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The European Populist Wave
Threats to European Values and the Case of Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Negli ultimi decenni, il termine ‘populismo’ e il suo aggettivo ‘populista’ hanno assunto notevole rilevanza, tanto nel mondo accademico quanto in quello politico e giornalistico. Specialmente negli ultimi cinque anni, eventi internazionali quali la decisione del Regno Unito di uscire dall’Unione Europea, l’elezione di Donald Trump negli Stati Uniti o la corsa di Marine Le Pen alle elezioni presidenziali francesi del 2017, hanno portato la parola ‘populismo’ al centro dell’attenzione mediatica e delle discussioni di politologi ed esperti. Studiosi e giornalisti hanno cominciato a parlare di un’esplosione populista che si sarebbe diffusa in tutto il mondo occidentale, sottolineando la minaccia che il populismo rappresenta per il sistema democratico e i suoi valori.

Questa tesi si pone un duplice obiettivo, sviluppato attraverso due serie di domande di ricerca. La prima serie di domande si concentra sulla presunta esplosione populista degli ultimi anni. La tesi mira infatti in primo luogo a valutare se si possa effettivamente parlare di un’esplosione populista nell’Unione Europea, in che misura il populismo oggi ha più successo che in passato e quali sono le ragioni che hanno portato alla sua ascesa. La seconda serie di domande affronta le minacce che il populismo può porre. Attraverso un’analisi dell’ambigua relazione tra i concetti di populismo e democrazia, questa tesi cercherà di capire se e sotto quali variabili il populismo possa essere considerato una minaccia per il sistema democratico e per i valori europei. Le minacce che il populismo e il suo impulso illiberale rappresentano per l’ordine democratico europeo saranno esemplificate analizzando il caso dell’Ungheria e del partito populista Fidesz, partito del primo ministro ungherese Viktor Orbán.

Nonostante il grande clamore mediatico e i numerosi studi condotti sull’argomento, il fenomeno del populismo ha sempre rappresentato un argomento di difficile trattazione per teorici ed esperti. Il concetto di ‘populismo’ è infatti ancora sfuggente, sfocato, la sua natura teorica e tratti caratterizzanti rimangono problematici da definire con chiarezza e univocità. La vaghezza del termine è in primo luogo determinata dal fatto che nessuna forza populista si definisce tale. La parola populismo ha infatti acquisito una connotazione peggiorativa soprattutto in Europa e il suo aggettivo è spesso usato come arma, un epiteto per respingere ed etichettare negativamente partiti politici opposti. Inoltre, il termine populismo è sempre stato impiegato nei contesti più vari, accostato ad una molteplicità di

fenomeni o utilizzato in combinazione con teorie politiche opposte tra loro, risultando in un uso poco chiaro del termine. La sovrautilizzazione del concetto, soprattutto in ambito mediatico, ha contribuito ad una confusione ancora maggiore e ha aumentato la difficoltà nel chiarire il suo preciso contenuto. Il significato e la natura di questo fenomeno rimangono lontani dal cittadino medio che sempre più spesso percepisce il termine populismo come cliché giornalistico piuttosto che come fenomeno in sé. 'Populismo' rimane un concetto essenzialmente contestato, ed è perciò necessario in primo luogo chiarire alcuni aspetti preliminari, quali il significato e la natura del populismo stesso.

Le origini del populismo possono essere fatte risalire alla seconda metà del XIX secolo, inizialmente in Russia ed alcuni anni dopo negli Stati Uniti. Il termine populismo deriva infatti dalla traduzione della parola russa *Narodnichestvo*, da *narod*, che significa popolo. Il populismo in Russia apparve in risposta alle difficoltà dei contadini nel regime zarista feudale, ma rimase un movimento promosso e gestito da gruppi di intellettuali russi. Essi credevano fosse un obbligo morale aiutare il *narod* a migliorare le sue condizioni e ritenevano che la propaganda politica tra i contadini avrebbe portato al risveglio delle masse e alla liberalizzazione del regime zarista. Il popolo russo rimase tuttavia fondamentalmente indifferente alle iniziative e propaganda politica del movimento. Contrariamente, negli Stati Uniti, il primo esempio di populismo nel mondo occidentale fu in grado di creare un movimento politico di massa che ebbe origine dal popolo stesso. Insoddisfatti delle condizioni socioeconomiche e del declino del tenore di vita dopo la guerra civile, molti agricoltori dal 1875 si unirono, formando inizialmente le cosiddette 'Alleanze degli Agricoltori' e successivamente il People's Party, Partito Popolare che si autodefinì populista, in difesa dei diritti dei contadini e della classe operaia contro il capitalismo e i magnati industriali. Alla fine del XIX secolo, le prime esperienze populiste riguardarono quindi il mondo rurale e sono state identificate come movimenti rivoluzionari agricoli. Nonostante le sostanziali differenze tra i due populismi descritti e i populismi moderni, possiamo già identificare quali siano gli elementi comuni a tutti i fenomeni populistici, ovvero la centralità del popolo e l'antielitarismo, o un'avversione verso un sistema partitico e politico consolidato. Solamente alla fine degli anni '40 e '50 del secolo successivo, le prime forme di populismo iniziarono ad apparire anche in Europa, da un lato in Italia, con l'*Uomo Qualunque* di Guglielmo Giannini, dall'altro in Francia, con *Union et Fraternité Française* e il cosiddetto poujadismo. Rispetto agli Stati

Uniti o all'America Latina, le esperienze populiste in Europa sono state tuttavia un fenomeno secondario e scarsamente riconosciuto fino agli anni '80, lasciando il populismo come un concetto teoricamente indefinito ed utilizzato semplicemente in isolati casi di studio del populismo agricolo americano. Alla fine degli anni '80 e negli anni '90 però, la nascita di nuovi partiti populistici nel panorama politico europeo ha portato un rinnovato interesse accademico sul tema, stimolando la nascita di nuovi approcci teorici. Sebbene il populismo rimanga un fenomeno controverso e siano ancora utilizzate diverse definizioni e accezioni del termine, la comunità accademica sembra ora più vicina al raggiungimento di un consenso e possiamo distinguere tre approcci teorici dominanti che caratterizzano il dibattito accademico, ovvero l'approccio ideologico, l'approccio strategico e l'approccio socioculturale.

La prima teoria, il cosiddetto approccio ideologico, descrive il populismo come un insieme di idee. Cas Mudde, uno degli studiosi più influenti del populismo e principale esponente di questo approccio, definisce il populismo come un'ideologia fluida che considera la società come separata in due campi omogenei e antagonisti, ovvero un popolo 'puro' che il populismo difende contro un'élite 'corrotta'. L'attore populista è l'unico vero rappresentante e portavoce della volontà del popolo. Con 'ideologia fluida', o dal nucleo sottile, si intende un'ideologia che non ha una struttura rigida o la stessa forza, profondità o complessità delle ideologie indipendenti. Le ideologie fluide devono essere assimilate ad altre ideologie complete, che potremmo definire ideologie ospitanti. Questa concettualizzazione del populismo permette di spiegare perché il termine populismo possa essere affiancato a ideologie di destra tanto quanto a ideologie di sinistra.

Il secondo approccio descrive il populismo come una strategia, perlopiù messa in atto da un leader personalistico. La strategia politica in questo approccio include tutti i mezzi e le tecniche adottate al fine di rinforzare il supporto elettorale del leader in questione, definito come flessibile e opportunistico, privo di principi ideologici, il quale privilegia un rapporto diretto con il popolo, nel tentativo di raccogliere il maggior numero di voti possibili. Il leader diventa personificazione della volontà del popolo, immagine che viene rafforzata tramite la creazione di una o più categorie identificate come nemici o avversari, usando in particolare discorsi anti-elitari come strumento politico.

Infine, l'approccio socioculturale concettualizza il populismo come identificazione con una categoria della società, denominata 'l'altro'. 'L'altro' è la vera espressione della nazione, il vero popolo, maggioranza silenziosa il cui volere è stato tradito da forze esterne e da una minoranza ostile. L'attore populista si pone dunque come unico difensore della volontà del popolo contro una minoranza ostile, la quale può essere assimilata all'élite corrotta dell'approccio di Mudde. Il risvolto interessante di questo approccio è la definizione di populismo come una categoria dello spazio politico. Pierre Ostiguy costruisce un modello bidimensionale dello spazio politico, formato da diverse categorie o scompartimenti, nel quale il populismo, e dunque 'l'altro', si trova nella parte inferiore. Nel suo studio, Ostiguy descrive gli aspetti sociologici e stilistici che caratterizzano questa categoria. Per esempio, l'attore populista preferirà uno stile politico risoluto, concreto, che favorisca azioni immediate a discapito di un'osservanza più attenta alla formalità e alle norme burocratiche. Anche lo stile personale dell'attore populista risulterà più diretto, spontaneo, meno curato e rigido, ma percepito come più vicino al popolo.

Ciò che unisce queste diverse interpretazioni è il concetto chiave sul quale tutte le teorie del populismo si basano, ovvero 'il popolo'. Il concetto di popolo è altrettanto dibattuto, in quanto concetto flessibile che può essere applicato a diverse percezioni della realtà. A seconda del tipo di populismo preso in considerazione, il significato di popolo cambierà. Esso può essere infatti definito in termini etnici o religiosi, solitamente dai populismi di destra, o in termini economici, solitamente dai populismi di sinistra. Quando si analizza il populismo quindi, i diversi riferimenti al popolo non possono mai essere intesi in modo univoco, ma ci si riferirà al popolo come costruzione specifica del fenomeno populista in questione. Le diverse concezioni di popolo determineranno chi e quali categorie vengono concepite come élite e come forze esterne avversarie, nozioni che possono infatti indicare per esempio il settore finanziario tanto quanto minoranze etniche o religiose.

Ai fini di questa tesi, nell'individuare una definizione di populismo attingeremo sia dall'approccio ideologico che dall'approccio socioculturale. Considereremo perciò il populismo come un'ideologia fluida, basata sull'opposizione tra un popolo 'puro' e un'élite corrotta. Questo modo di percepire il mondo come separato in campi antagonisti, dove gli attori populistici affermano di rappresentare la volontà di una maggioranza silenziosa contro una minoranza ostile e contro altri gruppi esterni, si manifesta attraverso appelli politici specifici e uno stile altrettanto peculiare, come definiti da Pierre Ostiguy.

L'aver identificato una definizione operativa di populismo ci consente di procedere con l'analisi delle due domande di ricerca.

