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Populism in Central and Eastern Europe

The Revival of History?

A Theoretical Approach to the Causes of Populism in
the Region

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Abstract:

In recent year, Central and Eastern Europe has experienced a wave of populist ascent that has swamped the mainstream discourse with radical notions and has led to a shift to the right in many countries of the region. Victor Orbán's endeavour of transforming Hungary into an 'illiberal democracy' is expressive of a larger trend of democratic hollowing and backsliding in postcommunist European states. Today, more than twenty years after Francis Fukuyama predicted liberalism's ultimate victory against its competing ideologies and with that 'the end of history', liberalism faces a powerful challenger in Central and Eastern Europe: populism. This paper travels back to the days of liberal triumph and explores to what extent the political-economic transformation of post-communist states has influenced populism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Building on Karl Polanyi's 'Double Movement', populism in Central and Eastern Europe is conceptualized as a countermovement against the hegemony of Western European liberalism. While resolving political and institutional differences between the democratic West and the communist East, I will argue, the transformation has not managed to resolve the normative hierarchy innate in the systemic confrontation between East and West. Instead, this hierarchy persists *within* the logic of democratic liberalism, perpetuating a power imbalance between the 'accomplished and normative' Western European version of liberalism and the 'defective and still becoming' Eastern European version thereof. Populist actors increasingly refuse to accept the Western liberal model as the normative ideal and instead draft their own version of democracy, abandoning many of what the West understands as liberalism's core concepts.

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1. Introduction

In an hitherto unprecedented measure, EU member states have recently activated the rule of law mechanism to freeze funds for Hungary worth € 6.3 billion (Tagesschau 2022, n.p.). Three months before this historic decision, in September 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution attesting to Hungary “a breakdown in democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary, turning the country into a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy” (European Parliament 2022, p. 28). For more than a decade, Victor Orbán and his Fidesz have strived to undermine democratic institutions, checks and balances, judicial independence, the freedom of press and minority rights. This trend prompted Freedom House to downgrade Hungary to a ‘partly free’ democracy in 2020 (Freedom House 2020, n.p.). The ‘illiberal turn’ in Hungary epitomises the populist threat to liberal democracy like no other case in Europe. It is by far not the only one, however. Orbán’s ‘illiberal democracy’ is expressive of a larger trend of ‘hollowing and backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe¹ that incrementally undermines the very essence of liberalism: freedom. Today, more than twenty years after Francis Fukuyama predicted liberalism’s ultimate victory against its competing ideologies and with that ‘the end of history’, liberalism faces a powerful challenger in CEE: populism. Explaining the *raison d’être* of this confrontation – and entangled with that populist success in CEE itself – requires the researcher to travel back in time to the days of liberal victory and the all-encompassing transformation it triggered.

The analysis in this paper departs from the observation that many of the existing explanatory patterns cannot adequately account for populist success and impact in CEE as many of the approaches a) focus on the phenomenon’s manifestations in the Western hemisphere which differ fundamentally from Eastern European populism, b) prioritize one dimension at the expense of others (e.g., the economic dimension), and/ or c) neglect the context of emergence. Any account of populism in CEE, however, must be sensitive to the context; to the multiple transformations on the social, political, and economic dimension that shape the political systems and societies until today. The shared experience

¹ In the following abbreviated: CEE.

of systemic transformation might be the key to solving the riddle of populist success in CEE. Hence, this paper asks the question: ‘To what extent has the political-economic transformation of post-communist states influenced populism in CEE?’

The argument put forward here proposes to conceptualize populism in CEE as a countermovement against the hegemony of Western European liberalism. While resolving political and institutional differences between the democratic West and the communist East, I will argue, the transformation has not managed to resolve the normative hierarchy innate in the systemic confrontation between East and West. Instead, this hierarchy persists *within* the logic of democratic liberalism, perpetuating a power imbalance between the ‘accomplished and normative’ Western European version of liberalism and the ‘defective and still becoming’ Eastern European version thereof. Populist actors increasingly refuse to accept the Western liberal model as the normative ideal and instead draft their own version, abandoning many of what the West understands as liberalism’s core concepts.

This paper’s aim is not to provide a holistic explanatory approach on populism in CEE. Instead, it aims to contribute to the academic debate on the phenomenon’s emergence by adding a building block to the theoretical discussion. This endeavour requires four major steps that reflect in the structure of this paper. First, the phenomenon will be defined, outlined, and differentiated from its Western European counterpart. The value of existing explanatory approaches will be assessed in a second step. Third, a theoretical framework for the analysis will be proposed before the above introduced argument will be developed in a fourth step.

While the scope of the paper is limited to right-wing *populist* parties, two reasons render it necessary to grant some attention to the *radical right*. First, as Bustikova (2016) notes, the boundaries between mainstream parties such as Fidesz, PiS or SMER and radical right parties are not clear-cut (Bustikova 2016, p. 18). Second, as Minkenberg (2017) observes, Central and Eastern European Countries² have witnessed a “radicalization of

² In the following abbreviated: CEEC.

the mainstream right”, the expansion of right-wing radical notions into the public discourse, leading – in at least five cases³ – to a shift to the right of the political system (Minkenberg 2017, pp. 32–33) exacerbating the fuzziness of the above mentioned boundaries.

Though this paper searches for answers in the past, it does not discard recent developments that shape populism in CEE and its relation to liberalism. In the course of writing, the analysis will touch upon questions of (economic) self-determination, European integration and the flaws of Western Europe’s normative power.

³ Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Hungary and Slovakia (Minkenberg 2017, pp. 32–33).

2. Populism in Central and Eastern Europe

Scientific interest in populism is all but new. For decades and longer, populist success stories have outperformed themselves in currency and scale with the most recent landslide victory of a populist-fascist party recorded in Italy's September elections. Not only since the electoral victory of Donald Trump – but since then exceedingly – have prestigious scientific journals been filled with articles prophesizing systematic attacks on democracy and the rule of law through populist forces. As manifold as the themes populism studies are concerned with – ranging from mobilization over populist techniques and tactics to impact on individual and societal dimensions –, as is the definitional variety applied in such accounts. The subjects referred to as 'populist' are many.

