

Populism Beyond Borders: Lessons from Hungary and Prospects for Comparative Analysis

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Executive Summary

This study examines the populist characteristics of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary through the perceptions of civil society actors, drawing on qualitative research conducted during a fellowship at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID). Through interviews with political analysts, activists, and academics, the analysis highlights the complex interplay of nationalism, Euroscepticism, and semi-authoritarian governance in Hungary's political landscape. The findings reveal how Orbán's rhetoric consolidates his support base while deepening ideological divides, offering a critical perspective on the implications of populism for democratic institutions in Central Europe. This research also outlines policy recommendations to foster inclusive political cultures and proposes an agenda for comparative studies on populism between East Europe, Hungary and Latin America, Ecuador.

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Introduction

Since coming to power in 2010, Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, have significantly transformed Hungary's political landscape. For over a decade, Orbán has implemented a model of governance characterized by strong centralization, the weakening of institutional checks and balances, and the strengthening of a nationalist and conservative narrative (Strázay, 2022; Kornai, 2015). His administration has introduced reforms that have consolidated control over the judiciary, media, and civil society, drawing criticism both domestically and internationally. This style of leadership, often described as "illiberal democracy" by Orbán himself, challenges the liberal principles that have historically defined Western European politics.

Hungary, strategically located in Central Europe, occupies a unique position as a geopolitical bridge between Eastern and Western Europe. This role grants it particular significance in the regional dynamics, especially in the context of crises such as the 2015 migration wave and the tensions arising from the war in Ukraine. Under Orbán's leadership, Hungary has adopted a stance that distances it from the mainstream currents of the European Union, advocating nationalist policies that prioritize state sovereignty over supranational integration. This approach, while controversial, underscores Hungary's importance in contemporary debates on the future of the European project.

Populism in Hungary manifests as a political narrative that combines the exaltation of "the people" in hand with a nationalist discourse. Viktor Orbán has utilized populism as a central tool to consolidate his power, positioning himself as a defender of Hungarian interests against globalist elites and European institutions. Recent studies, such as those by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), highlight that Hungarian populism is not only rooted in internal dynamics but also draws from a global context that fosters the rise of authoritarian leaders with polarizing discourses. This phenomenon poses significant challenges for the region's liberal democracies, testing the boundaries between democratic governance and competitive authoritarianism.

This report aims to explore perceptions of Viktor Orbán's government and its populist characteristics through the discourses of civil society actors. As part of the non-V4 expert Think Visegrad Fellowship, I conducted a research stay at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID) in October in Budapest, Hungary. During this stay, fieldwork for the research was carried out, consisting of semi-structured interviews with eleven political analysts, activists, academics, and members of civil society organizations. The purpose of these interviews was to understand their perceptions and interpretations of the Hungarian government, whether they characterize it as populist and why, as well as their self-identification with Hungarian politics and nationhood. Through a qualitative analysis, it seeks to understand how these actors interpret and respond to Orbán's policies and narratives, as well as their impact on contemporary Hungarian politics. For the analysis of the interviews, we used the qualitative research software Atlas.ti, which facilitated an inductive categorization, and the results will be presented below. This approach will

provide a critical and contextualized perspective on the debate surrounding populism and its implications in the current European political environment, as well as outline potential courses of action in terms of public policies.

The Rise of Viktor Orbán: Factors Contributing to His Ascent to Power in Hungary

Viktor Orbán was born in 1963 in the small town of Alcsútdoboz, Hungary. He studied law at the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest and became involved in the pro-democracy movement in the late 1980s, as the communist regime in Hungary was beginning to crumble. Orbán emerged as a prominent figure within the opposition, co-founding the Fidesz party in 1988, which initially positioned itself as a liberal, youth-oriented political force (Kenes, 2020; Greskovits, 2020; Szócs, 2008).

Viktor Orbán's journey to power in Hungary has been a complex and multifaceted one, shaped by a confluence of political, economic, and social factors that have gradually coalesced to propel him and his party, Fidesz, into a dominant position in the country's political landscape. Orbán's political career began in the late 1980s, when he emerged as a prominent figure in the Hungarian pro-democracy movement, advocating for the country's transition from communist rule to a democratic system (Pappas, 2013; Schiemann, 2004). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition to a multi-party system in Hungary, Orbán and Fidesz quickly positioned themselves as a center-right, nationalist political force, capitalizing on the public's disillusionment with the perceived failures of the country's initial democratic experiments and the economic upheaval that accompanied the shift to a market-based economy (Scheiring, 2018).

Orbán's rise to power was further facilitated by his adept political maneuvering, his ability to tap into and channel the growing nationalist and populist sentiments among the Hungarian electorate, and his willingness to employ increasingly authoritarian measures to consolidate his grip on power (Hajnal, 2024; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018).

