

## Chapter 2: Centrist and Radical Populism in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1 2</sup>

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### *1. Introduction*

There is an emerging consensus that populism is a form of democratic illiberalism (Krastev 2006; Krastev 2007; Pappas 2014; Pappas 2016; Pappas 2019; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Mudde 2018; Mounk 2018; Galston 2018; Smilova 2021). Populism combines a commitment to procedural democracy with a criticism of some substantive liberal values, such as pluralism, separation of powers, constitutional constraints, and minority rights. Populists challenge these values in the name of their vision of unrestrained ‘general will’ of a homogeneous people. The populists’ promise is that, unlike the established elites, they will ensure a direct and efficient transmission of the undiluted, genuine popular will in the public arena. By claiming that the political establishment has failed to represent the true interests of the people, populists position themselves as anti-corruption agents. The populist logic entails that the establishment parties betray the public good and thereby engage in inherently corrupt politics, and as a result, democracy becomes a government captured by private interests on behalf of a few.

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The citizens of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries<sup>3</sup> are well accustomed to this anti-establishment discourse. In many of these countries, where the transition to liberal democracy was long, painful, and elite-driven, this has become the dominant discourse over the last two decades (Engler et al. 2019). During this time, populist parties not only rose to prominence in virtually all of the post-communist countries, they became ruling parties in most of them. Such is the case in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovakia. Classifying political parties in CEE countries into populist and non-populist categories is a risky business, since populist discourse and populist strategies have been adopted by many players.

In this chapter, we argue that conceptually distinguishing between radical and centrist populists is useful to analyze both the supply and demand of populism. The distinction between centrist and radical right-wing populism in CEE countries has long been discussed (Učeň 2007; Stanley 2017; Havlík and Voda 2018; Pytlas et al. 2018). Populism comes in a variety of degrees and shades, but the degree of radicalism and behavior of the party, as well as the population segments it appeals to, matters for practical and theoretical purposes.

Some populist parties challenge the elements of liberal democracy, which are not part of the core of its underlying ideology. We call such political players centrist populists. There are substantive differences between their ideas and policies and those of the more radical challengers of liberal democracy. For instance, the former Tsar Simeon II of Bulgaria was not convinced that he needed a political party of his own in order to rule the country. He won the parliamentary elections in 2001 by using the registration of a minor political player. More than one year after the elections took place, he maintained his refusal to convert his broad political movement into a party organization. This position was underpinned by explicit and implicit criticisms of the polarization that political parties bring about. Simeon II claimed that he was essentially above all parties and that he personally represented the nation. Such a political strategy and positive voter response fall under contemporary definitions of populism, as they presuppose an understanding of ‘the people’ that is not particularly pluralist. But this type of populism, which is close to the personalistic populism

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3 The countries covered in the chapter are the post-communist EU member-states in Central and Eastern Europe. The trends discussed also apply to some of the accession countries in the Western Balkans.

of Berlusconi in Italy, cannot by any means be treated as a radical challenge to liberal democracy. Thus, it makes sense to speak of centrist populism, which claims to be beyond left and right ideological divisions and reflects the views of large groups in society in a catch-all manner.

In 2021, another centrist populist player with a very strong electoral result emerged in Bulgaria. Slavi Trifonov's party, There is Such a People (ITN), perhaps does not need further proof of its populist character than its name. The party stands for the introduction of a majoritarian electoral system in which people would presumably vote for persons, not parties. Established by a popular Bulgarian TV personality, ITN is strongly personalistic. The party is fond of referendums, has called for direct election of police chiefs, and openly rejects the value of left and right ideologies. Apart from these points, little is known about its political views. Overall, ITN promises fast, direct, undiluted representation of the people's interests. Yet, ITN is neither against the EU and NATO, it is not openly xenophobic or homophobic, nor does it challenge human rights or democracy. While the party is definitely populist, it does not make sense to classify it as a radical populist party.

In contrast to ITN, a wide variety of radical right-wing populist parties in CEE countries have challenged central aspects of the liberal-democratic order. These parties endorse much of the radical right-wing agenda; they tend to be xenophobic, homophobic, autocratic, anti-pluralist, strongly against the EU and NATO, or at least argue for major reforms of these institutions. Such parties advocate the idea of 'Europe of the fatherlands.' Many of them openly or tacitly sympathize with autocratic regimes, such as Putin's Russia. Fidesz in Hungary has become such a party under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. Since 2010, the party has transformed Hungary to such a degree that scholars have argued that it is not a democracy anymore (Halmai 2020a; Halmai 2020b). PiS in Poland is following a similar path. The radical right-wing party Attack in Bulgaria, as well as a rising newcomer, Revival, also fall into this category. Both parties have campaigned for Bulgaria to withdraw from NATO and the EU, are strongly Eurosceptic, pro-Russian, and skeptical of liberal democracy in general.

Centrist and radical populism are political offshoots of the same phenomenon: democratic illiberalism. Both reflect the frustrations of the electorate with certain aspects of liberal democracy and are rooted in anti-establishment personalistic political entrepreneurship. Yet, the role that centrist and the radical populists occupy in their respective polities is different. The rise of centrist populists has obfuscated the ideological borders

between the different parties. The rise of radical right-wing populists, on the other hand, has placed immense pressure on the constitutional frameworks of the CEE states and strained their relationship with the EU.