CEE as a hotspot for right-wing radicalism and populism has only in recent years attracted the critical eye of academia, as researchers had predominantly focused on the Western hemisphere. If at all, the region was on academia's agenda not because of surging populism but rather because of a lack thereof in spite of favourable domestic conditions for such. In 2002, Cas Mudde, a notable researcher in the field who has provided the probably most often-used definition of populism, and his colleague Andrea Hortig published an article titled "Why is right-wing radicalism in Eastern Europe so 'weak'?" They trace this weakness back to the strength of the radical left in the region, strong polarisation within right-wing parties and low levels of institutionalisation that bereaves radical populism of its most powerful tactic: the juxtaposition of the 'corrupt established elite' and the 'real representatives of the people' (Mudde and Hortig 2002, p. 629).

In 20 years' time, however, the tables have turned. While records indicate continuing volatility of radical right parties' success, their impact in CEEC is all but negligible: The mainstream is becoming increasingly radicalized, populist mainstream parties are assuming radical positions traditionally reserved for the radical right, xenophobic attitudes are rendered 'salonfähig', national and minority issues are increasingly politicized and ethno-cultural cleavages are deepened (Minkenbergh 2017, p. 33). In recent years, CEE has experienced a wave of populist ascent that flooded the mainstream discourse with radical notions and conflict lines.

This chapter will lay the theoretical groundwork for the analysis of populist success in CEE. Briefly – due to the extensive elaborations that can be found elsewhere – it will conceptualize ‘populism’. Thereafter, it will delineate the debate on the uniqueness of the phenomenon’s Eastern European manifestations that is concerned with the question whether populism in CEE is a phenomenon *sui generis* or rather a close relative to Western European populism. Last, the state of the art will serve as the departing point for the analysis.

2.1. Defining a Chameleon’s Colour

The academic debate on how to define ‘populism’ could (and has) filled books. Especially the phenomenon’s chameleonic character, allowing it to assume different pheno- and genotypical attributes in different contexts, complicates the endeavour of reaching an academic consensus. The dissent goes so far – to keep the zoological metaphor alive – political researchers do not even agree that the chameleon is in fact a chameleon, i.e., an animal. The genera ascribed to ‘populism’ are abundant. They include: movement, style, ideology, discourse, strategy, political culture, and others. While this variety bears witness to the phenomenon’s variability, it is at the same time highly problematic, as it leaves the field fragmented and impedes comparison of the variables (Pappas 2016, p. 7). Although this paper cannot do justice to the abundance of arguments that have been put forward by political scientists⁴, it is nevertheless imperative that the research subject be defined.

The most commonly used definitional approaches perceive populism either as an *ideology* (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), Canovan (1999), Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008)) or as a *discursive practice* (Laclau (2004), de la Torre (2000), Hawkins (2009)). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, who put forward one of the most cited definitions, propose to comprehend populism as a

thin-centered 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 Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6) (emphasis added).

⁴ Amongst others, these arguments have been reviewed elaborately by Priester (2011), Pappas (2016), and Dean and Maiguashca (2020).

Populism, following their understanding, consists of three main ingredients: the people, the elite, and the people's general will. Contrary to populist voices, however, that proclaim the three as ontologically given, these concepts are not existent *eo ipso* but are constructed through speech acts and actions that constitute the concepts as such. 'The people' is claimed to be a homogenous and exclusive group. To whom the group is exclusive depends on the 'type' of populism. While right-wing populism constructs its borders along supposedly ethnonationalist lines, left-wing populism draws the boundaries of 'the people' based on the socio-economic status. Outsiders, hence, are either those who supposedly have different ethnic roots as 'the people' or those who are of different socio-economic status, operationalized e.g., through income. Populists posit themselves as the voice of the 'righteous people' and believe it their task to express 'the people's' *volonté générale*. Likewise, the claim that 'the people' has one homogenous general will is a fallacy. Populism gains considerable popularity by strategically juxtaposing the 'pure people' with the 'corrupt elite'. By understanding populism as a "thin-centered ideology", Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser ascribe to the concept a restricted morphology. In contrast to thick ideologies, like liberalism, socialism or fascism, that have a relatively fixed set of world views, values and norms from which they derive a transformative vision, a thin ideology can be understood as a "mental map through which individuals analyze and comprehend political reality" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, p. 6). It comes to life only by converging with a thicker host ideology (Dean and Maiguashca 2020, p. 13). Right-wing populist parties tend to adopt host ideologies with a nationalist and protectionist agenda that advocates for a strong nation state with impermeable borders.

Despite the number of authors drawing on this definition, the Muddean approach has not remained uncontested. As stated by Dean and Maiguashca (2020), Mudde's ideology-definition bears conceptual as well as methodological pitfalls that stem amongst others from the equation of 'populism' and 'ideology' despite the former having "no necessary features of the latter", as for instance an intellectual history or a transformative vision (Dean and Maiguashca 2020, p. 13). In line with their criticism, Priester (2011) highlights that, rather than pursuing a future-oriented utopia or systemic modernisation

as is typical for ideologies, populism practices a conservative defence of a *status quo ante* (Priester 2011, p. 190).

To resolve conceptual pitfalls such as the genus problem, essentialism or conceptual stretching, Pappas (2016) proposes a minimal definition: Populism, he states, is “democratic illiberalism”. Congruent with the Mudde’s approach, Pappas regards the juxtaposition between the ‘good people’ and an ‘evil establishment’ or ‘elite’ as one of the main characteristics of populism. Populists exacerbate the cleavage between the supposedly homogeneous groups by promoting polarizing politics instead of seeking consensus or moderation. Moreover, preference for personalist authority over impersonal institutions and the rule of law as well as a strict adherence to the majority principle are also characteristic of populists (Pappas 2014, pp. 3–4). Populism’s illiberal tendency manifest in the rejection of checks and balances, the rule of law, division of power as well as disrespect of minority rights as these elements restrict the people’s sovereignty (Kriesi 2014, p. 363).

This paper will conduct the analysis of populism in CEE based on Pappas’ definition for three reasons: First, Pappas’ definition allows a glimpse at a particular project populists in CEE have advanced in recent years: the erosion of liberal institutions, checks and balances, as well as individual freedom. One of the avanceurs of this reorganization project is Victor Orbán who announced the restructuring of Hungary into an illiberal state in 2014:

[T]he new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead (Tóth 2014, n.p.).