Dopo aver tracciato un profilo generale dell'aumento del consenso del populismo dagli anni '80 agli ultimi anni, ci siamo concentrati sulla presunta esplosione populista degli ultimi cinque anni. Al fine di valutare la sua reale portata, abbiamo condotto un esame completo e dettagliato dei risultati elettorali dei partiti populistici europei, sia a livello nazionale che a livello europeo. A livello nazionale sono stati presi in considerazione i risultati riportati nelle ultime elezioni legislative nazionali di tutti i partiti populistici europei, e sono stati confrontati con i risultati precedentemente ottenuti nella stessa tipologia di elezioni. Le ultime elezioni nazionali prese in considerazione sono state le elezioni legislative della Grecia, tenutesi il 7 luglio 2019. A livello europeo, abbiamo confrontato i risultati nazionali dei partiti populistici nelle elezioni del Parlamento Europeo tenutesi dal 23 al 26 maggio 2019, con i risultati delle elezioni europee del 2014, esaminando sia la percentuale di voto ottenuta, sia l'effettiva rappresentanza acquisita nel Parlamento Europeo in termini di seggi. I partiti populistici utilizzati per condurre la suddetta analisi sono stati selezionati grazie alla classificazione della Foundation for European Progressive Studies, classificazione che più rappresenta il volatile consenso sulla categorizzazione dei partiti europei ed in linea con la definizione di populismo presentata in questa tesi. È stata inoltre presa in considerazione letteratura accademica pertinente, seguendo la categorizzazione di politologi ed analisti del settore.

Abbiamo sostenuto che l'Unione Europea negli ultimi cinque anni non è stata vittima di un'improvvisa esplosione o attacco populista. A livello nazionale, quando i partiti populistici vengono singolarmente analizzati, il sostegno alla maggior parte di essi appare stagnante e la maggioranza dei partiti populistici che sono riusciti a far parte di un governo, lo hanno fatto detenendo una minoranza di consensi all'interno di una coalizione. Allo stesso modo, a livello europeo, le elezioni del 2019 non hanno visto uno stravolgimento della rappresenta populista nell'emiciclo rispetto alle elezioni del 2014 e il fronte populista rimane perlopiù frammentato. Tuttavia, nonostante non si possa parlare di una recente esplosione populista, possiamo sicuramente parlare di un'ondata populista che è cresciuta gradualmente negli ultimi tre decenni. I partiti populistici hanno congiuntamente più che triplicato il loro seguito e, se è vero che il loro sostegno non è nettamente aumentato negli ultimi cinque anni, il populismo europeo non ha nemmeno mostrato

segni di un declino generale. I risultati aggregati non riflettono l'effettivo potere del populismo nell'Unione Europea poiché, come menzionato sopra, se i partiti vengono considerati singolarmente, lo stato generale del populismo non è cambiato drasticamente negli ultimi anni. Tuttavia, gli ultimi sviluppi nel panorama politico europeo stanno contribuendo al lento aumento generale del supporto al populismo e della sua rappresentanza. In effetti, la quasi totalità degli Stati membri europei che hanno tenuto le elezioni nazionali nel 2018 e nel primo semestre del 2019 hanno visto un aumento del supporto nazionale per i partiti populistici, e nelle ultime elezioni parlamentari europee la formazione di un nuovo gruppo parlamentare, composto esclusivamente da partiti populistici di destra.

La crescita di quest'ondata di forze populiste è determinata da un'unica causa principale, vale a dire una percepita indifferenza da parte della classe politica tradizionale, la quale non riflette più le aspettative dei suoi cittadini. In altre parole, il populismo sorge quando i cittadini ritengono che il sistema politico tradizionale non stia prestando attenzione o stia ignorando le loro richieste, aprendo dunque un divario tra le aspettative del popolo e le azioni della classe dirigente. Di conseguenza, il popolo, o parte di esso, non si sente più rappresentato dai partiti tradizionali e, abbandonato dalle opzioni politiche esistenti, si rivolge a scelte alternative, come il populismo, il quale afferma invece di essere vicino al popolo e di proteggerne gli interessi. Causa prima della crescita del populismo è dunque un sentimento di disillusione e mancata rappresentanza, sentimento che può nascere in seguito ad una serie di fattori che chiameremo 'agenti catalizzatori' del populismo. Per esempio, agente catalizzatore può essere la presenza di corruzione su vasta scala del sistema politico, o ripetuti scandali. Laddove la corruzione è estesa, i cittadini non si sentono rappresentati dalla classe politica, la quale non protegge più gli interessi del popolo, a favore di benefici individuali e particolaristici. Perché le forze populiste guadagnino consensi sono dunque necessarie determinate condizioni che costituiranno la domanda del populismo; l'offerta è costituita dagli attori populistici, i quali contribuiscono attivamente alla nascita della domanda, spesso enfatizzando ed esagerando situazioni di crisi o la presenza di minacce esterne. Abbiamo individuato tre principali agenti catalizzatori del populismo contemporaneo europeo, ovvero cambiamenti socioeconomici, una percepita minaccia alla cultura e identità nazionale e infine la perdita di sovranità nazionale. Cambiamenti socioeconomici, quali la crisi finanziaria del 2008,

ed in generale condizioni socioeconomiche sfavorevoli, sono spesso collegati positivamente ad una crescita del populismo. La classe dirigente o l'élite finanziaria vengono infatti colpevolizzate ed accusate di non rappresentare gli interessi del popolo e di non offrire soluzioni efficaci. Una percepita minaccia alla cultura e identità nazionale viene invece collegata all'immigrazione. Specialmente dopo la cosiddetta crisi europea dei migranti nel 2015, forze populiste hanno fatto leva su sentimenti di paura nei confronti degli immigrati, enfatizzando il pericolo che il fenomeno migratorio può porre, non solo in termini economici, ma anche in termini identitari, sottolineando la mancanza di provvedimenti in merito da parte dei partiti tradizionali. L'identificazione di un nemico esterno concreto è particolarmente utile per i populismi al fine di costruire negativamente l'identità del popolo, permette ovvero di definire il popolo non solo grazie alle caratteristiche che possiede, ma soprattutto grazie alle caratteristiche che *non* possiede. Infine, il sentimento causa della crescita del populismo è stato agevolato da una percepita erosione della sovranità nazionale, sia a causa di una crescente interdipendenza favorita dalla globalizzazione e da organizzazioni internazionali, sia più concretamente a causa di una sempre maggiore integrazione europea. L'Unione Europea viene spesso indicata dagli attori populistici come un corpo che, in accordo con la classe politica corrotta, lavora a difesa esclusiva degli interessi dell'élite, ignorando le necessità del popolo.

Il rapporto tra populismo e democrazia è sempre stato ritenuto ambiguo, e caratterizzato da posizioni diametralmente opposte. Il populismo è stato infatti descritto sia come una delle più pericolose minacce alla democrazia, sia come suo fattore rigenerante. Generalmente, posizioni antagoniste derivano principalmente da premesse differenti. Autori che analizzano casi di populismo inclusivo o che adottano un approccio radicale su cosa sia la democrazia, considerandola nel suo significato più puro, avranno tendenzialmente una visione più positiva degli effetti del populismo sulla democrazia. Contrariamente, laddove vengono analizzati casi di populismo esclusorio o dove è presa in considerazione un'accezione liberale della democrazia, i fenomeni populistici vengono intesi come patologia o minaccia. In questa tesi, al fine di rispondere alla seconda serie di domande di ricerca, abbiamo deciso di analizzare la relazione tra populismo e democrazia liberale. La scelta della democrazia liberale come soggetto di analisi, piuttosto che altre forme di democrazia, deriva dal fatto che la democrazia liberale è il modello di democrazia più diffuso e dominante, specialmente nell'Unione Europea, area

di indagine di questa tesi. Inoltre, nel suo uso quotidiano, il termine ‘democrazia’ è normalmente inteso con riferimento al modello liberale piuttosto che alla democrazia in sé o ad altre sue connotazioni. Abbiamo definito la democrazia liberale come un regime politico che include la definizione più pura e radicale di democrazia, quindi sovranità popolare e dominio della maggioranza, ma che prevede anche la presenza di istituzioni indipendenti che assicurano il mantenimento e la protezione di un insieme di diritti fondamentali, tra i quali i diritti delle minoranze, la libertà di espressione, la libertà di associazione e la divisione dei poteri. Questa tesi sostiene che il populismo può rappresentare sia uno strumento correttivo per la democrazia liberale, quanto un pericolo. Il populismo può favorire un processo di democratizzazione in quanto spesso solleva dubbi, critica e contesta la condotta della classe politica dominante, aumentando così la trasparenza in politica e ri-politicizzando aree e temi che erano stati ignorati. Gli attori populistici inoltre possono favorire una crescente partecipazione popolare nella sfera politica, poiché il populismo si rivolge direttamente alla gente comune e il cittadino si sente maggiormente coinvolto in questioni che precedentemente sentiva distanti. Tuttavia, il populismo è spesso in contrasto con la democrazia liberale, rappresentando una minaccia soprattutto nella sua forma esclusiva e quando arriva ad ottenere potere politico. La teoria e la prassi populista favoriscono la sovranità popolare e i diritti di una maggioranza che è intesa come unico popolo. I diritti delle minoranze, o di qualsiasi altro attore che non rientri nell’accezione prescelta di ‘popolo’, possono essere violati. Essendo l’attore populista il solo rappresentante legittimo della volontà del popolo, il populismo può arrivare a danneggiare la divisione dei poteri e il sistema di check and balances. Inoltre, istituzioni indipendenti, quali i diversi canali mediatici e il sistema giudiziario, sono le più inclini a essere messe a rischio da forze populiste.

