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ORCID: 000-0003-0597-5547***POPULIST NATIONALISM IN CEE:
A LEADER-CENTERED ANALYSIS**

Populist nationalism appears to spread across liberal democracies, including the „young” democracies in Central Eastern Europe. Two decades ago, it was a fringe phenomenon, but after the Brexit referendum, the one-term presidency of Donald Trump in the USA, the traumatic and damaging Coronavirus pandemic, the aggressive autocratic rule of Vladimir Putin in Russia (a special case of particularly belligerent nationalist), and the seemingly permanent dominations of Viktor Orbán in Hungary and his emulator Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, populist nationalism has come to be seen as threatening democratic stability in Europe and America. Populist-nationalist leaders and parties have more than tripled their electoral support during the last two decades, now sitting in more than a dozen European parliaments and governments, challenging the political establishment in France, and most recently (October 2022) forming a ruling coalition in Italy. Touting their success, populist-nationalist leaders redouble attacks on largely liberal political elites, using the mainstream media to enflame political conflicts at home and abroad, and replacing programmatic left-right policy cleavages with moralistic right-wrong, friend or foe divisions. They also defy the increasingly negative assessments of governance, freedom, and democracy – a seemingly paradoxical development on which we comment at the end of the article.

While most of the earlier analyses of populist leaders focus attention on the most powerful, influential, and prominent populist leaders in the USA and Great Britain – Donald Trump and Boris Johnson until his downfall – we argue that a more comprehensive analysis of populist-nationalist surges should encompass the less prominent but more established leaders in CEE, especially in Hungary and Poland. Viktor Orbán and his follower Jarosław Kaczyński have played the roles of

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populist path breakers in taking – and then fortifying – control not only of governments but also the entire state apparatus, including judiciaries and state-controlled media and enterprises. Their seemingly unassailable durability demonstrates the central role played by populist-nationalist leaders in shaping political regimes and key institutions as well as electoral outcomes. Moreover – and this is a central point – their durability illustrates the „autogenic”, self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating aspects of populist-nationalist surges.

■ CENTRALIZATION OF POLITICAL POWER AND THE POPULIST STYLE

There seems to be broad consensus among contemporary students of politics that political power in modern societies is increasingly concentrated and centralized in the hands of small „leadership groups” embedded in executive cores of political elites, and most spectacularly, in the hands of individual leaders (often celebrities) surrounded by hand-picked and court-like groups of trusted supporters. Such leaders win elections at the times of economic decline and widening inequalities (e.g. Orbán in Hungary) and economic growth and stable inequalities (e.g. Kaczyński in Poland) by aggressively attacking their opponents and the established elites, both portrayed as enemies of the people. They weaken institutional checks and balances, extend their control to the strategic segments of state administrations, mass media, top judicial and business-financial sectors, and through them public opinion and elections. Due to this concentration and centralization, contemporary democracy tilts toward „despotic democracy” (Tocqueville), „leader democracy” (Weber), „elite democracy” (Schumpeter) or „illiberal democracy” (Zakaria) (e.g. Field, Higley 1980; Pakulski, Körösiényi 2012).

A characteristic of contemporary leaders in democracies is their frequent embrace of „populism” – a specific political style of campaigning and ruling that defies and undermines conventional political competitions. Populist-nationalist leaders differ in backgrounds, outlooks, ideological leanings, and political careers, yet all exhibit a strategy that catapults them to prominence. It entails blaming allegedly arrogant, corrupt, and unpatriotic „elites” for real or imagined policy failures; claiming to be unstinting critics of a globalist liberalism they accuse elites of propagating; declaring they are the only authentic representative of „the people”; and purporting to be staunch defenders of national identities and traditions.

Parading as patriotic servants of the people bound by the people’s will (*vox populi, vox Dei*) populist-nationalist leaders are arch demagogues, chasers after celebrity, and savvy users of conventional and social media for mass persuasion and manipulation. They amplify and exploit mass anxieties and fears, typically by naming and demonizing „enemies of the people” (internal and external,

the two often related) creating hate and raising hopes of salvation and giving reasons to abandon a politics of bargaining and compromise. They promote an „anti-politics” of blame and confrontation in which rivals are portrayed as treacherous. While these leaders enjoy mass popularity, their rule degrades public discourse, deepens divisions within political elites and societies, weakens trust, and damages key political institutions, especially the rule of law, neutral state administration, and fair electoral processes (Fukuyama 2018; Mudde 2018; Fieschi 2019; Sadurski 2022).