Factors Contributing to His Ascent to Power in Hungary

One of the key factors that contributed to Orbán's rise to power was the perception among many Hungarians that the country's initial democratization efforts had failed to deliver on the promises of a better life and greater economic prosperity (Greskovits, 2006). The economic challenges faced by Hungary in the aftermath of the transition, including high unemployment, inflation, and a significant decline in living standards, created a sense of disillusionment among the populace, which Orbán and Fidesz were able to skillfully exploit (Nyerges, 2020; Nagy et al., 2012)¹.

Additionally, Orbán's ability to tap into the latent nationalist and populist sentiments within the Hungarian electorate, particularly by presenting himself and his party as the defenders of Hungarian identity and sovereignty against perceived external threats, such as the European Union

¹ It is important to highlight here that this might be true for the first Orbán government. In case of his return to power in 2010 the global financial crisis was a decisive factor as described later in the text.

and global liberal forces, played a crucial role in his ascent to power. Orbán's effective use of anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, and culturally conservative rhetoric resonated with a significant segment of the Hungarian population, who felt that their traditional values and way of life were under threat (Bíró-Nagy, 2021; Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Köröseyi & Patkós, 2017).

Moreover, Orbán's strategic use of constitutional and legislative changes, including the consolidation of executive power, the weakening of checks and balances, and the manipulation of electoral laws, enabled him to solidify his party's dominance in the political system and neutralize opposition forces. Orbán's ability to leverage state resources, media control, and a sophisticated propaganda machine to shape public opinion and undermine the credibility of his political opponents further contributed to his rise to power.

Ultimately, the combination of economic disillusionment, the exploitation of nationalist and populist sentiments, and the strategic use of authoritarian measures allowed Viktor Orbán and Fidesz to gradually erode Hungary's democratic institutions and consolidate their grip on power, transforming the country into an increasingly illiberal and centralized political system (Rupnik, 2022; Pirro & Stanley, 2021; Bozóki & Hegedüs, 2018).

Following the collapse of communism in 1989 and Hungary's transition to a multi-party democracy, Fidesz gradually shifted its political orientation, moving towards a more conservative, nationalist and Eurosceptic platform (Herman, 2015). Capitalizing on the public's disillusionment with the perceived failures of the initial democratic transition and the economic challenges faced by the country, Orbán and Fidesz were able to steadily increase their support among the Hungarian electorate, culminating in their victory in the 1998 parliamentary elections (Ágh, 2001, 1995).

Orbán's first term as Prime Minister, from 1998 to 2002, was marked by attempts to strengthen his political position and implement conservative reforms, though his efforts were constrained by the need to navigate a divided political landscape and the backlash from opposition forces (Schiemann, 2004).

Furthermore, Orbán's willingness to adopt increasingly authoritarian measures to consolidate his power, such as the systematic weakening of democratic institutions, the suppression of independent media, and the manipulation of electoral laws, has been a significant factor in his rise to dominance. By gradually eroding the checks and balances within the Hungarian political system, Orbán has been able to centralize power and marginalize opposition forces, allowing him and Fidesz to maintain a firm grip on the country's political and social landscape.

In conclusion, the rise of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz to power in Hungary has been shaped by a complex interplay of political, economic, and social factors, including the public's disillusionment with the initial democratic transition, the effective exploitation of nationalist and populist sentiments, and the systematic undermining of democratic institutions. These factors have coalesced to create an environment that has facilitated Orbán's ascent to power and the consolidation of his authoritarian rule.

Populism as a polysemic concept

It is not possible to speak of a unified populist theory, as its conceptualizations continue to multiply and evolve. Scholars have instead addressed approaches that have gradually gained prominence. Five key perspectives are often highlighted (Campos-Herrera & Umpierrez de Reguero, 2019): (1) structuralist, (2) discursive, (3) political-strategic, (4) ideational, and (5) socio-cultural performative. While there is no single consensus on the definition of populism, recent years have witnessed the consolidation of the ideational approach (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), alongside the powerful emergence of the socio-cultural performative approach (Ostiguy, Panizza, & Moffitt, 2021) and the continuity of the poststructuralist discursive theoretical approach (Stavrakakis, 2020; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021; Ema & Ingala, 2020). These frameworks have been applied to analyze populism across both Latin America and Europe, highlighting regional specificities while exploring shared dynamics.

In Europe, populism has often been associated with the rise of right-wing movements, particularly in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Italy, where leaders like Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, and Matteo Salvini have employed nationalist and exclusionary discourses to mobilize support (Krastev, 2017; Taggart, 2000; Inglehart & Norris, 2019). However, left-wing populist movements, such as Podemos in Spain or Syriza in Greece, have also gained prominence, employing an inclusive rhetoric aimed at challenging neoliberal economic models and austerity policies (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). This duality illustrates that populism in Europe is not monolithic but rather reflects diverse ideological orientations, adapting to local contexts and political traditions.

