

POPREBEL

**Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century
Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism**

Working Paper no. 4

Political populism from the fringe to the mainstream: A conceptual framework

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POPREBEL Working Paper series

POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) is a large Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The aim of the project is to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences and propose policy solutions.

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The POPREBEL consortium comprises six universities – UCL (co-ordinating institution), University of Belgrade, Charles University, Corvinus University of Budapest, Jagiellonian University and University of Tartu – and Edgeryders, a social enterprise.



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1. Introduction

Conceptual Framework

The key point that needs to be made at the outset is that we do intend to study populist parties which move from fringes to mainstream (by gradually winning votes and influence) – the classic West European story. Nobody in this WP is doing this. Instead, we propose to move the agenda of populism studies from one focused on the trajectory of groups emerging from the fringes to a different process whereby populist actors are already (or has quickly become) the cultural and political mainstream. This seems to be the essence of the Central and Eastern European story and by studying it we hope to gain new insights to the phenomenon of populism and its emergence.

There is a paradox regarding the definition of populism as a political phenomenon: although it is one of the most commonly used terms, both in scientific literature and public discourse, there is still no consensus on what exactly populism is (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012: 1). Is it an ideology or is it merely a strategy? What are the similarities and differences between demagogic, opportunism and populism? Is populism a new phenomenon or can we find it in other historical periods? Is populism tied mainly to right-wing parties; can it coexist with left-wing political orientations (Mudde 2004, Müller 2017, Dahrendorf 2003), centrist politics or even technocracy (Stanley 2017); and is it an inherently negative phenomenon for liberal democracies?

Populism is often defined as the antithesis of liberal democracy because it erodes, or bypasses checks and balances and minority rights in the name of popular sovereignty and majority rule. However, it can also be seen as a corrective to elite-dominated institutions and political oligarchy (Kaltwasser 2012, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012a), and authors such as Laclau and Mouffe consider populism as a potentially positive phenomenon, as it re-empowers democratic institutions that have become alienated and removed from the populace (Laclau 2005, Mouffe 2013).

There is also a dynamic debate about whether populism is a strategy devised by political elites to gain widespread citizen support for their policies, first at the symbolic and then at the policy level (Mudde 2004, Müller 2017), or a political formation that emerges via an interaction of elite-driven (top down) and popular (bottom up) mechanisms (Hall 1988). In the first case, it is a one-way process in which the elites have much more responsibility, while in the second case, populism is observed as a product of historical circumstances, implying that the role of elite actors is less important. In POPREBEL, we take the second position, at least as a working hypothesis, and conceptualise the problem with the help of concepts of ‘supply’ and ‘demand’.

We have chosen to construct our conceptual framework relying on several basic distinctions, increasingly accepted in the literature. We consider ‘thin’ populism to be primarily a *discursive strategy* that produces a distinction between the ‘alienated elite’ and ‘honest people’. Our point of departure is Mudde and Kaltwasser’s definition of populism as ‘a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012b: 8; see also Stanley 2008). Moreover, ‘populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it “corrupts” the purity’ (Mudde 2004: 544).

A ‘thin’ populist is one who criticises the ruling establishment, has reservations about pluralism and presents himself as the ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ exponent of the ‘common people’. Populism is not a traditional class-based ideology – in its discourse ‘the people’ are an undifferentiated entity that is constructed with disregard for ‘classical’ social classes. Populists often lack a clear economic doctrine, so they introduce *ad hoc* economic and social measures to gain the confidence of the people (Müller 2017: 15–17, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012: 2).

The intensity of ‘thin’ populist ideology or discourse varies from one manifestation to another and many political programmes show at least some ‘thin’ populist leanings (Muis and Immerzeel 2017: 911). Importantly, thin populist ideology can be easily combined with other ideologies and in this process it ‘thickens’.¹ We propose to think about *thickening*, a process via which populist ideology acquires additional features, as one of the central conceptual foci of our project.

¹ The concept of thin ideology is defined and analysed by Freedon (1996).



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There are several ideologies – in themselves often incomplete – that may be mixed with thin populism to generate its thicker versions. (Radical) right-wing populism, an ideological formation of particular interest for many scholars – including us in this project – is an ideology or discourse most commonly fashioned by thickening thin populism with *nativism* (Mudde 2007). For Mudde, nativism is ‘an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state’ (2007: 19).

The manner in which nativism acts as a thickening agent in concrete ideological elaborations of populism depends on specific socio-cultural contexts that, moreover, evolve over time. It is thus essential both to specify specific context-dependent features and identify general, context-independent patterns of thickening. While engaging in the former task, researchers should also consider other thickening agents, such as religion (usually in its fundamentalist versions), which seems to be playing a more elevated role in the post-communist world than in Western Europe (Allen 2015). Poland, for example, is a country whose culture is permeated by religious themes, where the Roman Catholic clergy and Catholic activists occupy positions of influence in public life and often use religion, both through discourse and action, as a tool of political mobilisation, also in the service of populist causes.

To summarise, we assume in POPREBEL that Populism is a type of ideology or discourse. It has two forms: thin and thick. The former has four features, the latter – five. Following Cas Mudde, we assume in POPREBEL that all four features of thin populism need to be present to classify a given ideological statement/political programme/discourse as populist. These features include:

1. *Vertical polarisation* that sets ‘the people’ against ‘the elites’, which are seen as separate and mutually exclusive groups or categories of people;
2. There exists *antagonism* between the two groups;
3. The whole construct is strongly *Manichean* (i.e. it is based on *fundamentalist moralising*), which assumes that the essential feature of social/human reality is the struggle of the forces of good and evil and that any conflict/tension between these two groups is an instance of that fundamental struggle;²
4. Finally, there is the idea that politics should be the expression of *volonté général* (general will). This idea helps to define and justify attempts to introduce in practice *popular sovereignty*, according to which the substance of (majoritarian) democracy trumps procedures (of liberal democracy). Moreover, the latter are seen as a nuisance if not an obstacle to the exercise of people’s genuine will. This, in turn, opens a way towards the justification of authoritarianism.

If democracy, in a nutshell, is understood as the rule of people constrained by the rule of law, ‘full’ democracy is always liberal democracy (Mueller 2016). Ergo, *authoritarianism* can be defined primarily as a strategy of power exercise that removes or minimizes the rule of law and the system of institutional checks and balances. Actors who support, attempt to institute, or work to maintain authoritarian systems, often promote ‘the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely. In this interpretation, authoritarianism includes law and order and “punitive conventional moralism”’ (Mudde 2007: 23).²

The key implication of combining the idea of popular sovereignty with the postulate of vertical polarization, in which ‘the people’ are seen as ‘uninstitutionalized, nonproceduralized *corpus mysticum*’ (Mueller 2016), is the rejection of pluralism of interests and identities that in reality characterizes any sufficiently large group of people.

The key implication of Manicheism is that political opponents of populists, construed as champions of the forces of evil, are – by definition – illegitimate or at least defective political actors, whose elimination from the public sphere needs to be rhetorically promoted and, if possible, enacted.

5. Populists need to define ‘the people’ and when they offer such a definition populism *thickens*. The most common cultural resource employed in providing such a definition is a conception of national identity, usually derived from the concept of nativism. It serves to generate *horizontal polarisation* whose essence is the juxtaposition of ‘good’

² Structurally, this proposition is akin to the Marxist argument that – in essence – all non-class social conflicts are merely epiphenomenal manifestations of class conflict.



and ‘bad’ people. But there are other cultural resources that may be employed in the thickening of populism, for example a religious discourse/idiom that contrasts the faithful with the infidels.

The study of the cultural dimension of the rise of right-wing populism is indispensable to understand its thickening, a central process since the definition of ‘the people’ is at stake. This process is always context dependent. Therefore, we need to add another task to our work: the reconstruction of the historical, political and cultural contexts in which populism develops. Although populism can be regarded as a global and transhistorical phenomenon (Blyth 2016; Moffitt 2016) with similar cultural repertoires and economic drivers, we believe different historical and geopolitical contexts must be taken into account, resisting the current tendency to downplay the distinctness of regional contexts. For example, in the early 2000s, scholars insisted on addressing the specificities of political and economic development in the Western Balkans, primarily because of the war in the former Yugoslavia, and a different model of transition to democracy and capitalism in these countries. Twenty years later, some authors are talking about the existence of a global phenomenon of populism into which former socialist countries (even former Yugoslav countries) fit perfectly despite their different historical contexts (Shafir, 2008: 425). We believe, however, that regional or national contexts matter, also when it comes to designing policy recommendations.

Given the prominence of performances in populist politics, we adopt the ideational approach to populism but enrich it with insights from Moffit’s (2016) and Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014) *political style approach*. In a nutshell, while the ideational approach concentrates on the content of populist discourse, the political style approach urges us to pay equal attention to its form. For example, we want to study populist aesthetics, which has something to do with its emotional appeal. Moffitt and Tormey write:

In this light, we define the concept of political style as the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations. There are a wide range of political styles within the contemporary political landscape, including populist, technocratic, authoritarian and post-representative styles, all of which have their own specific performative repertoires and tropes that create and affect political relations. Key examples of practitioners of these respective political styles are Hugo Chávez, Angela Merkel, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Subcomandante Marcos. (2014: 387)

In this approach researchers are asked to focus their attention on the manner in which populist (particularly right-wing) rallies or demonstrations are staged and thus can be seen as a specific form of *political theatre*. Two dimensions of this theatre need to be observed and analysed: the form and content of symbolic displays and performative styles.

