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**The theory and practice of populist electoral
autocracy: Hungary from the perspective of Central and
Eastern Europe**

– Doctoral theses –

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1 THE TOPIC AND PURPOSE OF THE DISSERTATION

The aim of the dissertation is to describe and understand the populist autocratization that has been taking place in Hungary since 2010, which can be considered more or less a regional outlier case. *How can we interpret the modus operandi of the Orbán regime established after 2010? How does it differ from the era of 1989–2010? How was the Orbán regime established and how the time period 2010–2022 can be structured? What are the general-regional and the specific factors that explain the establishment and everyday functioning of the Orbán regime? Finally, what long-term conclusions can be drawn from all this?* The main objective of the dissertation is to answer these research questions both at theoretical and empirical levels by presenting the theory and practice of *populist electoral autocracy* (PEA).

The topic of the dissertation is related to the most researched areas of contemporary political science, namely, the research of democratization, hybrid regimes and populism, seeking synergy between these areas. An important insight from the democratization studies is that, in contrast to their predecessors in the 20th century, the last decades have witnessed a decrease in the proportion of closed autocracies without genuine multiparty elections, and the increase in the number of electoral autocracies which hold multiparty elections, but their democratic and competitive spirit is hollowed out through systematic manipulation. As a result, academic focus has increasingly turned to the techniques of manipulation of contestation and the mechanism of autocratic stabilization. One of the key concepts of the dissertation, electoral autocracy, was created by Andreas Schedler (2002, 2013) for the purpose of capturing these aspects by emphasising that, although these autocracies maintain the democratic and representative institutions for legitimacy reasons, behind the façades they exercise autocratic political power. Therefore, this is a qualitatively different type of regime than the dissertation's concept of pluralist democracy which is based on polyarchy, the famous model of Robert A. Dahl (1971, 1989, and 1998).

Another key concept of the dissertation is populism, understood as an inherently anti-pluralist, thereby autocratic interpretation of democracy and representation.

The most important theoretical innovation of the dissertation is that it links systematically the electoral autocracies to a more robust understanding of populism, synthesising the strengths of these different research fields. The systematic linking of the literatures of the hybrid regime and populism in the broad sense, focusing on mechanisms of autocratic stabilization and democracy theory, and the use of the resulting combined explanatory power is a rather new and underexploited field of research not only in Hungarian but also in international political science. As a result of linkage, I claim that the model of PEA is the paradigmatic type of the spreading contemporary electoral autocracies, therefore a detailed analysis of the Hungarian case, which became electoral autocracy from liberal democracy in a few years, has a general significance that goes beyond itself.

2 THE METHODOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

It is important to stress that the research questions at the beginning of the dissertation and theses were not written with a hypothesis-testing aim as the dissertation is essentially an exploratory and interpretative (della Porta, 2008) work. The theoretical part covers areas of political theory such as democracy, hybrid regime and populism research. I carried out the linking of the complex research areas through traditional literature reviews. The key point of theoretical and conceptual framework is the construction of the model of populist electoral autocracy (PEA). The conceptualisation and operationalization of this model determined the subsequent structure of the empirical sections, in particular the Hungarian case study. The comparative research covering 12 countries including Hungary belongs to the group of research with few cases ('small N studies'). This is justified by the fact that this research is still a rather small 'database', and I have relied on deeper qualitative and interpretative approaches instead of a statistical analysis of various dependent and independent variables.