There are various reasons why populism—or populisms—remains a compelling concept. Its widespread rhetorical use may explain part of its appeal, as populism continues to manifest in specific cases worldwide, sparking debates about whether it serves as democracy's ghost or its mirror. Following authors such as Laclau (2005), Panizza (2009), Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017), and Müller (2016), it is also possible to argue that populist phenomena have historically played a role in fostering social and political integration. In Latin America, populist scenarios have opened channels for participation, mobilized "the people," and reconfigured entrenched class structures. Similarly, in Europe, populism has often emerged in response to crises—whether economic, migratory, or related to political representation—offering alternative narratives and challenging existing elites.

The recurring emergence of populist scenarios in both Latin America and Europe suggests that populism can be understood as a mode of constructing the political. The strength of subaltern groups to integrate and the opening of political channels for participation and mobilization can be interpreted, in both theory and practice, as attempts to create a political identity for "the people." Whether it is through the nationalist rhetoric of leaders like Orbán or the emancipatory narratives

of movements like Podemos, populism continues to reshape political landscapes, revealing the tensions and opportunities inherent in democratic systems.

Ernesto Laclau (2005) defends populism, defining it as a ‘political logic,’ a system of rules that shapes the political system by enabling the representation of certain objects while excluding others. He considers it an empty signifier that is filled through four key elements: equivalential demands, the antagonistic other, a hegemonic idea, and the leader. For this thesis, Laclau's thought is highlighted for its emphasis on populism and the identity creation of "the people." The logic of equivalence, through populist rhetoric, unifies individuals around their unmet demands and opposition to an antagonistic other—the elite—transforming individual identities into political ones and giving rise to a transformative project that seeks collective emancipation and self-determination.

However, limitations in Laclau's theory are recognized. Despite moving away from a normative political approach, it risks remaining purely ontological and does not sufficiently address the heterogeneities in the construction of "the people" (Grimson, 2019). Laclau also seems to overlook the role of civil society, conceiving politics solely as the struggle of projects within an institutional framework (Mazzolini, 2020). Here, the ideational approach is brought into focus, defining populism as a thin-centered ideology that views society as divided into two antagonistic camps: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite," and posits that politics should express the general will of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). While this approach addresses some methodological gaps in the discursive framework, it sometimes reduces the concept of populism, limiting deeper exploration.

The Rise of Hungarian Populism

The emergence of populist political movements in Hungary in the past decade has been a subject of significant interest and debate among political scientists and analysts. Populism, as a political ideology and rhetoric, has gained traction in various parts of the world, and Hungary is no exception (Rixer, 2021, 2014). The rise of the Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, has been particularly notable, as it has transformed the political landscape in the country, embracing a populist agenda that sets it apart from other forms of populism observed elsewhere (Korosényi & Patkós, 2017). To understand the key characteristics of Hungarian populism, it is crucial to examine its historical context, the socio-economic factors that have contributed to its growth, and the ways in which it differs from other populist movements.

Hungary's history has been marked by a complex relationship with its neighbors, periods of foreign occupation, and a desire for self-determination (White, 1992). These historical experiences have shaped the nation's political and social landscape, and have been instrumental in the development of a distinct form of populism that emphasizes national sovereignty, cultural preservation, and a rejection of perceived external influences (Martinelli, 2018). The communist era, which lasted from the late 1940s to the late 1980s, also played a significant role in the evolution of Hungarian

populism, as it fostered a sense of resentment towards the perceived imposition of foreign ideologies and a desire for a more autonomous political and economic system (Rixer 2021; Antal, 2018).

The rise of Hungarian populism has also been influenced by a range of socio-economic factors, including the country's economic struggles following the global financial crisis of 2008, the perceived marginalization of certain social and ethnic groups, and a growing dissatisfaction with the perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of the political establishment. These factors have contributed to a climate of discontent and a yearning for a political alternative that promises to address the concerns of the "common" people, or the "real Hungarians," as they are often referred to by the populist rhetoric (Rixer, 2021).

One of the key characteristics of Hungarian populism is its emphasis on national sovereignty and cultural preservation (Waterbury, 2020). Under Viktor Orbán's leadership, the Fidesz party has positioned itself as the defender of Hungarian values and traditions, often portraying the country as under threat from external forces, such as the European Union, global financial institutions, and immigrant communities (Bíró-Nagy, 2021; Nagy et al., 2012). This nationalist rhetoric, combined with a strong anti-establishment sentiment, has resonated with a significant portion of the Hungarian electorate, who have grown increasingly disillusioned with the perceived failures of the political establishment (Hungarian Country Report, 2023).

Another distinctive feature of Hungarian populism is its embrace of a "illiberal democracy," a term coined by Viktor Orbán to describe the party's approach to governance (Rixer, 2021; Pappas, 2013). This model, which has been widely criticized by international observers, prioritizes the will of the majority over the protection of minority rights and the rule of law, and has led to the consolidation of power within the executive branch and the erosion of checks and balances within the political system.