We also believe it is necessary to move beyond the tendency to observe populism through the prism of developed Western democracies – whose experience dominates and shapes current academic literature on populist politics – by including the theoretical ideas and expectations of populism typical of Central Europe (CE), post-Yugoslav countries of South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and the Baltic states. Populist parties and politicians have become significant political players in several countries, including Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, France, UK and Germany, and the number of populist parties in parliament has almost doubled since 2000 – from 33 to 63 (Eiermann, Mounk and Gultchin 2017). However, we hypothesise that populism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans may be a product -- at least to some degree -- of the region’s distinct heritage and specific semi-peripheral status (Wallerstein 1974). This leads, *inter alia*, to the more pronounced role of cultural (identity related) factors, the phenomenon that we attempt to capture with the help of our concept of neo-traditionalism. It is important to repeat here one of our key arguments concerning the case selection. While the exaggerated role of certain cultural factors in the rise of right-wing populism in the CEE region may be seen as the reason for its specificity and thus an obstacle to generalizing and comparing, it is also true – we argue – that a phenomenon appearing in its more extreme form (fortified by the “pro-populist” political culture) provides an opportunity for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of its features and thus a more precise diagnosis of its consequences.

In the political dimension, the region’s experience of populist politics has also diverged from Western Europe’s and shows some specific features. In older Western European democracies, currently the most typical locations where populism is analysed, vehicles for this ideology are new or previously marginal illiberal challenger parties that confront essentially liberal, non-populist mainstream parties. In Central Europe and South-Eastern Europe, it is the ‘mainstream’ political formations that have been populist often since 1989. It is also important to note, that the fight against corruption seems to be an important element of populism in these countries, which makes it more similar to Latin American rather than West European cases. Finally, unlike in Western countries, where populists come from the political



fringe or from the business or culture sectors, populists in former socialist societies are often already part of the political elite (Mikucka-Wójtowicz 2017: 107–108).

Some authors believe that there is a specific type of populism that is “characteristic of post-communist territories” (Mikucka-Wójtowicz 2017: 107). These authors believe that a specific model of populism, characterised by the existence of charismatic and populist leaders, a syncretic ideological message, and relatively widespread social support, is a consequence of, among other things, a communist-socialist legacy and an authoritarian political culture that may have even longer roots. We are sceptical of such generic models of post-communism (Kubik 2013) and populism. Therefore, we will use several methods and approaches to analyse the development of populism in different countries and sub-regions, before we engage in generalising. It is possible that there are sub-types of populism in Europe that do not fall neatly into only one of the two frequently proposed regions of ‘the West’ and ‘the East’. The map of “actually existing populisms” may show no respect for this worn-out polar image.

In this paper we will analyse populist parties that occupy mainstream positions in national politics, understood as sizable vote shares and/or key role in government. Although there are populist parties that enjoy neither and stay on the political fringes, these are not analysed: they are relatively unimportant for understanding the political dynamics in CEE/SEE countries and have less to contribute to the wider comparative and theoretical debates. We first contrast CE/SEE experience of populism with those of Western Europe and analyse variations in forms of between regions and countries in CE/SEE (2.1.). We then discuss four key themes that our research on populism in the region. The themes include: how populist challenges in the region can be expressed and maintain its momentum through the mainstream parties (2.2), how and why there more populists in power and why they stay in power for longer periods than in the Western Europe (2.3.) and how and why populism can take distinct cultural, as well as political forms (2.4.), and how and why populism can be expressed and reinforced through civil society (2.5). These themes both express much of distinctness of populism in CEE/SEE regions and highlight themes of comparative theoretical importance that can inform wider debates on populism.

2. Political populism

2.1 Varieties of populism in CE/SEE

Populism is often described in terms of symbols of duality or fluidity – be it Janus facedness (Palonen 2018; Bugarić 2019), Manichean dichotomy (Mudde 2004, Ágh 2016), or a chameleonic nature (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Taggart 2000). This makes it especially problematic that studies of populism in CE/SEE have usually been framed through ideas and expectations based on the West European experience. However, the region’s pattern of populist politics has significantly diverged from Western Europe’s. In older Western European democracies, currently the most typical vehicles for populism are new or previously marginal illiberal challenger parties that confront essentially liberal, non-populist, if flagging, mainstream parties.

The relationship between populism and democracy is also configured differently in core Western European countries and the Central and South-East European periphery. In a consolidated liberal democracy with an established liberal political culture, populism can sometimes serve as a warning and possible corrective when democracies are in need of reform (Kaltwasser 2012). Populism in Western Europe has emerged as a result of a slow-burning crisis of political representation, growing alienation between the elites and the citizens and challenges such as social inequality, migration and multiculturalism (Mudde 2016). In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and especially in the countries of the Western Balkans, the situation is quite different. Despite the earlier optimism (Dawson and Hanley 2016), these countries cannot be defined as consolidated democracies, but at best as democracies in the process of consolidation or even backsliding and de-consolidation (Greskovits 2015). In these countries, populism has developed in parallel with the building of democratic institutions and has become the mainstream (Lutovac 2017: 61).

On the other hand, the political situation in the former socialist countries should not be regarded as homogeneous. Although the countries in this region share a socialist legacy, there are significant differences in their experiences of communist rule and in the development of democracy after the fall of communism (Kubik 2013). *We, therefore, reject a generic model of post-communism and will compare and contrast across countries and sub-regions, primarily CE and*



the Balkans. There is a distinct regional experience of populism in the Balkans and the Baltic states, which can be discussed in correlation with more widely discussed Central European cases.

The post-Yugoslav region was marked by the 1990s war. Political elites encouraged nationalism and inter-ethnic tensions, while the process of consolidating democracy was marginalised. Serbia experienced a ‘period of blocked transformation’ (Lazić 2011: 11), combining electoral authoritarianism and quasi-capitalist economic principles. The political elite in Serbia, members of the former *nomenklatura*, used their position to illicitly convert state ownership into private property, while using electoral democracy as a façade. When the regime was replaced in 2000, the consolidation of electoral democracy and the capitalist market began (Jovanović, Radović and Marković 2016: 83-92). This delay in democratisation, the persistence of tension in the post-conflict environment, and slow economic development helped establish populism as the dominant strategy of the vast majority of political elites in Serbia. As a result of economic decline and ethical tensions political leaders often used populist narratives based on binary opposition between the ‘corrupt elite’ and ‘common people’. This narrative was used to attract voters and discredit political opponents as they were accused of being ‘corrupt elites’. The situation was similar in Croatia, although, despite the 1990s war, the consolidation of capitalism and democracy began earlier and developed faster than in Serbia, with greater international impetus for Croatia’s EU integration, and its ultimate accession to the EU in 2013.

The post-2000 period marked a turning point in both Serbia and Croatia, when the political regime changed and new actors entered the political scene (Pešić 2017: 162-167). In both countries, however, the establishment of more meaningful democratic institutions did not automatically assume the disappearance of authoritarian elements and models of government. In theoretical terms, we might see them as *illiberal democracies* (featuring regular competitive elections, but plagued by abuse of constitutional and legal constraints by the elite) or *competitive authoritarianism* (having democratic institutions, but with competition skewed to favour the holders of power) (Levitsky and Way 2010) or *populist democracies* (where any kind of criticism of the government is interpreted as an attack on democracy and ‘the ordinary people’) (Pappas 2014).

Consequently, fertile ground for populism developed in Serbia and Croatia, which is demonstrated – as across the Western Balkans – by the dominance of catch-all parties that embody both right and left ideological messages appealing to a wide range of social groups. Within such a context, populist narratives are very practical because they fit with some of the existing democratic institutions but, at the same time, they are an obstacle to the further development of liberal democracy, and therefore a perfect strategy for the ruling elites to carry out their agendas (Lutovac 2017: 53). In Croatia, there are bigger ideological differences between the parties, so we can identify the existence of right-wing populism. On the other hand, most parties in Serbia are simply catch-all parties, and therefore none of them can be properly characterised as right-wing or radically right-wing. Almost all major political forces in Serbia have pro-European discourses.

In the former Yugoslav countries there is also a great potential for activating the image of ‘dangerous others’ as central to the polarising and moralising discourse of thick populism to suit the needs of political elites. Most often, the ‘dangerous others’ are political opponents, but since we are discussing post-conflict societies, they may also be foreign countries, or even minorities. For example, a large percentage of citizens in Serbia believe that the Albanians and the Croats constitute a danger to the Serbs (Lutovac and Marković 2017: 95). The bad economic situation in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries, the high levels of social inequality and deep-rooted authoritarian values (Lazić and Pešić 2013: 295) also lead us to expect that populism will continue to exist as a viable option in the political future as well. Research has shown that, in Serbia, politics is personalised and citizens have tended for quite some time now to observe politics through the classic populist binary of opposing ‘corrupt elites’ and ‘honest people’ (Birešev and Jovanović Ajzenhamer 2018: 246-248), and are deeply distrustful of politicians, seeing them as self-interested defenders of the rich and powerful (Lutovac, 2017: 56).