Orbán’s concept of “foundational values of liberalism” has turned out to be very narrow, as fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech or gender rights, are systematically dismantled. Pappas’ definition acknowledges the illiberal and undemocratic nature of populist demands that is characteristic for populism in CEE. His definition is, hence, context-sensitive and fit for the regional focus of this analysis. Second, it narrows down the research subject in two dimensions: a) time and b) the political environment in which populist operate. Contemporary populism, following Pappas’ approach, occurs *within* democ-

racy⁵. That excludes populist phenomena occurring in CEE before the emergence of democracy in those respective countries and simultaneously populism operating outside democratic structures, i.e., for instance militant movements. Yet, Pappas' definition does not rule out the possibility that populists pursue an anti-democratic agenda within democratic structures. Third, pragmatic reasons do play a role as the minimal definition renders comparison of different forms of appearances possible and therefore enables the researcher to take into account a variety of literature.

2.2. A Phenomenon Sui Generis?

The preceding chapter provided us with a definition of populism and, thus, has brought us one step further towards the aim of this paper, which is to explore the extent to which the transformation has influenced the emergence and manifestations of populism in post-communist Europe. It seems intuitive that such an endeavour must start by interrogating existing approaches. Many of the existing explanatory approaches, however, are coined by Western-centred research. The study on Eastern European populism, on the contrary, is less developed (Santana et al. 2020, p. 289). Applying Western-centric approaches to the study of populism in CEE presupposes a degree of comparability of the research subjects. In light of the structural, contextual as well as ideological differences – to mention but a few – between Western European populism and its Eastern European counterpart, however, the kinship of Western European populism and its Eastern European version is subject to contestation among scholars. Is populism in CEE the equivalent to Western European populism, its distant cousin or rather an entirely different category – a phenomenon *sui generis*?

Experts in the field have presented various arguments supporting a conceptualization of populism in CEE as a phenomenon *sui generis*. Their arguments can be classified into four categories: a) context of emergence, b) structural differences, c) mobilization themes/ positions, and d) impact.

⁵ The reference to democracy renders it necessary to define the term itself. Democracy, in this paper, is defined in a Popperian sense. In Poppers' understanding, the essential characteristic of democracy is the possibility to oust the government from power without the use of force (Nasher 2017, p. 66).

Turning to the context of emergence, first, the observer must note fundamental differences in the political, economic, and societal environment that has served as a stage for Western and Eastern European populist genesis. In post-communist Eastern Europe, the end of the Soviet era introduced a multi-level and wide-ranging modernization process that did not only transform the public sphere but spilled over the doorsteps of citizens. Liberal market economy and democracy replaced planned economies and authoritarian one-party systems. Upon its collapse, the political system took down its legitimating ideologies with it. The political, social and economic (belief) system, citizens had been living in changed completely within a few years resulting in “high levels of disorientation and ambivalence towards the new order” (Minkenberg 2002, p. 336). Beichelt and Minkenberg (2002) trace the uniqueness of the phenomenon’s manifestations in post-communist countries back to the communist past and the subsequent transformation process that profoundly shaped party systems and cleavage structures (Beichelt and Minkenberg 2002, pp. 247–248).

Structural differences (b) between Western and Eastern Europe exist in the formal as well as in the ideological structure of the party system. In 1997, Peter Mair painted a rather pessimist picture of post-communist party systems. High electoral volatility, low party membership, elites’ tendency towards “conflictual rather than coalescent strategies” (Mair 1997, p. 193) and volatile cleavage structures, he argued, have posed obstacles to the formation of a stable party system (Mair 1997, pp. 175–198). Although 25 years of democratic experience have allowed the regions’ party systems to mature significantly, Enyedi and Bértoa (2018) still find instable party relations, ephemerality of parties, high numbers of new parties, low party membership as well as high electoral volatility in post-communist European democracies (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa 2018, pp. 422–450). Similarly, Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2015) observe high numbers of new parties as well as high levels of fragility of those newcomers (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015, p. 61). Despite national differences in the results, the findings clearly suggest that post-communist European democracies are inhabited by more unstable party systems than Western European democracies.

Ideologically, post-communist Europe currently witnesses a tectonic shift towards an increasingly radicalized mainstream within national party systems. This tectonic shift manifests in two trends: a) the ‘becoming populist’ of mainstream parties and b) the migration of radical right parties into the mainstream. In contrast to Western Europe, where populist challengers stand in confrontation with liberal mainstream parties, many mainstream parties in Eastern Europe have in fact increasingly *become* populist themselves (Bešlin 2020, p. 12). Exploring the effect of radical right success on mainstream parties’ policy positions, Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020) find that mainstream parties react to the success from the right by “emphasizing more anti-immigrant and culturally protectionist positions” (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020, p. 843) – themes that are indispensable to the right-wing populist agenda. A process of “mainstreaming the extreme” (Norocel and Szabó 2019, p. 4) is increasingly making elements of radical-right populism ‘salonfähig’, i.e., shifting the boundaries of the acceptable. Simultaneously – and that is the second trend – radical right parties are traveling into the political mainstream. These two trends profoundly restructure the ideological configuration of party systems in CEE.

Transnational ties and informal alliances between European populist parties – for instance the cooperation within the ID-faction in the European Parliament – hint to the existence of overlaps of Western and Eastern European populist mobilization themes and positions (c). Yet, many of the themes or positions differ in magnitude, populists’ assessment of the ‘responsible’, i.e., the cause of the problem, and the proposed solution. Despite the “lack of a coherent host ideolog[y]” (Havlík 2019, p. 380), a particular set of themes is salient among populist agendas in CEE. Populists in CEE stand for close ties between church and state, irredentism⁶, and an authoritarian governing style. They oppose immigration and devalue ethnic minority rights. Bustikova (2016) and Pirro (2015) highlight that – in contrast to Western European populists – populist parties in CEE often advocate for a leftist economic agenda coupled with an ethnonationalist paradigm. Pirro (2015) traces this back to the high costs entailed by market liberalisation and the building of capitalist institutions which was advanced by mainstream parties (Pirro 2015, p. 102).

⁶ Irredentism: The desire to unite all members of an alleged ‘ethnicity’ in one state, even if that requires redrawing state borders.

By promoting a leftist economy that vows to protect citizens against market volatility, stands for “more social spending, and greater state control over the economy, along with less foreign involvement and ownership” (Bustikova 2016, p. 16) populists capture the so-called ‘transition losers’.