Radical right-wing and centrist populists can coexist within a single party system. This phenomenon can be observed in many CEE countries. Examples include Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, and GERB and the United Patriots in Bulgaria. Furthermore, some parties have become increasingly radicalized over the course of their development. Fidesz and PiS have followed this course, as they have transformed from centrist populist into radical right-wing populist parties over the last two decades. We aim to explore the relationship between different degrees of radical populists in the region and the mechanisms of populist radicalization.

## *2. Definitions of centrist and radical populism*

In this analysis, we adopt the ideational approach to defining populism, which conceptualizes populism as a thin ideology (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Cas Mudde has defined its essential elements: the Manichean division between the good people and the corrupt elite and portrayal of ‘the people’ as homogeneous. Takis Pappas (2014; 2019) has also convincingly argued that populism always contains a degree of illiberalism, arguing that populism is essentially democratic illiberalism. Still, it is worth asking: To what degree should anti-liberalism be present in a party’s agenda and activities in order for it to qualify as populist?

It has been suggested that populist parties can be divided into ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ types, depending on the degree of radicalization observed in their messages (Smilov and Krastev 2008). Other scholars, such as Atila Agh (2019), have also adopted this distinction in their work. In more recent years, scholars have employed a similar and overlapping distinction between centrist and radical populism. While some populist parties feature certain elements of populism in the form of a thin ideology, such as the use of anti-establishment tropes, they often lack other elements, such as people-centrism and the invocation of the general will (Pytlas et al. 2018). In this chapter, we list the characteristics of centrist and radical populist parties based on the policies they pursue. The characteristics listed below are

derived from case studies of populist parties in CEE countries, developed within the PaCE (Horizon 2020) project<sup>4</sup>.

The actors and parties that uphold some anti-liberal policies and meet a list of minimum requirements are called centrist populists, as they provide moderate criticism of some peripheral elements of the liberal-democratic doctrine. This criticism is mostly focused on the representative structures of liberal democracy (types of parties, role of parliaments, type of electoral systems and representation) and is shared by many members of the electorate. Strong majorities in all liberal democracies, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, do not trust the political parties and even the parliaments of their countries.<sup>5</sup> Against this background, the criticism of liberal democracy set forth by centrist populist actors thus reflects the views of the median voter.

### 2.1. *Centrist populism: supply-side characteristics*

The following list of characteristics of centrist populism is derived from case studies of paradigmatic ‘moderate’ or centrist populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, including NDSV, GERB, and There Is Such a People (ITN) in Bulgaria, Hungary’s Fidesz from the beginning of the 2000 until 2006, ANO in Czechia (Buštková and Guasti 2018; Havlík 2019), and SMER in Slovakia. Not all parties share all of these characteristics, but all of the characteristics are shared by most of these parties, and in this sense, this list makes a strong case for at least a clear family resemblance that is persuasive to the political observer:

1. **Anti-establishment:** Centrist populists argue that the established parties do not represent the will of the people due to corruption or elite inaptness, a strategy that has been characterized as “anti-elitism for moderates” (Stanley 2017). Political parties that pursue this strategy have been called “anti-establishment reform parties, which combine moderate so-

4 Skleparis, Dimitris, et al. *DI.1. Historical and Political Development Of Populism In Europe*. PaCE, 2021, [cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PaCE\\_DI.1\\_Historical-and-political-development-of-populism-in-Europe\\_social-movements.pdf](https://cfpm.org/pace/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/PaCE_DI.1_Historical-and-political-development-of-populism-in-Europe_social-movements.pdf).

5 Recent data show that trust in political parties in EU 28 is “very much a minority view” - only 18% among the nationals of EU28 declared in 2017 to trust them (and 77% - to distrust them). This makes political parties the lowest scoring institution measured by the Standard EB88/Autumn 2017. The next least trusted institution are national parliaments - 35% trust.

- cial and economic policies with anti-establishment appeals and a desire to change the way politics is conducted” (Hanley and Sikk 2016) and have long been identified and studied (Pop-Eleches 2010). For a more recent detailed account of the diverse forms of anti-establishment politics in CEE countries, see Engler et al (2019);
2. Skepticism of ‘thicker’ ideologies of the left and the right: This is a particular characteristic of technocratic populists (Havlík 2019);
  3. Criticism of the transition in Eastern Europe;
  4. Distrust of political parties: Political parties are portrayed as nefarious mediators of the popular will. Thus, populists favor direct democratic means and forms of representation that are less dependent on political parties;
  5. Personalism: A charismatic populist leader is a better vehicle of the will of the people (Gurov and Zankina 2013; Pappas 2020);
  6. Skepticism toward constitutional constraints. These include liberal democratic features such as the division of power, independent constitutional bodies, checks and balances and the rule of law. As secondary values, these could be sacrificed for the purpose of the more efficient political representation of the popular will;
  7. Executive aggrandizement: This refers to the tendency of excessive concentration of power in the executive;
  8. Mild nationalism: This refers to a form of nationalism that is not outwardly aggressive but intends to appeal to internal unity and tradition, thereby weakening liberal and internationalist counter tendencies;
  9. Welfare policies are not to burden the middle class. Taxes should be flat and low, so that there is no massive redistribution in favor of the most deprived members of society, i.e., this type of populism is not a response to leftist revolt of the masses, Smilov and Krastev (2008: 10).