In terms of qualitative sources, I relied on primary sources (politicians' statements and official documents, semi-structured interviews at certain points) and other secondary sources such as relevant case and country studies related to the topics and dimensions covered, as well as comparative literatures on the whole or part of the region. I could not aim for a comprehensive collection of sources as the wide range of topics and cases required an optimizing logic in the research. In addition, the dissertation also builds on quantitative data, mainly on democracy indices, hence it is possible to exploit the advantages of the combined use of different methods (Almond et al. 2006). Among the group of democracy indices I primarily used Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), which is based on the same Dahlian tradition and concept of polyarchy that I use in the dissertation to draw a boundary between democracy and autocracy, and which is trying to find a way

out of the ‘terminological Babel’ with the help of systematic decomposition of the concept of democracy by creating its own historical, multidimensional, disaggregated and transparent approach with hundreds of indicators (Coppedge et al. 2011). However, because of various shortcomings of these types of data (permanent delay, binding force of previous assessments, aggregation, scale, transparency, bias, inconsistency between the concepts and the measurement etc.), I have used V-Dem data primarily for illustrative purposes. As far as the concept of populism, although several quantitative databases have been created, they are based on the mainstream approach of populism in contrast with the dissertation, and provide too general information. Consequently, in this case I also relied basically on qualitative approaches in the empirical parts. In light of the above, the multi-methodology approach of the dissertation builds on theoretical and empirical parts, as well as qualitative and quantitative sources, which can be considered complex and novel in several respects.

Not counting the introductory and concluding chapters, the dissertation consists of four bigger parts. The first theoretical part clarifies the basic concepts and presents the model of populist electoral autocracy (PEA) to provide the analytical foundation for the empirical parts. In doing so, I first deal with the conceptualization of democracy and autocracy, and develop the regime typology of the dissertation, with a special emphasis on the dilemmas related to the difficulties of demarcation. Secondly, I extend the regime-level perspective with the phenomenon of populism, of which I give a brief overview from the perspective of democratic theory, then examine the relationship of populism and (the crisis of) democracy, and finally, I conceptualize populism. Lastly, focusing on the relationship between populism and autocratization and examining the symbiosis between populism and electoral autocracies from a regime stability perspective, I outline the PEA model.

In the first empirical part, I focus on the last three decades (1989–2022) of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in a variable-oriented, exploratory research to empirically grasp the previously outlined theoretical-conceptual distinctions, contextualise the Hungarian political processes discussed in the next part, and examine the interrelations between populism and autocratization. By studying 11 countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland and Serbia) of CEE region, I explore factors and patterns that can explain the mechanisms of democratization and autocratization, the role of populism in these processes, the modus operandi of different types of regimes including PEA. In these wide-angle comparative chapters, I deal firstly with the more or less resilient liberal democracies (the Baltic States, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), then the low quality but relatively stable electoral democracies (Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria), and finally, the front runners of populist autocratization which led to regime changes (Poland, Serbia). More detailed analyses of some populist autocrats in power can be found in each group.

The only detailed case study of the dissertation is the second empirical part which focuses on Hungary in the same time period (from regime change in 1989 to parliamentary elections in 2022), first from regime level, then from populist perspective. These chapters focus primarily on the substantive aspects of political contestation such as freedom of association and political public sphere instead of formal criteria of polyarchy such as suffrage, elected officials and procedurally clean elections. The main emphasis of the

regime level and populist-focused analyses is on the post-2010 Orbán regime, since the latter is an empirically clear (paradigmatic) case of the model and ideal type of PEA. Therefore, this case study can make significant contribution to understanding contemporary (electoral) autocracies in general. According to the Hungarian case study, the rather depoliticized liberal democracy became extremely polarized and unstable in the second half of the 2000s before it rapidly collapsed in the early 2010s, while the emergence of PEA can be registered between 2014 and 2018. As a result, the 2022 elections have already taken place in a fairly consolidated PEA.