Ad oggi dunque, il populismo nell’Unione europea non rappresenta una minaccia per la democrazia nel suo senso puro, ma rappresenta una potenziale minaccia per la democrazia liberale e quindi per valori e pilastri democratici europei. Esempio emblematico di come il populismo possa arrivare a danneggiare concretamente i valori europei e i pilastri della democrazia liberale, è il caso dell’Ungheria e del partito populista Fidesz. Fidesz e il suo leader Viktor Orbán sono uno dei primi partiti populistici arrivati a governare con una straordinaria maggioranza. Fidesz ha mantenuto un consenso elettorale senza precedenti in Ungheria per oltre otto anni consecutivi. Difatti, dopo un primo mandato nel 1998 e

due sconfitte nel 2002 e nel 2006, Fidesz ha vinto le elezioni legislative nazionali del 2010 e tutte le successive, assicurandosi una maggioranza di due terzi nel Parlamento ungherese per tre mandati consecutivi. Negli ultimi nove anni, il governo di Viktor Orbán si è distinto per iniziative e posizioni che hanno sollevato preoccupazioni e critiche sia a livello nazionale che europeo. L'Ungheria è stata il primo paese ad indurre il Parlamento Europeo a votare per l'attivazione dell'articolo 7(1) del Trattato sull'Unione Europea, la cosiddetta opzione nucleare, un meccanismo attivato quando il Parlamento Europeo constata l'esistenza di un "evidente rischio di violazione grave" da parte di uno Stato membro, dei valori fondamentali e dei principi democratici difesi dall'Unione Europea. La straordinaria maggioranza parlamentare di Fidesz ha infatti consentito l'approvazione di una serie di leggi e manovre che nel 2019 hanno portato l'Ungheria ad essere dichiarata primo paese 'parzialmente libero' tra gli Stati membri europei. In seguito alle accuse di violazione dello stato di diritto e dei principi dell'Unione Europea, il 20 marzo 2019, il Partito Popolare Europeo (PPE) ha approvato la sospensione di Fidesz dal partito. Il dichiarato progetto di costruzione di una democrazia illiberale ha coinvolto diversi campi e valori fondamentali sui quali si fonda l'Unione Europea. Ad esempio, diverse riforme hanno limitato la libertà accademica, fondamentalmente rimuovendo l'indipendenza dell'Accademia Ungherese delle Scienze e trasferendo il controllo dei diversi istituti di ricerca ad una nuova organizzazione fortemente influenzata dal governo. Un nuovo emendamento sull'istruzione superiore ha costretto il trasferimento a Vienna di una delle più prestigiose università presenti a Budapest, la Central European University. Più organismi internazionali hanno espresso ripetutamente la loro preoccupazione per la crescente xenofobia verso le minoranze etniche presenti sul territorio e per presunte violazioni dei diritti di rifugiati, migranti e richiedenti asilo. O ancora, diversi pacchetti di leggi hanno progressivamente ridotto l'indipendenza del sistema giudiziario. Inoltre, la concentrazione di oltre quattrocentocinquanta canali mediatici filogovernativi sotto il controllo di un'unica fondazione ha seriamente danneggiato la libertà di espressione e il diritto ad accedere e di reperire informazioni indipendenti. Campagne informative condotte contro l'Unione Europea, consultazioni nazionali suggerenti piani nascosti per minare la sicurezza nazionale e una limitata libertà di associazione e di espressione, sono state giudicate come altamente fuorvianti per gli elettori, i quali potrebbero essere stati dunque fortemente influenzati nella loro scelta elettorale. La campagna elettorale di

Fidesz e di Viktor Orbán è stata descritta come caratterizzata da una retorica intimidatoria e xenofoba, caratterizzata da uno spazio limitato per dibattiti significativi o osservazioni da parte della società civile e da un condizioni di scarsa equità, minanti la capacità dell'opposizione di competere su base paritaria.

Questo ultimo punto, ovvero il funzionamento del sistema elettorale è particolarmente rilevante nell'analisi della relazione tra democrazia e populismo. Abbiamo sostenuto che il populismo può essere in conflitto con la democrazia nella sua accezione liberale, ma che normalmente rispetta i principi della democrazia intesa radicalmente, ovvero come sovranità popolare e dominio della maggioranza, la cui espressione concreta può dunque essere identificata in elezioni libere ed eque. Se il partito il governo ungherese dovesse rafforzare il progetto di una democrazia illiberale a tal punto da compromettere il funzionamento del sistema elettorale, non potremmo più parlare del populismo ungherese come minaccia alla sola democrazia liberale, ma come pericolo per la democrazia in sé. Fidesz dovrebbe dunque essere etichettato non più come populismo ma come una forma di autoritarismo. Il percorso del populismo ungherese invita a riflettere sulle insidie che questo fenomeno presenta e sull'importanza di un continuo monitoraggio dello stato del populismo europeo.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, populism has gained more and more prominence in the academic and political field. International events such as the so-called migrant crisis, the referendum representing the will of the United Kingdom to departure from the European Union, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States or the run of Marine Le Pen to the 2017 French presidential elections, sparked interest even in those who were so cynical and drained by politics that had distanced themselves from the political world. These events led many scholars and journalists to speak of a populist explosion or populist menace that would have spread across the Western world, so much that ‘populism’ has been selected by Cambridge University press as the word of the year in 2017. Journalists, scholars, politicians and representatives of the European institutions never fail to warn us about the dangers of populism and populist parties, emphasizing the presence of a populist breakthrough, threatening liberal democracy and democratic values.

This dissertation has a twofold goal, which has been operationalised through two interweaved sets of research questions. The first set of questions pertains to the so-called ‘populist attack’. The dissertation aims in a first place to assess whether we can truly speak of a populist explosion in the European Union, to which extent populism today is more successful than in the past and which are the reasons that might have led to its rise. The second set of questions addresses the threats that populism can pose. Through an analysis of the ambiguous relationship between the concepts of populism and democracy, this dissertation will try to understand whether and under which variables populism can be considered a threat to the democratic system and for European values. The threats that populism and its illiberal impulse might represent for the European democratic order will be exemplified analysing the case of Hungary and of the populist party Fidesz, the party of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Despite its great media coverage and the several studies conducted on the topic, the phenomenon of populism has always represented a difficult subject of discussion for political scientists. Its conceptualization is theoretically challenging, and its characterizing features and nature remain hard to define. The concept of populism is still

elusive, blurred and tricky. When data about populism are collected and statistics are drawn, it is always necessary for the authors to specify which definition of populism is taken into consideration and which of its manifold acceptations is considered as the basis of the study, revealing a hidden reluctance and difficulty in providing a univocal definition. The vagueness of the term is in a first place determined by the fact that no populist force defines itself as such. The word populism acquired a pejorative connotation especially in Europe and its adjective is often employed as a weapon, an epithet to dismiss opposite political parties, making the construction of a clear definition and common understanding of the concept an even more slippery path. Beyond its empirical complexity, the concept of populism has always been employed in the most different contexts, used as a label for a multiplicity of phenomena, combined with opposing political theories, disciplines and fields of study, resulting in an unclear use of the term. This indiscriminate and inflationary use of the concept contributed to an even greater confusion and increased the difficulty in clarifying its precise content. The significance and nature of this phenomenon remain far from the average citizen and civil society which more and more frequently perceives it as a journalistic cliché rather than as a phenomenon per se. The political and social theorist Walter Brice Gallie wrote in 1956 the paper 'Essentially Contested Concepts', engaging in a theoretical analysis of terms characterised by conceptual confusion in scientific works. He identified seven criteria of 'contestedness' which can help us understanding more precisely which characteristics of populism make it such a conceptually debated and challenging term:

1. *Appraisiveness*. As mentioned above, the concept of populism is connotatively charged and evaluative. For instance, especially in Europe or more generally in the context of liberal democracies, the term populism is negatively appraised and mainly associated with demagoguery. Nowadays, it is rarely neutrally employed.

2. *Internal complexity*. Internal complexity refers to the fact that the concept may encompass an array of numerous constituent elements or 'component parts', so much that it might, as a whole, admit diverse descriptions of the concept. Populism is described as an ideology, a strategy, a dimension or a style, perfectly fitting this second feature.

3. *Diverse describability*. Diverse describability is directly and strictly interconnected with internal complexity. As a matter of fact, it implies that the different components or elements of a concept which allow it to be described in different ways as a whole, are

ranked in a different order of importance. To clarify, those understanding populism as an ideology will rank the set of ideas characterising populism as the most important feature, while those understanding it as a style will prominently see populism as composed by different sets of expressions. However, the components are not contradictory between themselves but might jointly exist.

4. *Openness*. Gallie says: “The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance. For convenience I shall call the concept of any such achievement ‘open’ in character”¹ Populism has been repeatedly subject to changes in its understanding. Populism is a fluid phenomenon whose nature has never been fixed. From its origins where it was associated to agrarian movements, to the description of political parties representing a certain set of appeals, it might in a near future arrive to be a synonym of illiberalism, authoritarianism or something we cannot predict.

5. *Reciprocal recognition*. The different accounts and interpretations of the concept are not totally independent and extraneous between themselves, but they recognise to be sustaining a certain view against other readings of the concept. Before starting to write about populism, today declaring the contested nature of the phenomenon is almost a norm, acknowledging the fact that other understandings exist and that the author is providing only one interpretation.

6. *Exemplar*. Gallie argues that all contested concepts and their disparate analyses all derive from one original exemplar, which is comprehensively recognised. The first instances of populism have been identified in Russia and the United States, nevertheless there is not one single original model from which different interpretations started. This absence creates an even broader conceptual confusion.

7. *Progressive competition*. In light of a reciprocal recognition of the different acceptations of the concept of populism, contestation among the alternative meanings determines an increase of the quality of arguments. Despite not having reached a consensus yet, efforts of conceptualisation have been growing over the past two decades, qualitatively increasing the level of research and argumentation.

¹ Gallie, W. B. (1956). *Essentially contested concepts*, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, New Series, 56, p. 167–198

Taken into consideration the ‘contestedness’ of the term, in a first place it is necessary to frame the concept of populism, clarifying some preliminary aspects such as the meaning and nature of populism itself. The first chapter will focus on providing a better understanding of the meaning of populism, familiarizing the reader with the intricacies of this phenomenon and trying to reach a definition that will allow us to proceed with the study on the two sets of research questions. After having identified the first instances of populism in the Russian *Narodnichestvo* and in the American People’s Party and having traced the origins of the European populist phenomenon in the French *Poujadisme* and the Italian *Uomo Qualunque*, we will give a brief overview of the reasons that have led the term populism to be employed, mainly in the public debate, as a label in order to discredit parties, leaders or movements that are considered politically obnoxious. This section is especially meant to be an invitation for the reader not to consider the populist phenomena as inherently bad and to reflexively interact with the concept whenever they come across with it. Being conscious and aware of the roots that charged the term with a negative connotation will also help to conduct a more impartial research on which truly are the threats that populism can represent for democratic systems and the values of the European Union. The second section overviews three main theoretical approaches to populism, which are considered the most successful attempts to respond to the question “What is populism?”, question whose answer normally escapes analytical grasp. The first approach is the ideological one, theorised mainly by Cas Mudde, one of the leading scholars of populism at the moment; this approach defines populism as a thin-centred ideology which implies an opposition between a ‘pure people’ and a ‘corrupt elite’.² The second approach, called political-strategical or organizational, whose main exponent is Kurt Weyland, sees populism as a political strategy usually adopted by a personalistic leader.³ Finally, the socio-cultural approach analysed through the works of Pierre Ostiguy, builds a two-dimensional model of the political space, where populism is defined as ‘the flaunt of the low’.⁴ To the purposes of this dissertation, we will consider populism

² Mudde, C. (2017). *Populism: An ideational Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³ Weylan, K. (2017). *Populism: A Political-Strategical Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴ Ostiguy, P. (2009). *The High and the Low in Politics: A Two-Dimensional Political Space for Comparative Analysis and Electoral Studies*. Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series of the International Association of Political Science (IPSA)

as a set of ideas or as a way of perceiving the political world (drawing therefore from the ideational approach), which manifests through specific political appeals, such as the ‘flaunt of the low’, as defined by Pierre Ostiguy. The last section of this first framing chapter will try to identify which are the main elements and features of populism which characterise all populist phenomena and connect the numerous theories on its nature. After having explored the core concept of populism, namely ‘the people’ as a unified pure body, we will outline five characteristics of populism identified by Brubaker, which make explicit and label the essential traits of populism.