Characteristics of populism in CE countries (like Poland and Hungary) are different in some aspects when compared to Western Balkans. Poland illustrates what Krastev (2007: 58) defines as ‘the Central European paradox’, where the rise of populism is ‘an outcome not of the failures but of the successes of post communist liberalism’. David Ost explains this paradox as follows: ‘[B]y presenting their policies not so much as ‘good’ ones but as ‘necessary’ ones, not as ‘desirable’ but as ‘rational,’ liberals left their supporters no acceptable way to protest or express dissatisfaction’ (cited in Krastev 2007: 58-59). The EU accession process institutionalised elite-controlled politics, hollowing out the role of parliaments in such a manner that ‘[o]rdinary citizens experienced transitional democracies as regimes where voters



could change governments but could not change policies' (Krashev 2007: 59). This, perhaps, confirms the understanding of populism as a response to the crisis of legitimisation.

With regard to economic growth, Poland appeared for a long time to be one of the greatest success stories in post-communist Central Europe, exemplifying the success of liberal economics and politics in the region. Yet, three decades after the fall of communism, Poland faced the rise of right-wing populism. Populist rhetoric was visible already before its EU accession and it catalysed concerns related to both post-communist transformation and European integration. The parliamentary elections of 2005 brought populists into the government. This widely discussed right-wing coalition of Law and Justice, Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families survived only until 2007, although the ruling Law and Justice party managed to increase its power and gain enough political capital to win the 2015 elections. In Poland, populism has become a domain of parties and organisations located on the right side of the political spectrum, not only because the representation of the left in Poland is weaker for historical reasons, but also because populism is, as the case of former Yugoslav countries discussed in more detail later in this paper shows, often linked to neo-traditionalism and nationalism. Polish right-wing populists, like other populist actors, would also use anti-elite rhetoric, claiming that they represented 'the people', targeting elites both internally and externally (international institutions such as IMF, EU or NATO). This feature makes Polish populist discourse Eurosceptic and even Europhobic. Interestingly, the majority of relevant political parties in Poland use populist discourse to some extent, although that of the re-elected Law and Justice coalition is considered the best example of right-wing populist rhetoric among the large parties (Pytlas 2018). In this respect, populism in Poland and other countries of the region has become 'pathological normalcy', as noted by Mudde (2010).

Turning to the case of Hungary, the complicated intertwining of various ideological strands in Hungarian politics makes distinguishing populism from other political ideologies extremely challenging. On the right of the political spectrum, politicians promote an exclusive political vision, gaining legitimacy on the basis of distinguishing between ingroup *versus* outgroup entities. At the same time, an ex-racist party, Jobbik, further challenges the conventional political categorisation by taking a pro-Western stance. On the left of the spectrum, the post-communist left parties' ideologies have shown some degree of thick-centred populism, as they have failed to consistently support minority groups such as the Roma. The new populism of Fidesz is not easy to define, although its central feature seems to be anti-Western rhetoric, which has no serious roots in the earlier post-communist Hungarian public discourse. This can be explained from the point of view of pure political logic: political parties had performed under permanent pressure from Hungarian society, which was constantly comparing its situation to the West and was frustrated that they were lagging behind. As a result, they repeatedly punished the governing coalitions in all elections from 1990 to 2006. This 'punishing' voting behaviour could be partially ameliorated by separating voters from their traditional benchmark, 'the West' (Körösényi 2015).

Baltic countries provide us with examples of populist parties different from the ones in ex-Yugoslav republics and CE countries that are discussed above. For several decades after the restoration of independence, Estonia, like Poland, was distinguished by its transition success, its strong consensus on liberal democracy and its rational and responsible political elites. Even when democratic backsliding and populism became increasingly common in many CEE/post-communist countries, Estonia continued to combine strong democratic institutions with its vibrant civil society, rule of law, low levels of corruption and high levels of media and internet freedom.

However, around 2014–2015, a previously marginal right-wing party began to gain popularity. The Conservative People's Party (EKRE) was established in 2012 as a result of the merger between the centre-right People's Union of Estonia (*Eestimaa Rahvaliit*), which represented rural interests, and the more nationalistic and Eurosceptic pressure-group – the Estonian Patriotic Movement (*Eesti Rahvuslik Liikumine*). Since its inception, EKRE has depicted itself as an alternative to the established elites. Its programme and rhetoric are illiberal, nativist, xenophobic and anti-EU. EKRE had 8% of the vote in the 2015 general elections and entered the national parliament for the first time. Four years later, the party obtained 18% of the vote (nearly a fifth of the seats in the national parliament) in the March 2019 parliamentary elections.

As in Poland, the rise of EKRE was explained by the failure of liberal market-oriented elites to pay sufficient attention to social issues, cultural sensitivities and regional disparities, to groups left behind in the processes of transition and globalisation and to public concerns over the migration crisis (which had very limited direct impact on Estonia). EKRE's rise cannot be attributed to anti-EU sentiment – the EU enjoys very high support/approval ratings in Estonia. The party's anti-establishment rhetoric and social conservatism played a much more important role than Euroscepticism



and immigration attitudes in augmenting its popular appeal. The ‘average’ EKRE voter is male and socially conservative, with an anti-establishment disposition (Trumm 2018).

We are ready now to offer a few preliminary conclusions regarding populist parties in CEE. First of all, there are many differences among populists in CEE. This is not surprising if we bear in mind that these countries had different pre-communist experience, communist experience and have followed different paths of transition and new regime consolidation (Ekiert, Kubik, Vachudova 2007). The POPREBEL researchers will produce a novel typology and propose an explanation of the observed differences. Nonetheless, there are two key similarities among populists in CEE. First, in all of these countries at least some of the populist parties are mainstream, which is different from Western European experiences with populism. In some of these countries populist parties have always been mainstream (especially in former Yugoslavian republics, such as HDZ in Croatia, SPS in Serbia etc.). Second, most of these populist parties are catch-all parties, which claim to represent ‘the honest people’.

2.2 The populist challenge from within the mainstream

As noted previously, populism in CE/SEE has usually been framed through ideas and expectations based on the West European experience. In older Western European democracies, the populist challenge has expressed itself principally through the rise of new or previously marginal illiberal challenger parties, which confront essentially liberal, non-populist, if flagging, historic mainstream parties. Populist parties emerging from the fringe in Western Europe in this way have become electorally relevant forces and some cases evolved into principal opposition parties (like the National Rally in France), ‘support parties’ for governing coalitions, or themselves direct participants in coalition governments (the Freedom Party (FPO) in Austria, Five Star Movement (M5S) in Italy).

There are some populist parties in CE/SEE, often the radical right, which track some or all of this trajectory: Jobbik in Hungary (strongest opposition party since 2009-10), Self-Defence in Poland (in government 2005-7) or – as discussed above - EKRE in Estonia. However, often in CE/SEE, it is the supposed mainstream that is or has become populist – a pattern that has little or no parallel in the rest of Europe (and is consequently understudied).³ In some instances, this reflects the success of new ‘centrist populist’ or ‘technocratic populist’ parties (Učeň 2004; 2007; Havlík and Voda 2018; Havlík 2019; Buštíková and Guasti 2019; also Caramani 2017; Bickerton and Accetti 2017), such as ANO in the Czech Republic or Ordinary People (OL'aNO) in Slovakia, which are common in CE/SEE (Stanley 2017).⁴

In other instances, however, parties once regarded as mainstream centre-right or centre-left parties – and integrated into West European-led Europarties appear to have radicalised and transformed themselves into overtly populist groupings in the course of the 2000s (Buzogány and Varga 2019; Dąbrowska 2019; Jasiewicz 2019). Not all mainstream parties in the region are potential vehicles for populism, and not all populists hail from the mainstream.⁵ But many of the most significant populist formations in the region do. It appears to be the case with both Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) and Fidesz in Hungary. Both were integrated into European-level party groupings founded by West European centre-right parties (Batory 2009; Steven 2020) and were treated by the comparative political science literature as responsible, if conservative, mainstream groupings, which contributed to democratic consolidation by promoting ‘robust competition’ and party system consolidation (Grzymala-Busse 2007; Hanley et al 2008).

This highlights a key point: that the populist challenge in CE/SEE cannot be reduced to tracking the ascent of new or previously marginal challenger parties, but can take important additional forms: the populist transformation of mainstream party actors or, alternatively, the re-assertion of underlying populism of parties, which have partially or superficially adopted West European-style party identities and ideologies.

These two patterns of populist party development are illustrated by two strands of research on party-based populism in CE/SEE in the current project. These deal respectively with 1) trends towards illiberal populism *within* some social

³ Greece and Ireland are possible exceptions (see Pappas 2014; O’Malley and Fitzgibbon 2015)

⁴ Such parties construct politics in the familiar terms outlined by Mudde (2007) juxtaposing a morally bankrupt, corrupt and exhausted establishment to an upstanding but exploited public. However, rather than making nativist or anti-capitalist demands, they stress the need to fight corruption, reform politics and inject managerial efficiency into government, presenting themselves as citizen-politicians and/or non-partisan experts (see Učeň 2004; Stanley 2017; Caramani 2017).