In the last part of the dissertation I analyse and interpret the most important general (regional) and specifically Hungarian lessons, interrelations and implications of the empirical results. In doing so, in contrast to the unsophisticated (democratic) ‘backsliding paradigm’, I illustrate the more nuanced regional dynamics, the nature of autocratization mechanisms and the role of populism in them. I also draw to certain aspects of the political and economic transformation after 1989 and the (dys)functioning of the new democracies, in particular the depoliticising trends which contributed to the success of ‘populist backlash’, especially after the global financial crisis in 2008. Moreover, I highlight some specific Hungarian factors such as the domestic political crisis of the mid-2000s that preceded the global crisis, the nature of the pre-2010 political system, the sudden imbalance between the increasingly growing populist polarization after 2006, the breakdown of elite consensus, as well as some aspects of political culture and voter behaviour. This part ends with an outlook on the Orbán regime as a populist electoral autocracy.

3 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework is based on the ‘mid-range’ concept of electoral democracy instead of liberal democracy. Agreeing with Claude Lefort (1988), I think that democracy can also be endangered by an over-emphasis of liberal principles, especially if the predominance of liberal logic and institutions reduces political struggle to a mere alignment of particular interests, viewing popular will and common good as a fiction (Abst–Rummens, 2007), and constrains these by its over-institutionalized and depoliticized nature, which triggers populism that promises re-politicization. Therefore, in contrast to polyarchy, an optimising approach is needed here, because the liberal principles can strengthen electoral democracy through important guard rails on one hand, but these can undermine democracy and lead it into crisis on the other hand.

At the most abstract level, I conceptualized (electoral) democracy as a polyarchy that attributes power to the people with a limited majority rule (Sartori, 1987). In my view, representatives of the demos are accountable to the extent that the political preferences and beliefs of society formulate, express and take into account in pluralist, free and fair circumstances. Consequently, the key aspect of democracy in my approach is the broader

context of popular will, namely the arena of politics and the nature of contestation. In light of the foregoing, I conceptualized (electoral) democracy with three formal (suffrage, elected officials and procedurally clean elections) and two substantial (freedom of association and political public sphere) criteria of political contestation. This definition makes elections meaningful with the term ‘democracy’ as the embodiment of the power and self-government of the people, and thus able to distinguish democracies from autocracies, in contrast to Schumpeterian minimalist approaches (Lührmann–Tannenberglindberg, 2018: 62–63). It is important to note that de jure competitive elections are not sufficient for democratic quality (Levitsky–Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013), since elections in themselves do not guarantee the accountability of the government, which is the ‘essence of democratic government’ (Pastor, 1999: 123). This conceptualization of democracy also explains the scope of the empirical analyses, which deals only marginally with the topics of rule of law, separation of powers, international level or corruption.

The dissertation pursues an essentially binary (democracy/autocracy) approach to regime typology, therefore, it is critical of ‘tripartite’ (democracy/mixed regimes/autocracies) approaches, because the cases of the latter group fall into one of the two main regime types. Two subtypes of democracy and autocracy can be distinguished as follows. Electoral autocracies hold de-facto multiparty elections for the chief executive, but they fall short of democratic standards due to significant irregularities, limitations on party competition or other violations of Dahl’s institutional requisites for democracies’ (Lührmann–Tannenberglindberg, 2018: 61). On the contrary, the key decision-makers are either not subjected to elections or there is no meaningful, de-facto competition in elections. Finally, liberal democracies not only hold de facto free and fair and multiparty elections and achieve a sufficient level of Dahlian dimensions of freedom of association (civil society defined in broad terms) and political public sphere, but they are characterized by the liberal principles, too (rule of law, civil liberties, separation of powers). The differentiating logic between i) closed and electoral autocracies is the existence of political competition, ii) electoral autocracies and electoral democracies is the nature of political competition, and iii) electoral and liberal democracies is the existence of liberal principles. In this framework, democratization means a significant and de facto increase in the fulfilment of the criteria of electoral democracy, while autocratization refers to processes in the opposite direction. The binary logic of democratization/autocratization is more fruitful than the other approaches which can be incorporated in the previous conceptual framework (Lührmann–Lindberg, 2019).