This agenda is centrist since it is designed to capture the votes of majorities, namely to attract large non-marginalized groups. It contains a promise to quickly resolve societal problems without the complications of cartelized party system and parliamentarian politics. Simeon II, for instance, promised to “put Bulgaria in order” within 800 days (Guechakov 2001). Centrist populists can also be technocratic, like in Czechia, where they have promised to bypass parties and partisanship by relying on experts or by using business models of running the country. As such, this strand of populism is based on a Schmittean belief in the role of personalities in politics. The German constitutional scholar of the Weimar and the Nazi

periods developed the decisionist theory of politics, which over-exaggerated the role played by persons and downplayed the role of rules and institutions. Carl Schmitt (1984 [1922]) argued that politics essentially is what happens in a ‘state of exception,’ in which established rules are useless. Relying on individuals rather than institutions is a salient feature of most of the contemporary populist parties as well, and it ultimately leads to a focus on executive power. Viktor Orbán has used this model of leadership expansion throughout his career, even in his more moderate and centrist phases. Andrej Babiš in Czechia is also a clear example of this phenomenon.

Criticism of transition is the most distinctive element of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. It takes a variety of forms. Sometimes there is an element of nostalgia towards the socialist past. It is more common, however, to criticize the ‘liberal elites,’ who have allegedly hijacked the transition and led it in a wrong direction. Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland are the prominent examples of the latter. Generally, the criticism of the post-Soviet transition seems semantically tied to the anti-establishment feature of the centrist populism.

The defining feature of centrist populism is its anti-establishment *Weltanschauung*. The established elites are portrayed as corrupt or otherwise inept and in need of replacement. As far as people-centrism is concerned, centrist populism is mildly nationalist but does not go as far as to reject pluralism altogether. Rather, centrist populists rely on the perception that a charismatic leader is closely connected to the people. This connection is the most important element of centrist populist politics. Centrist populists claim to uphold the will of the people and express it more efficiently than others. Even so, their skepticism of party democracy and parliamentary procedures does not go as far as to suggest implementing constitutional reforms that could lead to plebiscitarian democracy or autocracy.

## 2.2. Radical populism: supply-side characteristics

Radical populism features all or most of the elements of centrist populism, but it also contains a number of more radical upgrades in the form of challenges to liberal democracy. Its definitive characteristics are:

1. Skepticism of and attacks on individual rights, especially the right to privacy, sexual orientation, and gender identity;

2. Skepticism of and attacks on minority rights, including ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities;
3. “Symbolic thickening” (Kotwas and Kubik 2019) of the populist ideology by combining it with another ideology—such as nativism—to denote the ‘enemies’ of the ‘true people.’ This shift from politics to symbolic politics (Krasteva 2016) is achieved by instrumentalizing collective victimhood (Kreko et al. 2018), mobilization of collective resentment (Bonikowski 2017), and the longing to restore lost authenticity and regain lost national pride (Krastev and Holmes 2019), which may verge on collective narcissism (Marchlewska et al. 2018);
4. Attacks on independent judiciaries and other constitutional bodies (Zürn 2021), including attempts to staff them with party loyalists;
5. Attempts to take over the media and reduce pluralism;
6. Anti-EU, anti-NATO, pro-autocratic policies, glorifying the *Realpolitik* nationalist heritage of the 1920s and 1930s in the region;
7. Attacks on NGOs, especially foreign funded ones (as ‘foreign agents’ or ‘traitors’);
8. Aggressive redistributive measures, including increasing social benefits which target the ‘true’ members of the people and exclude minorities;
9. Instrumentalization of the police and prosecutors against political opponents who are deemed disloyal to the will of the people;
10. Attempts to entrench a particular religion or specific religious views in public life and the constitution;
11. Unconstitutional nationalization of property;
12. Altering the constitution to establish an illiberal democracy.

The case studies on which this list is based include paradigmatic instances of radicalized populism, such as Fidesz after 2010, PiS, Ataka and other ‘patriotic’ parties in Bulgaria, Jobbik in Hungary, and several other formations of the radical-right. Central to these characteristics of populist radical right-wing parties is the challenge posed to liberal democracy. This is not the case with centrist populist parties. There are two main vectors of radicalization:

1. Aggressive majoritarianism. According to this doctrine, the true representatives of the people have the right to take over all independent institutions, including judiciaries, media regulators, and central banks. They have the right to suspend constitutional restraints and even (more importantly) use their power to weaken the opposition. In doing so, they can instrumentalize the law for partisan purposes in order to grant favors to their loyalists and punish their opponents. Viktor Orbán’s Fundamen-



tal law of 2011 is a clear example of an accomplished system of aggressive majoritarianism.

2. Turning the state into an ethnically homogenous and Christian polity. Radical populist leaders, such as Orbán, Kaczyński, and Siderov, uphold a vision of the state as an ethnically pure and religiously defined polity. Many of their policies—such as the vehement rejection of accepting refugees with Islamic background or different races (in contrast to migrants from the Ukraine or the former Soviet Union, for instance) is a clear expression of this radical aspiration. The desire for homogeneity is usually coupled with homophobic attitudes and opposition to the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe.