⁵ In a CE/SEE context ‘mainstream’ parties may, as an ideal type, be understood as parties which are: (i) programmatic (rather than patronage-based) and (initially) non-extreme in their positions; (ii) important (electorally well-supported, regular participants in government) players; and (iii) which identify with and/or are integrated with major West European party families.



democratic parties in Central Europe and 2) recurrent and resilient historic patterns of party-based populism in the former Yugoslav space, which have tended to reproduce themselves across regimes and social structures.

2.2.1 Populist currents in Central European social democracy

In both Western and Eastern Europe, populism is most often seen as a phenomenon of the right, although culturally conservative and nativist positions are increasingly fortified with economically ‘left’ statist positions (Inglehart and Norris 2016, Norris and Inglehart 2019). Social democratic parties, by contrast, are viewed as the archetypal mainstream victim of the rise of populist parties. There is a large literature exploring the decline and crisis of social democracy in established West European democracies and the parallel rise of radical right populists, who appear the principal beneficiaries of the erosion of social democracy’s social constituencies in consequence of socio-demographic change and the difficulties of delivering national economic and welfare strategies in a globalised world (Berman 2019; Kriesi et al 2008; Keating and McCrone 2015; Cuperus 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Benedetto, Hix, and Mastrorocco 2020).

There is a parallel, although less well explored, decline of social democratic parties in Central Europe (CE) accompanied by the rise of populisms (Vachudova 2015; Grzymała-Busse 2017; Berman and Snegovaya 2019). This has some overlaps with the broader crisis of European social democracy, but also reflects the distinct origins of social democratic parties in the region (discussed below) and its distinct patterns of party competition and party-voter alignment compared to Western Europe: if we think in terms of two-dimensional political space with a classic left-right economic division crosscut by a one over moral, cultural and identity issues, we find that, in broad terms, in CEE- unlike in Western Europe - competition in CEE tends to pit parties combining economic (neo-)liberalism and cultural liberal stances (and pro-EU stances) to those combining more statist, pro-welfare positions on the economy with traditionalism, nationalism or social conservatism (Rovny and Edwards 2012; Enyedi and Deegan-Krause 2018).⁶ Such divisions do not map neatly onto self-declared party identities, especially as understood through the prism of the West European historical experience. In policy terms parties and voters in CE identifying as centre-left have, broadly speaking, more market-friendly, than parties identifying as on the right, which are often more market-sceptic (Tavits 2009). Familiar cultural and economic dimensions may be complicated by a ‘regime divide’ reflecting parties’ origins in the former regime or opposition and the salience of anti-communism among voters (Grzymała-Busse, 2001), as well local political traditions that construct national understandings of ‘right’ and ‘left’ quite distinctly (see, for example, Holubec and Rae 2010) and marked variation across the region in the values of voters identifying with these labels in each country (Piurko, Schwartz & Davidov 2011).

The resilience (or vulnerability) of social democratic parties to populist challenges, whether from without (rival parties) and within (populist turn), is of considerable wider importance. Social democratic parties were among the most successful West European party families in (re-) establishing a presence in new democracies after 1989. They can, therefore, be regarded as a test case for the post-1989 experiment of adapting and emulating West European ideological and political forms (Jacoby 2000; Sloam 2005; Krastev and Holmes 2018). Moreover, in seeking to reconcile the demands of market-led modernisation with protection of social groups least likely to benefit from cultural and economic liberalisation, they are the key pillars of democratic change in a region, marked by growing concerns about ‘democratic backsliding’.

By the mid-1990s, social democratic parties had successfully established themselves across much of CEE – usually in the form of reconfigured former ruling communist parties – often emerging as moderate, reformist and pro-market groupings (Grzymała-Busse 2002). A socially illiberal or nationalistic populist politics of the left - that is one combining nativist and conservative cultural appeals with economic leftism, was thus confined to several small radical groupings and several ‘late reforming’ ex-communist social democratic parties with roots in the more repressive pre-1989 regimes, such as in Romania and Bulgaria (Vachudova 2005, 2015), as well to the complex multi-ethnic contexts of the ex-Yugoslav space (discussed below).

⁶ In Western Europe, the pattern was one of social liberal-economic left versus social conservative pro-market right. Populist and non-populist constructions of politics, as a ‘thin ideology’ can be seen as an additional, third dimension capable of hosting, sometimes incoherently or inconsistently, a range of substantive positions (Polk et al 2017).



However, as social democratic parties in CE started to fail electorally in the 2000s (Grzymała-Busse, 2018), the question of the relationship between social democracy, the left and populism re-emerged. Much of the debate around such issues was framed in terms familiar from the long-running debates about the crisis or decline of social democracy in Western Europe, as the rise of populism challenged the mainstream centre-left (Berman and Snegovaya 2019; Berman 2017). The immediate challenge came both from right-wing ‘thick’ populists – often radicalised mainstream conservative groupings rather than emerging challenger parties – taking up themes of welfare and social cohesion, and from ‘centrist’ populists, taking over ideas of technocratic modernisation and good governance (Bågenholm 2013, Stanley 2017, Bušíková and Guasti 2019).⁷ Nevertheless, it is also possible to detect the emergence of illiberal populist left currents within the outwardly social-democratic centre-left. This phenomenon is of particular interest in the Czech and Slovak cases, where an illiberal, populist centre-left cannot be straightforwardly understood as a political successor of hardline ruling parties of the period prior to 1989. The Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) are a ‘historic’ party with roots going back to the 19th century, which became an umbrella for forces ranging from ex-*nomenklatura* technocrats to left-wing socially liberal ex-dissidents and regionalists. Slovakia’s principal centre-left force *Smer* was founded in 1999 by Robert Fico, a popular figure in the declining Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), a reformist communist successor party (Grzymała-Busse 2002, Haughton 2004), and took on a social democratic identity in 2005 after a period of vague anti-establishment centrist populism (Marušiak 2005). *Smer*’s populism, nationalism and conservatism has always been quite noticeable, while the ČSSD has seen divisions between a wing close to the party’s former leader, current Czech President Miloš Zeman, and politicians with more socially liberal positions.

Both parties have crystallised the illiberal populist notions of social democracy most clearly in the aftermath of the global recession and multiple crises of the European Union’s management of the Eurozone, the European refugee crisis and the European Union’s relations with Russia. Without overtly rejecting the Western models, politicians, commentators and intellectuals within such currents have developed themes such as: social democracy’s special role in uniting and defending the nation; Central Europe as an exploited periphery of the EU analogous to ‘left-behind’ or peripheral regions within Western Europe; and anti-liberalism, encompassing opposition not only to economic neoliberalism but also social liberalism and values of openness and multiculturalism, which are seen as ill-fitting for the concerns of Central European societies, a distraction from the defence of working people or a smokescreen for the interests of elite groups (Hanley 2019).

The notion of a ‘populist social democracy’ is in many ways counterintuitive. Social democratic parties appeared to be one of the key pillars of success of the democratic change in Central Europe after 1989. The rise of populists within the erstwhile mainstream left might be taken as an indicator of the failure of the post-1989 experiment of emulating Western European ideological and political models (Jacoby 2000, Sloam 2005, Krastev and Holmes 2018) and/or as a result of the cultural and political re-assertion of the forces unhappy with the broadly liberal tenor of the post-1989 economic, social and cultural reforms (Kubik 2019). It certainly is a marker of democratic backsliding in the region (Dawson and Hanley 2019).

However, the fact that Central European social democratic parties are experiencing pressure for a populist turn should perhaps, in hindsight, not surprise us. Historically, from the outset, social democracy was marked by national and regional diversity, adapting across different historical contexts, and spreading geographically beyond its Western European heartland (Sandbrook et al. 2007, Schmidt 2016). Moreover, in many (semi-)peripheral societies – including Central and Eastern Europe – social democratic parties had to accommodate cross-cutting pressures of nationalism and make cross-class alliances well beyond its chosen (but sometimes small) working-class core constituency, particularly with rural and agrarian groups.

Indeed, the same dynamic was arguably at work in Western European social democratic parties’ responses to social and technological changes after 1945, through their reinvention as ‘catch-all’ people’s parties (Smith 1989). The current debates in Europe about whether social democrats should seek to emulate the rhetoric of populism – and become less socially liberal – in order to rebuild a broad electoral support (Cuperus 2003, 2017; Mudde 2019) might be read as a continuation of social democracy’s long and awkward relationship with populism, rather than a unique historical moment of crisis.

⁷ Unlike in Western and Southern Europe (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014. Ramiro and Gomez 2017, Kioupkiolis and Katsambekis 2018), however, CEE has not seen the emergence of new radical left populist parties.



2.2.2 The historical recurrence of party populism

At the moment, however, we should remain open to long-term underlying continuities in state–society relationships in Central and South-Eastern Europe (cf. Kitschelt et al. 1999, Kitschelt 2001), which led to the recurrent forms of illiberal nationalistic social populism across outwardly very different political and economic regimes.