While multi-party elections are held in electoral autocracies, their democratic spirit is suffocated through severe and systematic manipulation (Schedler, 2013: 55). Therefore, these elections, like other democratic and representative institutions do not guarantee the democratic quality of those regimes, but to remain in power, while they provide quasi-authorization in the quasi-democratic façade making ‘for lovely decorations in the shop windows of authoritarian regimes’ (Schedler, 2013: 69). Holding multi-party elections poses a real risk to electoral autocrats, as even the most uneven contest can carry the risk of electoral defeat (or declining support) and thus the lack or weakening of popular feedback. However, they minimise the costs of this risk by manipulating the nature of political contestation through the dimensions of freedom of association and political public sphere.

As a result, the very certain quasi-democratic legitimacy gained by electoral success fairly outweighs the costs of the risk of real multi-party elections. To maximise their chances of electoral success, electoral autocrats differ from other non-democracies in the manner they shape the institutional arena of authoritarian politics. They establish the entire set of formal representative institutions we associate with liberal democracy – while deploying a broad range of manipulative strategies that prevent them from being effective.’ (Schedler 2013: 54).

My definition of populism consists of the following elements: i) Manichean worldview and political identification based on the existential threat to the political community, ii) imagination of the homogeneous people and its will, iii) absolutization of the people and its will as morally superior, iv) moralising, extremely exclusive representative logic with a radical leadership principle. It is important to note that my approach of populism is inherently anti-pluralist hence anti-democratic (Urbinati 1998, 2013, 2019; Müller, 2016; Abts–Rummens 2007), in contrast to the mainstream populism research that interprets populism as ‘democratic illiberalism’ (Mudde, 2004; Mudde–Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2019). The reason for this is that I consider ‘illiberal democracy’ as an oxymoron, which is not democracy at all but electoral autocracy. Moreover, I regard the homogenising and radical exclusive political logic of populism incompatible not only with the liberal but also with the Dahlian pluralist (electoral) democracy which is used in this dissertation. Since my definition of electoral democracy based on the combination of popular sovereignty with limited majority rule is inherently pluralist, it cannot correspond to the mainstream populism research’s concept of democracy as popular sovereignty with unlimited majority rule (Mudde–Kaltwasser, 2017: 80). Consequently, it would be rationally untenable to define democracy as an inherently pluralist regime (polyarchy) and populism as democratic anti-pluralism (and illiberalism).

1. Table: The model of the populist electoral autocracy (PEA)

| Dimensions | Description | Ideal type |
|---|--|---|
| <u>Existence of multi-party elections</u> | <i>Suffrage Elected officials Procedurally clean elections</i> | In PEA, the formal electoral criteria of democracy are essentially intact. <i>Qualitative assessment: yes/no</i> |
| <u>Hollowing out of the democratic political contestation</u> | <i>Freedom of association Political public sphere</i> | The PEA manipulates the substantive dimensions of democracy systematically (at regime level), which hollows out elections and political contestation. <i>This Qualitative assessment: yes/no</i> |
| <u>The populist nature of the regime</u> | <i>Manichean worldview and identification People-centrism Imagination of homogeneous people Exclusive representation</i> | The PEA is closer to the populist ideal type in all four dimensions. <i>Qualitative assessment: yes/no</i> |

Notes: own compilation

Finally, the model of populist electoral autocracy (PEA) synthesises the key concepts in a regime type (**1. Table**) in which the substantive dimensions of political competition (civil society and/or political public sphere) are hollowed out by the regime in order to prevent elections from being meaningful, while the regime can be characterized by populism with all its four dimensions. In the empirical parts, and especially in the Hungarian case study, I compared the ideal types of the different dimensions with concrete practices in a complex qualitative research.