### 2.3. Centrist populism: demand-side characteristics

There is a certain paradox about the drivers of populism in Eastern Europe. Political frustrations, such as distrust of political parties and parliaments, are widespread. The question then is why only some parties are populist but not all of them. This question is quite relevant, since in some Eastern European polities, even “mainstream” parties have adopted much of the populist agenda. Take for instance the Bulgarian Socialist Party. As the successor to the former communist party, it has attempted to turn itself into a European center-left party. For a certain period of time (until 2014), this attempt was mostly successful. One of its former leaders, Sergei Stanishev, served as the president of The Party of European Socialists (PES). Nevertheless, his own national party currently opposes the Istanbul Convention, strongly rejects the influx of migrants and refugees, has displayed a significant degree of skepticism toward the EU and NATO in particular, and has expressed pro-Putinist views and nostalgia for the Soviet era. If this party can be called mainstream, then there is hardly anything special about the populists.

Setting such curiosities aside, the fact is that people who vote for centrist populist parties generally have political complaints and frustrations about the functioning of liberal democracy. These voters do not generally come from groups of economically deprived people (for more detailed discussion on economic factors for voting populist in CEE countries, see section 2 of this chapter). Indicators of political frustration, however, seem to be over-inclusive, while indicators of economic deprivation are significantly under-inclusive in explaining the centrist populist vote.

Much has been said in the literature on populism about the ‘cultural drivers’ of populism. And indeed, there are plausible theories to be explored. For instance, the theory of “demographic panic” (Krastev 2020) maintains that Eastern Europeans are extremely protective of their ethnicity, religion, and national identity, because of their declining, ageing populations and massive emigration of young people to the West. While it is true that populist leaders have significantly contributed to the creation of this panic, it is questionable whether the present moment, which is witnessing rapid economic development in Eastern Europe, is really an opportune moment in history to invoke the possible decline, and possibly extinction of these societies.

The cultural explanation, furthermore, fails to explain the success of populist parties in CEE countries empirically. Cultural factors do not seem to be particularly good predictors of the centrist populist vote. Some explanations do not work well because they are over-inclusive. For instance, only PiS is positively correlated with anti-LGBT attitudes, whereas this correlation does not exist among people who have voted for GERB and Fidesz. Anti-immigration attitudes also are a poor predictor of the populist vote in the region, in contrast to the vote for radical right parties in Western Europe. There are more apparent paradoxes: GERB in Bulgaria, for instance, is negatively correlated with ideas of strong government. Thus, cultural factors have a mixed record; some of them seem over-inclusive, while others are under-inclusive in Eastern Europe (for a more detailed discussion on the cultural drivers for populism in the CEE region, see section 2).

The following picture emerges. People who vote for centrist populists may not be economically worse off, older, or less educated than the supporters of other parties. Furthermore, they may not feel culturally under-represented by the established or mainstream parties. Still, they may have political frustrations in heavily constitutionalized, cartelized political systems. By voting for populist players, such voters may believe they are taking a shortcut to a desired political outcome. Thus, their motivation to vote populist is ‘political’ in the narrower sense of pertaining to the functioning of the representative structures of democracy:

1. Voters could be frustrated by the cartelized and over-constitutionalized (excessively constrained) character of contemporary political systems and may see populists as a tool to weaken the party cartels and to push

through a partisan agenda without the consent of the opposition and other players, or without a delay due to checks and balances.

2. Voters may be frustrated by what they perceive as corruption or ‘state capture’ by established political parties. The collapse of the party system in Italy in the 1990s was produced in this way, and this has been the model of emergence for many populist actors in CEE countries.

Political grievances about corruption are thus at the heart of the causal mechanism leading people to vote for populist parties, especially in CEE countries. Virtually all successful populist players have developed a strong anti-corruption message. Venting frustration with ‘democracy without choices’, populists focus public attention not so much on socio-economic matters, but on the issue of corruption and identity politics (“in order to mount distinctive appeals at a time when the differences between parties on economic issues has narrowed, many parties have put more emphasis on identity or values issues” (Gidron and Hall 2017: 60)). Political frustrations and grievances do seem to play a central role in explaining populist voting patterns in the region.

Yet, the question remains of whether frustration with the political process is widespread and reflected in the attitudes of most voters. For example, trust in political parties in the European Union had averaged to around 15% in 2017. Bértoa and Rama (2020) find a causal link between the increase in votes for populist anti-establishment parties and two structural factors: the volatility of the public vote and the fragmentation of the party systems. According to these authors, political factors alone—without recourse to underlying economic or cultural explanations—are associated with the decision to vote for anti-establishment populist parties.

Cartelization of the political parties (Katz and Mair 1995) may per se be considered a form of corruption. Hence, populists often campaign for the reduction of the number of MPs as a way of ‘punishing’ a political class which is perceived to have become alienated from the people (Smilov 2020). Parties in the government fail to ensure the desired balance of responsible and representative government, which is “a principal source of the democratic malaise that confronts many Western democracies today” (Mair 2009). Recent empirical studies of the profile of ‘populist citizens’ in countries across Europe and Latin America demonstrate that these are dissatisfied democrats—they highly value democracy, yet find faults in its performance, as they feel they underrepresented (Rovira Kaltwasser and Van Hauwaert 2020).

