinants of civic culture
(ordinary least squares) (continued)



indicate that both the number of years living under populism and GDP per capita are statistically significant for most indicators, except social trust. Economic position, represented by income quintile, remains an important individual-level factor correlating with trust in formal and informal institutions. The coefficient of the variable is higher for people belonging to higher income quintiles. An additional year of living under populism is associated with higher institutional trust and trust in the EU, but also lower social connectedness and satisfaction with democracy. Lower satisfaction with democracy and social connectedness align with expectations of control over civil society. An improving economy, represented by GDP per capita, is associated with higher values in institutional trust, social trust, social connectedness, and satisfaction with democracy, which is in line with scholarship. However, it has a surprising negative association with trust in the EU.

The correlation between income and social trust was already established by other studies, but the Central and Eastern European sample shows that it is valid for other elements of civic culture as well.³⁸ Age (with the young and middle-aged being the most active) and gender (with women being more active than men) also align with expectations in terms of significance and sign of its coefficients.

Figure 11 presents the second set of determinants of elements of civic culture (participation in demonstrations, voting turnout, interest in politics, and membership in trade unions) as dependent variables. The results indicate that the number of years living under populism has a statistically significant impact on participation in demonstrations, voting turnout, and interest in politics, but not on trade union membership. GDP per capita is statistically significant in all four models. Like the previous set of regressions, economic position, represented by income quintiles, remains

statistically significant for individual-level outcomes such as participation in demonstrations, voting turnout, interest in politics, and membership in trade unions. The magnitude of this effect is higher for individuals belonging to higher income quintiles.

An additional year of living under populism correlates with a decrease in political interest but an increase in the propensity to participate in demonstrations and vote in elections. This phenomenon could be attributed to a combination of factors: dissatisfaction with the incumbent populist government, the activation of previously dormant voter groups, and the ensuing disappointment of non-populist voters in politics. For instance, the rule of Fidesz (since 2010), the populist party in Hungary, was marked by a surge in both pro- and anti-government protests. Hungary experienced pro-government demonstrations, the so-called Peace Marches, attended by over 100,000 individuals and organized by pro-government organizations part of the Fidesz-loyal civil society umbrella.³⁹ But the increase in demonstrations could be partially attributed to the efforts of opposition parties to express disagreement with the government's retreat from democracy.⁴⁰ The most significant anti-government protests were against the internet tax proposal, the Lex-CEU law, and the additional regulation and taxation of civil society organizations. Except the internet tax protest, none of these protests effected any change.

A higher GDP per capita is associated with increased participation in demonstrations but is negatively correlated with turnout, interest in politics, and trade union membership. Both the linear and quadratic components of age are highly significant (except for the variable on demonstrations). The negative effect of the square of age on some of the indices points to the cohort effect of those who experienced the transition, who are the most disappointed with the political outcomes and seek alternative representation. This shows the impact of the economic crisis, which increased economic insecurity.

Evidence from individual-level data shows that both populist incumbency and economic growth are significantly correlated with civic culture. The duration of living under a populist government is associated with low values in social connectedness, dissatisfaction with democracy, and lower interest in politics. This is expected from the previous section on the control of civil society. However, each additional year of living under populism is associated with higher trust in national and supranational institutions (such as the EU Parliament), increased participation in demonstrations, and higher election turnout. This could be attributed to the partial "rally around the populist flag" effect, or a higher general trust in domestic and supranational institutions among populist and non-populist voters. At the same time, economic development shapes civic culture. It is associated with higher values in institutional trust, social trust, social connectedness, and satisfaction with democracy, echoing previous scholarship. It also has a negative association with trust in the EU, lower election turnout, disinterest in politics, and low participation in trade unions. When the economy is thriving, there is a diminished need for change: voting, joining a trade union,

or taking an interest in politics. This observation aligns with research conducted in established democracies, which associates lower voter turnout with increased levels of economic globalization.⁴¹

Conclusion

This article examined a set of hypotheses about the influence of populism in power and the economy on civic culture and civil society, focusing on Central and Eastern Europe. Using V-Dem and ESS data, the study reached a two-fold conclusion.