In my opinion, populism plays a key role in creating an uneven playing field in political contestation and in autocratic regime stability. Moreover, because of the moral representative claim of populism, which cannot be disproven and provides charismatic legitimacy that goes beyond the formal-procedural legitimacy of democracy, it is even compatible with closed autocracies. Contrary to the mainstream populism research, the model of PEA explicitly focuses on the fact that populism can not only pose a threat to democracies by generating and amplifying polarizing tendencies, but it can also play a key role in autocratic transition and in stabilizing mechanisms of electoral autocracies in a number of ways. For example, the friend versus enemy logic of populism i) creates impenetrable cleavages in the society, which maintains a favourable political environment and antagonistic oppositions in the electoral arena, ii) serves as a source of legitimacy, and iii) can mask or even justify moral and political inequality with a pseudo-democratic language. Because of its importance in the mechanism of autocratic stability (Schedler, 2013; Gerschewski, 2013, 2018; Dukalskis–Gerschewski, 2017; Mazepus, 2017; Morgenbesser, 2017, 2020; Cassani–Tomini, 2019), the populist electoral autocracies are the paradigmatic type of the spreading contemporary electoral autocracies. The best known examples of PEA are Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, Aleksandar Vučić’s Serbia and Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines, while other examples include Vladimir Putin’s Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey, however, the latter regimes waver between electoral and closed types of autocracies.

In electoral autocracies, the electoral arena originally characterized by democratic contestation and investiture mutates into an arena of acclamation (Schedler, 2013: 91), which is favourable to the representative logic of populism. In the case of the appointment of the government in manipulated circumstances, the formally democratic investiture is rather a mere self-appointment of the leader, because procedurally ‘free elections with unfree opinion express nothing’ and ‘an empty sovereign who has nothing to say, without opinions of his own, is a mere ratifier, a sovereign of nothing’ (Sartori, 1987: 87). Related to this, the main function of populism is to create ‘populist myths’ (Casullo, 2020) and storytelling in order to facilitate the grant of popular approval with the assistance of the autocratic arsenal of the regime. The populist discourse is about an extraordinary crisis, and a heroic (and never-ending) struggle between the hero(s) and the foreign and domestic villains who threaten the unity and identity of the people.

4 FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

My empirical research on 12 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) building on the above-mentioned theoretical and conceptual framework found that the unsophisticated (Cianetti–Dawson–Hanley, 2018; Cianetti–Hanley, 2021; Cabada, 2021) ‘backsliding paradigm’ (Bermeo, 2016) is not plausible in the case of the CEE region as a whole, because the countries can be grouped under three main types. Although in the case of the more or less resilient liberal democracies (Baltic States, Slovenia, Czech Republic and Slovakia) are significant democratic dysfunctions such as ‘technocratic and ethnic hollowness’ (Cianetti, 2018), not only the criteria of electoral democracy but also those of liberal democracy (rule of law, civil liberties, separation of powers) can be considered as fulfilled. In contrast, Romania, Croatia and Bulgaria as relatively stable electoral democracies were protected against autocratic transitions by relevant institutions, or social discontent, or sometimes only by the relative balance of power of the main political-economic actors. Finally, populist autocrats in power generated regime-level changes in the 2010s in Hungary, Serbia and Poland, therefore these countries are the front runners of contemporary populist autocratization in the CEE region. However, Hungary is an outlier even in the latter group, as its regime-level trajectory after 2010 is a combination of Poland (from liberal to electoral democracy) and Serbia (from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy). Consequently, the Hungarian developments cannot be explained by general and regional trends alone.

There are important regional factors and patterns that can explain to a certain extent the general mechanisms of democratization and autocratization, the functioning of PEA and the Hungarian case. Firstly, the differentiated and gradual autocratization trends in CEE are typically accompanied by the phenomena of populism and ‘executive aggrandizement’ (Bermeo, 2016), and hollow out the substantive dimensions of democracy and political competition (civil society and political public sphere) instead of formal aspects. I have identified several regional characteristics in respect of mutually reinforcing phenomena of autocratization and populism. The most important factors are the simultaneous (Offe, 1991), elite-driven, and uncontestable nature of transition to democracy and market economy, which are presented as necessary interconnected with each other and with well-being (Dimitrova, 2018). Furthermore, an overemphasis on formal democratic institution has been a common feature of the CEE countries after 1989, which increased the level of technocratic politicisation. As a result, social discontent with economic policies and living standards, which the elites conflated with the democratic structures, was usually articulated against the existing democratic framework. For this reason, populist ‘backlash’ (Norris–Inglehart, 2019) catalysing mass discontent related to the Great Recession in 2008 particularly successfully should not be seen as a failure of (neo)liberalism (Dawson–Hanley, 2016), but as a consequence of its victory and hegemony (Krastev, 2007; Rupnik, 2018).