Populists have largely succeeded in convincing voters that the political establishment is corrupt in a deep, structural way. It is hardly surprising, then, that in recent years political grievances have increasingly affected the median voter and ever larger groups in the center of society (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018). Populism can thus be understood as a reaction to the widespread perception of corruption. Populist parties have often come to power after serious corruption scandals by promising to eradicate corruption from politics, or ‘drain the swamp,’ and the like. Some prominent cases include the rise of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy in the early 1990s after the major party funding scandals, Tsar Simeon II promising to rid the country of the corrupt politicians in the 1990s, GERB coming to power in Bulgaria in 2009 with a strong anti-corruption message, and Fidesz returning to power in 2010 after the major corruption scandals that plagued the Socialist Party. Corruption and anti-corruption have also been turned into a major, if not the most significant political factor over the last decade in Romania, Czechia, and Slovakia.

In conclusion, at the level of voter attitudes, the political causal mechanism outlined here implies a link between voting for centrist populist parties and frustration with (cartelized) mainstream political parties, over-constitutionalization of politics (national or supranational), and frustration with the power of elections to change policies.

The political mechanism for mobilizing populist voting is important because it explains why populist parties emerge even without a deep economic crisis, as the cases of PiS in Poland and other centrist populist parties in CEE countries demonstrate. This ‘political’ explanation is not limited to CEE—it applies to the cases of Forza Italia, and possibly to the Brexit vote in the UK and to Trump’s election.

#### 2.4. *Radical populism: demand-side characteristics*

While the question of populism in all of its forms is difficult enough, the question of what drives and accounts for the radicalization of politics is even more complex. There is a common sense theory that describes the radicalization of populism in Eastern Europe, which is borrowed from the theory of the rise of the radical right in the West. According to this theory, there are socially deprived groups of the population (in economic and cultural terms), who are dissatisfied with the functioning of liberal democracy. These poorer, lesser educated and rural people vote for radical right parties.

In times of economic crises like in 2008 or during the immigration crisis of 2015 and 2016, as the number of immigrants grew, so did the vote for the radical right. Such theories can help explain the emergence and the rise of parties, such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and possibly the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

The problem with this theory is that it is difficult to confirm it empirically in Eastern Europe. First, populism has emerged not as an expansion of radical right parties in the region. Fidesz was actually a liberal party. NDSV and GERB started as centrist populists of the Berlusconi type. So, Eastern Europe is not so much a case of expansion of existing radical right attitudes. Secondly, populism started to rise to prominence in the region before the economic crisis of 2008. GERB won elections in 2009 in Bulgaria, but its leader, Boyko Borissov, rose to political prominence in 2007. NDSV won elections in 2001. Fidesz and Viktor Orbán gradually radicalized, but they had become a very influential political force before 2008 as well. The same could be said of PiS. Thus, in Eastern Europe the more interesting phenomenon seems to be the radicalization of centrist populism.

Thirdly, as the discussion from the previous section suggests, it is difficult to establish a link between economic factors, economic crises and populist vote—radical or not. Yet, there is logic to the argument that the economic crisis of 2008 ultimately helped Fidesz and PiS to radicalize their stance. From this perspective, it can be plausibly argued that economic crises or crises such as the migration crisis promote the radicalization of centrist populism and its transformation into a radical version. Although many more studies are needed to fully substantiate such a theory, it seems at least *prima facie* plausible.

### *3. An alternative theory of radicalization of centrist populism*

The argument that we advance in this chapter is that what is defined here as centrist populism in Eastern Europe is the basic phenomenon which underlies the success of populism in the region. Others have instead argued that the success of the populist radical right in highlighting some issues (such as opposition to ethnic minorities) or introducing entirely new issues (opposition to Islam and non-European migration) has led to shifts in important positions of more centrist actors, paving the way for the spread of populism, regardless of the electoral success of the radical right actors themselves (Pirro 2015). Recognizing the role of the populist radical right in

shifting some positions of the centrist populists does not deny, in our view, that the basic phenomenon behind the success of populism in the region is centrist populism.

Most of the important populist parties, which have ruled their countries in Eastern Europe, have started as centrist populists and only later have radicalized.<sup>6</sup> A particularly spectacular case of this unexpected trajectory is Fidesz in Hungary, which even has its origins as a liberal party in the early 1990s. It gradually transformed into a centrist populist party and then radicalized, taking on its present form. The radicalization of the party started in the early 2000s and escalated in the period 2006-2010.

Another case of a centrist populist party becoming radicalized is PiS in Poland. This party, which started as a right-conservative splinter from *Solidarność*, was generally inspired by Orbán's example and followed many of the steps that he took in Hungary, including the partisan takeover of the judiciary and the strategic clashes with the EU, meant to mobilize nationalist support.

Not all centrist populist parties follow this path of development, though. Some of them transform into liberal parties and then simply disappear. This was the trajectory of NDSV, the party founded by Tsar Simeon II. After a year in office as the prime minister, Simeon II finally set up a political party, which eventually became a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). After the 2005 parliamentary elections, NDSV was only a junior coalition partner in a ruling coalition. By 2009, the party had effectively disappeared from the political scene. This example suggests that turning a centrist populist party into a mainstream liberal party is not easy. The successful cases of institutionalization of such parties ebb in the direction of increased radicalization.