The second chapter will give an answer to the two sets of research questions. Firstly, it will analyse the rise of contemporary populist actors in Europe, tracing a comprehensive profile of the increase of consensus of populism from the 1980s until the last years. This section will selectively and illustratively use cases of European populist forces. On the contrary, in order to assess the true extent of the so-called populist invasion of the last five years, a complete and detailed examination of the election results of European populist parties has been conducted, both at the national and at the European level. In order to do so, at the national level we took into consideration the last results reported by European populist parties in the national legislative elections, as compared to the results reported in their previous national legislative elections. The last national elections taken into account are the Greek legislative elections, held on July 7, 2019. At the European level, we analysed the national results of populist parties during the European Parliament elections held between May 23 and 26, 2019. We compared the results of the 2014 and 2019 European elections, examining both the percentage of vote share and the effective representation gained in the European Parliament in term of seats.

In order to conduct this analysis of the state of populism, we determined which parties could be selected as populist using mainly the classification of the Populism Tracker, a continuously updated database operated by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). As a matter of fact, the FEPS respects the definition of populism as understood in this dissertation, that is to say, it draws both from the ideological approach, considering the definition provided by Cas Mudde, and the socio-cultural approach, analysing several other criteria such as rhetoric and campaign slogans of the party, exploring therefore political appeals like the ‘flaunt of the low’.

Once having assessed the scope of the populist rise, the following section defines the root cause and the main catalysing agents of populism. We argue in fact that the surge of populist forces is determined by one single root cause, namely the perceived unresponsiveness of a party system which could not adapt to the changing expectations of its citizens. However, an array of different issues can push the emergence of this sentiment, what we will call ‘catalysing agents’. We will analyse the main agents for populist forces in the European Union, namely socio-economic changes or socio-economic conditions, a perceived loss of identity or cultural threats, and the loss of national sovereignty.

Finally, the last section of this chapter will examine the ambiguous relation between populism and democracy. In particular, after having established a definition of liberal democracy, we will delve into the ambivalent role of populist forces for the liberal democratic order, understanding how and under which conditions they might represent a danger or a restorative for European values. The choice of analysis of the relationship between populism and *liberal* democracy, rather than other forms of democracy, derives from the fact that liberal democracy is the more diffused and dominant model of democracy especially in the European Union, area of inquiry of this dissertation. Furthermore, in its day-to-day usage, the term ‘democracy’ is normally understood with reference to the *liberal* model rather than to democracy *per se* or other connotations.

The threats which populism might pose when it comes to power are exemplified through the case of Hungary and Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance, the party of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Fidesz and its leader Viktor Orbán are one of the first instances in the European Union of populism arriving to govern with a striking majority in Parliament and maintaining such a widespread consensus for over eight consecutive years. As a matter of fact, after a first mandate in 1998 and two defeats in 2002 and 2006, Fidesz won the 2010 national legislative elections and the all the following ones, securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament for three consecutive mandates. Hungary has been the first country leading the European Parliament to vote for triggering Article 7(1) of the Treaty on the European Union, a mechanism activated when a Member State is

considered by the European Parliament to represent a “clear risk of a serious breach”⁵ of the core values and democratic principles defended by the European Union. Fidesz and Hungary appeared therefore as the best case study for this dissertation. Moreover, I had the opportunity to work for three months from January 2019 in the Embassy of Italy in Budapest, experience which allowed me to gain precious insights and a better understanding of the development of the Hungarian politics, as well as of the consequences which specific policies had on the Hungarian socio-political life. Therefore, the third chapter will trace the rise to power of Fidesz, how it arrives to govern both in 1998 and in 2010, identifying in this path the catalysing agents which formed a demand side for populism. After having described the main policies that the Orbán government adopted after the 2010 electoral victory and which might partly explain the consensus maintained over the past eight years, we will focus on the supply side of populism. The second paragraph will consider the populist traits of Fidesz and the populist narrative which has been built over the years, as well as Orbán’s features as the populist charismatic leader. Finally, we will analyse how the Hungarian government posed and is still posing a threat to European values, exploring different fields which are recognised as pillars of the liberal democratic order and which different policies adopted by Fidesz are endangering.

⁵ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I Common Provisions - Article 7 (ex Article 7 TEU). Available at < <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/>>

Chapter I

FRAMING POPULISM

1.1 Historical background

1.1.1 *The origins*

The origins of populism can be traced back to the second half of the 19th century on both sides of the ocean, firstly in Russia and only some years later in the United States. The term populism comes in fact from the translation of the Russian word *Narodnichestvo*, from *narod*, meaning people or folk. The term seems to have come in use from the early 1870s, however, populist ideas were circulating in Russia before the 1870s, with the works of the Russian intellectual Alexander Herzen (1820-1870). Herzen might be considered the pioneer of populism, born from the attempts of the author to plant a socialist seed in Russia before the revolutions of 1848. As a matter of fact, when Herzen was arrested in 1834 for its affinity to revolutionary ideas, he started to focus his thoughts more and more to the Russian people and the rural communities. The Russian peasant's life seemed to him the result of a missed historical development. In order to successfully reach further development, it was necessary a complete liberation and emancipation of the rural communities against the servile and slave structures oppressing them, where the *obščina*, the commune of the peasants in villages, could continue to exist only in light of a fundamental evolution of the state and the Russian society.¹ The revolution of 1848 further crystallised his ideas and opened new perspectives, as it happened to many socialists in Europe and to some of Herzen's colleagues such as Michail A. Bakunin and Nikolaj G. Černyševskij. Before 1848, the working class in France had appeared to Herzen as similar to the Russian peasants. However, 1848 revealed to him a new facet that the working class could assume, a revolutionary proletariat that raised his hopes for a similar reaction of the Russian peasants. A peasants' revolution would have disrupted the Tsar despotism, cut the chains of the rural community with the aristocracy and the state and assured a periodic redistribution of the land, assuring the end of poverty and developing an internal rural administration through the *obščiny*. He started to perceive

¹ Venturi, F. (1972). *Il Populismo Russo*. Vol.I. *Herzen, Bakunin, Černyševskij*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

differently the attitude towards - and especially the relationship with - the masses, reconceptualising the position of the Russian bourgeoisie in Russian politics, whose supremacy he envisaged having a short deadline.² Embracing ideals of agrarian socialism, opposing to tsarism and believed in a new anti-bourgeois society, where peasants and the people could be free, developing their own authority against the tsars' autocratic policies. Herzen largely contributed to the creation of a new conscience and awareness among the Russian intellectuals of his generation, giving new strength to a spirit of independence from the state and from the dominant power, spirit which had been mostly dormant. Herzen laid out the essential point of Russian populism, namely the centrality of the people for a future revolution and development of the Russian society, the necessity to create some revolutionary who had to concentrate exclusively on the people helping them breaking the ties from the tsarist regime and the Russian aristocratic elite, and finally the belief of a central role of the rural communes.

If Herzen can be considered the founder of populism ideologically, Černyševskij (1828-1889) was the one tracing its lines of action. From a young age he condemned the Russian situation and developed the certainty that a total revolution of the system was necessary, a transformation of the entirety of political and social relations of the country.³ Like Herzen, he believed that the only hope for this revolution to happen was to be placed in the hands of the peasants and it was imperative to start giving unity to the many separated protest movement. The core of his political ideas in 1850 could be resumed in the claim of giving to the lower classes the power *de facto*, criticising the aristocracy which was limiting the development of the society.

The ideals of intellectuals such as Herzen, Černyševskij and Bakunin can be said to have heavily inspired the Russian revolutionary movements of the 1860s and 70s, considered as the first populist movements by the majority of scholars.⁴

The reforms of the Tsar Alexander II in 1861, the so-called 'emancipation of the serfs', did not help the miserable situation of the peasants, who were still bound to the land and did not enjoy any economic improvement. In 1861 a small group of activists started a

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ Poggio, P.P. (2007). *Il Populismo Russo: Percorsi Carsici*. Fondazione Biblioteca Archivio Luigi Micheletti

secret organization called *Zemlja i volja*, Land and Liberty, what they believed that the peasants should have received by the regime. Before its formation, activists had started to gather thanks to the *Sovremennik*, a Russian literary and political magazine, one of the most prominent of the time, with which Černyševskij was actively collaborating. They started to distribute posters and tried to organise student movements, looking for the first contacts with the peasants. One of the posters addressed to the peasants is said to have been written by the same Černyševskij.⁵ The first *Zemlja i volja* combined the groups of intellectuals gathered around both the *Sovremennik* and the *Kolokol*, the Russian newspaper published by Herzen in London. The group was disbanded only three years later by the police who arrested its members, but other small organizations defending the ideals of *Zemlja i volja* continued to exist, especially at university level.⁶ In the following years, the activists of the first *Zemlja i volja* continued their political propaganda, trying to create a connection with the people, the *narod*, trying to motivate them to embrace the principles of the ideology that came to be called in these years *Narodničestvo*, translated as populism. As a matter of fact, the movement was so widespread and with deep ideological roots that populism is said to be born in these years, even though as we have seen, its ideals started to spread much earlier.⁷ Initially addressing to workers of the cities, thousands of students, many of them from the Circle of Čajkovskij⁸, from 1872 with a peak in 1874, went to the people in the countryside, to talk with the peasants, to know them and prepare them for their insurrection, constituting a movement called *khozhdenie v narod* ('going to the people'). The 'Going to the people' movement was a concrete response of the youth to the call of the revolutionary populist ideas circulating at the time. They believed that the political propaganda among the peasants would have led to their awakening and to the end of the tsarist regime, and one of the core ideas idea which dominated their actions was the belief of a 'debt' of the intellectuals towards the people. The most cultured class had a moral duty to help the *narod* to improve their condition, since the people with their work were materially supporting the intellectuals.