This possibility is especially strongly suggested by the experience of the former Yugoslav space. Historically, the basis for 19th-century populism in Serbia was its resistance to modernisation, its aspiration to avoid the West European path and its faith in the ideological and political power of Russian tsarism. Its foundations were laid by Nikola Pašić (and the National Radical Party), who drew on the egalitarian traditions of the socialist doctrine of Svetozar Marković and the ideas of the Russian Narodniki to create an ideology of the social, national and political unity of Serbs, denying the need for social differentiation and political pluralisation. Serbian populism thus took a left-wing form, arguing for social egalitarianism, but its nationalist nature also made it right wing to a certain extent. This dichotomy would remain present throughout the 20th century (Perović 1985: 23–38; Perović 1993: 104–131; Brubaker 2017: 325–364). There were also programmatic and political continuities: an authoritarian leader; relying on Russia and avoiding Western models; a dominant party that identifies with the ‘people’ as the only interpreter of the people’s ‘will’; a belief in unity instead of the division of power; and an idea of a large and ethnically homogenous state (Stojanović 2017: 12–17, Perović 2019: 348–423, Hobsbawm 2002: 5–26).

Despite preserving its basic ideological structure, the populist form changed in the 20th century as it was articulated within different political regimes. In Socialist Yugoslavia populist motifs found expression in the ideology of the ruling communists, who took power after the defeat of fascism in the Second World War: court verdicts made ‘in the name of the people’, slogans such as ‘Death to fascism, freedom to the people’ and use of the term ‘working people’ as a political, ideological and constitutional category.

Socialist populism in Yugoslavia was also associated with economic populism, with its economic and social egalitarianism sometimes used to suppress reforms and attempts to democratise the system (Popov 1993: 3–34, Stojanović 2010: 125–157). In Serbia, particularly at the time of accelerated reform at the end of the 1960s, nationally inflected ‘thick’ populism became dominant within the intellectual elite and also among some politicians, who opposed economic and political decentralisation and liberalisation with demands for either a Yugoslavia suitable for Serbs or an ethnically homogenous Serbian state.

This laid the foundations for the explosion of populism in Serbian society in the late 1980s with the appearance of a new ‘thick’ populist leader of Serbia who had broad support from the society, Slobodan Milošević. He launched a populist ‘anti-bureaucratic revolution’ fuelled by street gatherings called ‘happenings of the people’ and ‘truth meetings’, which also spread to Montenegro in 1989. However, the attempts to transfer this kind of populist movement through these gatherings to other parts of Yugoslavia failed (Bešlin 2019: 650–765, Dragović Soso 2004: 76–128, Trkulja 1998: 14–97, Đurić Bosnić 2016: 178–238).

After the subsequent debacle of populist authoritarianism in Serbia, wars, international isolation, defeats and economic collapse, in 2000 the Serbs tried to change the system. However, the ideological matrix of populism and the national populist platform survived. The idea of a big state was remodelled and taken up by new intellectual and political protagonists gathered around Slobodan Milošević’s successor, President Vojislav Koštunica. Koštunica used the phrase ‘the people know’ as his main motto.

Populism emerged again in Serbia during the time of Boris Tadić (President of Serbia 2004–2012), who restored one of the leading players of Milošević’s regime – Ivica Dačić and his party, the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS) in 2008. Since 2008, Ivica Dačić, the Serbian Socialist Party leader and successor of Slobodan Milošević, has persisted through every government rule in Serbia. By 2019 most mainstream political parties in Serbia embraced populism (Varga 2018: 159–175, Subotić 2007: 45–72, Stojanović 2010: 125–157).

To take the example of left represented by the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), which is the oldest party in Serbia, and which claims a socialist legacy. The SPS, headed by Slobodan Milošević, was a ruling party from the beginning of the multi-party system until the collapse of Milošević’s regime and the beginning of the consolidation of democracy in Serbia (1990–2000). In 2008, the SPS rose to power again and has since then remained there (despite changes in its coalition partners). Nominally, the SPS has been a party with a socialist agenda, and it has been left-oriented since its foundation, but in essence it combines leftist ideas with nationalist narratives, as well as ideas of the necessity of free



market and the importance of Serbia's EU accession. Its policy consists of contradictory ideological options that attract a large number of voters in Serbia. The ideas put forward by the SPS are almost identical to those offered by other parties, although the specificity of the SPS is that it places emphasis on social justice and democratic socialism.

With the example of the SPS we have illustrated a mechanism of maintenance at mainstream position that succeeds in the case of many other parties in Serbia as well. This mechanism implies that the transformation of a political programme and leaders does not mean that party leaves the mainstream position. Some other parties (such as the Democratic Party or the Serbian Radical Party) have changed their programs, policies and leaders, some have even divided and split, but they kept their mainstream positions. Ergo, the main characteristics of Serbian political scene is that several major political options, *with the help of populist strategy*, maintains several decades on leadings positions.

Batory (2016) claims that what made Fidesz strong was its past: it started as a mainstream, centre-right party, which gave it international connections (membership in EPP), strong enough to survive the party's transformation. The same seems to apply to PiS. This transformation is symptomatic for the period that Cas Mudde names the fourth wave of (radical right) populism (2019). For many years radical right-wing populism existed at the periphery of politics. Beginnings of the XXI century brought three major crises and the gates to the mainstream opened to the radical right so wide that sometimes differentiation between the radical right and the mainstream right is almost impossible. Some right-wing mainstream parties transformed into radical right: PiS and Fidesz as the most notable examples, as they formed majoritarian governments; some transformed while being in opposition (FPÖ and the SVP).

2.3 Populists in power

Early studies on populism perceived it as a temporary phenomenon: populists' contestatory character, it was argued, made them a successful opposition, and sometimes even brought them to power, yet often rendered them unable to create a positive, long-term programme, to become an effective governing organisation (Heinisch 2003; Drelich 2010) or to build stable governing coalitions. However, the recent study of Pappas (2019), who examines seven post-II-World-War cases of populist governments, showed that once in office, populists maintain strong, steady electoral support. The cases of Poland and Hungary where both PiS and Fidesz seem to enjoy unabated support, confirms his findings.

Both CE and SEE have a well-developed and extensive range of populist ruling parties, going beyond the limited number in Western Europe, where – with the recent exception of Italy – populist parties have typically been junior coalition partners or 'support parties'.

What makes the populism in the region distinct is the approach towards democracy. According to Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, currently in Europe there are eleven authoritarian populist governments, which is one-third of all European governments (Timbro 2019: 24)⁸. However, what distinguishes Polish and Hungarian populisms from populism in Western states, are different levels of authoritarianism (see Bugaric and Kuhelj 2018). Therefore, the essence of liberal democracy (for example rule of law) is in danger in the former, and while it remains relatively safe in the latter.⁹

The fourth wave is characterised not only by the presence of extreme right parties in parliaments (such as Golden Dawn in Greece, Kotleba – People's Party Our Slovakia, or Konfederacja in Poland), but by considering them as viable partners in government formation and including them in actual policy making. There is also a new phenomenon of running right-wing populists as candidates of mainstream parties in various elections (Mudde 2019).

Yet, in some CEE countries, populists have entered governments following a 'West European' pattern of outsider parties making electoral breakthroughs and being incorporated into coalitions with mainstream parties as junior partners. In Estonia, for example, the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE) was included in the governing coalition in April 2019, following the national elections in which the party obtained 18% of the vote, taking one fifth of the seats

⁸ Hungary, Poland, Greece, Norway, Finland, Latvia, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Switzerland, Austria and Italy.

⁹ Not all scholars use the term 'authoritarian populism'; some refer to 'illiberal democracy' or populist democracy'. Victor Orban named his type of governance an illiberal democracy already in 2014, hence usage of this term may be perceived as legitimisation of policy making by populists themselves (Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka 2017). Analysing the current situation in Hungary, Attila Ágh talks about a 'velvet dictatorship', which emerged during the third period of transformation from soft to hard populism (2016, 2019).



in the parliament. As in West European countries such as Austria, where in 2017 populists entered the government (which subsequently collapsed), EKRE's inclusion in the coalition was the result of mainstream parties' failure to cooperate: two liberal parties, the Reform Party and the Centre Party (both members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) group in the European Parliament), failed to work together in the process of government formation. Having rejected an invitation by the victorious Reform Party to start coalition talks, the incumbent Centre Party formed a coalition with two right-wing parties, including both the moderate Pro Patria and the illiberal, nativist, xenophobic, Eurosceptic and populist EKRE (Ehin and Talving 2019). This was an apparent change of tack by Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, who had cultivated the image of himself as a liberal, pro-Western leader – notably during Estonia's presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2017.

The inclusion of a far-right populist party in the government caused an alarmed reaction both at home and abroad and was seen as a threat to Estonia's liberal values, progressive international reputation and its international alliances on which the small country's security so heavily depends (Ehin and Talving 2019). EKRE's rise has affected public discourse in the country, strengthening conservative and nativist voices, but policy implications remain limited (and reversible) as of yet. The difficulties of partnering with the populist far-right have been on ample display, as the Centre-EKRE-Pro Patria coalition faced a series of scandals and crises in 2019, resulting in forced resignations of three EKRE ministers.