Many populist parties in the region have abandoned EU-rejectionism in favour of a “soft Euroscepticism” (Berend 2019, p. 76). Instead of proposing an exit, they accept membership as the status quo and oppose to “any kind of further EU development”. The reason for that – and in that Eastern European populism differs from Western European populism – is not only the defence of their national identity, traditions and values and the sovereignty over those that they perceive threatened by integration; but also the fear of becoming ‘second-class countries’ within the Union (ibid.). By assuming a soft Euroscepticism, populists attract those wanting to remain in the EU but are, at the same time, discontent with its current trajectory. Anti-EU sentiments, Santana et al (2020) find, are the common denominator for success of populist parties throughout CEE (Santana et al. 2020, p. 295). In their Joint Declaration in 2018, for instance, the Visegrád countries stated:

EU institutions should treat all member states equally and act strictly within the remits of their respective (...) competencies. The right of member states to carry out domestic reforms within their competencies should be respected (Visegrád Group 2018, n.p.).

Let us, lastly, turn to the impact of populism in CEE. Populism in CEE has caused a degree of hollowing and backsliding that is far greater than in Western Europe. The term ‘hollowing’ goes back to Peter Mair (2013) who noticed the “popular withdrawal and disengagement from conventional politics” in Western European democracies (Mair 2013, p.30). Declining turnouts at elections, a dwindling of citizen’s identification with parties – measured by decreasing party membership and increased volatility of voter preferences – as well as loss of parties’ relationships with society (Mair 2006, 2013) led Mair to his thesis. Although, as Mair notes, these symptoms have exacerbated in the last years in Western Europe, party membership – and consequently identification with parties – as well as election turnout have traditionally been at lower levels in the East (Van Biezen et al. 2012, p. 29). In the words of Greskovits (2015):

[In the East] there has never been much to hollow out in the first place. (...) In comparison to their western counterparts, the postsocialist democracies had been born with a ‘hollow core’ (Greskovits 2015, p. 30).

In contrast to the hollowing of democracy, which is a silent but nevertheless disruptive trend, backsliding attracts more media attention since its manifestations pose acute and visible attacks to democracy and its institutions. Backsliding refers to the “destabilization and reverting to semi-authoritarian practices” (Greskovits 2015, p. 28).

While CEE provides the stage for both trends, their performing share and constellation differs from scene to scene. With data gathered from 2000 to 2014, Greskovits (2015) finds that Hungary has the highest range of backsliding but performs low in hollowing. Estonia – being the very opposite to Hungary – experiences a high degree of hollowing and scores low in backsliding. Latvia, Bulgaria and Romania record high levels in both hollowing and backsliding. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic seems to be spared by both trends (Greskovits 2015, p. 32). According to Havlik (2019), the Czech constitutional system is more resilient to constitutional changes as it has a “complex set of checks and balances” and ANO has so far not been able to assume a governing function (Havlík 2019, p. 381). Compared to Western Europe, the magnitude of hollowing and backsliding is much greater in Eastern Europe. While – as Bugarcic et al. (2018) put it – Western European populists “lack the capacity to threaten the essence of liberal democracy” (Bugarcic and Kuhelj 2018, p. 21), CEE is knee-deep in a tectonic restructuring towards the illiberal that rejects the values underlying democratic institutions.

The above-noted differences prove not only that populism in CEE is fundamentally different from its Western European neighbour, but also that explanatory approaches that are coined for the phenomenon’s analysis in Western Europe, must be applied with care. To identify the value of existing approaches, the following chapter will introduce the state of the art.

2.3. State of the Art

Hawkins et al. (2017) identify two dominant explanatory strands in the literature on the causes of populism: (a) the cultural strand that perceives populism as a response to identity loss and (b) the economic approach that highlights corruption, weak governance, and mainstream parties’ inability to cope with the challenges of socioeconomic change as

causes for the rise of populism (Hawkins et al. 2017, pp. 343–346). I propose the consideration of yet another category that declares the relationship between political decision-makers and citizens (or the lack thereof) central for the success of populism. Indeed, Hawkins’s logic considers this party-citizen-relationship in both the cultural and the economic strand – in the former insofar as the lack of party identification exacerbates the identity crisis and, in the latter, insofar as an unresponsive party system paves the way for populist success. Neither of the two strands, however, believes the disruption of the party-citizen-relationship and the entailing representation gap to be the immediate causal momentum. Though the economic strand hosts mechanisms that blame parties’ inability to cope with the challenges of socioeconomic change for the rise of populism, populism is regarded as result of the voters’ rational and economic considerations rather than parties’ inability to fulfil their representative function and their detachment from citizens. This ‘party-citizen-relationship strand’, I propose, considers the “erosion of party’s role as intermediary between citizens and public policy” (Kriesi 2014, p. 364) as the reason for the rise of populism. There are commonalities between the cultural strand and the third one: loss of identification plays a role – although here it is not as in the cultural strand a loss of identification *within* society but rather loss of identification *between* society and political representatives.

The cultural strand bases its explanation on the Durkheimian concept of ‘mass society’ which holds that society is held together by a kind of ‘social glue’, comprising a shared set of norms, values, and a collective consciousness. Industrialization, bureaucratization, and urbanization, related theorists hold, function as solvents, dissolving the ties between individuals, traditionally organized in local institutions, such as the church, the neighbourhood or the nuclear family (Thomson 2005, p. 422). Instead, relations are increasingly managed by large impersonal institutions, such as the state, which leads to alienation, the loss of citizen’s local and group attachments and, eventually, their identity. Populists offer an exit to alienation and disorientation by advocating an alternative identity.

Ernesto Laclau (2005), underscoring this mechanism with a Marxist logic, claims that “industrialization create[d] multiple new identities that compete with the proletarian (...) identity”. This renders the socialist revolution impossible as organization depends

on the shared identity of the working class. The identity of ‘the people’ advocated by populist charismatic leaders offers the functional equivalent of the proletarian identity and promises to reduce inequality between the elite and the ‘pure people’ (quoted in Hawkins et al. 2017, p. 344).