⁵ Venturi, F. (1972). *Il Populismo Russo*. Vol.I. *Herzen, Bakunin, Černyševskij*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

⁶ Bartlett, R. (2007). *Storia della Russia. Dalle Origini agli Anni di Putin*. Oscar Mondadori

⁷ Venturi, F. (1972). *Il Populismo Russo*. Vol.III. *Dall' Andata del Popolo al Terrorismo*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

⁸ The Circle of Čajkovskij, whose members were called the čajkovcy, was a literary socialist propaganda association, which draw its name from one of its most prominent members, Nikolaj Čajkovskij

“Its adherents held that the intellectuals should not lead the people in the name of the abstract, bookish, imported ideas, but adapt themselves to the people as it was, promoting resistance to the government in the name of real, everyday needs.”⁹

The revolution however could only originate from the people itself.¹⁰ The peasants remained largely indifferent to the populist propaganda, revealing that they were not ready for an insurrection yet. The ‘Going to the people’ movement underwent a strong repression from the tsarist regime and the members of the movement arrived at the conclusion that the revolutionary efforts had to be intensified and that a centralized organization was needed. In 1876, the second *Zemlja i volja* was formed, based on much more radical ideals. It was created as a revolutionary party, a stronger organisation where all the protest movements, the propaganda and all the populist elements of the previous years united to cooperate. The core claims of the organization were the ownership of the land to the peasants and its egalitarian distribution among them, the separation of the Russian empire with the end of the tsarist regime and a full self-administration of the *obščiny*, the communes which worked as a cooperative for the village, an institution which was in charge of the division of the arable lands, among other responsibilities.¹¹ The populists saw therefore a socio-economic revolution for the people by the people, in conformity with its will, vision which came both from an authentic desire to help the people and from a conscious awareness of the social and political condition of the Russia of the time. The means to reach it would have to be the organisation of the people and their upheaval through revolutionary forces and the creation of a disorganisation of the State, term which meant terrorist actions. Divergencies on how the revolution should have been reached led to the separation of the second *Zemlja i volja* in two different groups, the revolutionaries and the propagandists: the *Narodnaja volja* (‘People’s Will’) which focused on terrorist action and the *Čěrnjy peredel* (‘Black Repartition’) which continued to believe in a central role on the peasantry and continued the political propaganda.¹² In March 1881, the executive committee of *Narodnaja volja* assassinated Tsar Alexander II, date which does not mark the end of Russian populism, in fact the *Narodnaja volja*

⁹ Pipes, R. (1964). *Narodnichestvo: A Semantic Enquiry*. Slavic Review. 23(3), p.445

¹⁰ Venturi, F. (1972). *Il Populismo Russo*. Vol.I. *Herzen, Bakunin, Čěrnjyševskij*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

¹¹ Venturi, F. (1972). *Il Populismo Russo*. Vol.III. *Dall’Andata del Popolo al Terrorismo*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi

¹² Ibid

continued to exist, even though without the same strength, but which surely marks the end of that historical period.

Some years later, another instance of populism emerged in the United States, often considered as the first populist case in the Western world. The term populism in English was reported for the first time in a newspaper in 1891 in the United States, translated from the Russian *Narodnichestvo*, and it was used as a self-descriptive term by the People's Party, an alliance born in 1891 between different farmers' confederations and industrial workers.¹³ Unsatisfied by the declining socio-economic conditions and the falling standard of living after the Civil War, many farmers, especially in the Midwest and in the South, came together in the organization of what was called Farmers' Alliances, constituted in order to have larger bargaining power. Among other requests, farmers demanded the abolition of national banks – considered responsible for the hard conditions of the peasants, a more effective immigrant regulation and an improvement of the living standards through the adoption of pensions and shorter working days. The People's Party was created by the crystallisation of the different Farmers' Alliances and Eastern industrial workers, who joined their forces when the necessity for political action made the establishment of a party fundamental. The People's Party became a third choice between the Republicans and the Democrats.¹⁴ The People's Party, was created as a challenge to the established party system, in defence of the rights of peasants and the working class, against industrial capitalism and the magnates of industry. It defined itself as populist because of the central role of the people, repository of the authentic values of the American spirit. American populist experience has been short-lived. It ended with the defeat of the democratic candidate William J. Bryan, supported by the People's Party, in the race for the presidential elections of 1896. In addition, the improvement of the economic conditions of the farmers determined a loss of interest and support to the movement.

¹³ Bjerre-Poulsen, N. (1986). *Populism - A Brief Introduction to a Baffling Notion*. American Studies in Scandinavia, 18: 27-36

¹⁴ Lazaridis, G. and Campani, G. (2017). *Understanding the Populist Shift Othering in a Europe in crisis*. London and New York: Routledge

At the end of the 19th century, the first populist experiences concerned therefore the rural world and have been identified as agrarian revolutionary movements. Despite the difference both between the Russian populism and People's Party and between these first populist instances and the contemporary ones, we can find already the elements that constitute the core of the study of populism, namely the central role of the people (the *narod* in Russia and the worker class in the US), anti-elitism or the aversion towards an established party system (hostility toward the tsarist regime in Russia and opposition to the industrial elite and party system in the US) and the will of the people (*Narodnaja volja* in Russia and what was represented as 'the true spirit of American people' in the US).

1.1.2 European populism

It is only in the late 1940s and 1950s that the first forms of populism started to appear also in Europe, on the one hand in Italy, with *Uomo Qualunque* and on the other hand in France, with the *Union et Fraternité Française* and the so-called *poujadisme*. In comparison to the United States or Latin America, the populist experiences have been however a minor recognized phenomenon in Europe until the 1980s, when the French scholar Pierre André Taguieff applied the concept to a concrete political phenomenon of the time, describing the rise of Front National.¹⁵

The movement *Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque* – Common Man's Front, took its name from the journal founded in 1944 by the Italian journalist and writer Guglielmo Giannini. The movement, and later the party founded in 1946, wanted to put at the centre and be representative of the common man. It was characterised by its anti-political vocation, the unconditional criticism of the professionalism of politicians and saw representative democracy as a real dictatorship of the policy makers class on the 'common people'. *Uomo Qualunque* wanted to be the voice of the people that sided up neither with the fascist nor the anti-fascist position, believing that politics was an easy task that any citizen

¹⁵ Campani, G. and Pajnik, M (2017). *Populism in Historical Perspectives*. In: Lazaridis, G. and Campani, G. (2017). *Understanding the Populist Shift Othering in a Europe in crisis*. London and New York: Routledge

could have taken care of, like a simple administration.¹⁶ The party was initially very successful, especially during the elections of the Constituent Assembly in 1946, when with thirty deputies it became the fifth national party. It dissolved few years later, after the failure reported in the elections of 1948, due also to splits within the party.

Some years later in France we witness the emergence of another movement of very different nature, but very paradigmatic for the history of European populism, namely the *Union et Fraternité Française* - Union and French Fraternity (UFF). The movement emerged as an anti-tax protest in 1953 when Pierre Poujade founded l'*Union de défense des marchands, des commerçants et des artisans* (UDCA), which later expanded and, with the name of *Union et Fraternité Française* UFF, obtained fifty-two Members of Parliament at the elections of 1956, with more than two million votes.

The party stood up for the small merchants and, to the hostility towards the political class, Poujade added a strong criticism towards the intellectuals, which were said to lack 'common sense', a quality which belonged only to the common people. What came to be known as *poujadisme*, was therefore initially characterised by aversion to the economic elites, anti-parliamentarism and an exaltation of the direct political participation of the people, besides of the exaltation of the people itself. Poujade however interpreted the meaning of 'people' in purely nationalist terms, referring only to the French people. As the other populist experiences, the UFF had a short life and dissolved in 1958. However, from the deputies elected in 1956 under the poujadist flag, emerged the well-known leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder in 1972 of the Front National which now under the leadership of his daughter became one of the main forms of contemporary populism.¹⁷

As in the first agrarian forms of populism, despite the ideological differences between *Uomo Qualunque* and *Poujadisme*, we can find again some recurring elements, namely the centrality of the people and its opposition to an elite. We will further analyse these 'common denominators' of the different populist phenomena in the last section of this framing chapter.

¹⁶ Lazaridis, G. and Campani, G. (2017). *Understanding the Populist Shift Othering in a Europe in crisis*. London and New York: Routledge

¹⁷ Ibid

1.1.3 How did populism become a negative label

We have seen that in its origins, in the late 19th century, the term populism did not carry with it a pejorative connotation, so much that it was used as a self-descriptive term by the People's Party. It used to indicate those agrarian movements that defended the interests of the people and that could be seen more as an advocacy of the peasants rather than as a pretentious demagogic attitude, like it is often interpreted today. Nowadays in Europe no political actor defines itself as populist, the term has come to be employed as a negative label, a weapon and often an insult in order to denigrate the political adversary.

In the second chapter of this dissertation we will analyse how and to which extent populism represents a threat, however it is important to be aware that the term populism should not be considered a priori as detrimental and dismissive, or as a label to be attributed to every political style or ideology that might be considered politically unpleasant. Populism has been employed as a negative concept especially in Europe, since it came to indicate almost exclusively radical right-wing parties, connected to negative and radical ideological leanings or often attributed to neofascist racist ideologies. Starting from the European elections of 2009, we start to assist to the rise of left-wing populist parties such as Syriza in Greece, or later Podemos in Spain, and this allowed the concept to free itself from the radical right, at least academically.¹⁸ Nevertheless, in Europe the term is still prisoner of a stigmatised meaning. The often indiscriminate and pejorative use by the media of the term populism contributes to a greater confusion around the topic and to an uncomplete understanding of the phenomenon, which arrived to become an empty adjective to be employed as a fuss-generator for titles of articles and TV reports. It is fundamental to consciously use the term and to understand which are the roots of the negative acceptance of the term which still persist mostly in Europe.

Scholars trace back the focus of Europeans on the pejorative connotations of populism to the work of Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, published in 1955. Before his work, American historians had treated populism quiet benevolently, almost fondly.¹⁹

¹⁸ Mudde, C. (2018). *How Populism Became the Concept that Defines Our Age*. The Guardian, 22 November 2018, last accessed: 15 June 2019

¹⁹ Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). *How did 'populism' become a pejorative concept? And why is this important today? A genealogy of double hermeneutics*. Thessaloniki: POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 6

Referring to populists and their hold on the values of the agrarian life, Hofstadter wrote: “I have found much that was retrograde and delusive, a little that was vicious, and a good deal that was comic.”²⁰ The second chapter, pejoratively entitled ‘*The Folklore of Populism*’, contains the famous core of its famous attack on populism and on the populist American movements at the end of the 19th century, considered to be merely a “heightened expression at a particular moment of a kind of popular impulse that is endemic in American political culture.”²¹ Hofstadter focuses on anti-Semitic and racial traits of populism, on its close relation to nationalism and nativism. He depicts populists as the forerunners of McCarthyism and dismiss the movement to a collective paranoia: “There was something about the Populist imagination that loved the secret plot and the conspiratorial meeting. There was in fact a widespread Populist idea that all American history since the Civil War could be understood as a sustained conspiracy of the international money power.”²² In addition, populism is added to those movements of dissent which “offer special opportunities to agitators with paranoid tendencies, who are able to make a vocational asset out of their psychic disturbances.”²³

Hofstadter’s theses immediately faced sustained critiques and objections from the scholar community – mainly the American one, giving impetus to a new body of literature siding with populism and analysing its progressive traits.²⁴ Nevertheless, the opinion of the scholar community does not necessarily overlap with public debate and public opinion, and Hofstadter’s work steered populism towards a pejorative ‘mythologization’ of the concept. Despite the fact that Hofstadter in the following years retracted most of his argument, lightening some attacks on populism and admitting some conceptual mistakes, mostly European scholars remained faithful to the initial depiction of populism and built their definitions on the initial work of Hofstadter.²⁵ Most of the times, when the media approach the concept of populism, its meaning is still linked to the stereotypes and the