This point is illustrated by the trajectory of another centrist populist party in Bulgaria: GERB. In 2009 it became the largest party in parliament. It was founded around another charismatic figure, Boyko Borisov, whose political career began as the bodyguard of Tsar Simeon II. GERB campaigned on a strong personalistic and anti-corruption agenda and has been a governing party in Bulgaria for the better part since 2009 (with a brief interruption in 2013-2014). In 2021, it was finally replaced in office by a newcomer. Although GERB itself did not radicalize visibly over the

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6 A dynamic not predicted by the theory of radical populism, as Stanley (2017) points out. He recognizes, however, the role of PRR in clearing the path to radicalization for such more moderate parties.

years, it got into a coalition with radical populists (United Patriots, including parties such as Ataka) and actually helped them quite a lot in attaining electoral success. Gradually, the politics of the coalition government started to include openly homophobic elements, demonstrated by their rejection of the Istanbul Convention (Smilova 2018; Smilova 2020), and strong anti-immigrant messages. Under pressure from radical nationalist populists, GERB even embroiled Bulgaria in a dispute with its neighbor North Macedonia, even though GERB was previously a strong supporter of the rapid admission of the Western Balkan countries into the EU. This process may be called ‘radicalization by a proxy,’ and it is very important in parliamentary systems with proportional representation, where legislatures are fragmented, and complex coalitions are needed for the formation of government.

Based on these and other case studies, the following picture emerges in Central and Eastern Europe:

1. Centrist populists rise to power;
2. Some of these centrist populists manage to remain in power for more than one electoral cycle (the technocratic populism of ANO in Czechia is a case in point). Others transform into liberal parties (NDSV), but this does not seem to be a successful strategy of institutionalization;
3. Paradigmatic cases such as Fidesz, PiS, and GERB suggest that radicalization is a successful strategy for institutionalizing a populist political actor and gaining enough electoral influence to guarantee a position in government.
  - a. Radicalization could take a direct form. Both Fidesz and PiS have become much more radical than their earlier centrist versions.
  - b. Radicalization could take place ‘by a proxy.’ This occurs when the centrist populists govern alongside radical populists and start implementing key issues from their agenda. A notable example includes GERB’s third cabinet (2017-2021) in coalition with ‘United Patriots’ in Bulgaria.

If the radicalization of centrist populism is a key element in populism’s natural dynamic, the question remains: What are the catalysts of such radicalization? As discussed above, the prevailing theories suggest that radicalization is primarily driven by economic factors, specifically the deterioration of the economic status of constituencies, either real or perceived.

As previously noted, one of the challenges regarding Central and Eastern Europe is that this explanation does not fully account for the complexity of

the region. In many CEE countries, the radicalization of centrist populists occurred during periods of economic growth and an improved standard of living for the overall population. Recent empirical studies find weak or no significant correlation between indicators such as economic hardship or deprivation (be it objective, relative, or perceived) and voting for populists in CEE countries (Santana et al. 2020). Hanley and Sikk (2016) also demonstrate that the enabling conditions for the breakthrough of anti-establishment reform parties in the region include high and rising levels of corruption. However, such parties are more often successful during periods of economic prosperity. In some paradigmatic cases of populist parties in the region, such as GERB and Fidesz, even a statistically significant negative correlation between economic indicators (such as growing perceived inequality and perceived relative deprivation) and populist vote is  $-0.21^{**}$  (GERB) and  $-0.26^{**}$  (FIDESZ), respectively (Smilova et al. 2020b). This suggests that economic grievances alone do not make the voters for such parties distinctive from the rest of the electorate. Economic factors seem to better explain the success of ‘nativist parties’—or radical populist parties—such as the AfD and Front National (FN) in Western Europe and to a lesser extent the most successful right-of-the-center populists that command absolute majorities and enjoy several terms in office—most notably in CEE countries, but also in Italy (Forza Italia under Berlusconi).

Another notable explanation of the radicalization of centrist populists pertains to fundamental cultural changes in societal values towards social conservatism. A number of authors have argued that voting for populist parties is caused by major cultural shifts, namely large segments of voters becoming more conservative and more nationalist, thereby giving wings to populist leaders. There is evidence that the voters of populist parties in CEE countries, too, are strongly involved in identity politics. The ‘cultural backlash’ thesis, for example, explains this support as “retro reaction by once-predominant sectors of the population to progressive value change” (Inglehart and Norris 2016: 1), brought about by the Silent Revolution (Inglehart 1977) and the societal shift towards post-material values and cosmopolitan multiculturalism. These changes have produced a powerful backlash among the older generations (particularly among the lesser educated members with lower income) against the post-material values promoted by the ruling elite, leading to the success of ‘authoritarian populist’ forces across the globe.

There is indeed some evidence that CEE societies have become more socially conservative over the last two decades. However, the question



concerning the direction of causality remains: Is the growth of socially conservative values the cause of radicalization, or is it, rather, the effect of the radicalization of specific political players? Mainstreaming of specific topics in the media, for instance, may be the explanation for the observed shift in public attitudes.