Methodological Design

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of Viktor Orbán's government and its populist characteristics through the discourses of civil society actors. To achieve this, a qualitative research was conducted with a descriptive and explanatory scope, using case study as a method. Qualitative research was chosen for its ability to capture the crucial elements of theories in sociology and the humanities, providing data on structural conditions, consequences, processes, and systems (Glaser & Strauss [1967] 2006). Hungary was selected as the case study for its clear elements that categorize it as an example of right-wing European populism.

In-depth interviews were executed. Staying true to our approach of understanding the research phenomenon through the voices of those who experience it, speech was the medium through which we accessed the ways of configuring, symbolizing, and sharing the lived and constructed experiences during the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

For the selection of the participants, I worked very closely with the Director of CEID to contact political analysts, academics, and members of NGOs and CSOs who were willing and voluntarily interested in participating in the interviews. The selection criteria were broad; we sought individuals from the fields of politics, academia, and civil society who could share their perceptions of Hungary's political reality. The sample consisted of 11 participants, and their codifications and (simple) profiles are shown in the following table.

Table 1. List of participants

Code	Profile	Date
P1	Political Scientist and political analyst	10/10/2024
P2	Political Scientist and political analyst	15/10/2024
P3	Member of NGO	16/10/2024
P4	Journalist	16/10/2024
P5	Member of CSO	17/10/2024
P6	Political Scientist and political analyst	17/10/2024
P7	Member of CSO	17/10/2024
P8	Academic	18/10/2024
P9	Academic (Slovakia)	21/10/2024
P10	Political Scientist and political analyst (Slovakia)	21/10/2024
P11	Political Scientist and political analyst	22/10/2024

For data analysis, the Atlas ti program was used, which allowed for an inductive categorization to be made. Inductive analytical categories were designed to guide the description and subsequent discussion of the results. A total of eight categories were created: 1) Economic Disparities, 2) Hungarian Politics, 3) Ideological Landscape, 4) Political Landscape Populism, 5) Authoritarianism and 6) Social Change and Identity.

Description of Results

For the description of results, it was decided to group the categories into four themes that guided the participants' discourses and also allowed us to address the stated objective. This description is presented below, followed by an analysis that engages with the selected populist theory while also enabling initial comparisons between the Hungarian-European and Ecuadorian-Latin American populist phenomena.

Hungarian Economic and Political Context

So after 2018, it's obvious that Orbán is the ruler and the only ruler of the party, the state, the country, and everything. (P4)

It was necessary to broadly understand the economic and political context of Hungary over the past 14 years in order to relate it to the rise of Orbán's government and subsequently identify whether there have been positive or negative changes in these aspects that Hungarians recognize and that lead them to support the ruling party. In many cases, according to various populist theories, economic crises create fertile ground for the emergence of populism, as they generate demands that the population recognizes and considers highly significant. According to our interviewees, this was the case for Orbán due to the European economic crisis of 2008. "So we have an economic crisis, it's still 2008, and we are living in that economic crisis, and we are economically in a peripheral system..." (P5). Orbán capitalized on this discontent, positioning himself as the leader who could restore national pride and economic stability. His success in the 2010 elections marked the beginning of his consolidation of power, as his party, Fidesz, leveraged the crisis to implement its political agenda and reshape Hungary's socio-economic landscape.

Orbán's economic measures have been dual-pronged, offering limited support to the poor while enabling significant wealth accumulation for himself and his allies. Policies such as utility price freezes and tax cuts for large families were popular across the political spectrum, with even opposition voters viewing them favorably (P1). However, these initiatives often favored middle-class families over the poorest segments of society. Simultaneously, Orbán's government reduced unemployment benefits to just three months, the shortest in the EU, demonstrating its limited commitment to social welfare (P1). Reports have also suggested that Orbán and his inner circle have profited immensely during his tenure, with accusations of wealth being "outsourced to cronies" (P11). And he has shifted his allies from Western Europe to Russia and China. This dual approach reflects a populist strategy that balances token economic benefits for the poor with systemic enrichment of the ruling elite.

Hungary's economy, which experienced consistent growth until the COVID-19 pandemic, has faced significant challenges in recent years. Before the pandemic, many Hungarians felt they were "living better" under Orbán's rule, particularly in comparison to the demonized previous governments.

"I also cannot really believe, even if I wanted to, that, oh, people are just voting for Fidesz because they are, they don't know the truth, or they don't have enough information, or they are brainwashed, or something, no, no, no, no, I mean, there was, at least in the last two, okay, now, after COVID, or during COVID, of course, the whole economic, the, the whole economy was collapsing, you know, collapsing, okay, too dramatic, but so, I guess, we are in a negative, negative, economically negative time, but since they got into power, so from 2010, to, let's say, then 2020, or something like that, as, as in the whole world, I guess, so there was also, of course, in the world economy, as far as I know, it was quite a positive time (...)" (P8)

However, the dual crises of the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war have disrupted this narrative, with the economy entering "economically negative times" (P8). Rising energy prices and inflation have eroded the popularity of Orbán's earlier economic measures, such as subsidized energy costs, which had previously garnered widespread support. These crises have exposed Hungary's dependence on external factors, including its ties to Germany's economy and the EU, highlighting the vulnerabilities of Orbán's economic model in times of global instability. Making this also a positive element, which could prevent the narrative of "leaving the EU" becoming a reality.