Economic approaches, on the other hand, base their theories on the belief that the *homo oeconomicus* is guided by materially self-interested considerations (Hawkins et al. 2017, p. 345). According to this logic, voters opt for those parties, which seem most capable of securing or enhancing their socio-economic position. Especially in light of the manifold challenges posed by globalization – for instance foreign competition to local businesses – populist promises, clearly identified scapegoats, and simple solutions tempt especially those who are at risk of economic descent. Studying right-wing parties in Western Europe, Swank and Betz (2003) find that globalization positively correlates with electoral success of far-right parties. They note, however, that national political institutions and welfare structures shape this link profoundly. In generous and employment-oriented welfare systems, for instance, increases in trade openness do not fuel but decrease support for radical right-wing parties. Likewise, “universalistic, generous and employment-orientated welfare states directly depress” political support for right-wing parties (Swank and Betz 2003, p. 239). Their findings suggest that those experiencing or threatened by the repercussions of globalization and not protected by a generous welfare state are prone to populist vote.

Their thesis is refined by Dani Rodrik (2018) who claims that the form of populist protest – i.e., its location on the ideological continuum – is contingent on how globalization manifests in a society (so-called globalization shocks). If the movement of goods (or capital) is perceived as threatening, populist protest is articulated on the ideological left. If, on the other hand, it is the movement of persons, that is regarded as problematic in a society, populist protest tends to manifest on the right side of the spectrum. In countries that experience massive cross-border movement, and which are equipped with universalist welfare state that offers social protection also to immigrants, populists find it easy to mobilize along ethno-nationalist cleavages. In these countries, Rodrik claims, the welfare state has successfully managed the repercussions of the cross-border movement of goods

and capital and has disempowered the threat of such. Consequently, the public is sceptical towards the arguments of left-wing populist parties as their themes are not considered as pressing. Rather, left-wing populism flourishes in countries, in which market liberalization, foreign competition and investment pose a risk to citizen's economic well-being. These countries witness little cross-border movement and do not provide safety nets for immigrants. Following his logic, Rodrik claims that left-wing populism is predominant in Latin America, while populist protest in Europe manifests predominantly on the right-wing.

Even though the logic of Rodrik's argument is convincing and does not lack empirical support, the nuances of populist appearance in Europe fell victim to the parsimony of Rodrik's argument. Although Rodrik admits a few variations within Europe, his theory bears fundamental anomalies that contradict the empirical findings. Not only the traditional strength of the populist left in Southern Europe or its persisting weakness in CEE – in spite of the Euro Crisis and the lack of significant cross-border movement – but also the shift to the right in Brazil⁷, Venezuela and Argentina in the last decade contravene the laws of his theory.

Manow (2020) offers a more fine-grained approach towards populist appearance in Europe by identifying a north-south divide within Europe. Northern Europe, Manow finds, is inhabited predominantly by the populist right while the leftist version flourishes in Southern Europe.⁸ The author traces the north-south divide back to the existence of universal welfare states in the North and the lack thereof in the South of Europe. In contrast to the Northern European export-oriented states, in which the welfare state mitigates the effects of market liberalisation on the labour market, Southern European states never developed the need for such social protection measures as their export sector is less developed (Manow 2020, pp. 39–40). Although Southern European states have generous welfare systems and high social spending – in the year 2019, for instance, Italy used 28.2 % of its GDP on public social spending; Spain (24.7 %), Greece (24%) and Portugal

⁷ In Brazil, however, the pendulum has recently swung back to the left with president Lula's electoral success.

⁸ There are a few exceptions to this rule as the recent electoral success of Giorgia Meloni and her party 'Fratelli d'Italia' shows.

(22.6%) are listed a little lower (OECD 2019, n.p.) – these systems remain rather exclusive, clientelist and thus immune to migration. While immigrants have quick access to the labour market compared to Northern European countries, they often end up in precarious working conditions without social protection (Manow 2020, p. 39). In Northern Europe, however, entering the labour market is a bigger obstacle. Yet, immigrants benefit from safety nets and social protection which makes it easy for populists to exploit sentiments of perceived unfairness and fuel fears about so-called ‘Sozialtourismus’.

Despite Manow’s corrective and nuanced analysis of populism in Europe, the question of how Eastern Europe fits in this picture remains unsolved. Migration flows to CEE are – with some exceptions⁹ generally lower than in Western European countries. In 2021, Poland registered 16 asylum applications per 100,000 inhabitants, Czechia 10/100.000, Slovakia and Estonia 6/100.000, Romania 47/100.000 and Hungary zero (European Commission 2022, n.p.).

Lauzadyte-Tutliene et al. (2018) find that social protection in Central and Eastern European welfare states is – except in Slovenia – lower than the OECD average as well as the average of the European Union. Especially in Eastern Europe, the research team observes, welfare systems are characterized by a “rigid and discriminatory labor market and lower government financial capacities to pursue generous social policies” (Lauzadyte-Tutliene et al. 2018, p. 111). Furthermore, Central and Eastern European markets have not been spared from the financial crisis (Gardó and Martin 2010, p. 41). These three observations give cause to the expectation of a pendulum swing to the left. This expectation, however, failed to materialise. Manow explains this contradiction with the historically grown convergence of conservative right-wing ideology and a leftist economic agenda that vows to protect the nation from the brute forces of market liberalization by adopting redistributive policies. Left parties in CEE, on the other hand, promoting liberalization in both economic and socio-cultural matters, are not perceived as capable to mitigate the repercussions of free trade and liberalization. If it is the populist right (instead of the left), then, that offers solutions to counter the globalization shock arising

⁹ Immigration to Bulgaria (157 asylum applications per 100.000 inhabitants), Slovenia (247/100.000) and Lithuania (140/100.000) even exceeded the quote in many Western European states (e.g., Germany (178/100.000), Belgium (169/100.000) or France (153/100.000) (European Commission 2022, n.p.).

from the movement of goods and capital, these very parties are the ones that rise to power in the face of such globalization shocks (Manow 2020, p. 43).

While Manow's explanation stabilizes the globalization-shock logic, it nevertheless remains insufficient to explain right-wing populist power in CEE for two reasons. First, it does not explain how right-wing populist parties successfully mobilize against immigration while the number of immigrants remains low, the welfare systems in the region are rather exclusive which means that, according to Manow's logic, immigration is not perceived as threatening to the societies. Not only is labour immigration not perceived as threatening; in fact, Poland and Hungary are more senders than recipients of labour migrants. Furthermore, as Schwuchow (2019) states, it is predominantly those outside the labour market – i.e., those that do not benefit from generous social services – who support PiS and Fidesz (Schwuchow 2019, p. 3). Second, the question remains why right-wing populist parties in CEE often adopt leftist economic agendas. And why – if that strategy proves successful in Eastern Europe – right-wing populist parties in Southern Europe refrain from assuming this strategy to boost their votes. It seems that rather than explaining why citizens vote *in favour* of right-wing parties, Manow's account explains why people vote *against* left-wing parties. There is, however, no intrinsic connection between the two – disappointment towards the left does not automatically lead to right-wing populist success, as votes could also travel to moderate parties. Likewise, citizens could also refrain from voting all together. There must be something else, a combination of push and pull factors, that attracts voters.