20 Hofstadter, R. (1955). *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*. New York: Vintage eBook, p.11

21 Ibid, p. 8

22 Ibid, p. 41

23 Ibid, p. 41

24 Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). *How did ‘populism’ become a pejorative concept? And why is this important today? A genealogy of double hermeneutics*. Thessaloniki: POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 6

25 Jäger, A. (2019). *The Myth of “Populism”*. Jacobin. Issued: 1/03/2018. Available at: <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy>> Last accessed: 8/03/2019

arguments drawn from Hofstadter's reading of populism as a blameworthy phenomenon, what we can call Hofstadter's legacy to Europe.²⁶

If Hofstadter is commonly considered as the matrix of this a priori negative vision, clearly he cannot be held the sole responsible for the adoption of the term populism as an implicit synonym of demagoguery or of proto-fascist tendencies. Stavrakakis, in his 'genealogy of double hermeneutics', identified a broader context for the birth of the contemporary understanding of populism and the background where Hofstadter's argument should be placed, namely the emergence of modernization theories in cultural and contemporary politics in the 1960s. Stavrakakis argued that these theories built a dualism between modern and traditional societies, dualism identified within the societies as well, creating a division and two different socio-cultural spheres of influence, one exerting modernizing forces, the other exerting backward pressure towards the traditional pole. Modernization theorists, like Seymour Martin Lipset or Daniel Bell, recognised capitalistic democracy as the dominant system, cosmopolitan, rapidly adapting to the changes and conform to the rules of liberal laws system. This order would be the natural choice that societies should follow, while any other option diverging from it (e.g. populist movements) was dismissed as anomalous and fostering backward pressures in order not to advance beyond the traditional society. Discrediting the first revolutionary agrarian populist movements of the late 19th century as abnormal and as an obstruction to the modernization process, modernization theorists contributed to the contemporary demonization of populism.²⁷

While discussing the populist phenomenon, consciousness on the historical roots of its naturalised negative acceptance needs to be raised in order not to nurture a self-serving anti-populist rhetoric. In the following chapters, populism is not considered as an inherently bad phenomenon. It surely presents contradictions and can represent a threat to democratic values to the extent that we are going to analyse, but this section aims to be an invitation to the reader to impartially and reflexively interact with the concept whenever they come across it, considering whether it is being used merely as a political

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). *How did 'populism' become a pejorative concept? And why is this important today? A genealogy of double hermeneutics*. Thessaloniki: POPULISMUS Working Papers No. 6

epithet or as a deprecatory adjective for whatever political opinion or position that does not fit in the consensus.

1.2 Theoretical approaches: what is populism?

The term ‘populism’ was rarely employed in the 20th century and it was mostly used by historians in order to describe isolated case studies of US agrarian populism at the end of the 19th century, leaving populism as a theoretically undefined phenomenon. Populism seemed to refuse to be caged at first in any category and, especially at early stages of its study, many scholars acknowledged the lack of a precise definition of the phenomenon and simply proceeded to an enumeration of its most salient traits. In 1978, Gino Germani started his explanation of populism as follows:

“Populism itself tends to deny any identification with or classification into the Right/Left dichotomy. It is a multiclass movement, although not all multiclass movements may be considered populist. Populism probably defies any comprehensive definition. Leaving aside this problem for the moment, populism usually includes contrasting components such as...”²⁸

Another intellectual strategy has been adopted by Margaret Canovan during her first studies on populism.²⁹ Laclau describes her research methodology as an analysis of the spectrum of populist empirical cases, a descriptive comparison between them, from which she could draw possible conclusions on the nature of this phenomenon, dividing populism in two macro-categories, namely agrarian and political, and other seven sub-categories.³⁰ This bottom-up approach surely provides an useful description of the multiplicity of varieties and features that characterise populism, but finally it does not result in a theoretical definition. Canovan argued that populism itself could not be inscribed in a coherent whole and that “the temptation to force all populist phenomena into one category should be resisted, [...] the various populisms we have distinguished are not just different

²⁸Germani, G. (1978). *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism*. New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Books, p.88

²⁹ Canovan M. (1981). *Populism*. London and New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich

³⁰ Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso

varieties of the same kind of thing: they are in many cases different sorts of things, and not directly comparable at all.”³¹

An example of how the concept of populism managed to escape a defining dimension in the early populist literature is the essay “A Syndrome, not a Doctrine” by Peter Wiles.³² Wiles extensively explored the concept of populism, presenting twenty four different dimensions of populism, among which the opposition to religious establishments and class war, or the propensity to being revolutionary. Wiles wrote about populism: “Its ideology is loose, and attempts to define it exactly arouse derision and hostility”³³ dismissing the importance of moving from a mere descriptive exercise to the comprehension of the conceptual specificities of populism.³⁴

In the late 1980s, before the wave of revived interest in academic research on populism, a theoretical approach emerged. Nowadays mostly faded in the scholar community, the economic theory of populism gained at the time a wide consensus. Popular economists identified populism as a set of economic behaviours, such as overspending and financial irresponsibility.³⁵ Populist leaders according to this approach were those leaders keen to employ economic means in order to gain popular support and maximise their chances of being elected through the distribution or promises of economic benefits. Acemoglu and other authors explained populism as “the implementation of policies receiving support from a significant fraction of the population, but ultimately hurting the economic interests of this majority.”³⁶ However, this definition did not ensure an analytical grasp on the concept and the approach did not spark off the interest of political science, raising doubts about its conceptual usefulness.

³¹ Ibid, p.298

³² Wiles, P. (1969). *A syndrome, not a doctrine: some elementary theses on populism*. In Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (eds), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 166–79.

³³ Ibid, p.167

³⁴ Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso

³⁵ Hawkins, K. Read. M. and Pauwels, T. (2017). *Populism and its causes*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³⁶ Acemoglu, D. Egorov, G and Sonin, K. (2013). *A Political Theory of Populism*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 128 (2), 771–805

The more space populism gained in the political landscape, the more the body of literature and academic studies on the topic increased, the concept gained maturity and new insights allowed bigger steps towards notional clarity. Beginning in the 1990s, a new wave of research on populism emerged and tried to minimise the ambiguities and disagreement on the phenomenon. Contemporary scholarship is moving away from ad hoc theories empirically built on comparative case studies and the academic community seems now closer to a consensus in its conceptualization. Although populism remains a contested phenomenon and diverse strategic definitions are still employed, we can distinguish three dominant theoretical approaches that characterise the academic debate, namely the ideational approach, the political-strategical approach and the socio-cultural approach.³⁷

1.2.1 The ideational approach

The ideational approach identifies populism as an ideology, a set of ideas and is probably the most shared and popular approach among political scientists thus far. We can distinguish three main components in the ideational definition: the people, opposed to the second component, the elite, and the final component, a moral dimension. The moral dimension is represented by the identification of the people as a homogeneous and virtuous community against the elite defined as a corrupt and vicious entity.³⁸

Cas Mudde, one of the most influential scholars of populism and main exponent of the ideational approach, defines populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”³⁹ The shrewdness of identifying populism as a thin-centred ideology rather than a thick or full-fledge ideology is that thin-centred ideologies do not have the same consistency as independent ideologies or a rigid structure, but they need to be combined or assimilated to other stronger ideologies. As a

³⁷ Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³⁸ Hawkins, K. Littvay, L. Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2019). *The Ideational Approach to Populism. Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge

³⁹ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.6

matter of fact, we can observe how the label of ‘populist’ is attached to other political ideologies which are needed in order to present concrete projects, while populism alone would not be sufficient in order to identify a specific political programme.⁴⁰ According to this approach, a self-sufficient unmixed populist ideology does not exist and this entails and explains the association of populism with often opposed political beliefs and the multiplicity of aspects that populism assumes.

The ideational approach however includes also scholars that reject the concept of ideology and prefer describing populism as a set of ideas, discourse, rhetoric, or discursive frame. What joins these different conceptual interpretations into a common theoretical approach is the key core concept around which they place populism, namely ‘the people’. Other core concepts are ‘the elite’ and the ‘general will’, but they are both subordinated to the people since they respectively are its antagonist group and its statement of will.⁴¹ While other approaches classify ‘the people’ as an empty category with no content (e.g. Laclau), scholars of the ideological approach clearly distinguish the people as a meaningful and fundamental category in their conceptualization, even though this category is often not filled and identified in an uniform way and its significance entered the mainstream of academic debate together with populism. Following the definition provided by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, the people are identified on a moral basis, their *purity* against the *corruption* of the elite, definition where the meaning of purity is culturally determined and can change, adapting to the thick/host ideology to which populism is associated. The people can therefore be understood in different ways, depending on the features of the ideology to which populism is attached. Secondary features and means of distinction in the host ideology might be the nationality – typical of nationalism, political power and socio-economic status which will respectively lead to understand the people as the nation, as sovereign, or as ‘the common people’.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴¹ Mudde, C. (2017). *Populism: An ideational Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴² Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

This approach defines populism not only positively but also negatively, making possible a distinction of what populism is and is not, through the recognition of its two antipodal ideologies, elitism and pluralism. Mudde describes elitism as the mirror of populism since it perceives the people as the agent of corruption of the purity of the elite. Pluralism instead does not share with populism the same distinction between two homogeneous groups, but believes in a fragmentation of the people, where a multitude of different but overlapping groups constitute the society and this diversity represents a strength rather than an element of possible corruption. Pluralism envisages a multipolar structure of power, where as many different groups as possible are taken into consideration and we do not find the expression of a *volonté générale*, a common will.

Another strength of the definition proposed by the ideational approach is its travelability, hence the possibility of applying it to the several typologies of populism, both in terms of geographical and of ideological varieties, for instance left or right-wing populism in Europe as much as in Latin America. Travelability of the concept implies the feasibility of comparative cross-regional studies, which may foster even further a comprehensive understanding of populism as a global phenomenon. In addition, being identified as a set of ideas allows populism to be attributed to every actor involved in its definition, not only to politicians, parties, leaders – the ‘suppliers’ of populism, but also to those who follow them, the mass - the demand side.⁴³

However, if the thinness attributed to the populist ideology is in many ways a strength and solution to many of the critiques to the concept of populism (such as its vagueness and multitude of varieties), some scholars criticise this definition, identifying in this thinness the weakness of this approach and of populism itself. Lacking its own pure form and needing another ideology to support it, populism may only be conceived as a temporary phenomenon which either is finally completely absorbed by the other ideology to which it is attached or disappears. What is more, many scholars are critical towards the excessive breadth of this approach as the core elements described by Mudde surely are a feature of populism, but the reverse relation is not necessarily true: not all the parties or political actors which appeal to the people and are anti-elitist should be automatically considered as populists.