The Orbán government has leveraged its constitutional supermajority to enact sweeping changes to Hungary's political system, ensuring its dominance and reshaping the country according to its conservative vision. This supermajority allowed Fidesz to draft and implement a new electoral system without consulting the opposition, effectively tailoring the system to their advantage. As one participant explained,

"And Fidesz introduced this new electoral system, which was also another constitutional supermajority law, that they drafted an electoral system which was not consulted with the opposition, it was their electoral system imposed on Hungary. Their own system. And every time that they need to change the system for some reason, they can do it because they have the constitutional supermajority." (P1)

Furthermore, this dominance enables Fidesz to modify the system whenever necessary to maintain its grip on power, demonstrating how the constitutional supermajority serves as both a legislative tool and a means of entrenching political control. Some of our participants referred to this as being living in a "captured state", meaning that it has been captured by the government elites.

However, according to some of the participants, the emergence of Péter Magyar marks a significant shift in Hungarian politics, as he has become a unifying figure for various opposition factions that seek to challenge Orbán's regime. Despite the electoral system favoring large parties and Orbán's advantage in single-member constituencies, Magyar's dynamism and perceived ability to bring change have garnered broad support. "What unites these people who vote for Péter Magyar is that they hate the Orbán regime and they would like to see a change of government... with the support of left-wing voters, liberal voters, and green voters" (P1). His appeal transcends ideological lines, rallying a coalition of dissatisfied voters who view him as the best hope to defeat Orbán. This dynamic underscores the growing discontent with the ruling party and the potential for a more competitive political landscape in the future.

Political and Ideological Landscape

The government of Viktor Orbán has embedded its ideological vision into Hungary's political framework, portraying itself as the protector of national sovereignty and traditional values. Through actions such as drafting a constitution without public consultation and centralizing authority, the regime projects a worldview rooted in nationalism and cultural conservatism. As one

interviewee observed, "The governing party shaped the constitution to serve their ideology and their interests. It embodies their vision of Hungary and their approach to power" (P1). This vision is reinforced by Orbán's narrative of "sovereignty protection," which positions external actors like the EU or the US as adversaries threatening Hungary's autonomy. This rhetoric, combined with control over the electoral system and media landscape, ensures the dominance of Orbán's ideological agenda (P1, P2). "But on the other hand, I also believe that we should name the things that we experience. And it's, yeah, we have propaganda, we have hatred against many groups. We have a very centralized country." (P5)

Orbán's government has utilized ideologies such as nationalism, illiberalism, and traditionalism to justify its policies and maintain power. The term "illiberalism," adopted by Orbán as a defining characteristic of his regime, is closely tied to his emphasis on Christian values, traditional family structures, and national sovereignty. As one interviewee explained, "His ideology supposedly consists of respecting Christianity, traditions, and traditional family values" (P11). However, the use of these terms is contradictory. What some of our interviewees argued is that concepts such as "illiberalism" or "Euroscepticism" are terms employed by the leader or regime, which do not necessarily align with their academic usage or resonate within the common imagination. Instead, they are part of the government's strategy to craft its rhetoric.

"In Hungarian, still illiberal, I mean, it sounds very scientific. So no one uses illiberal by any sense. Liberal, however, you use as a swear word." (P2)

"However, Eurosceptic, I think, is a word that the intelligentsia uses to describe him. I think that he himself does not really use this word. What he uses about himself is that he is a sovereignist, which is funny, because I think that yet again that is a word that the audience doesn't understand." (P2)

Orbán's rhetoric also appeals to anti-Western sentiments, framing the West as a declining power and positioning Hungary as aligned with the East or as a neutral actor (P8). These ideological constructs, while seemingly rigid, are instrumental in rallying voter support, particularly in rural areas where nationalism and traditional values hold significant sway.

Hungary's population exhibits a mix of ideological inclinations that resonate with Orbán's rhetoric. While nationalism and cultural conservatism are deeply rooted in Hungarian society, there is also a notable reliance on traditional values and skepticism toward foreign influences. A respondent highlighted, "Cultural conservatism is quite popular in Hungary. Also, nationalism has always been popular at least for half of the Hungarian society" (P1). This ideological alignment has allowed Orbán to mobilize significant voter support, particularly by portraying Hungary as a unique and proud nation with a distinct way of thinking, as many Hungarians identify with the sentiment that "we Hungarians are something special. We have our own way of thinking." (P4).

So in that sense, it does resonate with, at least with certain sections of the population. So it just makes sense to then follow these ideological positions because the majority, or at least the majority of those for whom they seek the vote of (...). So it makes sense politically to just represent it. (P3)

They just say, Oh, Orbán says that we don't need this shit, and we should stick to what we are. Yeah, he's right, and that's it. Most people don't think about politics all the time. (P4)

However, it is worth noting that political engagement in the population varies, with many citizens expressing only a superficial interest in politics.