The West European pattern of populist outsiders as disruptive and awkward junior partners is to some extent also reproduced in Latvia. It has been argued that high levels of internal fragmentation of the Latvian party system, combined with electoral volatility, have facilitated the emergence and rise of new (populist) actors (Ikstens, 2013; Saarts, 2011). The nationalist National Alliance was formed in 2010 as an alliance between the far-right All for Latvia! and a union of two parties whose history goes back to the restoration of independence (For the Fatherland and Freedom and the Latvian National Independence Movement). Since 2011, the National Alliance has been included in most Latvian governments in order to keep the Harmony Centre, a centre-left alliance representing the country's Russian-speakers and advocating good relations with Russia, out of the government. While antagonism between pro-Russian interests and ethnonationalism has also been a mainstay of Estonian party politics, the dynamics have played out differently in the two countries. Between 2010 and 2016, the Estonian Centre Party, similarly to the Harmony Centre, was cordoned off, kept out of the government by other mainstream Estonian parties because of its links to Russia. Having become the leading government party in 2016, after the government led by the liberal Reform Party fell, the Centre Party was able to stay in power following the 2019 elections only because, in contrast to its main competitor, the Reform Party, it was willing to partner with the far-right EKRE.

Poland had populists in the government already in the early 2000s. Although some elements of populism had been noticeable in Polish politics since the early 1990s (for example Tyminski's candidacy in the first free presidential election of 1990), parties using populist rhetoric were considered fringe parties. Populist parties managed to enter the parliament in 2001, but it was only in 2005 that the country was for the first time and for a short period (2005–2007) governed by a minority three-party 'populist coalition' comprised of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, the agrarian Self-Defence movement and the right-wing, nationalistic Europhobes from the League of Polish Families (LPR). Interestingly, during the 2001–2005 term of the parliament, the 'Self-Defence and the League of Polish Families were regarded as populist outsiders, while Law and Justice was a party of the political mainstream' (Stanley 2015: 14). The short period of the 'populist coalition' government was characterised by rising polarisation and its claims that it was fighting corrupted elites and building a new, reformed Fourth Republic (*IV Rzeczpospolita*), which would represent the people and fight (post-)communist elites.

After this coalition collapsed, the early elections of 2007 were won by the conservative-liberal Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*), which remained in power for two terms (2007–2015). Law and Justice, however, remained the biggest opposition party and kept the 'us versus them' rhetoric as one of the most characteristic features of its political image, including its 'soft' Eurosceptic arguments (the party was one of the founders of the European Conservatives and Reformists group in the European Parliament). The 2015 elections brought Law and Justice back to power, this time with two right-wing coalition partners – Agreement (*Porozumienie*) and Solidary Poland (*Solidarna Polska*). Both domestic and external factors (the Eurozone crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis and Brexit) fuelled even more radical and anti-establishment rhetoric and contributed to the success of new nationalist, conservative and economically more libertarian movements like Kukiz'15 or political parties founded by Janusz Korwin-Mikke.



The leader of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, emphasised the need to preserve and even enhance sovereignty and minimise foreign influence, especially the influence of secular and leftist movements coming from Western Europe. The management of the refugee crisis and the European Commission's proposal to distribute asylum seekers among the Schengen zone member states faced severe criticism from the PiS government and contributed to its depiction of the EU as a source of strange ideas and of dangerous 'others', giving it the opportunity to deploy the 'us versus them' rhetoric once again. The illiberal reforms introduced by the ruling coalition in areas such as the judiciary have led the government into an ongoing dispute with the European Commission over the rule of law and have sparked a reaction from the liberal civil society, while the polarisation between the two blocs of Polish society has become more visible than ever (Sadurski 2019). Law and Justice repeated its electoral success in the 2019 elections, when the PiS coalition again received a majority of seats in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament (*Sejm*) and announced it would continue to realise the political programme that it had started to implement during its previous term.

Until recently, the dynamics of Hungarian politics followed the pattern of populist parties contending elections, but not implementing their populist agenda after gaining power. This changed when in 2010 the right-wing parties came to power on the basis of a rather broad programme and immediately initiated the post-election drift towards populism. When internal surveys commissioned by the government confirmed that a policy based on enemy images and anti-institutional, feudalistic personal links brought many more votes than relying on a broader intellectual background, the ruling party committed to exercising the 'populist' technology of power. This form of populism can be dubbed the 'new right'. Centrist political traditions have proven to be too weak to prevent this rightward drifting pattern and the centre-seeking parties fell out of parliament (Hungarian Democratic Forum - 2010), failed to get there (Centrum Party - 2002) or split along a left-right division (Politics Can Be Different - after 2010). This opened the way for the Fidesz government to rule with little oversight and implement its neo-feudal (for details see Working Paper 1) policies without opposition. Additionally, the polarised media structure, the solidifying monopoly by the pro-government media outlets, and the use of highly stereotypical political language (frequent use of "left" and "right" labels) further erode centrist moderation in politics and exacerbate the polarisation of cultural life (ideologisation of literary, theatrical and other cultural organisations), increasingly dominated by the precepts of neo-traditionalism (on this concept see Working Paper 1). All of this helps to produce a fertile cultural terrain for generating and solidifying populist 'us' versus 'them', in-group versus out-group attitudes (Jakab-Urbán 2017).

Populist parties in the former Yugoslav space are all characterised by a similar concept: the idea of a people's party and a leader representing the voice of the 'common people'. In Serbia and Croatia, various populist leaders and parties have been continuously circulating in power since the introduction of the multiparty system in the 1990s. What all these parties have in common are strong leaders who supposedly represent the interests of the 'common people' rather than the economic, political and other elites. A common denominator of many populist parties ruling in the 21st century is that there is no clear ideological profile but segments from different ideological orientations, combined to create an attractive political offering for voters. In the case of Serbia, almost all major parties stress the preservation of national and territorial identity and integrity but almost all mainstream parties also advocate EU accession. Unlike parties in Serbia, the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union) in Croatia has a somewhat more consistent, nationalist-oriented ideological agenda.

One of the most common and obvious forms of using the institutions of liberal democracy to create an 'uneven playing field', characteristic of competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2010), in both countries is the violation of the rules and procedures of free and fair elections by governing parties or governing coalitions. The executive uses media coverage of regular activities as a pre-election campaign and thus creates a great disproportion in media representation between the ruling parties and the opposition. As equal media representation is one of the basic preconditions and free elections, it is a violation of the fundamental pillar of liberal democracy. Also, the rhetoric used in these campaigns has a populist character because it portrays the opposition as a 'corrupt elite'.

The populist rhetoric and imagery of Serbian populism in power is designed to create a cult of personality and generate a sense that the nation is endangered. The nation, in this view, faces a permanent threat from the outside (or from the inside – by foreign mercenaries) and - relying on its glorious history (that enemies want to alter or usurp) - must try to resist the hegemonic tendencies of encirclement. The opposition is portrayed as weak, incapable and traitorous. In Croatia, on the other hand, political parties are ideologically more profiled and thus we can identify a right-wing populist party (HDZ), which shares some similarities with PiS in Poland. Parties can strongly advocate an idea one day but diametrically change it the other, adjusting it to current politics, all so as to remain in power. The political systems



that populists install in the ex-Yugoslavia region when they gain power are characterised by the lack of civil liberties (suppressing freedom of the media), decline of institutions, electoral farce and executive control over the judiciary, with executive power virtually suspending the parliament, because it is ultimately accountable only to one person or their party.

2.4 Popular geopolitics and the cultural grounds of populism

Most literature on populism is heavily embedded in traditional political science, with a predominant emphasis on studying elites, institutions and ideologies. It is only recently that alternative conceptualisations and methodologies have started appearing, opening up comparative politics to fruitful engagements with disciplines such as political semiotics, political sociology and cultural studies. This growing cross-disciplinarity, which is the hallmark of the political style approach to populism introduced above, is fundamental for tackling the identities of new populist groups as ‘fluid’ phenomena, constituted not by rigid ideologies or adherence to pre-given policy rationalities but by and through performative means.

A growing number of authors pay attention to systems of meanings integrated by particular communicative codes (Almeida 2019: 269-270) as key elements of performative semantics of populism. Thus, several studies have understood nationalist/conservative populist parties in the context of ‘cultural wars’, focusing attention on the basics of their and their allies’ cultural policies (Kotwas and Kubik 2019). Adherents of the approach focusing on cultural imaginaries observe ‘how a wide variety of objects and phenomena—from antisemitic cartoons to political philosophy, from Viking heritage to (wo)men in nature, and from Hobbits to pop music—are imagined as part of a lived cultural context, of a directly practised communal and personal lifestyle, in such a way that it effectively constitutes the ‘ideal extreme-right subject’’ (Kølvraa and Forchtner 2019). We might, therefore, speak of ‘aesthetic populism’ – a profoundly political phenomenon that pops up at the intersection of media, entertainment and urban arts, and adds strong emotive components to the normative reconfiguration and resignification of ‘the people’ as a core of thick populist discourses and imageries. The analysis of aesthetic populism is usefully complicated by the concept of ‘cultural populism’ (see Working Paper 2) that denotes a phenomenon that does not need to be explicitly political but nonetheless may have indirect political repercussions. Such indirect cultural influences on politics are captured also by the concept of rightward thickening of public culture, introduced by Kotwas and Kubik (2019).