■ SOCIETY-CENTERED EXPLANATIONS

In spite of populist nationalism’s sudden appearance, rapid proliferation, and swift rise toward government power, most explanations of populist surges adhere to a gradualist, society-centered perspective, in which causal arrows point from long-term structural changes (increasingly anemic economies; wage and productivity stagnation; persistent unemployment and underemployment; growing diasporas of culturally alien immigrants and unauthorized migrants; insidious inflation) to changing public attitudes (heightened insecurity, frustration, and fear) to populist-nationalist entrepreneurs who channel structurally-induced attitudes against established elites while promising quick and painless fixes. Most structural explanations focus rule of law and judicial-constitutional foundations as well as state administrative apparatuses and electoral systems that are taken over by populist-nationalist leaders and transformed into tools of domination. Society-centered explanations are certainly plausible but they are incomplete. They don’t readily account for the sudden success of populist-nationalist leaders and parties in some societies but not in others that have undergone the same structural changes.

In *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (2019), Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart emphasize broad societal (structural and cultural-ideological) changes to explain the surge of „authoritarian populism”. They posit cultural backlashes as the main cause of authoritarian populism, defined as „a style of rhetoric claiming that legitimate power rests with ‘the people’ not the elites” (p. 4; see also Müller 2016; Mounk 2018). Norris and Inglehart argue that cultural backlashes are a consequence of the structural changes in living conditions and individual security that created a „silent revolution” in values during the 1960s and 1970s. That „revolution” eventually generated conservative backlashes and authoritarian reflexes, mainly among older voters (2019: 14–15). Their argument is complex and nuanced and is supported by expert analysis of survey data on public opinion and voting patterns underpinning more than fifty authoritarian populist parties in mostly Western democracies. Hardly oblivious to the importance of idiosyncratic populist leaders like Donald Trump and Nigel Farage or contingent

events in each country, Norris and Inglehart nevertheless contend that, as a phenomenon, authoritarian populism „is much broader than any individual and thus requires a more general theory” (2019: 13). Their thesis and data can't be seriously disputed, yet the emphases on long-term structural and value change leave the reader asking „Why the surge of authoritarian populism now”?

Cas Mudde (2018), a respected student of European politics, portrays populism as a new political-ideological current and attributes its surge to several structural changes and their political effects, most especially policy failures of liberal democracies in conditions of „liberal globalization” (2018). More specifically, Mudde argues that growing economic inequalities and cognitive political mobilizations centered on them have created dissatisfied European populations. In addition, a broad elite consensus about neoliberal economic policies and desirable supranational undertakings has lessened the effectiveness of mainstream political parties and made them more similar, while a radically transformed media landscape has provided populists with publicity and unprecedented access to mass publics. As with Norris and Inglehart's cultural backlash thesis, Mudde's argument is more complex, and he doesn't ignore the importance of canny populist leaders who benefit from improved organization and propaganda (2018: 1).

Francis Fukuyama (2014, 2018) portrays populist nationalism as a type of regime pursuing popular but inconsistent and unsustainable policies. It adheres to a legitimization principle anchoring political power in the wills of ordinary people located in ethno-national or quasi-class constellations and it involves a personalistic and responsive leadership style. Fukuyama ascribes recent populist surges to broad structural economic, political, and cultural trends that have produced institutional decay, especially a lessening of legal constraints. To these broad causes, Fukuyama adds liberal policy failures that have deflated incomes and social statuses among working and lower-middle strata and triggered a „politics of resentment” that creates gridlocked and ineffective governments („vetocracies”) along with racial, ethnic, and religious identity fears, especially among native populations in the face of swelling immigration. In Fukuyama's view, populism feeds on and accelerates institutional decay by assaulting independent judiciaries, centralizing executive power, indulging in nepotism, and hollowing out electoral processes through an increasing manipulation of voter opinions. He treats populism as at once a key beneficiary and a perpetrator of institutional decay and, thus, the deterioration of liberal democracy. His analysis is also more detailed and nuanced than a brief rendition can encompass.