This is in line with the thoughts of Lefort (1988) mentioned earlier, that democracy can mutate both in the direction of depoliticisation due to the over-emphasis of liberal principles of democracy, as well as in the anti-pluralist direction of populism. The extent of

the opposite but interacting swings was increased by the fact that the significance of an increasingly multicultural West as a reference point for an increasingly homogenized CEE has been weakened, or even a ‘reverse imitation’ trend can be registered (Krastev, 2018; Krastev–Holmes, 2018). In addition to the performance of formal democratic and representative institutions, political cultural, historical and social factors such as the weakness of democratic traditions, the fragility of elite consensus and the existence and influence of informal structures have strong explanatory power. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that populist polarization correlated with autocratization, that is to say, the higher the level of polarization, the lower the level of democratic quality. However, this is not a causal relationship, as populist polarization (which, rather than democratic backsliding, can be seen as a general-regional trend since the late 2000s) has not always been accompanied by a decline in the quality of democracy. Moreover, it seems that the traditions of informal politics and the persistence of the topic corruption in public life, and the phenomena of personalisation and mediatisation accompanying populism are favourable conditions to populist autocratization. Finally, there are some characteristics of the CEE in historical perspective that are favourable to democratization, such as the sometimes surprisingly resilient democratic institutions, and the social discontent with living standards and corruption, or even openly with autocratic steps, which are constantly flaring up in the CEE (Dimitrova, 2018).

The Hungarian trends are similar to those of the CEE (and broader international) patterns in that autocratization accompanied by ‘executive aggrandizement’ and populism hollow out the substantive dimensions of democracy and contestation. Therefore, political competition can still be described as more or less democratic from a formal-procedural point of view since 2010 (EBESZ, 2014, 2018, 2022; Coppedge et al. 2022). Moreover, in the cases of the civil society and political public sphere as the key (substantive) dimensions of democracy, the most formal aspects (such as the mere existence of multi-party elections, the lack of party ban, freedom of discussion) have remained relatively intact. However, with regard to freedom of association, the autonomy of opposition parties from the ruling regime and the freedom of civil society in general has been significantly reduced by the government since 2010 to such an extent that they were no longer able to give genuine democratic meaning to the general elections 2018. As to the political public sphere in broad terms, in my view, by 2018, the erosion of its diversity and the scope of public criticism of the regime had reduced the level of civic autonomy and rationality to such an extent that has made real popular accountability impossible. Thus, by the end of the second term with constitutional majority (2014–2018), the democratic investiture guaranteed by an essentially free and fair political-electoral competition mutated into an arena of acclamation and de facto self-appointment of the leader, by (regime-level) manipulation of the substantive dimension of democracy. As a result, after the term 2010–2014, when the liberal pillars of post-1989 liberal democracy were dismantled (Kis, 2019; Kornai, 2011) which process is not detailed in this dissertation for conceptual choice, the Orbán regime became electoral autocracy by the 2018 elections. In relation to the autocratic transition in these years, among the attacks on civil society, the government actions in 2017 are worth mentioning, while in connection with the political public sphere, the new media war was

accelerated and became increasingly violent by the struggle with the former ally oligarch Lajos Simicska after 2015.