Despite its ideological framing, Orbán's government demonstrates a highly pragmatic approach to ideology, adapting its positions as needed to maintain power. Orbán's political evolution—from liberalism to moderate conservatism and finally to far-right nationalism—illustrates this pragmatism. As one observer stated, "Orbán is very pragmatic, so he is also willing to change his ideas from time to time" (P1). This chameleonic flexibility allows the regime to utilize ideologies as tools rather than commitments, responding to external pressures and shifting narratives to appeal to different audiences. Another interviewee highlighted that "there is no ideology," but instead, Orbán employs narratives to serve his political interests (P10). This adaptability underscores the government's strategic focus on voter support and political survival rather than any deep ideological conviction. Interviewee 11 also identifies the shift that Orbán is taking to the East, to Russia and against the EU, is also part of this strategy, and the fact that he recognizes some clear potential in "becoming a leading figure of this populist surge, so I think his strategy is focusing on on on presenting himself as the champion of the populist or international or European populist or skeptic movements" (P11).

Populism

Most of our interviewees characterize Orbán's regime as populist; however, not all of them understand populism in the same way. Populism is seen by the interviewees as a set of tools used by political leaders to gain and maintain power by appealing directly to the people. As one participant put it, "populism is a set of tools or means used by political actors to persuade the electorate to win votes" (P11). This approach frames the leader as the representative of "the true people" against the elites. However, some interviewees pointed out that populism is not an ideology in itself but rather a strategy, a rhetorical instrument that allows leaders to position themselves as defenders of the people while simultaneously challenging political and societal norms. As one interviewee clarified, "populism, I think, is just a tool how he does it" (P1). Participant 4, had an interesting point of view, in identifying that every political leader has to be a populist, because it returns to the roots of democracy, "Because every politician is a populist and has to be a populist. Every democratic politician has to be also a populist because he has to have the popular votes. He has to have the votes from the people." (P4)

Viktor Orbán is described as a leader who uses populist rhetoric to consolidate power and appeal to various voter bases. His strategy involves constantly positioning himself as an outsider, despite being in power for over a decade. As one observer noted, “it’s very difficult to do this kind of populism, anti-establishment populism, if you are the power in Hungary for 14 years” (P1). Orbán’s use of anti-elite rhetoric—claiming to represent the people against foreign influences, like the EU or George Soros—reinforces his image as a populist leader who seeks to remain aligned with the general populace. Even though his party has transitioned ideologically from anti-communist to conservative to far-right populist, Orbán’s leadership continues to be grounded in populist strategies that resonate emotionally with his supporters (P4).

Orbán’s populist narrative heavily relies on constructing the image of an external enemy and defining who belongs to the “true people” of Hungary. The interviewees highlighted how Orbán frames the “true people” as those who oppose the European Union, global liberalism, and external elites, while portraying enemies as those who represent the opposite. As one participant noted, Orbán’s regime “decides who the people are, so what the nation is, and who the nation is, and who belongs to the nation, and who does not belong to the nation” (P11). It is not just that this rhetoric is constructed by the regime, but to some extent, it finds its roots in a feeling of inferiority that comes from and continues to linger in a certain part of the population.

“Because if you are frustrated for being considered a secondary citizen, for not being rich still and so on, these emotions are very easy to exploit. And I think that this underdog feeling in the region is basically the same. It’s only the extent to which populist leaders were able to exploit it for certain reasons, which makes a difference.” (P2)

This “us vs. them” rhetoric positions the Hungarian people against perceived threats, often scapegoating groups like migrants or progressive elites to unify his base and incite nationalist sentiments. One participant also remarked that Orbán’s regime has constructed a strong enemy image by exploiting fears of migrants and promoting conspiracy theories, such as linking George Soros to migration policies and gender ideology (P11).

Orbán’s populism is intricately linked with nationalism and authoritarianism, blending these ideologies to strengthen his political position. Interviewees noted that Orbán’s populism often overlaps with nationalistic narratives, constructing a vision of Hungary that is defined in opposition to foreign influence and liberalism. As one participant observed, Orbán’s rhetoric paints a picture of Hungary as a nation resisting “Brussels’ tyranny,” making a strong appeal to national pride (P8). This combination of populism with nationalism creates a powerful emotional connection with the electorate, who are offered a narrative they can relate to. Additionally, Orbán’s populism also leans towards authoritarianism, as his use of populist strategies often leads to the weakening of democratic checks and balances and the erosion of civil society (P7). As one interviewee emphasized, Orbán’s populist tactics serve to consolidate power, undermine minority rights, and sideline democratic institutions (P3), characterizing his government in the far-right European wing of populism.