Adam Przeworski (2019) analyses the surge of national populists in the broader context of institutionally based „crises of democracy” which he anchors causally within two general „structural conditions”: rising economic inequalities connected with the development of modern capitalism and, more directly, with

the changing nature of political competition, „the sheer quest for political power” (2019: 16). The emphasis on this second condition places Przeworski close to leader-centered analyses of nationalistic populism. When posing a question why „some political leaders use these [populist – JP] methods”, he suggests that „their motives matter and so do the [institutional – JP] constraints. When political parties are highly ideological, then they believe that essential issues or values are at stake, they see their opponents as enemies that must be prevented from coming to office by any means. In Poland the ruling party, PiS (Law and Justice), believes that the very values that constitute Poland as a Christian Nation are at stake and all their opponents are „traitors”. In Hungary, Orbán thinks that what is at stake is whether „Europe will remain a continent for Europeans” (2019: 20).

Wojciech Sadurski (2019, 2022), and Dominik Héjj (2022) analyze the rise of „anti-constitutional populism” in Poland and Hungary predominantly in institutional terms – constitutional crises, control of judiciaries, and (national) identities. These changes are portrayed as backlashes against classical liberalism and its ideological-legal supports, mainly constitutions and juridical-political institutions such as the modern *Rechtsstaat*, an independent judiciary, and the underlying rule of law meta-principle. Sources of these backlashes are seldom discussed in detail, but the authors tend to favor historical legacies and societal disruptions that accompanied the post-communist transitions (Héjj) as well as constitutional arrangements and particular actions of previous leaders and regimes. Both analyses, we stress, highlight the fragility of institutional frameworks that determined leaders demolish and „adjust”. But the autonomy of leaders to impose their wills is limited and circumscribed by pre-existing institutional frameworks. Political agency, in other words, is recognized but seen to be limited.

These society-centered explanations of populism’s surge are not incorrect, but they tend to be devoid of actors, linear in causal direction, and they sometimes conflate causes with effects. They also do not account for cases of earlier and more politically successful populist surges cum takeovers in CEE, where nationalism and reactive (anti-liberal) conservatism *followed*, rather than *preceded*, populist surges. Their limited recognition of leader agency is rather ironic, considering their conception of populist-nationalism as a distinctive *leadership* style. They overlook the fact that institutional change typically follows political activism and that institutions can be re-vamped by single-minded political leaders. What society-centered explanations fail to consider is that, once they acquire significant amounts of power, populist-nationalist leaders deliberately exacerbate the societal divisions and grievances that underlaid their rise. To a considerable extent, leaders act *autogenously*, that is, independently of external influence or aid. They shape and re-shape social and institutional frameworks in and through which they operate. This active and autonomous re-shaping helps them to perpetuate their rule.

■ LEADER-CENTERED EXPLANATIONS

Leader-centered explanations of populism's first wave – Bolshevism, Fascism, and National Socialism – were set forth by Max Weber, Vilfredo Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, and Joseph Schumpeter. Their contours are described elsewhere (Field, Higley 1980/2013; Pakulski, Körösényi 2012; Higley 2016; Pakulski 2018; Körösényi 2019). Here, it is enough to mention Weber's analyses of plebiscitary leadership and democracy, „leader democracy”, and transitions of political leadership from charismatic to bureaucratic types (the „routinization of charisma”). Weber theorized that halfway points in these leadership transitions are marked by the rise of populists wearing direct-democracy mantles and portraying themselves as servants of the people. They anchor legitimacy in the devotion of followers, which they create with emotionally charged demagoguery. Pareto (1916/1935) depicted the rise of populists as a symptom of elite degeneration. Their rise splits and weakens ruling elites and initiates a de-legitimation cycle of elite decline, frequent crises, and, eventually, sweeping elite circulation. Mosca (1923/1939) provided an historically anchored analysis of „ruling class [political elite] decay” that unleashes radical challenges to constituted authority. He portrayed political leaders as actively „imposing themselves” on political establishments and „getting themselves elected”. Schumpeter (1943), who experienced populist-nationalism first-hand as a cabinet minister in a short-lived Austrian government during the tumultuous 1920s, linked it to increasing *étatisation*.