Populism, which can be seen as an interrelated and parallel phenomenon of autocratization in Hungary, became pervasive in the mid-2000s in the form of extreme polarization around the figures of Viktor Orbán and Ferenc Gyurcsány (the former was the leader of the opposition, while the latter was the Prime Minister at that time). In those years, Orbán's populism was the catalyst for the crisis of post-1989 liberal democracy and the fragile elite consensus protected by the 'soft guardrails' of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance (self-restraint) (Levitsky-Ziblatt, 2018), on one hand, and the greatest beneficiary of these crisis, on the other hand. After coming to power, Orbán used populism with the help of state's resources as a quasi-democratic software and form of justification to dismantle liberal democracy and ensure the autocratic transition. During the establishment of electoral autocracy in 2014–2018, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis, the previously domestic-focused enemy images of populist discourse became internationalised, which helped to preserve the (now globalised) anti-establishment populist logic as incumbent. Since then, populism has functioned as an important tool of regime stability by creating and maintaining favourable political cleavages and identities with blind faith in the populist leader.

The main characteristics of Orbán's PEA are the permanent state of exception, the struggle between the increasingly internationalised elite as enemy and the populist leader as a hero of folk-tale fighting for the people with a personal and blank cheque authorization, hollowing out the democratic contestation and hence real popular accountability, the use of formal institutions as weapons, and their further complementation with informal dimensions of power. With the help of institutional and economic resources, the electoral autocratic hardware ensures regime-level manipulation of political competition through hollowing out civil society and the political public sphere and the effective use of populism. The autocratic control of the political public sphere is particularly efficient due to blind faith in the populist leader as a consequence of populist polarization. The polarizing nature of populism's homophily-generating tribalism is key to the disintegration of a shared perception of a common reality. Continuous electoral victories in manipulated circumstances and an effective use of populism provide the Orbán regime not only with quasi-democratic legitimacy, but also with renewed access to resources and thus with durable survival.

This unprecedented degree of populist autocratization in the European Union and in the CEE, not counting Serbia, can be explained with some specific domestic processes beyond the above-mentioned general and regional trends. Firstly, it should be noted that the period of the mid-2000s could be considered as a 'critical juncture' (Capoccia-Ziblatt, 2010), when Hungary was already in the midst of serious political turbulence with increasing political polarization, even before the emerging social discontent caused by the Great Recession in 2008. During that period, the short-lived equilibrium of populist polarization ('competing populism', Palonen, 2009) that had temporarily replaced the dominant liberal-technocratic way of post-1989 politics (Korkut, 2012) was radically disturbed due to unexpected austerity measures after the 2006 elections, and especially due to the leaks of Gyurcsány's scandalous Öszöd speech in autumn that year. The success of populism,

catalysing and channelling the mass discontent of elite-driven and technocratic reforms forced without public and political support became an insurmountable flood-wave against post-1989 liberal democracy, which was exacerbated by the effects of the Great Recession after 2008. As a result, Orbán's populism gained constitutional majority in 2010, which is exceptional from regional perspective.

The austerity measures and structural reforms that triggered political turbulence and disturbance of equilibrium of populist polarization were necessary because of the permanent budgetary overspending after 1989, and they were unexpected for the society because of the dishonest behaviour of the political elite of the millennium with a competition of irresponsible promises. At the root of these are the prevalent discourse of regime transition in 1989 claiming that democracy and market economy are necessary interconnected with each other and with well-being, on one hand, and the uncontested nature of policies that cannot satisfy social demands related to this allegedly necessary interconnection, on the other hand. The depoliticising, irresponsible and dishonest (toward to their constituents) elite consensus collapsed in 2006 during a period of significant intensification of populist polarization. The populist opposition with the promise of re-politicisation of politics (Antal, 2019) was able to profit from the political turbulence caused partly by itself. In sum, the main factors that prepared the ground in Hungary for an unprecedented level of autocratization in the CEE were the depoliticising nature of post-1989 liberal democracy, the intensification of populist polarization in the 2000s and the collapse of its equilibrium in 2006, the social impacts of the Great Recession after 2008 and the electoral victory with constitutional majority of the populist opposition in 2010. After coming to power, the new political elite of the Orbán regime replaced the previous dominant liberal-technocratic consensus with a consensus on autocratization, accompanied by further intensification of populist polarization. The latter not only continued to remove significant areas from the scope of citizen control (like the liberal-technocratic politics between 1989 and 2010), but also sought to make the government and the emerging populist electoral autocratic regime de facto unaccountable and non-removable.