There is reason to doubt the cultural explanation for populism in the CEE region. In some countries, the voters of the populist parties—either centrist or radical—do not appear to be either more socially conservative or more autocratic than the rest of the electorate. The cultural explanation fails to fully account for the spectacular success of populist parties in CEE countries, for example, where parties such as Fidesz and PiS do exceptionally well among the young voters as well as among all other age groups. Furthermore, while support for illiberal values, particularly anti-LGBT values, may be positively correlated with support for populist radical right-wing parties in the established democracies in Europe, with regard to CEE populism it is only the voters of PiS (0.42\*\*\*) who are most likely to support this party if they have anti-LGBT attitudes. Support for Fidesz or Jobbik, or support for the populist GERB or the more radical ethno-populist United Patriots in Bulgaria, for example, is not predicted by higher than average opposition to LGBT or other liberal values. Another set of illiberal values—endorsement of strong government—is positively correlated with voting for PiS, but not voting for GERB or Fidesz, which are instead negatively correlated. Anti-immigration attitudes are also not strong predictors of the populist vote in CEE as expected, and the explanation may be the domination of such attitudes across the ideological and political divides between mainstream and populist parties in CEE. Furthermore, the voters of populist parties in CEE do exhibit relatively weaker anti-immigrant attitudes than the voters of PRR in some established democracies in Europe (for details on these findings concerning cultural drivers for populism in CEE, see Smilova et al. 2020a; Smilova et al. 2020b).

If the most popular economic and cultural explanations do not offer a straightforward explanation of the radicalization of centrist populist parties in CEE, then there must be other drivers and mechanisms that produce this effect. Here, we suggest an alternative explanation according to which there is a built-in tendency in centrist populism towards radicalization. This radicalization may well partly be an effect of populist parties in power responding to the ‘incumbency challenge,’ as has been demonstrated for the case of Fidesz (Hegedüs 2019). The theory that we advance traces the process of radicalization of centrist populism through the following steps:

1. Voters are frustrated with the politics of liberal democracy, which they see as cartelized, overly complicated, excessively constrained by a variety of constitutional bodies, and structurally corrupt;
2. They opt for a centrist populist who promises to provide a personalistic shortcut in the political arena—a by-pass of the complicated and difficult to understand procedures. The centrist populist promises to shake up the system as a whole and ultimately restore the respect for the will of the people;
3. The centrist populists win elections and gradually they become ‘the system.’ At the next election, they either have to step aside as the part of the ‘establishment,’ or they must seek further proofs of their radicalism as a potential challenge to the system;
4. Many parties decide to ‘radicalize’ in either an economic or cultural direction, in order to preserve their reputation as credible systemic challengers and as a threat to the status quo. Since the personality of the leader is no longer sufficient to motivate voters, they start to look for more socially divisive issues, which could demonstrate their transformative potential;
5. Eventually some populist leaders start to nurture the idea of an alternative form of democracy, such as illiberal democracy and pursue a significant constitutional and systemic change.

This theory does not rely on dramatic economic or cultural shifts in society. Actually, it argues that radicalization is going to take place:

1. with or without an economic or an immigration crisis;
2. that it is in the nature of populism to polarize societies and to radicalize its anti-systemic, anti-liberal message over time;
3. this radicalization of the populist message obviously results in some cultural shifts as well. For instance, people may become more homophobic if political parties and the media manage to mainstream the topic.

#### *4. The intrinsic limits of ideological and strategic radicalization*

So far, we have argued that centrist populist parties show a built-in tendency to radicalize over time. In order to preserve their image as direct transmitters of the will of the people, populists (especially after a term in power) have to demonstrate that the systemic constraints do not apply to them and that they could initiate and carry through ever more substantive changes

to the system. They thus continue to challenge more and more elements of the liberal democratic system. At the end of this spectrum of radicalization lurks an entirely different form of democracy, namely, illiberal democracy.

The problem with this strategy is that over time it starts to alienate the centrist voters—the very ones who have been responsible for the initial success of the party. Indeed, if the populist party remains in office, it could attract more of the ideologically committed voters who are radical on cultural or economic issues. It could also start attracting extremist voters from the margins of society. But at the same time, such a party would run the risk of scaring off more centrist voters. At some point, these would start to defect, seeking refuge with a mainstream party or in a new centrist populist party.

In our previous research, we identified and analyzed two groups of voters for populist parties: strategic and ideological (Smilova et al. 2020a; Smilova et al. 2020b). Ideological populist voters are or feel economically or culturally deprived. They see the populist party as a real system changer that is likely to bring politics more in line with their preferences. In essence, ideological voters are rational utility maximizers in a specific way - they seek the party that is closest to their substantive ideological preferences.

Strategic voters, on the other hand, choose a populist party not because it better reflects their ideological preferences in terms of content, but because they see it as an efficient instrument that offers a more effective way of translating these preferences into governmental decisions and actions. Thus, this vote choice is a means of cutting through the complications of constitutional liberal-democratic politics. Strategic voters, too, are rational choice maximizers, but their agenda is not about ideologically motivated transformation of the system—they simply seek the most efficient instruments to satisfy their preferences within the system. From this perspective, populist parties are just bargaining chips for strategic voters to extract concessions from their opponents. In this way the voter threatens the opponent with potential systematic changes in the future without actually being interested in these changes. These changes are just bargaining techniques for extracting concessions.

For instance, many strategic voters could opt for a populist party since they see it as an instrument for keeping taxes low for the middle classes. The other elements of the populist message might just be bargaining chips for such voters, i.e., ‘if you don't agree with this agenda, we won't compromise on other ideological issues.’ Since the voters of many of the Eastern European populist parties are not ideologically different from the voters

of other parties, we may assume that strategic voting is not an insignificant phenomenon. As the centrist parties become more radical in their messages, ideological turnout may actually increase. Finally, at a certain point, when the populist party becomes too radical, an exodus of strategic voters can be expected.