Contemporary leader-centered analyses of populist nationalism follow those early theories. They hold that power in complex societies is necessarily concentrated at apexes of large organizations and institutions, including parties. Holders of high government and other executive positions in them actively dominate complex societies politically through mixtures of persuasion, deception, and coercion. As Schumpeter held in his „competitive theory of democracy” this doesn't prevent leaders, in some societies, from being „representative” and „democratic” (1943: 269–283). They freely participate in regular competitions for parliamentary seats and government office and respect the rule of law. Nor does it stand in the way of routine circulation, with one governing set of leaders and factions being replaced peacefully by another.

Three features of leader-centered explanations need noting. First, they focus attention on *the rhetoric and actions of leaders and their consequences, intended and unintended*. Second, societal circumstances – social-structural configurations, institutional settings, political cultures – are taken into consideration, but as both *causes and consequences of leader actions*. As Weber observed, leaders actively shape the societal circumstances in which they operate, though not always successfully. They demolish and reshape institutions within they operate in order to fortify their power and political control. This implies, third, a view of *leaders as partly autogenous*.

With varying degrees of success, leaders can create and sustain conditions essential to their ascendancies. They can also undermine these conditions through mistakes (and unintended, unanticipated consequences), and that paves the way for new leaders.

Society-centered explanations of populist nationalism fail to capture – or at least play down and underestimate – the self-propelling and self-destructive actions of leaders. Consequently, they seldom appreciate the conscious „imitation through success” in populist „pandemics”, the spirals of „political decay” the surges of nationalistic populism trigger, as well as durability of populist rule. More specifically, such explanations overlook the fact that populist nationalist leaders (1) usually appear initially as conventional, and seldom successful activists and politicians, who are (2) motivated in diverse and contingent circumstances to adopt (often copy) the populist-nationalist style of rhetoric, which enables them (3) to take over and transform their parties or movements into personal power vehicles, and then (4) tighten their hold on power by deliberately intensifying grievances and divisions they first profited from, channeling them against established elites, culturally alien immigrants or other „evils”, so that (5) political rivalries become hostile confrontations that fracture existing elites and institutions. Moreover, while accessing leadership positions, they (6) promptly adjust the legal-political institutions to prevent challenges, dominate the media, format ideologically and bribe their „iron constituencies”, and appoint loyalists to the key state-administrative positions. By doing that, they are socially „reinforcing”, institutionally „securing” and politically „cementing” their rule.

■ LEADERS AND ELITES AS BUILDERS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Leader-centered explanations, we stress, highlight the way leaders and elites create and sustain stable (liberal) democracy. They create it in contingent and dramatic circumstances that induce political leaders to (1) collaborate to throw off vestiges of colonial rule (e.g. the Netherlands and Britain’s English-speaking colonies); (2) suddenly „settle” long-standing, poisonous disputes (e.g. England in 1688 and 1689; Sweden in 1809; Spain in 1977 and 1978); (3) reach accommodations with leaders of dissident groups in conditions of advanced industrialization (e.g. Denmark and Norway immediately before World War II; West Germany, France, Italy, and most European countries during the twentieth century’s final quarter) (Higley, Burton 2006). Stable democracy is sustained by political leaders muffling explosive distributive and other issues that gain public attention that, if not curbed, would create widespread disorder (Higley 2016, 2021).

Because democracy is routinely understood as an arrangement in which all or most citizens should have equal and decisive political influence, the muffling and curbing of explosive issues by political leaders is widely viewed as undemocratic.

Leader-centered explanations of stable democracy are, therefore, distasteful. Yet if one looks at the matter closely, it will be clear that continuous political pacification by leaders is what sustains democracy. It is important to take account of how stable democracy actually works and think about it in realistic terms. Leader-centered explanations embody this realism, focusing not only on elections, but also how such things as behind-the-scenes networks of influence and friendship among political leaders enable them to perform functions essential for stable democracy (Putnam 1976: 45–47, 106–132; Higley et al. 1991; Knoke 2018).