⁴³ Mudde, C. (2017). *Populism: An ideational Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

1.2.2 *The political-strategical approach*

The political-strategical, or organizational, approach defines populism as a political strategy. Weyland described it as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers.”⁴⁴ The political-strategical approach focuses on the practical side of populism, rather than on its rhetoric. It analyses what populists and the leader do more than what they say. The political strategy in this approach includes all the means and techniques adopted in order to build support and governmental consensus and is formed by two elements, namely the political actor that wants to enforce the political strategy and the power capability.⁴⁵

The political actor is understood to be an individual person. The power that should reside in the people falls on a strong charismatic figure which is able to organise and direct the masses towards what he/she recognises to be the will of the people, too disorganised to do it alone. The approach identifies therefore the need of the emergence of a leader who represents the unifying and directing agent of the otherwise confused people.⁴⁶ Weyland recognised that charisma is not a definitional characteristic of populism, however, we can observe that populism has an affinity with charismatic figures and the presence of a strong leader ensures the intensity of the link between him/her and the supporters. The populist leadership is defined as flexible and opportunistic, prioritizing electoral results and number of votes, against the non-populist leaders who are depicted as more rigid and will prioritise their ideological principles.

The power capability, second main element of the political strategy, is the tools used by the political actors in order to build their basis and gain authority. According to the political-strategical approach, the power capability of populist leaders derives from numbers, from the quantity of people that they seek to mobilise, both through the voting booths and through mobilization on the streets. Another weapon used by populists in

⁴⁴ Weyland, K. (2001). *Clarifying a contested concept: 'populism' in the study of Latin American politics*, *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), p.14

⁴⁵ Weyland, K. (2017). *Populism: A Political-Strategical Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁴⁶ Ibid

order to gain support are opinion polls, which can constantly prove, even prior to official electoral results, their wide popular representation and therefore strength. The populist leaders distance themselves from other power capabilities such as economic influence (usually employed by private business), criticizing them as elitist strategies.⁴⁷

Another core component of the definition provided by the political-strategical approach is the bond between the masses and the personalistic leader, which is said to be direct, unmediated and uninstitutionalised. Nowadays, the connection with the followers is easier and inflated by the use of technology and social media, which give the perception of an even more direct contact between the two parties and allow the leader to be constantly present in the lives of their supporters. The leader becomes the personification of the will of the people which is scrutinised through opinion polls and surveys and is strengthened by the creation of one or more categories identified as enemies or adversaries, using especially anti-elitist discourses as a political tool.

The political-strategical approach therefore frames populism as a political strategy combining three elements, namely a personalistic leader, a heterogeneous and diverse people to serve as power capability and a direct, unmediated and quasi-personal connection between them, to strengthen a bond that would otherwise be based on weak foundations. This approach can be useful in the explanation of the volatility and diversity of the concept of populism since, being defined as a strategy, it allows populism to be attached to the most different political movements and leanings. As a matter of fact, scholars following this approach do not consider as relevant the type of policies that populist leaders decide to adopt or their envisaged outcomes, so that the populist strategy as defined by the political-strategical approach can be adopted as much by right-wing politicians as by left-wing representatives.⁴⁸ The central role that is attributed to the leader and their opportunistic behaviour can easily explain the different varieties of populism and the unpredictability that has frequently characterised the policy-making and government of populist forces.⁴⁹ In contrast to the ideational approach, populists are not

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Hawkins, K. Littvay, L. Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2019). *The Ideational Approach to Populism. Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. London and New York: Routledge

⁴⁹ Weyland, K. (2017). *Populism: A Political-Strategical Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

seen as committed to an ideology or a set of ideas. The initiatives and programmes undertaken by populist leaders are perceived to be simple instruments in order to gain power and construct a solid, independent from other political forces, electoral base. In this way, this approach draws a stricter delimitation of the populist phenomenon, excluding for instance extreme right-wing movements which appeal to ‘the people’ but that have strong ideals, and taking into consideration as populists only those catch-all political movements that seek a wide electoral base and popular support.

The centrality of the leadership is at the same time a weakness of this approach. The dependence of the political-strategical definition from a personalistic leader do not explain the existence of populist leaderless movements at grassroots level and, as pointed out by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, the presence of a leader is not a defining feature of - and should not be directly linked to - populism.⁵⁰ The populist strategy as described by Weyland appears as an end in itself, with no greater purpose or reason other than the self-fulfilling of the leader, a strategy and phenomenon which runs out with the death of the leader itself and that made scholars question again the meaningfulness of the concept.

1.2.3 *The socio-cultural approach*

The socio-cultural (or performative) approach firstly conceptualises populism as an identification for political purposes of a category of the society, named ‘the Other’. According to this approach, the Other is represented by a majority of people in the whole population which feels trapped between a hostile minority and antagonistic global forces. The Other is actually the true expression of the nation, the ‘true people’, betrayed by the current or previous government which is or were responding to the needs of the hostile minority. This minority, which we can assimilate to the elite of the ideational approach, can be represented by an oligarchy, by the financial sector, by the liberal supporters or a dominant ethnic minority.⁵¹ Populists are the embodiment of the Other and claim to speak

⁵⁰ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁵¹ Ostiguy, P. (2017). *Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

for the true people, the silent majority, defending a truth that has been repressed or that has been excluded by the ruling or previously ruling government, manipulated by nefarious forces. Being populism the representative of the majority of the people which is in contrast with a usually proper and well-educated elite, this approach paints populists as generally transgressive, violating the proper and accepted way of the elite of doing politics and publicly behaving.

Focusing on the sociological elements of populism, Ostiguy builds a bi-dimensional model of the political space, composed by two main axes, namely the high-low axis and the left-right one, where populism is located on the lowest part and is therefore simply described as “the flaunt of the low”.⁵²

The high and the low refers to a relational dimension, the way in which political actors relate to people, their way of being and acting in politics, of exposing the private in the public sphere. Specifically, the axis is divided into two different components or sub-dimensions, the political-cultural dimension and the socio-cultural one.

The political-cultural component is related to how political leadership is worn and the different approaches and techniques in decision-making. Politicians belonging to the low dimension will lead a stronger, more personal form of dealing with decision-making in politics, against a more formal and procedural way of managing authority. The populist political actor will prefer resoluteness and immediate, prompt actions rather than following meticulously bureaucratic paths.⁵³

The second dimension, the socio-cultural component, “encompasses manners, demeanours, ways of speaking and dressing, vocabulary, and tastes displayed in public.”⁵⁴ On the high end of the axis people and politicians publicly express themselves in a correct and proper way, mannerly, respecting etiquettes and following the well-behaved decorous style of doing politics. On the contrary, on the low end of the axis people and politicians will follow a more ‘colourful’ style, perceived as closer to the

⁵² Ostiguy, P. (2009). *The High and the Low in Politics: A Two-Dimensional Political Space for Comparative Analysis and Electoral Studies*. Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series of the International Association of Political Science (IPSA)

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ostiguy, P. (2009). *The high and the low in politics: a two-dimensional political space for comparative analysis and electoral studies*. Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series of the International Association of Political Science (IPSA), p.9

people, less polished and rigid but more spontaneous and unconstrained by formalities.⁵⁵ An important distinction to be taken into consideration is the one commonly made between the low of the political space and the lower classes or poor people. Ostiguy provides instances of wealthy politicians, such as Berlusconi or George W. Bush, which belong more to the low political space than other politicians that had humbler origins or economic status. The socio-cultural component includes also a distinction between cosmopolitanism (on the high) and nativism (on the low). Populism is therefore associated also with the home pride, with a strong bond to the local and the original culture of the people. The high has a more universal character, less immediate and more loosely linked to the people and the 'land' or the nation.

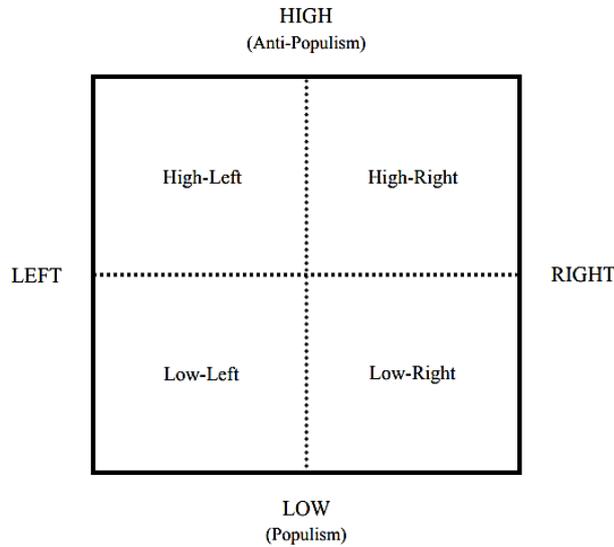
These are the reasons why the populist leader or political actor is perceived in both dimensions as closer to the people. The high in both sub-dimensions is perceived as abstract and more moderate while the low is more concrete, direct, less mediated by institutional rules, both in personal conduct and procedures. The gap between the classic distant authority and the people is shortened and voters may easily recognise populist actors as part of them, part of the Other that populists claim to defend and to be the spokesperson of.⁵⁶

The second axis of Ostiguy two-dimensional model of political space is the left-right axis, which is divided as well into two sub-categories, namely the socio-economic policy dimension and the political-cultural one. The former establishes a common distinction between a left that claims for a larger equality and state intervention, while the right favours a more economically liberal state. The latter takes into consideration the amount of hierarchical order and authority that is perceived as necessary to regulate the common spheres of life. The right will be much stricter and more demanding in terms of hierarchical authority, while the left will consider it as less relevant for public and social order. Taking into consideration the two axes identified by Ostiguy in order to define a political space and position populism, the bi-dimensional model will therefore appear as in the following picture.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ostiguy, P. (2017). *Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Fig 1. A Two-Dimensional Political Space of Positions and Appeals



Source: Ostiguy, P. (2009). Working Paper n. 360

Defining populism as an ordinal category rather than a nominal one is extremely useful for political analysis as it allows to effectively locate populism in the political arena. What is more, in its approach Ostiguy recognises the central role of the leader without reducing it to a pure self-serving strategy but rather emphasizing a two-way connection between the leader and the people, representing both political and socio-cultural elements. The performative approach might be used in conjunction with the ideological approach as it does not exclude an ideological element, especially in its description of ‘the Other’, but it does not limit populism to ideas, going beyond and dealing both with identities and political appeals.

1.3 Common denominators

To the purposes of this dissertation, we will consider populism as a set of ideas or a way of perceiving the political world (drawing therefore from the ideational approach), which manifests through specific political appeals, such as the ‘flaunt of the low’, as defined by Pierre Ostiguy. Theories on populism, however, abound. Thanks to the inflationary body of literature dedicated to defining clear boundaries and to the renewed interest in a

theorization of the phenomenon, scholars are slowly advancing towards a general agreement, even though a consensus have not been reached yet. The most operational way to work with such an ambiguous and contested concept is therefore to find “the main characteristics – or to use more a sophisticated jargon, the necessary and sufficient criteria – of the phenomenon under consideration”⁵⁷ which will lead scholars towards a minimal definition. In this section we will therefore analyse the commonly considered core element and main features of populism by the great majority of the theorists of this phenomenon. Starting with the core concept of ‘the people’, we will later outline five traits which characterise all forms of populism.