Approaches hosted by the citizen-party-relationship, as proposed in this paper, believe the changing relationship between parties and the electoral basis to be the cause of populism. Trends in governance modes, such as the shift towards a multilevel and more informal mode of governance, or the increasing mediatization of the political sphere affect the relation between parties and citizens. Peter Mair (1997, 2012) and Hans-Peter Kriesi (2014) both offer convincing theories here, linking the rise of populism to the “erosion of the representative function” (Kriesi 2014, p. 361) of Western European party systems. The

applicability of these theories to the investigation of populism in CEE is, however, limited, as party systems in CEE differ in configuration and institutionalization from those of the old democracies. Hence, this strand will be discussed only briefly.

Mair's analysis departs from the observation that a party's function in established democracies is twofold (Mair and Mulhern 2013, p. 95): First, a party links voters to their representatives, which Mair calls the representation function; Second, parties fulfil a government function by "organis[ing] and giv[ing] coherence to the institutions of government" (Kriesi 2014, p. 364). Parties in Western Europe, Mair argues, are emphasizing their governmental role at expense of their representation function and are thus moving "their centre of gravity from civil society to the state" (ibid.). The result of this shift is increasing detachment of the party from civil society. Symptoms of this malformation are low election turnouts, plummeting party membership, and increasing electoral volatility.

Kriesi traces this malfunction back to two substantial challenges of contemporary democracy: a) the denationalization of politics and the increasing significance of the European and global dimension in a multilevel governance architecture and b) the increasing mediatisation of politics. Shifting the policymaking to outer layers of the multi-level governance architecture, he claims, implies the empowerment of the executive branch at the detriment of the national parliament. Considering that the parliament and the electoral process are immanent to the representation function, a weakening of the parliament inevitably entails the weakening of the representation function. This trend is reinforced by long and obscure chains of delegation and responsibility, entailed by European level decision-making which hampers accountability of political decision makers.

The developing representation gap is exacerbated by the mediatisation of the political. Kriesi describes its impact on the party-citizen-relationship as follows:

The mediatisation of politics contributes to the shifting balance of party functions by reducing the role of the party apparatus, by linking the parties' leaders more directly to their voters, by enhancing the personalization of political leadership, and by fostering the 'depoliticization' of the party base (Kriesi 2014, p. 365).

These two trends, according to Kriesi, erode the representation function of parties while at the same time strengthening their government function. Populism, hence, is the result "of a party system that does not fulfil its representation function" (ibid., p. 372).

Although Mair's analysis is regionally limited to Western Europe, Kriesi holds that the basic argument is nevertheless instructive for investigating populism in CEE. Like in Western Europe, populism in CEE is a result of parties' failure to fulfil their representation function. In CEE, however, it is not mediatisation and denationalization of policymaking that magnify the chasm. Rather, Kriesi holds, it is the lack of institutionalization, that hinders adequate representation of the constituency in CEE's party systems, and, hence, triggers the populist response. This structuralist explanation, however, is also disputed. Pointing out the spectacular decline of democratic quality in Hungary – the country he claims to be the most institutionalized in the region – Enyedi (2016) raises the question why “the relative consolidated arena of party competition [did not prevent] decay in the quality of democracy” (Enyedi 2016, p. 212). Similarly, Western European nations, epitomising stable institutionalization, are haunted by populist forces which gives cause for scepticism towards the institutionalization argument.

The component which many of the above-mentioned approaches share is that populism is seen as a reaction – be it against globalization, economic trends, identity diffusion, multiculturalism, or lack of representation. The following chapter analyses the value of assessing populism as countermovement and, on this basis, further develops the main argument.

3. The Revival of History

In recent years, Karl Polanyi's concept of the 'Double Movement' has gained renewed attention. The main thesis of his prominent work, 'The Great Transformation', is that fascism is a countermovement to economic liberalism and the repercussions it entails. Despite undeniable differences between fascism and populism, his concept proves insightful for the study of populism.

3.1. Populism as Countermovement

Polanyi (1944) considers modern society to be governed by a dialectical tension between two organization principles: economic liberalism and social protection. Capitalism, favouring the former of the two, pursues the installation of a self-regulating market as ultimate objective. This is to be realized through free trade, laissez-faire policies, and a lean state. The installation of such a 'market society', however, leads to the commodification of so-called 'fictitious commodities', i.e., goods that were not intended to be commercialized: land, labour, and money. Incrementally, a market logic infiltrates social relations, traditional ways of managing social relations are replaced by financial transactions, tensions between social classes intensify, workers are exploited (Polanyi 1944, p. 139), and social protection is sacrificed. This "marketization" provokes the dis-embedding of the economy which – Polanyi proves this with multiple historic references – has historically been integrated in the social order. Unless the state implements counteracting social protection measures to reinstate balance between the two organization principles, a countermovement comes into being which tries to mitigate the "dislocation which attacked the fabric of society" (ibid., p. 80) and re-integrate the economy back into society by promoting social protection measures. Whether provided by the state or forcedly advanced by the emerging countermovement – social protection is the essential counterweight to perils of the free market. According to Polanyi, the self-regulating market is utopian and eventually also self-defeating. "A market economy," he argues, "left to evolve according to its own lase would create great and permanent evils and in the end destroy the very organization of production that it developed in the first place" (Polanyi 1944, p. 136).

Several scholars have highlighted the value of using Polanyi's 'Double Movement' for analysing the recent rise of populism throughout the globe (Bieling 2019, Davis 2020). Following Bieling (2019), populism is the response to "socio-cultural identity crises" and social exclusion summoned by the disembedding of the market and the "processes of globalisation and financialisation". Davis (2020) highlights that the Global Financial Crisis provided the perfect nurturing ground for populism as it exacerbated economic instability and tensions inherent in the self-regulating market (Davis 2020, p. 398).