For leaders to act in this way, they must trust each other to manage politics in ways that prevent distributive and other issues from reaching acute degrees. In democratic settings, however, trust that leaders have in each other is not self-evident. In competitions for government office, they regularly and publicly portray each other as scoundrels. Yet the bulk of them agree about basic democratic institutions without adhering to some single policy or viewpoint, as is the case in totalitarian or rigidly autocratic regimes. Except when political leaders in democracies collectively pull their punches to keep the lid on an abrupt and profound crisis, trust is mostly tacit. The question to ask is whether leaders act over time to keep doctrinal and policy disagreements from exploding into winner-take-all confrontations – whether, that is, the *pattern of leader behavior* suggests a common, though seldom openly voiced, desire to keep political competitions tame.

The pattern involves adherence to a norm of restrained partisanship (Di Palma 1973). Leaders accept one another as legitimate rivals and exert institutional prerogatives with moderation (Levitsky, Ziblatt 2018: 8). Over time, these practices enable competing leaders to achieve diverging aims, which inclines them to view the totality of political outcomes as positive-sum and uphold institutions that process their bargains and compromises. They are reasonably confident that after missteps, scandals, or defeats they will retain their lives, reputations, and a decent social status. Stable democracy depends, in short, on political leaders and other influential, often privileged persons and groups feeling safe. As Robert Dahl put it in *Polyarchy*, a „well-developed system of mutual security” and a „system of mutual guarantees” are bedrock features of leaders who keep institutions stable (1971: 36–38).

However, political leaders in most societies are not, and have never been, mutually trusting. Consequently, efforts to spread stable democracy around the globe have been frustrated by the fact that the essential leadership prerequisite is usually not present. Where leaders are accustomed to bitter political conflict along lines of „Grab what you can – never mind the other fellow”, or when they view political action as a crusade against dangerous foes, introducing democratic suffrage and competing political parties soon leads to serious disturbances. Disparate leaders fear what these aspects of democracy portend. They assume their enemies will employ them to take advantage of innocent voters and gain the

upper hand. When trust among the leaders evaporates, power seizures by military leaders or civilian leaders controlling the military/security forces (as well as the media of mass persuasion) become likely.

■ THE POPULIST LEADERS IN CEE – THEIR RISE AND ENTRENCHMENT

Such conditions formed in Hungary in 2006–2010, and in Poland in 2007–2010. Let us look at them briefly. A surge of populism in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, preceded the highly publicized Trump’s political ascent as well as the Brexit imbroglio by several years (Lengyel, Ilonszki 2016; Héjj 2022). Early in his political career, Orbán was a member of *Fidesz* (Hungarian Civic Alliance), a center-left party. However, during two consecutive terms of Socialist (*MSzP*) government, 2002–2010, *Fidesz* moved in a conservative direction, centralizing its structure, and becoming a leader-centered party. A turning point was the leaking of a self-critical speech by the Socialist prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, to party activists in 2006 („We stole in the morning, afternoon, and evening”). This confession proved to be a political death blow for the Socialists, and the sudden rise of an extreme right-wing party, *Jobbik*, opened the way to a sweeping defeat of the Socialists in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Controlling two-thirds of parliamentary seats, Orbán became prime minister and began to initiate fundamental changes to Hungary’s democratic institutions.

In a secret speech before the 2010 elections, Orbán told *Fidesz* activists that his goal was to build a „central field of force” and keep it intact. The election victory and ensuing victories in 2015 and 2019 elections enabled Orbán to realize his goal. Overwhelming *Fidesz* majorities in parliament, centralization of executive power, weakened constitutional protections, muzzling of media and educational institutions, along with curtailed civic and property rights, give him control of the entire Hungarian state. Systematic clientelism extends his control to the economy.

In power, Orbán stirs anxieties, fears and envies, demonizes immigrants, and attacks domestic critics as enemies, most notably, the expatriate Hungarian, George Soros, whom Orbán depicts as Hungary’s mortal enemy. Orbán is solidly entrenched as national leader, although indicators of corruption and poor governance increase, economic growth is weak, public and private debts to foreign lenders are large, and Hungary is shunned by EU governments other than Poland’s. Orbán radiates confidence and high self-esteem, but he has numerous political adversaries and must deal with disobedient oligarchs asserting influence and autonomy. If a deep economic or other crisis occurs, it’s doubtful Orbán’s chief foreign admirers, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, will do much to help him.