Hungarianness

Finally, it was decided to explore how Hungarians perceived the Hungarian nation, how they perceived others, and whether or not they identified themselves with Hungary, due to the high polarization and fragmentation experienced in the political context. This question was particularly interesting, as many interviewees were surprised by it and admitted that, in this context, such reflections on their Hungarian identity felt distant to them.

The concept of Hungarian identity is multifaceted and has been shaped by both historical and contemporary factors. For some, being Hungarian is deeply rooted in the nation's historical ties to the West, dating back to the reign of St. Stephan, Hungary's first king. As one participant stated, "Hungary belongs to the West... it started with St. Stephan, the first king of Hungary, who decided that we are part of the West" (P4). This perspective emphasizes Hungary's cultural and political alignment with Western values and ideologies. However, the idea of "Hungarianness" also involves more intimate, cultural aspects such as the Hungarian language, literature, and traditions. As another participant described, "for me Hungarian-ness means... the language" (P8), highlighting the significance of understanding and connecting with Hungarian culture on a personal level.

The interviewees have diverse and sometimes conflicting views about their Hungarian identity. Some, like one participant, express a cosmopolitan sense of self, which distances them from a strictly nationalist Hungarian identity. "I clearly feel myself more of a cosmopolitan person," they shared, suggesting a more global outlook rather than a nationalistic one (P2). For others, the rise of political figures like Viktor Orbán has brought about a sense of national pride, albeit with some discomfort. As one individual explained, they feel "part of the Hungarians," but this feeling is often accompanied by "shame" due to the political association with the current regime (P6). These contrasting feelings of belonging and shame illustrate the complexity of Hungarian identity in the current political climate.

We cannot clearly speak of two distinct Hungaries, especially since most of the information gathered pertains to the city of Budapest. However, there is a clear identification of two political groups, divided by their tendencies and ideologies toward the government. Budapest is recognized as the stronghold of the opposition, characterized as a more open, inclusive, and democratic society. The Orbán electorate is generally rural, older, poorer, and less educated. However, as P5 pointed out, "I would not, you know, use or naturalize the characteristics of the Fidesz voters, because I think it's very, it's much more contextual." Nonetheless, there is an awareness of living in a fragmented country, divided by social class—with a very wealthy elite, a poor majority, and a middle class comprising a small percentage of the population. Above all, Hungary is marked by strong ideological cleavages, where traditional values coexist with more liberal-progressive ideals.

Within the European context, Hungarians see themselves both as part of the broader European community and as distinct from other European nations. Some participants emphasized the historical and cultural ties to Central Europe, with one stating, "I feel that I can really closely

communicate or find common ground really fast with the Czech people or Slovakian” (P8). This regional affinity contrasts with a more nationalistic rhetoric that paints Hungary as a victim of Western indifference. One participant noted that Hungary has “always been defending the West” but now faces a sense of abandonment by Europe, a sentiment echoed in the prevailing political discourse (P8). This view underscores the tension between Hungary’s European aspirations and the current nationalist populist sentiment within the country.

The two interviews conducted in Slovakia allowed us to broaden the scope and begin to understand not only Hungary but Hungary within the identity of Eastern Europe, as well as Eastern Europe itself. While both countries share certain characteristics, notable differences emerged in the narratives of our interviewees. Despite Slovakia’s current political shift toward a more radical trend similar to Hungary’s, it does not appear that alliances or membership in a unified European front are likely. As one interviewee explained, “Maybe the old Central Europe was an illusion, like the area of the most advanced countries with brave political leaders who fought communism. What we have now is very, very new, so to say. A region where the governments are changing and sometimes populists with different ideologies come into power” (P9).

They believe that Orbán’s ideology, “It’s a combination of nationalism, nostalgia for communist rule, and extreme right, I would say, and conservatives, social conservatives” (P9). This blend has positioned Hungary as a unique case in Eastern Europe, characterized by its pro-Russian stance and its criticism of Brussels, which resonates with its ethnic Hungarian minority in Slovakia, influenced by Hungarian state propaganda (P9).

Conversely, Slovakia, while also exhibiting shifts toward populism and authoritarian tendencies, demonstrates a more fragmented political identity. The current government under Robert Fico is described as ideologically diverse, ranging “from conservatism to even fascism” (P9), making it difficult to align with Orbán’s cohesive Fidesz model. Moreover, Slovakia’s historical trajectory, shaped by its integration into the Czechoslovakian democratic experiment, differentiates it from Hungary’s path, which transitioned “from Habsburg monarchy to an unpleasant authoritarian state under Horthy” before embracing democracy in 1989 (P10). Despite their shared Central European past, the perception of the U.S. further divides the two nations, with Slovak society displaying significant anti-American sentiment, contrasting with Hungary’s traditionally more pro-American public (P9). This divergence underscores the complexities of identity and governance within the region, highlighting the nuanced interplay of historical legacies and contemporary political trends.