Yet, these scholars alert us to the pitfalls of historical comparison that stem from variations in context, the settings of the international stage, and the research subject itself. As put forward by Bieling (2019), Polanyi's account is inattentive to the political-strategic component of party politics and party competition (Bieling 2019, p. 79). Not only – but especially – when the research focus lies on anti-establishment parties, this component is indispensable as certain policies, e.g., social protection policies, might be political-strategic calculus rather than the result of party-internal deliberation. Furthermore, an explanatory approach must take into account the legacies of the transformations – the ideological shift and its political, societal, and cultural implications, institution building and party system organization, EU integration, and the development of a participatory civil society to mention but a few.

This paper draws on Polanyi's logic of the 'Double Movement', diverts from it, however, in what is perceived as the trigger of the countermovement, i.e., the movement itself. Populism, here, is understood as a countermovement against the hegemony of the Western European model of liberalism. The economic sphere and the entailed cultural meaning-production, prioritized by Polanyi, do yet play a role here as their underlying paradigm – economic liberalization – is a fundamental signifier of the Western European model of liberalism. While the transformation resolved systemic differences between Western European democracies and post-communist European states, it failed to resolve the normative hierarchy attached to the systemic confrontation of the 20th century, that juxtaposed 'advanced Western societies' with 'backwards-oriented communist states'. Rather than dissolving this hierarchy, it was shifted *into* the logic of liberalism, where the liberalism model of the old democracies is hailed as the normative ideal while the East

European model is destined to the role of the ‘ever-catching up’. Populists challenge this power relation by denying the normativity and normality of the Western European model of liberalism and designing their own version of liberalism that contravenes the basic features of the Western European liberalism model, i.e., illiberalism.

3.2. Liberalism’s New Rival: Populism

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama predicted the evolution of “mankind in the direction of liberal democracy” (Fukuyama 1992, p. 48). The liberal-democratic triumph over socialism, his argument goes, was sealed by the latter’s inability to stimulate economic growth and prosperity. The revolutions in Eastern Europe paved the way towards a liberal-democratic global order. The Polish People’s Republic was overthrown by sustained resistance in 1989. After a peaceful regime change, Mátyás Szűrös proclaimed the Republic of Hungary in October of the same year. In East Germany and Czechoslovakia, regimes abdicated after predominantly peaceful but nonetheless powerful demonstrations. Romanian dictator Ceausescu was ousted from power by a violent revolution. In Bulgaria, successive political reforms led to liberalization. Despite the differences of these revolutions, Habermas (1990) contends, they had the same function and served as “rectifying revolutions” (Habermas 1990, p. 181). They aimed at “return[ing] East European societies to the mainstream of Western modernity by allowing them to gain what the West had long possessed” (Krastev and Holmes 2018, p. 120): prosperity and freedom.

By implementing liberal-democratic institutions, adopting Western political and economic practices, and endorsing Western values, Ivan Krastev (2018) contends, Eastern Europe hoped to achieve the same level of economic wealth as the old democracies. Hence, Eastern Europe assimilated to the West, ‘imitated’ it in political, economic, and cultural terms (Krastev and Holmes 2018, p. 118), following what Krastev calls the ‘imitation imperative’. The term ‘imperative’, in this context, does not suggest formal or physical coercion but rather a form of informal and moral coercion that arises from the West’s claim that their policies are not merely ‘good’ or ‘desirable’ but rather ‘necessary’ and ‘rational’ (Krastev 2007, p. 58). This left CEEC no alternative but to consent to the

(neo-)liberal paradigm which had practical as well as more intangible discursive implications. Not only did this logic limit the countries' scope of action considerably; simultaneously, it directed the political discourse towards a specific path. The alleged rationality of Western principles pruned the discursive scope insofar as contravening positions were consequently deemed irrational.

The newborn liberal democracies' dependence on foreign capital paved the way for constraints that were more formal in their nature. After the revolutions, Orenstein and Bugarič (2022) find, CEEC were desperate for investment as they lacked domestic capital and know-how (Orenstein and Bugarič 2022, p. 180):

International financial institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) created ranking systems that showed exactly what type of reforms to introduce. EBRD's Transition Indicators allowed CEEC governments to see what reforms investors wanted and informed investors yearly about the degree of compliance in different countries. Recommended reforms included mass privatization, trade liberalization, creation of stock markets, and others that reflected the reigning Washington consensus on economic policy. CEECs competed with one another to rise to the top of these ranking systems, or at least to not fall too far behind (ibid.).

Access to foreign capital, hence, was contingent on the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies. This example illustrates Western liberal elites' power over the transformation pathway. Furthermore, it epitomises the clear role distribution that established Western states as standard-setters and CEEC as the 'evaluated' who had to fulfil these standards. Immanent in this is a normative hierarchy positioning the West as the 'accomplished normative ideal' while CEE is downgraded to the role of the 'ever-catching up', the defective version of the West that yet had to 'become'.

The heart of Europe's normative power has always been located in the West rather than in the Centre or the East. Apart from the EU's internal power dynamics, the Union's external relations and its discourses, e.g., in the realm of development cooperation, bear witness of this geographic bias. The 'failed state' and 'good governance' discourses, for instance, have been criticized by several scholars, among them Gruffydd Jones (2014), for their Eurocentric nature that establishes the West as point of comparison, as the ideal form of statehood and governance. As experts state, however, the discourse on 'good governance' is highly racialized and disregards the 'dark shadow of colonialism' (Du Bois 1925, p. 423). The discourse on state failure constructs an international hierarchy based on a "state's institutional and capacity to govern" (Gruffydd Jones 2014, p. 73) that

requires “Africans [to] always judge themselves using the European as their standard, model, or norm” (Hoskins 1992, p. 250). In past decades, categories like ‘failed state’ have been used to legitimize external control over domestic matters – “from military intervention to governance reform”, as for instance in Liberia which was long deemed the prototype of a ‘failed state’ (Gruffydd Jones 2014, p. 63).

At the turn of the century, cracks appeared in the liberal ivory tower. As global crises began to put liberalism’s universal claim to prosperity in question, CEEC became increasingly disillusioned with the much-appraised panacea. This disillusionment was triggered by three main reasons.