If there were important structural preconditions for a populist-nationalist surge in Poland, they were located, above all, in the political elite (Pakulski 2016).

The failure and demise of the chaotic and fractious 2005–2007 PiS-supported government was a prelude to deep political polarization. The 2010 Smolensk airplane crash, in which Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and his presidential entourage died, was immediately depicted by his twin brother, Jarosław, as the result of a murderous conspiracy by Russia's Vladimir Putin and the governing Civic Platform (PO) leaders. In the following year, Kaczyński, leading the Law and Justice Party (PiS), lost election debates, much public credibility, and, consequently, the 2011 elections, which he denounced as „rigged” by the PO elite. These setbacks alienated Kaczyński and his supporters, who came to view politics as a crusade against treacherous enemies to be defeated with any means.

Impressed by Orbán's shift from liberalism to populist nationalism, Kaczyński announced his intention to „bring Budapest to Warsaw,” and he and other PiS leaders began to emulate most of Orbán's tactical and stylistic innovations, including a takeover of the mass media, stacking top state administration, state-controlled enterprises and the judiciary with his supporters and contesting the powers of „the Brussels”. These moves were accompanied by ruthless attacks on the socialist opposition, nationalistic rhetoric, propaganda campaigns in subordinated media, as well as courting the Catholic Church hierarchy. Governing PO leaders were attacked not only as a corrupt, murderous, and treasonous clique, but also as an unpatriotic, self-interested elite that ignored ordinary Poles, was subservient to Brussels, and was opening the door to alien and dangerous Muslim refugees from the Middle East. Kaczyński paraded as the champion of ordinary Poles (versus a corrupt elite), a patriot (versus pro-EU cosmopolitans and pro-German opportunists), an anti-communist (versus conspiring ex-communists), and a staunch defender of Christian values (versus liberal secularists, „genderists” and a pro-abortion „nihilist”). Kaczyński's postures and his emotionally loaded language of condemnation, resentment and hatred soon pervaded the PiS leadership as well as conservative segments of the Catholic Church hierarchy and the arch-conservative *Radio Maryja* controlled by a Redemptorist monk and priest Tadeusz Rydzyk. Former political rivals were now portrayed as foes, enemies, corrupt traitors. Opposition parliamentarians were denounced by Kaczyński as „treacherous mugs” and scoundrels who hatched the „Smolensk conspiracy” masked as a plane crash (Pakulski 2016; Kotwas, Kubik 2019)³.

In the meantime, Poland's economy recovered from the 2008–2009 GFC and emerged as the leader of CEE. This is worth stressing as evidence that populists

³ In which 96 members of the Polish elite, including Kaczyński's twin brother and his wife, had perished. All these accusations were groundless. Two investigative commissions (one civil and one military), one Polish and one Russian, concluded that the 2010 plane crash near Smolensk was the result of poor weather and pilot's errors. The third „investigation”, led by Kaczyński's best friend and top loyalist, Antoni Macierewicz, was discredited by its widely publicized errors and omissions.

do not win under conditions of economic decline. They won elections in Poland enjoying economic prosperity and growth – in spite of Kaczyński's campaign denials („Poland in ruins”). Between state socialism's demise in 1989–1990 and 2015 Poland's per capita GDP increased fourfold, unemployment was declining, mass consumption was intensifying, and living standards were rising. Still, a sizable minority of Poles – older, less educated, poorly skilled, and located primarily in the less well-off eastern region – comprised a shrinking „silent minority” of persons who felt deprived and left behind. This minority, carefully cultivated by the leaders of PiS, formed the core of the party's „iron electorate”.

Kaczyński's campaign hit the opposition hard because of the leadership vacuum. In spring 2014 PO's Prime Minister Donald Tusk resigned to take the Presidency of the European Council, headquartered in Brussels. Moreover, Kaczyński used the buoyant mood among his supporters created by earlier victory of PiS candidate in presidential elections. Above all, he promised – and promptly delivered – the popular PLN 500 monthly support payment for child, increased pensions and lowered retirement age. After a bruising campaign, he won 38 per cent of the popular vote, which was enough in the skewed electoral system to provide a majority of seats in parliament.