First, countries where populists have the longest tenure in cabinet are associated with tighter control over civil society organizations and fluctuations in participation in civil society initiatives. Economic well-being correlates with the quality of the organizational environment of civil society organizations. Both living under populism in power and the performance of the economy shape civic culture, but higher levels of civic culture are most consistently driven by one's position on the income scale.

Second, data at the individual level indicate that both the tenure of populist incumbency and economic growth influence civic culture. The duration of populist governance correlates with lower values in variables that measure social connectedness, dissatisfaction with democracy, and interest in politics. Each additional year of living under populism is linked with higher values in trust in national and supranational institutions (such as the EU Parliament), more active participation in demonstrations, and increased turnout in elections. Conversely, economic development is associated with civic culture. It correlates with higher levels of institutional trust, social trust, social connectedness, and satisfaction with democracy, echoing the literature. It also negatively correlates with trust in the EU, election turnout, interest in politics, and participation in trade unions. These results suggest that the economy is extremely important for civic culture in Central and Eastern Europe. They reiterate the politicization of the economy by the state and the lack of separation of social, political, and market activities. A person's perception of the current situation, and evaluation of and trust in national and supranational institutions, is heavily influenced by their position on the income-distribution scale in the context of the dual political and economic transformation that unfolded in the region.

Do citizens who live under ruling populists turn against democracy, become less satisfied with the democratic process, lose confidence in institutions, and become engaged only where institutional mechanisms channel their activities toward orderly outcomes? The answer is no. Despite cracking down on the civil society and attempting to redefine state-society relations, populists in power are less effective in affecting the civic culture of the citizens. Moreover, no impact is immediate; it takes time for a populist party to introduce and implement policies, and even longer for them to

impact civic participation. Instead, citizens turn into allegiant citizens: they trust government institutions and support principles and practices (demonstrations) of democracy but display a higher degree of apathy toward politics. Differences in civic culture, serving as initial conditions at the start of the transition from communism to democracy, the electoral cycle, and the politicization of civil society are additional factors that warrant consideration in future studies.

This study has implications on the civil society, civic culture, and democratic quality beyond Central and Eastern Europe. It suggests a two-fold conclusion: (1) an individual's economic situation underscores egalitarian approaches to liberal democracy where people must possess the economic means to participate; and (2) governments play a key role in shaping civic culture, and therefore, civic culture is not just a pre-existing condition for a flourishing democracy.

This analysis is limited by its focus on correlation rather than causality. It is possible that those more likely to take initiative in civil society are also more likely to take initiative economically, suggesting that the correlation could be explained by a third causal factor. The use of quantitative methods on a large ten-country sample is also marred by inevitable generalizations; the findings might hold true for some countries, not for others. In addition, the overly simplified measurement of populists in power (years in a government coalition) does not account for whether populist rule is continuous (as in Hungary since 2010) or discontinuous (as in Slovakia). All these limitations represent avenues for further research.

Appendix

Figure A1
Civil society control (difference between years) and populism in power

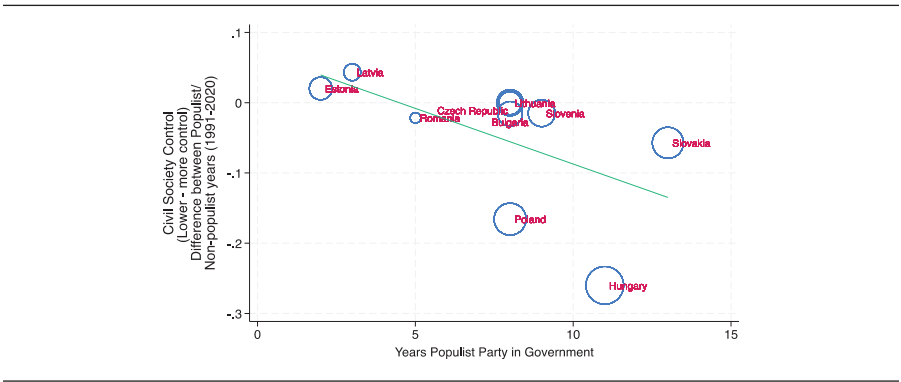
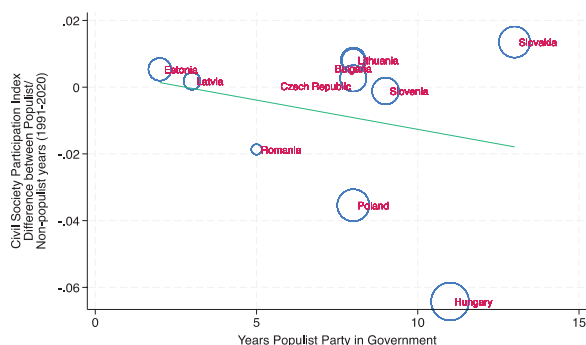