The success of national-populist conservative parties, such as EKRE in Estonia, Latvia’s National Alliance, or Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, has seen them mount an assertive challenge to mainstream liberal visions of Europe and current forms of European integration. Euroscepticism, often underpinned by intensifying neo-traditionalism, forms an important component of EKRE’s engagement in politics covering geopolitical, sociocultural and economic dimensions. The party is critical of EU pressures on Estonia to participate in the bailout packages for richer Eurozone member states with troubled economies, opposes tax concessions to foreign capital and objects to the acquisition of land by foreign nationals. In Poland, the main bones of contention are values and levels of integration. It seems that Polish populist Euroscepticism is identity-based and even the economic arguments are double-bottomed. As one of the axiom of Polish neo-traditionalism, the European Union is believed to be a threat to the traditional Polish (Christian) way of living, by forcing multiculturalism and secularism.

There is an extensive academic debate on the cultural roots of Hungarian populism. Kis (2013) and Csizmadia (2017) argue that neither the Hungarian left could detach itself from the power structure of communist Kádár-era – accepting partocracy accompanied by welfare distribution – nor could the right detach itself from the memory of its interwar position, appearing as a guarantor of stability against foreign and domestic ‘enemy images’. In the latter case, the parallel is intentionally bolstered by relying on traditionalist symbolism (rhetoric, architecture of public spaces), deliberately revived in yet another example of neo-traditionalist strategy. Interestingly, we might detect a sort of consensus that this political thinking dates back to interwar (or deeper) traditions (Wittenberg 2006). What is highly debatable is its morality and effectiveness: according to the ‘new right’, the interwar period was an exceptionally successful period of socio-economic stabilisation, whose memory can be invoked to legitimise the decade of 2010-2020. According to many critics, this stability is only a temporary phenomenon, although many social norms (inclusivity, transparency or reliability) are eroded and international embeddedness is weakened to such an extent that the whole country is in a dangerous drift towards a new crisis, like the one on the eve of the World Wars.



Euroscepticism, a frequent feature of populist rhetoric and imaginary, has often been studied through the lens of party-electoral politics and party-based Euroscepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2013) and explained as a reaction to socio-economic changes that have played out since 1989, both in CEE and globally. As several analysts argue, the anti-European rhetoric blended with populist slogans has emerged in new post-communist EU member states as a reaction to European integration as well as processes of modernisation and globalisation (Holmes and Krastev 2019). As we hypothesise in the project, populist, anti-European stances may also have been caused by rising neo-traditionalism associated with the lack of the feeling of belonging to the European community, reflected in proposals to reduce ‘the EU strictly to economic cooperation, which would still allow for the redistribution of funds for the benefit of poorer nations but which would not extend to the European public sphere, civil society and common European identity’ (Mach and Styczyńska 2020).

However, conservative and illiberal geo-political visions, especially in CEE, can be studied from the vantage point of their aesthetic and emotional appeal, analysing visualised symbols, images and other performative elements sustaining and promoting these groups’ public profiles and political agendas (Kotwas and Kubik 2019). These performances can be read as a combination of signifiers (certain visual elements intended for public gazing) and signifieds (concepts, ideas or myths represented in the public space). The case of Estonia is emblematic. The local far-right, including the Blue Awakening movement affiliated with EKRE, extensively uses highly symbolic appearances such as torch rallies to celebrate and commemorate important days of the national independence. The symbols of Blue Awakening include clear references to the North (including the North Star used by ancient Estonian seafarers to navigate) and a re-actualised version of pre-Christian neo-pagan mythology largely grounded in Finno-Ugrian cultural heritage, challenging Estonia’s belonging to the European mainstream as exemplified by the EU.

The Estonian national populists’ attempts to reach beyond the politics of the territorial *status quo* also translate into a peculiar vision of political space at Europe’s margins. Relying upon their connections with like-minded groups in other Baltic states, particularly Poland, Blue Awakening appears to be in sympathy with the historically Polish-based project of the Intermarium. This project envisages the reshuffling of the existing system of blocs and loyalties in Central and Eastern Europe to create an alliance of countries from the Baltic to the Black Seas as a potential counter-balance to both Western and Russia-dominated institutions. The Intermarium project, promoted by the online platform The New Nationalism, aligns Baltic, Polish and CEE nationalists against the dual threat of Western ‘ultra-liberalism’ and the ‘Eastern despotism’ of Russia (Wierenga 2017). It envisages an EU of voluntary cooperation among nation-states and a different Europe that is more right-wing, more socially conservative and more nationalist. The Intermarium, being particularly popular among national conservative forces (Chodakiewicz 2012, Kubik 2020), may offer a rich playground for right-wing ‘aesthetic populism’, populist, neo-traditionalist imageries and mythologised narratives.

Such a recalibrated analytical focus, demonstrates vividly how an interdisciplinary sensitivity to cultural issues can run in parallel with and enrich more conventional political science understandings of populism and its drivers, highlighting that there may be unexplored cultural and popular cultural phenomena, underpinning other forms of populism such as the illiberal populist left discussed earlier in this paper.

2.5 Looking beyond parties to understand populist politics: the Church as an important piece of the populist puzzle in Serbian, Croatian and Polish societies

An important part of populist parties’ strategies and discourses is their reliance on various segments of civil society (Greskovits 2020, Ślarzyński 2017). Non-governmental organisations, civic associations, syndicates and, in particular, the Church are common pieces of the populist puzzle because they support political elites and are also a channel of communication between the elites and the wider social class. The citizens of post-communist countries generally express low levels of religiosity and declare that religion does not play an important role in their lives (PEW 2009:81).

However, the situation is different in some parts of the region. There is a very high degree of religiosity in Polish society, while in the former Yugoslavia the Church played an important role in the creation of national (Croatian or Serbian) identity and the Churches as well as religiosity continue to play a significant role in these societies.

Right-wing populist political elites have often relied on the Church because it has great influence in society and plays an important role in the spreading of populist narratives about the necessity of the political representation of the ‘common people’. The Church also participates in the re-traditionalisation (promoting its own version of neo-



traditionalism) process in these countries, which prevents political emancipation and development of a critical approach to populism. This is why we have focused on the analysis of the role of the Church in the growing thick, right-wing populism in Serbia, Croatia and Poland.

The shifting position of the Church in Central and South-Eastern Europe – traditionally a repository of nationalism and traditionalism – highlights the ways in which social and civil society organisations contribute to the development of thick populist discourse and integrate into the power structures established by ruling populist parties.

In the late 1980s, especially after the collapse of the socialist federal state, the Church in the post-Yugoslav countries returned to the public and political space and the process of desecularisation began. Compared to other Central and SEE countries, this process was similar in its basic features, albeit delayed and relatively fast. However, one major difference is evident in this process in Serbia. The strong influence of the wars in the former Yugoslavia marked the first phase of the relationship between nation and religion in a twofold way: 1) national identity intertwined with religious identity; and 2) religion became a distinguishing marker between major constitutive ethno-national groups in the post-Yugoslav space (see further Drezgić 2009, 18-19; Ivezović 2012). Empirical research shows that, burdened by the social crisis, the economic crisis, lost jobs, the massive refugee crisis that left people displaced without homes or economic security, and civilian casualties during the war, the citizens of the post-Yugoslav countries ‘were ready’ to turn to religion and church discourses (Vukomanović, 2014; Blagojević 2006).

While the Croatian Catholic Church (CCC) acted from the start as a partner of the newly formed Croatian Democratic Union (CDU), which had won the first free elections in 1990, the ‘return’ of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was a surprising phenomenon for sociologists and political scientists. The first multi-party elections brought to power the regime of Slobodan Milošević, which firmly adhered to an atheist ideology and propagated the separation of church and state. In addition, a fast desecularisation process unfolded in Serbia, which differed from desecularisation in other Central and South-East European countries. After four decades of the complete marginalisation of religion in Serbia, in the 1990s and 2000s surveys showed a high rate of religiosity, which had increased from 10% in the socialist period all the way to 80% (Blagojević 2006). In that process, the SOC flourished as the keeper of the Serbian collective entity in the context of the social crisis, presenting itself as a bearer of an authentic national identity. It reduced the concept of belonging to the nation to a black-and-white ethno-religious matrix: ‘being a Serb means being Orthodox’ (Radic & Vukomanović 2014, 181-182).

From the fall of Yugoslavia until 2019, the SOC has consistently advocated anti-modernistic, Eurosceptic, anti-European integration, homophobic and anti-abortion standpoints. Firstly, the SOC representatives refer to ‘the people’ as ‘a metaphysical category, an undifferentiated group or “mass”, a concept that is absolutely compatible with its “tribal” character’ (Radic and Vukomanović, 2014: 201). The SOC has continuously acted according to what Brubaker has singled out as the main features of populism – ‘ambiguity’ and ‘two-dimensionality’ (see Brubaker 2019). Thus, the SOC acted as a mediator between ‘the people’ and the political elite, distancing itself from the ‘corrupted elite’ of Milošević’s regime, supporting the poor, naïve and betrayed ‘people’, and also being the second most important power in Serbia, in numerous cases acting as a ‘consultant’ to the governments of Mirko Cvetković and Vojislav Koštunica, as well as to presidents Boris Tadić and Tomislav Nikolić.