There is a wide range of strategic reasons for voting for populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond):

1. They represent a good and sometimes even better alternative than the mainstream parties for securing a lower/flat tax for the middle classes;
2. They offer a strong argument for nation-centered policies at the EU level;
3. They provide an argument for the lack of redistribution toward generally unpopular population segments, like the Roma or the refugees;
4. They provide a justification for prioritizing additional social benefits for the middle classes, such as loans and subsidies for working families with children, as in Hungary.

All these strategic reasons for voting for populists relate to a common point: Populism can serve as an excuse for the abrogation of certain solidarity obligations of the middle classes toward the most vulnerable members of society. It also provides a justification for the unrestrained self-centered politics of majorities, whether in economic terms or in terms of party affiliation. Thus, not only do populist parties promise to efficiently carry out the wishes of the people, but in terms of bargaining over resources, a populist party can be a good bargaining chip. If it has many anti-systemic, anti-liberal messages with which it can threaten its opponents, ultimately these elements can be traded for greater payoffs for the voters of that populist party. Such political trading may occur at the national or even at the EU level.

On the basis of this analysis, we suggest there are two types of radicalization of populism.

1. Ideological radicalization:  
Ideological radicalization happens when voters truly become illiberal and when they become committed to a radical transformation of liberal democracy. What they want is a systemic change, and they see the populist party as the tool for creating an illiberal democracy— another system of government.
2. Strategic radicalization:

Strategic radicalization happens when leaders and their voters see the populist party as an instrument to put pressure on their opponents in the bargaining over resources (Gurov and Zankina 2013; Guasti 2020). The central goal of the voters and the leaders is not systemic change, but rather to extract competitive advantages, both political and economic. The leaders hope to defeat the ‘mainstream,’ and the voters want more resources in terms of, say, lower taxes, less redistribution, more attention to their cultural and religious preferences and the like.

The point is that strategic and ideological radicalization are processes that can happen simultaneously, and if so, can potentially limit each other. An increase in ideological radicals (and political messages of this kind) is likely to deter strategic radicals in certain situations. Simply put, in a real crisis where the system is really under pressure and threatening to collapse, the strategic radicals would most likely defect.

Empirical data from Central and Eastern Europe demonstrate both the ideological and strategic form of radicalization. It is true nevertheless, that despite the evident processes of radicalization, all of the countries that we discuss remain defective albeit liberal democracies. The only exception is the case of Fidesz in Hungary, which can now be characterized as an illiberal democracy (Smilova 2021) if not yet as an outright ‘electoral autocracy’.<sup>7</sup> It is sufficient to compare them to Russia and Turkey in order to see the differences between liberal democracy and its authoritarian alternatives. Overall, Eastern European member states of the EU have endured the COVID-19 crisis in ways comparable to established Western democracies without much damage to their institutions. This is a mark of democratic resilience. Moreover, these East European countries still have citizens who generally are strongly pro-European and committed to trans-Atlantic cooperation with the US.

This may not be a guarantee that liberal democracy will survive and thrive in the region. But it does support the thesis that much of the radicalization of populism may be strategic in nature. This radicalization is driven by the opportunistic behavior of both political leaders and voters who seek

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7 Even though Viktor Orbán’s Hungary may have already taken the ‘turn’ towards illiberal deconsolidation of liberal democracy, the rest of the CEE populist regimes discussed in this chapter are definitely still at the stage of yet reversible ‘swerving’ towards such deconsolidation (Buščíková and Guasti 2017). The recent resolution of the European Parliament from September 2022 to declare Hungary ‘an electoral autocracy’ may just be a controversial political position rather than an accurate account of the type of regime Orbán is building during his three terms in office.

competitive bargaining advantages in the allocation of resources. In times of real existential crises, such opportunistic behavior is likely to decrease. At least thus far, this seems to have been the case. But the future, of course, remains open.

## 5. Conclusion

We sought to define centrist and radical populism through the types of challenges each of these phenomena present to liberal democracy. We further sought to demonstrate that the paradigmatic cases of successful populist parties that have ruled their countries in the region (NDSV, Fidesz, GERB, PiS, ANO, SMER) all started as centrist populist parties. Prominent cases, such as PiS, Fidesz and GERB have radicalized—either themselves, or through cultivating a relationship with a more radical coalition partner. Thus, we claimed that centrist populism is essential for the success of populism in general, and the radicalization of centrist populism seems to be a good strategy for the institutionalization of populist parties over time. Finally, we advanced a theory underpinning the radicalization of centrist populism which does not rely on economic deterioration or fundamental cultural changes in society. We argued that there is a built-in tendency in centrist populism towards radicalization, which shows itself when strategic and ideological voting for populists is taken into account.

Our argument raises a question that cannot be answered here: Whether the developments described here are peculiar to Central and Eastern Europe. Our understanding is that they are not—centrist populism and its trajectory towards radicalization over time can also be observed in Italy. The election of Trump and the radicalization of his position in office is also a case that may be analyzed through the proposed theoretical lenses. Nevertheless, additional research is needed to further explore these insights.

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