Figure A2
Civil society participation (difference between years) and populism in power



List of Populist Parties in Government (1991–2020)

Bulgaria: Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB)
 Czech Republic: Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO)
 Estonia: Estonia Conservative People's Party (EKRE)
 Hungary: Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance (FIDESZ)
 Latvia: Who owns the state? (KPV LV)
 Lithuania: Labor Party (DP), Order and Justice (TT)
 Poland: Law and Justice (PiS)
 Romania: Greater Romania Party (PRM), Romanian National Unity Party (PUNR)
 Slovakia: Ordinary People (OLaNO), Slovak National Party (SNS), We are family (SR), Direction—Social Democracy (Smer)
 Slovenia: Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)

A Note on Data and Method

I construct two samples with the ESS data, which contains cross-sectional face-to-face interview data of twenty-eight European countries. The first sample is a cross-sectional survey for every two-year period between 2002 and 2016. The second sample is reduced to the years of the post-economic crisis, which contain answers to the question on income. I then focus on the determinants of civic culture using multiple OLS regressions and a set of standard controls. The independent variables are derived from the literature I reviewed. The description of the main variables of interest that compose the components of civic culture is reported in Table A1.

Table A1 includes key independent variables, which comprise different components of civic culture, a set of standard controls (income brackets, gender, age, and education). All four elements, while interconnected theoretically, have a small correlation (less than 0.5) among themselves, each grabbing the effect of an additional angle.

Table A1
Description of the Variables

	Description	Source/Literature
<i>Civic culture (four components)</i>		
<i>I. Formal Institutions:</i>		
Institutional trust	An equal scale comprised four equally weighted components: trust in politicians, trust in political parties, trust in parliament, and trust in legal system. It is then turned into an index and is re-scaled from 0 to 1 from the complete lack of trust to the full trust, respectively (scale reliability statistics [0.8996] shows high correlation between the components).	European Social Survey (2002–2016), individual and also aggregated to country levels
Trust in EU	Similarly constructed equal scale as per previous indicated but focused on the trust in European Union, from 0 to 1 from the complete lack of trust to the full trust (also used in Pitlik and Rode, 2017)	Dyadic or social trust as a proxy for measuring informal institutions. European Social Survey (2002–2016), individual and also aggregated to country levels
<i>II. Informal institutions:</i>		
Social trust	The answer to the question: “would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” An equal scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means you cannot be too careful and 10 means that most people can be trusted	Gaber et al. (2019) focuses on measuring similar items from World Value Survey, in line with the theoretical propositions of Putnam (1993).
Social connectedness	The answer to the question on the frequency of meeting family, friends, or work colleagues. Coded on the increasing the seven-point scale	Participation in demonstrations, people should have more say, people should be responsible, unconstrained leader is bad, interest in politics, social trust, trust in courts, trust in parliament, trust in government, taking unjustified benefits is bad, unacceptable to take a bribe
<i>III. Political culture:</i>		
Participation in demonstrations	The answer to the question whether the person had participated in a demonstration, recoded to 0 and 1 (participation)	
Satisfaction with democracy	The answer to the question on satisfaction with democracy, a simple minimum to maximum, 0 to 10 (very satisfied) scale	

(continued)

Table A1 (continued)

	Description	Source/Literature
Electoral turnout	Self-reported voting in the last national elections, 0 or 1 (those who are illegible, omitted)	
Interest in politics	The answer to the question on the interest in politics. Recoded to the increasing scale of 1 to 4 (very interested)	
<i>IV: Occupational protection:</i>		
Trade union membership	Self-reported membership at a trade union (recoded to 0, 1)	European Social Survey (2002–2016)
<i>Controls</i>		
Income quintiles	Total household income. Recoded into five quintile brackets from the income deciles presented in European Social Survey	European Social Survey (2008–2016)
Education	The logarithm of years of education	
Age	The logarithm of age (total years)	European Social Survey (2002–2016)
Gender (self-reported)	Female = 1, 0—otherwise	
Populists in government	The number of years when at least one member of governing cabinet belongs to a populist party	ParlGov database, classification of populist parties according to PopuLIST 2.0 by Rooduijn et al. (2019)
GDP per capita	Estimated gross domestic production, understood on a per capita basis	World Bank Databank

Source: Provided in the table.