Social and historical factors such as political culture and voter behaviour facilitated the deepening of the crisis of post-1989 liberal democracy and the intensifying populist polarization, and the emergence of PEA in the 2010s. More specifically, I highlighted the importance of democratic education, and anti-Western sentiments in society that are stronger for historical reasons in comparison to other countries of the region (Enyedi, 2016). In addition, there is a specific co-existence with unprecedentedly high proportions of extremely polarized and populist antidemocratic social groups, on one hand, and passive and politically alienated ones, on the other hand (Sík, 2017). The voters of the former are closed into political camps that build on mutual and moral rejection with a radically different perception of reality, while the latter group do not participate in public life, because of the alienating impacts of the former groups and inadequate political socialization mechanisms. Those of the lowest social status, Roma, youth and some highly qualified people are over-represented in the passive social groups (Szabó, 2015).

It is crucial for the prospects of Orbán's PEA which secured its fourth consecutive term with constitutional majority in the 2022 elections that the opposition are lagging behind events without a proper and timely understanding of the nature of (changing) regime

around it, and its own situation and role in it. Electoral cooperation (only implemented in 2022) might have prevented the autocratic transition in 2014, and it could have stalled or even reversed the consolidation of Orbán's PEA, but since 2018, a real alternative to the regime cannot be expected with the partially co-opted and regime-compatible opposition. With the maximisation of the exploitation of the rally 'round the flag effect caused by the Ukraine–Russia war, the Orbán's PEA not only discredited the belated electoral cooperation of the opposition, but also provided an opportunity to rebuild the so called 'central political force field' in the party system where marginal and non-compatible (and increasingly co-opted) left- and right-wing parties of the opposition face a central governing power. A real alternative to the regime which takes the logic of populist electoral autocracy seriously trying to win the 'meta-game level struggle' (Schedler, 2013) over the basic rules of political competition, has to win not only within the fluid and unpredictable framework that openly serves the survival of the autocratic regime (Unger, 2022), but also against the party co-opted and regime-compatible façade opposition. In light of the last years of the examined period, the chances of the emergence of a successful domestic alternative to the regime that seems to be almost non-removable due to external crises and factors are extremely slim in the near future. Instead, the end of the seemingly consolidated Orbán PEA could come from the directions of succession crises or the slow erosion of the regime. Although the erosion could be accelerated by the successful appearance of a political outsider who convincingly rejects and demands the replacement of both the government and the façade opposition, but in this two-front war, it is extremely difficult to create a successful alternative in a longer term perspective. However, as for the potential erosion of Orbán's PEA, it is also worth considering from a historical point of view, because the contemporary autocratization is accompanied by still existing waves of democratization, especially from 1989, and the fact that experiencing such a crisis could have an 'immune-boosting' impact on a future democracy. The co-existence of various waves of democratization and autocratization leaves the future open-ended in the longer term, which tends to limit the short-term impacts of current political decisions, on the one hand, but increase their importance in the longer term. Finally, the results of the dissertation and the model of PEA could be applied to broader empirical research projects beyond the CEE region and examination period. Furthermore, the dissertation as a scientifically sound assessment of the political situation could be a starting point for further research directions such as exploring various scenarios of future democratic transition, or outlining the ways in which democratic consolidation, by drawing lessons from the last three decades, could be more successful after a democratic transition.

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