Future Agenda for cross-regional populism

One of the long-term objectives of this research is to explore Hungarian populism as a case study within European populism in order to draw comparisons with Latin American populism. To achieve this, it would be necessary to expand the fieldwork across various dimensions. However, based on the information already analyzed from the Ecuadorian case (in the period of Rafael Correa), I will

make some initial comparisons to lay the groundwork for a future cross-regional study agenda on populism. At first glance, Ecuador and Hungary might not seem like easily comparable cases. Yet, throughout my fieldwork during the fellowship, I realized quite the opposite—there are many aspects that allow for an intriguing comparison.

While the historical trajectories of these nations are clearly different, there is a point during their respective transitions back to democratization where parallels emerge, shedding light on why there exists a political-cultural essence that facilitates the rise of authoritarian governments. The transition from agrarian-traditional societies to industrialized-developed societies was distinct for each, but similar in its challenges—slow, arduous, and externally influenced. In both cases, these processes were not fully autonomous but were heavily shaped, even subordinated, by Western hegemonic powers: in Hungary's case, European powers, and in Ecuador's case, North American influence. It is argued that this dynamic cemented differential identities within the rural-urban dialectic, which remain significant and continue to weigh heavily on the political actions of these societies.

For this initial comparison, key aspects of the two populist currents followed by the author—discursive and ideational—were selected. Using a comparative table, initial points of intersection and divergence are proposed, setting the stage for further analysis.

Table 2. Comparisons Between the Main Features of Hungarian and Ecuadorian Populism

Populism Elements	Hungary	Ecuador
Ideological Tendencies	Far-right populism: authoritarianism, nationalism, and illiberalism	Far-left populism: 21st-century socialism, nationalism, and progressivism
Context of the Populist Phenomenon's Emergence	2008 economic crisis Change in the political landscape, with remnants of post-Soviet heritage	2000 economic crisis 10 years of political instability Erosion of political parties
People vs. Elite	Clear construction of the 'people' vs. the 'elite.' The 'people' are portrayed as true Hungarians: rural, older, low-income, and less-educated. However, social policies benefiting the popular classes are not implemented. The 'elite' are constructed as traditional Hungarian	Clear construction of the 'people' vs. the 'elite.' The 'people' are framed as the true nation: the poorest, forgotten, and most affected by the crisis, but also include various age groups, appealing to the youth. The government clearly implemented social policies to benefit the popular

	politicians, but mainly framed as external enemies.	classes. The 'elite' are constructed as traditional political parties, bankers, and the wealthy ('pelucones').
Construction of the Enemy	Internal and external enemies. Internal: opposition, socialists, LGBTQI+ community, social movements. External: European Union and immigrants.	Internal and external enemies. Internal: opposition, traditional political parties, bankers, and the wealthy ('pelucones'). External: less predominant; initially, the United States was framed as the 'Yankee empire.'
Leader/Ruler	Strong, masculine, personalist, and charismatic figure	Strong, masculine, personalist, and charismatic figure
Regional/International Alliances	Seeks positioning in Eastern Europe as a leader of the anti-European front. Shift to alliances with Russia and China.	Actively integrated into the Latin American union project led by Hugo Chávez, involving Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. Strengthened relations with China throughout the administration.

Final Remarks

This research analyzed the dynamics of Viktor Orbán’s government and its populist strategies through qualitative insights gathered from civil society actors in Hungary. The findings reveal a regime characterized by nationalist rhetoric, consolidation of executive power, and a polarized ideological landscape. Orbán’s governance style, framed as “illiberal democracy,” has leveraged economic discontent and cultural identity to cement its appeal, while eroding institutional checks and balances. These outcomes emphasize the broader implications of populist leadership on democratic structures in Central Europe.

To address the challenges posed by Hungary’s populist governance, *public policies* should aim to foster inclusive political cultures that prioritize democratic participation and institutional transparency. Strengthening civil society, investing in education that emphasizes critical thinking, and supporting independent media are pivotal steps. Additionally, enhancing regional collaboration within the European Union to counter nationalist narratives can create pathways for rebuilding trust in supranational governance while promoting dialogue across ideological divides.

There must be an awareness that the appeal of regimes with authoritarian traits is not solely the result of political leaders' strategies but also stems from cultural characteristics of the population, historically unmet needs, structural problems, and the coexistence within Hungarian society of a living imprint of its post-Soviet past alongside a modern young population with radically different ideologies. An important point to address is fostering dialogue between the diverse cultures and perspectives that coexist in Hungary's physical and symbolic spaces.

Future research should explore the shared and divergent characteristics of populism in Hungary and Ecuador for the construction of a cross-regional study agenda of populism. While Orbán's far-right populism emphasizes nationalism and Euroscepticism, Ecuador's left-wing variant under Rafael Correa focused on anti-elite rhetoric and socio-economic reforms. A comparative analysis could illuminate how populist leaders adapt their strategies to local contexts, offering insights into the broader phenomenon of populism across regions. This agenda could serve as a foundation for cross-regional studies on governance, identity, and democracy in a globalized world.

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