Following the 2015 victory, a highly centralized and semi-formal power structure was erected, with Kaczyński, the PiS chairman, at its center, structured in the United Right and supported by the Church. Top state officials were replaced by PiS loyalists, the state media was renamed the „national media” and reforms of the education system to implant Polish and Christian values were undertaken. A de-communized „Fourth Republic” was proclaimed, Polish history was re-interpreted in martyrologic anti-Russian and anti-German terms, Lech Wałęsa, the legendary Solidarity leader, was accused of having been a communist secret police agent, and the Round Table agreement that paved the way for liberation and democratisation of Poland in 1989 was denounced as a communist conspiracy to stay in power. The military high command was purged, and a Civil Defense force, suspected of being a PiS party militia, was organized. The Constitutional Tribunal and the Supreme Court have been incapacitated and stacked with compliant party loyalists (Sadurski 2019). Under Kaczyński's rule, Poland is the first EU member state investigated and condemned for breaking EU laws, the first country threatened by EU Article 7 sanctions and the first country condemned for undermining judicial independence, and the first country punished by massive fines for violating court orders and by the withholding of the EU's „recovery funds” (for violating the rule of law). All of these actions have been exceedingly controversial, but they have yet to dent PiS electoral support, which is boosted by regular welfare „handouts” (thus neutralizing the influence of socialists), the powerful Catholic Church's open support and the endorsement of the strong nationalistic far right. What needs stressing is that government power enabled Kaczyński to double down

autogenously on the populist nationalism that brought him to power. In the 2019 EU parliamentary elections his party attracted over 40 per cent of popular vote.

■ POPULIST-NATIONALISTS' STRATEGIES

It is quite clear that Kaczyński followed Orbán in the latter's quest for power. The Polish leader emulated all key steps that made Orbán so spectacularly successful in four elections since the initial electoral victory in 2010. The „use” of leadership vacuum after Tusk's departure to Brussels, the anti-EU turn, personal attacks on the leadership of PO, demolition of independent judiciary through key judicial appointments, disciplining the parliamentary majority through strategic deals with nationalist groups, the takeover of the „public” (renamed „national”) media, clientelist appointments in key positions in the state administration, „oligarchic” appointments of loyalists in the main state-controlled enterprises, including the key financial institutions – all these steps bear a clear trademarks of the strategy called „bringing Budapest to Warsaw”. One strategic – and potentially alienating – difference concerns the attitudes of both leaders to Putin, Russia and Ukraine.

Both Orbán and Kaczyński have managed to „reprogram national identity” (Héjj 2022) of many Hungarians and Poles using the party-controlled mass media and capturing a big segment of opinion-making elites. By declaring themselves as defenders of Christian values and traditions, both refused to accept Middle Eastern refugees, and both brutally suppressed illegal migration. They have also built and cultivated support of these actions among their „iron electorates” anchored in older, less educated, lower status employees, retirees, and those living in rural areas and small towns. Orbán's supporters prove younger, more educated and more territorially dispersed than Kaczyński's followers. They are also less religious and more liberal in their outlooks. One should stress that these „iron electorates” were not „naturally attracted” to the populists, but rather actively „constructed” by both leaders' who used skillfully crafted rhetoric, popular historical and political references, all reinforced by electoral handouts.

Both CEE populist leaders have gained control of the mass media, „stuck” the top judiciary bodies with their loyal appointees and assured the support of the Catholic Church (though Orbán is a Calvinist). Both have been leaning on media outlets to broadcast pro-government stories and dismiss criticisms as „fake news”. Both have supported religious „patriotic” traditionalism, though Orbán takes a more liberal line than Kaczyński on gender equality, access to abortion and teaching of religion. The shared views are more emphasized: condemnation of „moral decay” in Western countries, defense of the „Christian civilization and culture”, condemnation of LGBTQ+ promotion, sexual education, „gender equalization”, and opposition to taking immigrants and refugees from the Middle East.

Orbán and Kaczyński are masters of partisan nepotism. All key appointments in state administration, the mass media and state-controlled enterprises are distributed according to inter-factional and inter-party arrangements and made by promoting faithful loyalists, or Leader's favorites. Disloyalty is punished by dismissal. Power abuses and professional failures by favorites are seldom investigated – and dismissed as „fake news” when highlighted by the media.