The clericalisation of the Croatian society was grounded in deep connections of the Croatian nation-building process with their medieval history and the traditional role of the Catholic Church as partner of the State. Franjo Tuđman, a historian by profession, headed the CDU using the populist matrix under which the CDU was portrayed as the ‘true Croatian people’ in contrast to the dominant Serbian elite, which was seen as the main threat to the survival of the Croatian nation. The CCC supported the Croats both during the war and afterwards (*Domoljubi* movement of war veterans) but it never neglected its humanitarian charitable duties. As a result, the CCC has been socially integrated in the newly established Croatian society and it has dominated the political and public spheres in the last decade. Still the moral authority of the CCC suffered as a result of its alliance with the HDZ (Grzymała-Busse 2017: 145).

The Catholic Church is also a very active political actor in Poland. As is the case with the former Yugoslav countries, its importance is historically rooted. During the partitions of Poland, the Catholic community was often regarded as the only conserver of Polish national identity under Russian and German domination. The Church played a similar role during communist rule, ultimately becoming one of the actors involved in the negotiations between the communist regime and the opposition in the late 1980s (Koseła 2003, Porter-Szűcs 2011, Ramet and Borowik, eds. 2017). Since 1989, the Catholic Church has remained active in Polish politics, supporting certain political parties, movements and



legislative initiatives. Even now, it is still regarded as the guardian of Polish identity and culture, an almost uncontested part of Polishness (Kotwas and Kubik 2019). Interestingly, the majority of Poles, even those who declare to be believers, say that the Church plays ‘too great a role in their country’s political life’ (PEW 2009: 81, CBOS 2015: 4).

There is a strong alliance between the ruling coalition led by Law and Justice and the Church hierarchy. The Church insists on preserving the existing abortion law or even making it more restrictive as well as continuing religious education in public schools. However, the Church in Poland is also considerably divided. It includes a conservative faction that is strongly critical of Western Europe and a more liberal and pro-European one. The conservative part of the Church hierarchy as well as ultra-Catholic civil society groups regard the European Union as a propagator of postmodernism, secularisation and so-called ‘LGBT ideology’ (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Since 2015 it has been increasing its influence, owing to the support of the ruling Law and Justice party.

In the ‘fairly secularised’ Hungary, ‘right-wing populist parties cannot afford to appear in front of the electorate as political representatives of churches or religious values’, as Ádám and Bozóki (2016: 99) argue. Instead, the ruling right-wing party Fidesz employs religious symbols selectively in constructing a secular religion that has at its centre the celebration of the nation, understood as the ‘ordinary’ people. Already in the 2006–2010 period, Fidesz employed anti-elitist rhetoric directed against ‘new aristocrats,’ ‘opulent millionaires,’ ‘loafers’ and ‘swindlers,’ who exploit ordinary Hungarians. The frequently used ‘the establishment versus the people’ dichotomy was mainly directed against the international economic and cultural elites and their local representatives: the ‘foreign-minded’ cosmopolitan leftists and liberals. After becoming the de facto political elite, the party intensified its criticisms of various international agencies, Brussels and Washington and engaged in a paternalistic defense of its ‘own people’ against powerful foreigners, cultivating religious leaders but relying on religious symbolism with restraint.

Anti-gender and anti-LGBT rhetoric is common to the discourse of the churches in Poland and the former Yugoslav space, while a similar line of arguments can also be found in the other countries of the region (Slovakia, Austria, Bulgaria). However, the alignment between populist parties and the Orthodox Church in Poland, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has become increasingly assertive and socially conservative, which has roots in an influential version of national tradition, is not replicated in all post-communist states. In Hungary, as noted above, the situation is more complex, while in the Czech Republic left populists have shown little interest in aligning with the social conservative stances of the Catholic Church, which reflects the relatively marginal role of Catholicism in Czech nationalism and national identity. Slovakia’s *Smer* – while willing to accommodate and embrace social conservatism – places the Catholic Church outside the coalition and the vision of Slovak society it seeks to build. Churches in Serbia, Croatia and Poland gave additional legitimacy to right-wing populist regimes, as they gave them an aura of traditionalism and continuity that was very much needed for attracting voters.

3. Conclusions

Lessons learned and tentative conclusions

There are many differences among post-communist countries in CE and SEE (section 2.1), but some shared elements of populism in these regions can be observed: the ability of populist parties in these countries to occupy mainstream positions (section 2.2) and often to be in power (section 2.3). In order to understand these successes of populists in CE and SEE, particularly when they espouse thick, right-wing versions of this ideology, in CE and SEE we highlight the importance of cultural factors (certain traditions) (section 2.4) as well as the support of some ‘cultural’ civil society actors, such as various churches (section 2.5), in these successes. Such factors and organizations often act as vectors of and vehicles for neo-traditionalism. Understanding populism in these terms is not just necessary for understanding social and political dynamics of the particular region we study. Such an understanding can enrich the debate on populism’s rise and consequences, by providing us with a perspective on this phenomenon that is to some extent different from and complementary to the one dominated by the frame of reference drawn from the party-centred literatures embedded in the experience of Western Europe.

The analysis of the experience of Central and South-Eastern Europe demonstrates that populism, even in Europe, is a broader and more complex phenomenon than has been assumed in the studies that focus on the electoral rise of



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right-wing outsider parties, catalysed by the relatively recent process of socio-economic change or external economic and social shocks. In addition, the analysis of the emergence and development of populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe confirmed our expectation that, for a holistic study of populism in this part of Europe, it is not enough to use the experience and theoretical framework created for the purpose of researching populism in Western Europe but it is also necessary to formulate a new approach based on the specific historical and contemporary geopolitical context in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The region demonstrates how populist parties can emerge as part of the mainstream. This does not simply imply that such political players are able to win votes or form sometimes long-lasting governments. It also shows the durability of (proto)populist traditions that can be mobilised to mimic and subvert more moderate political traditions, including those of the centre, centre-left and centre-right, heavily relied on by the elites responsible for the process of democratisation and Europeanisation. Indeed, the Europeanisation project has offered rich, new opportunities for populist parties of all shades, providing a convenient target of ‘alien’ and threatening liberal elites. Targeting these elites becomes easier when domestic opponents are weak(ened) or exhausted, although few populist parties seek the break-up of or exit from the Union, although they often challenge the core values of the EU such as the rule of law or the protection of minorities.

The preliminary empirical analysis of populism in Central and South-Eastern Europe carried out in this Working Paper has shown that these countries also foster a distinct populist discourse based on the dichotomy between the ‘honest people’ and the ‘corrupt elites’ (as is the case in Western European countries) and that there is a strategy of presenting political opponents as enemies. However, what our analysis has also shown is that some populists in Central and South-East European countries incorporate ideas of party pluralism, democracy, free market and affirmation of the EU into a populist amalgam, but others challenge these ideas while performing a balancing act of appearing to be “good” citizens of the Union.

Importantly, our approach highlights the need for a more multi-disciplinary approach to political populism: put simply, to understand political populism, we need to do political science, focusing on parties and voters, *and* to move beyond political science to examine historical and cultural patterns that have also shaped the electoral and political rise of populism. One of the central concepts of our project, neo-traditionalism, allows us to focus on the mechanisms of cultural reproduction that are behind the rise of pro-populist sentiments but also directs our attention to the spread of populist tropes and imaginaries in popular culture, as a result of the determined efforts by various cultural entrepreneurs. As previously pointed out, populism is not only a discursive strategy used by elites to attract voters on elections; it is also a thin-centred ideology that needs to be ‘thickened’ and in this process it relies on different sources of legitimisation, such as the specific elements of popular cultures. It can also utilise religious themes, as is the case of several states in Central and South-Eastern Europe, where a very important pillar of populism is the Church. This particularly refers to the case of ‘thick’ right-wing populism and centre-right populism (which are more dominant than left-wing populism).

We may also wish to consider the broader lessons that can be drawn from the region’s experience. These, we suggest, need to go beyond the notion of Central and South-Eastern Europe as a distinct and troublesome periphery in need of astute political management. Without wanting to overplay the similarities across the subregions of Europe or deny their distinct histories and political trajectories, we think there may be both policy and research lessons transferable to other contexts, including that of Western Europe: the need to consider populist trends within established mainstream parties, on both left and right; revisiting the possibility that there may be recurrent populist traditions within, as is strongly suggested by Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser (2016); and better integrating the study of populist cultures and subcultures with the analysis of the party-electoral arena.

Finally, it should be emphasised once again that, although there are similarities among the forms of populism in the Central and South-East European countries (as our comparative analysis has shown), one should still be careful when setting up a unique theoretical model to explain the emergence and expansion of populist leaders and parties in these countries. There are contextual specificities that should be taken into account when analysing these countries individually. In order to design remedies, mostly in our forthcoming *Foresight Scenarios*, we will analyse both general patterns and case-specific phenomena.



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