Table A2
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Institutional trust	0.338	0.181	0	0.995
Trust in European Union	4.470	2.577	0	10
Social trust	4.402	2.471	0	10
Social connectedness	4.363	1.677	1	7
Participation in demonstrations	0.032	0.175	0	1
Satisfaction with democracy	4.341	2.429	0	10
Electoral turnout	0.688	0.463	0	1
Interest in politics	2.192	0.850	1	4
Trade union membership	0.436	0.496	0	1
Age	48.041	18.518	14	102
Gender (female = 1)	0.554	0.497	0	1
Populists in government (number of years)	1.428	2.129	0	8
GDP per capita	21,490.77	4042.49	12,706.18	28,823
Income quintiles	2.836	1.368	1	5

Source: Compiled by the author.

Table A3
Ordinary Least Squares Regressions, Determinants of Civic Culture in Central and Eastern Europe

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
	Institutional trust	Trust in the European Union	Social trust	Social connectedness	Satisfaction with democracy	Demonstrations	Turnout	Interest in politics	Trade unions
Years living under populism	0.045*** (0.003)	0.016*** (0.003)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.026*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	-0.012*** (0.003)	0.008*** (0.003)	-0.019*** (0.003)	-0.004 (0.002)
GDP per capita, logged, base 10	0.690*** (0.037)	-0.491*** (0.041)	0.501*** (0.039)	0.175*** (0.037)	0.247*** (0.043)	0.794*** (0.039)	-0.481*** (0.039)	-0.649*** (0.038)	-0.153*** (0.034)
Age (log)	-3.548*** (0.273)	-2.567*** (0.293)	-1.779*** (0.279)	-4.393*** (0.252)	0.235 (0.271)	-3.518*** (0.284)	2.729*** (0.393)	1.428*** (0.282)	-2.170*** (0.216)
Age (log sq)	0.481*** (0.037)	0.338*** (0.040)	0.225*** (0.038)	0.497*** (0.035)	-0.040 (0.036)	0.467*** (0.039)	-0.313*** (0.053)	-0.128*** (0.039)	0.441*** (0.030)
Sex (female)	0.039*** (0.014)	0.073*** (0.015)	-0.007 (0.014)	-0.063*** (0.013)	-0.069*** (0.015)	-0.009 (0.015)	0.001 (0.015)	-0.310*** (0.014)	-0.050*** (0.012)
Second quintile	0.143*** (0.022)	0.121*** (0.024)	0.160*** (0.024)	-0.025 (0.023)	0.024 (0.019)	0.148*** (0.024)	0.126*** (0.025)	0.146*** (0.023)	0.123*** (0.021)
Third quintile	0.173*** (0.022)	0.220*** (0.024)	0.195*** (0.024)	-0.034 (0.023)	0.053** (0.021)	0.233*** (0.024)	0.207*** (0.025)	0.211*** (0.023)	0.221*** (0.021)
Fourth quintile	0.261*** (0.022)	0.295*** (0.025)	0.315*** (0.024)	0.002 (0.023)	0.091*** (0.023)	0.337*** (0.025)	0.319*** (0.025)	0.301*** (0.024)	0.241*** (0.021)
Fifth quintile	0.314*** (0.024)	0.375*** (0.026)	0.422*** (0.025)	0.071*** (0.024)	0.180*** (0.028)	0.410*** (0.027)	0.396*** (0.026)	0.423*** (0.025)	0.242*** (0.022)
Observations	47,489	43,716	47,685	47,631	45,916	47,641	44,980	47,636	47,572
R-squared	.041	.027	.031	.133	.039	.008	.040	.086	.220

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. First quintile is the reference group for the income quintiles.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

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Notes

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