Perhaps most importantly, both leaders use similar combative rhetoric and attack their opponents in an aggressive and denigrating way. They employ offensive innuendos and do not shrink from using secret police files to discredit their opponents. By doing that they enflame conflicts and widen social divisions – all in the name of partisan and personal advantage.

■ CONCLUSIONS

Populist leaders are proverbial children of insecurity and uncertainty and are at the same time key breeders and disseminators of it. Yet, as the Polish and Hungarian cases show, they can also blossom in conditions of relative security, economic growth, and rising prosperity. When they hold government power, they act as autogenic generators of insecurities and uncertainties, fertilizing conflicts and anxieties that helped them rise, and they then declare themselves to be political saviors and protectors. They adopt, sometimes through emulation, a demagogic style that divides and weakens ruling elites, erodes elite trust, degrades political discourse, weakens governance, and threatens democratic stability. This helps to explain seemingly paradoxical outcomes of populist-nationalism. Orbán and Kaczyński have been winning successive elections in spite of their governments' declining performance. Measures of effective governance (e.g. Worldwide Governance Indicators published by the World Bank), freedom of expression rankings (e.g. Press Freedom Index – RSF), and the overarching measures of „quality of democracy” (e.g. Freedom House Index and Rankings) show a consistent decline in Poland and Hungary since the electoral triumphs of Orbán and Kaczyński. In fact, Poland is at the bottom of the democratic pack, and the Hungarian regime ceased to be classified as a democracy in 2021 and is termed a „hybrid” regime combining democratic and autocratic features⁴.

These poor performances and conspicuous democratic deficits do not seem to dent the popularity of their leaders – at least in the eyes of their „iron electorates”. Effective populist propaganda and control cum manipulation of information seem to count more in winning democratic elections in Poland and Hungary than

⁴ See <https://rsf.org> Notes from Poland, May 4 2022, Poland Falls in World Press Freedom Index for seven year running. See <https://freedomhouse.org> Nations in Transit 2022. See <https://info.worldbank.org>

government performance. Denying and shifting blame becomes the key strategy of avoiding responsibility. Similarly, buying votes by distributing popular handouts proves more effective in securing votes than promoting democratic norms and practices.

Society-centered accounts of populists and populism are insufficiently sensitive to the top-down exercise of power, to mass manipulation, to the leader-created, self-propelling and self-sustaining character of populist-nationalist rule. They also underestimate the long-term damage populist leaders inflict on key political institutions and governance.

Leader-centered accounts of populist nationalism, derived from classical theories of elites and leaders, counteract these dangers (e.g. Pakulski 2020; Higley 2021). They highlight the fragility of liberal democracy, the stylistic distinctiveness of populist-nationalist leaders, while recognizing intensifying insecurities and discontents – often amplified by leaders – that make publics vulnerable and receptive to populist-nationalism. Above all, leader-centered explanations emphasize the independent actions of populist nationalist leaders, portraying them as relatively autonomous, autogenic agents of political change. Without this broadening in the analysis of populist-nationalist leaders, especially in two CEE countries where they managed to entrench themselves politically, explanations of the rise and dynamics of populist nationalism are incomplete.

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POPULIST NATIONALISM IN CEE: A LEADER-CENTERED ANALYSIS

Surges of populist nationalism in Europe and the United States over the last decade made it a central subject in comparative sociology. Most explanations center on changing societal conditions that undergird these surges and focus on populist takeovers in Western societies. The causal significance of populist-nationalist demagoguery and manipulation of publics by leaders tends to be downplayed. Taking a leader-centered approach and focusing on the „established” populist leaders in CEE, this article emphasizes the „autogenic” aspect of populist-nationalist leaders – their independent proclivity, especially when holding government executive power, to shape national identity and deliberately enflame discontents and divisions that fueled their rise. Society-centered explanations of populist nationalism are not wrong but need to be supplemented by analyses of these self-entrenching leaders’ actions. Consistent with how Max Weber and early elite theorists treated populist nationalism around the time of World War I, this article defines it as a distinctive leadership style that threatens democratic stability.

Key words: populist leaders; autogenic capacities; elite trust; restrained partisanship; democratic stability