First, multiple crises challenged European solidarity. The Global Financial Crisis dragged many Europeans into bankruptcy. Liberal peacebuilding has failed to live up to its expectations in the Middle East. The migration crisis has revealed that Europe suffers from a severe identity crisis. As liberalism failed to deliver on its expectations in the West, CEEC became increasingly disillusioned. The imitated, to use Krastev’s words, was losing its dominance and the imitator started wondering about the purpose of the imitation altogether (Krastev and Holmes 2018, p. 119).

Second, Eastern Europeans increasingly rejected the ‘imitation imperative’ as the hierarchy between the imitator and the imitated brings with it the “implicit assumption that the mimic is somehow morally and humanly inferior to the model” (Krastev and Holmes 2018, p. 118). As the example of the EBRD’s Transition indicators shows, CEEC accepted not only Western standard-setting in the course of the transformation, but also “the West’s right to evaluate their success or failure at living up to” these standards (ibid.).

The disillusionment – and that is the third reason – was reinforced by a changing concept of normality that met fierce opposition from conservative forces in CEEC. Contrary to the socialist agenda, which was highly utopian, the post-communist revolutions attempted to bring CEEC back to ‘normality’ that the West was exemplifying at the time. ‘Normality’, then, was predominantly understood in political terms, including “free elections, separation of powers, private property, and the right to travel” (Krastev and Holmes 2018, pp. 121–122). In the last decades, however, it has increasingly been interpreted in

cultural terms, embracing concepts like secularism, multiculturalism, cultural and personal freedoms, as for instance the freedom of sexuality. While conservative forces in CEEC might have consented to liberalism's political and economic implications – they do not necessarily agree on the cultural ones.

In this development, EU-integration plays a rather ambiguous role. On the one hand, the integration of Eastern European market economies sparked economic growth, investments and transnational cooperation between East and West. Furthermore, all CEEC – and foremost Hungary and Poland – belong to the Union's net beneficiaries and profit from large funds assigned to cohesion policy (Statista 2020, n.p.). Yet, some moves of integration came with repercussions that are now hijacked by populists to fuel their narrative portraying the EU as an elitist project.

The Copenhagen criteria, for instance, not only set criteria for membership and thus the normative ideal; countries were also instructed on how to achieve these criteria, e.g., through conditional funds that were tied to specific democratization or liberalization measures. This, according to populist reasoning, symbolizes the EU elites' control over the transformation process and the undermining of national sovereignty.

Furthermore, the discrepancy in economic wealth between West and East gives rise to the impression that wealth did not trickle down as promised. Although the countries' economic performance has improved massively since the accession, they rank much lower than Western, Northern, or Southern European states. In 2021, Poland – leaving its Eastern European neighbours far behind – was the only Eastern European country that made it into the Top 15 of the European states when ranked according to the GDP (Statista 2022a, n.p.). When it comes to the GDP per capita, no CEEC scores above the EU-27 average (Statista 2022b, n.p.). The populist narrative here is that Eastern Europe peoples have arrived at the end of the rainbow only to find that there was no treasure in the first place.

Another reason for the ambiguity of EU integration is the dual effect of some integration moves. Liberalization, for instance, triggered economic growth but at the same time resulted in social welfare losses. The Schengen agreement, as a major achievement

in pursuing liberalization, promised free movement of people, services, goods and financial assets. It has shaped the life of people in the whole Union enormously, allowing them to travel freely in the Union and settle in other member states. It also simplified trade and business with foreign partners and increased transnational collaboration. At the same time, however, it has exacerbated one of Slovakia's most pressing socio-political problems: the rapid ageing of its population. As more and more (young) people leave Slovakia to find work elsewhere in the Union, new economic and political challenges arise at home. The citizen's perception of and attitude towards migration is also impacted by demographic changes. Societies, which undergo extensive demographic changes, may perceive migration as more threatening than societies which is demographically stable. The fear of losing traditions, norms, values, and identity and with that increasing psychological insecurity plays a huge role at this instance.

Yet, it would be foolish to deem EU integration complicit in supporting populist rise in CEE. As we move towards further integration and supranationalism within the EU, it is nevertheless crucial to critically reflect on the integration process; particularly on those integration moves that populists hijack to support their narratives.

It is essential to note that populism would not have developed a such dense root system without a favourable breeding ground. In the case of CEE, this was the context of transformation. Favourable opportunity structures developed on a) the socio-cultural dimension, b) the economic dimension and c) the political-institutional dimension. Economically – and as a Polanyian element –, the transformation was associated with high costs which produced a lot of 'globalization losers'. Additionally, neoliberal economic policies resulted in the loss of protection of both the social and the economic sphere. Traditional mainstream parties that had advocated for liberalization measures were sanctioned by the electorate. On the socio-cultural strand, the transformation has not only led to a severe identity diffusion in post-socialist societies; at the same time, it introduced the necessity for societies to re-organize themselves, to assume an active role in shaping the public sphere that had been unknown to them in socialist times, and for citizens to understand themselves as *homo politicus*. This endeavour proved especially difficult as party systems were under-institutionalized and links between parties and citizens were weak. After the

transformation, especially the political left failed to offer politics that could function as an alternative to populist parties. This conglomerate of factors provided a suitable window of opportunity through which populism could emerge and flourish.

Twenty years after Francis Fukuyama predicted the end of history through liberalist victory, it seems, liberalism is struggling to keep up its defence. Orbán's introduction of the 'illiberal democracy' heralded the revival of ideological contestation and thus the revival of history. While it might seem dystopian to the reader, we must not discard the alarming fact that populism incrementally undermines majority support for the liberal consensus.

4. Conclusion

Building on Polanyi's countermovement theory, this paper has argued that populism in CEE can be understood as countermovement against the hegemony of Western European liberalism. A hierarchy persists within the logic of democratic liberalism, that posits the 'normative West' of Europe against the 'defective East'. Simultaneously, the transformation provided fruitful opportunity structures on the economic, political, and socio-cultural dimension that were and still are exploited by populists. Right-wing populist parties mobilize against both the economic and cultural implications of Western European liberalism. Several economic and societal factors decide which arguments serve the populist strategy more.

With this argument, this paper contributes a piece to the puzzle that academia is currently attempting to solve: the causes for populist success in CEE. Yet, empirical support is necessary to test the hypothesis presented here. Only by acknowledging the multidimensionality of the transformation process, the dynamics and structural hierarchies entailed by it, can populist success in the region be understood. An understanding of populist success in the region is crucial to dismantle populist reasoning and secure majority support for liberal values.

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