1.3.1 Populism and the concept of ‘the people’

We can find a general agreement among all the theories that all forms of populism involve an appeal to the people and an opposition to an elite. Being the core element of populism, questioning who are ‘the people’ is unavoidable. However, the concept of ‘the people’ have probably been as much debated in history, if not more, as the concept of populism itself. About its polysemy Margaret Canovan wrote: “The great charm of ‘the people’ for a politician -and the fundamental source of exasperation for a political scientist- is that the term manages to be both empty of precise meaning and full of rhetorical resonance.”⁵⁸ Laclau argued that it is precisely this lack of an established meaning and its nature of “empty signifier” that gives strength to the concept of populism itself, as it can be filled with different identities according to the groups that populists seek to mobilize around a common cause.⁵⁹ In fact, the idea of the people as a construction and a flexible concept that can be applied to different perceptions of reality is the most shared interpretation. Before introducing the most classical interpretations of ‘the people’, we will explore two more recent readings on the concept, namely ‘the people’ as a process and ‘the people’ as a two-dimensional social space.

⁵⁷ Rovira Kaltwasser in: Fitzzi, G. Mackert, J. and Turner, B. (2019). *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Routledge, p. 85

⁵⁸ Canovan, M.(1981). *Populism*. London and New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, p. 285

⁵⁹ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Paulina Ochoa Espejo identifies one main current of thought describing the people as an ideological tool, created in order to unite the population and give an appearance of legitimacy to the governing bodies. She distinguishes between a *hypothetical* account of the people and an *historical* account, most often embraced from the populists. The hypothetical account falls back into the category of the people as an abstract construction and ideological tool. It depicts the people as an ideal reference which is built as a guarantee of popular participation in politics, defence of the minorities and of the rights of individuals.⁶⁰ On the contrary, even though still considering the people as a not delimited and undefined concept which can take many forms, the historical account recognises the people as political movements formed by different groups of citizens. The movement arises in order to advance some requests to the state and ‘the people’ constitutes exactly around those demands, which work as a unifier. ‘The people’ is associated with those political movements, composed by individuals and not by an abstract idea of them, which taking on the street represent and materialize the will of the people.⁶¹ Especially useful for the explanation of right-wing populism, even though more controversial, is the idea of this theorization that the initial indeterminateness of the people part of the political movement leads the movement itself to seek for a stronger unifying base, other than the requests initially advanced. The unifying base is often found in a religious, racial or ethnic identity, which transforms the people in a religious, ethnic or racial ‘us’ against a politically excluded ‘them’. Criticism on this account of ‘the people’ highlights how it cannot be considered representative of all the populist phenomena; we cannot affirm that all populist expressions start with grassroots political movements and a consecutive establishment of ‘the people’ itself. Often, populist phenomena have started with a top-down mobilization targeted to an already existing and idealized ‘people’.

Ochoa Espejo identifies a third account which mediates between the abstractness of the hypothetical account and the concreteness of the historical one, exposing a procedural view of democratic legitimacy which sees ‘the people’ not as an ideal construction nor as a collection of individuals “but as a procedure of decision making, by which individuals

⁶⁰ Ochoa Espejo, P. (2017). *Populism and the Idea of the People*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁶¹ Ibid

interact with each other mediated by legal institutions that channel popular demands and force representatives to adopt views and make decisions.”⁶²

Another interesting approach to ‘the people’ comes from the analysis of Rogers Brubaker.⁶³ Populist literature always describes ‘the people’ in opposition to an elite, tracing like this a vertical opposition between the two concepts. Brubaker adds a horizontal dimension where the two opposite poles are the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, creating a two-dimensional portrayal of ‘the people’ and of social space. In the vertical dimension, the people are depicted as “economically struggling, hardworking, family-oriented, plain-spoken, and endowed with common sense”⁶⁴ while the opposing end, the elite, as “the rich, the powerful, the well-connected, the (over-) educated, and the institutionally empowered”.⁶⁵ If ‘the elite’ is placed on the top end of the vertical dimension, according to Brubaker’s model, the people is not placed on the bottom, but at the centre. The people are defined not only in relation to the elite at the top but also to those which are recognised as ‘the bottom’, namely those embodying opposite values in respect of ‘the people’ and perceived therefore as disrespectful towards the society and ‘the people’ itself, lacking common sense, unwilling to work hard and generally represented as freeloaders.

The inside-outside horizontal dimension deeply varies according to the type of populism taken into consideration. Generally, left-wing populism inscribes ‘the people’ in an ‘inside’ which is economic or political, while in right-wing populism the horizontal dimension is most commonly defined in cultural or ethnical terms. In both variants the elite is recognised to be ‘on top’ as well as ‘outside’, determining a strong correlation between the two dimensions. The elite is seen as different not only because of its values and social status, expressed by the vertical dimension, but also because of their economic status or cultural positions, expressed by the horizontal dimension.⁶⁶ The interweaving of the two dimensions is particularly evident when analysing the ‘bottom’ end in right-wing

⁶² Ochoa Espejo, P. (2017). *Populism and the Idea of the People*. P. 733 in: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶³ Brubaker, R. (2019) *Why Populism?* In: Fitzzi, G. Mackert, J. and Turner, B. *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Routledge

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.30

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

populism, since we almost always find an overlapping of the values which define the bottom, with the ethnic-cultural characterisation and outsiderhood of the horizontal dimension.

In any interpretation of ‘the people’, whether if as a social space, a construction or an ideological tool, ‘the people’ do not represent an intangible principle and can vary historically and culturally, allowing an incredible flexibility to the concept. The people as an imagined community, an abstract concept that can be adjusted and included in a broad variety of political and social contexts, is most classically used in combination with three meanings: ‘the people’ as sovereign, as the nation and as the common people. The three concepts are analytically separate but commonly intersect in practice.

When seen as ‘sovereign’, the people is not only perceived as source of power for the rulers, but as rulers themselves. In democratic regimes, the break between the people and the rulers should not subsist, being the rules, at least theoretically, the direct representation of the people. However, if the people do not feel represented by the rulers and do not identify with the ruling class, the gap between them widens, and the people will claim for the power to be brought back to them.⁶⁷ The populist common argument draws from Rousseau’s *Social Contract* and the division between government and sovereign. ‘The people’ is seen as the community as a whole and the citizens, acting and speaking collectively, voice the general will and constitute the sovereign, while the government, representation of the sovereign, is simply guarantor of the execution of this will. The concept of ‘people as sovereign’ highlights the fact that the ultimate source of political power resides within the people and derives from their approval. When this condition is not satisfied, it should bring to the loss of power of the state and the return of the government to the people. This interpretation sees therefore ‘the people’ as *demos*, as a political entity whose roots are on the willingness of the citizens to adhere to a common project, expression of the general will.

⁶⁷ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

In its second interpretation, ‘the people’ is defined with reference to the nation. The people are the citizens of a national community, identified in civic or ethnic terms.⁶⁸ This correspondence of a people with a nation is usually considered problematic since the boundaries of a nation are hard to define and often within the same territory more ethnic groups co-exist, each one considered as a people per se. However, this conceptual problem when it comes to understand for instance nationalist claims do not subsist. If the people and the nation are understood as *ethnos* (typical in right-wing populism as well), namely on the basis of cultural, religious or ethnic characteristics, those who do not have the cultural, religious or ethnic features identified as proper of the nation are simply excluded from the idea and definition of the nation and of ‘the people’ itself. The people of the nation are bound by blood, language and history, not anymore by the willingness of the citizens to work together for a common project. Those who do not share this bound are simply not considered part of the nation. The definition of the content of the people in its cultural or ethnic meaning is inevitably linked to the exclusion of some components of the society living inside the physical borders of the nation. These components are therefore considered as external to ‘the people’ and often as a threat to the physical and spiritual integrity of the nation and of the people.

The last interpretation understands ‘the people’ as ‘the common people’, with reference to the concept of class. The people are represented by the most modest classes with popular values, opposed to those who have a higher social and economic status. This interpretation of the people probably displays the higher explicit opposition to the elite. The idea of ‘common people’ clearly evokes an antagonism with those who are not considered ‘common’ and whose values are perceived as distant from the people. This understanding highlights the dignity and position of those who are feeling refused from the position of power because of their economic or sociocultural status and whose characters (according to the people itself) are perceived with inferiority by the elite.⁶⁹ The claim to defend the common people, often labelled as the weakest class needing protection from bigger powers, is one of the most current among all types of phenomena recognized as populist. Populism on this regard will leverage on the presence of a power

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

or a class that does not represent and give value to the people and that is depicted as a force that the common people cannot control alone. The elite is most frequently identified as an economic elite by this account, transmitting the vision of a secular struggle between the holders of economic power and the peoples subjected to the pressures of the international and financial logic. However, the elite can also be defined culturally and socially, identifying all groups that are recognised as external to the people and harming the values and interests of the people. We can therefore distinguish the majority of the elites on a basis of power, including most of those holding top positions, regardless from the field (may it be political power, economic power or power derived from a particular working status).

In conclusion, every populism is called to identify its own people, and that people will be renamed '*the people*'. Populist objectives and possible enemies (such as the elites and the interests they defended) mirror the characteristics of *the people* and only the populist exponents are its true representatives. All other political competitor might be considered as either part of the elite or as part of external forces working against the general will of the people.⁷⁰ What ultimately associate all forms of populism in their understanding of 'the people' is that the people is always represented as a homogeneous unified body (even though unified according to different criteria depending on the different types of populism), as a pure whole, setting populism as a "moralized anti-pluralist expression"⁷¹. Populism requires an exclusive representation of the people and necessitate a *pars pro toto* argument to be considered as such: "There can be no populism, in other words, without someone speaking in the name of the people as a whole."⁷²

1.3.2 Five populist features, towards a minimal definition

In order to improve the conceptual clarity of the phenomenon of populism, Brubaker outlines five central features common to all populist phenomena, in order to make explicit and label the main elements of populism, most of which we have already encountered

⁷⁰ Müller, J.W. (2016). *What is populism?* Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid, p.22

during the analysis of the core concept of the people.⁷³ These five elements further develop the opposition between the elite and the people and between the people and all those categories perceived as external and are extremely useful for the journey towards a minimum definition of populism and towards a common understanding of the populist phenomenon in all its forms. The five elements identified by Brubaker are the following:

1. *Antagonistic or contentious re-politicisation*: it involves the claim of populism to bring back and reaffirm political control over areas that are perceived to have been removed from the national political realm and democratic decision-making. For instance, it represents the populist claim according to which there is an increase of technocratic and administrative powers which damage democratic decision-making or the opposition to the presumed transfer of crucial portion of national sovereignty to the European Union.

2. *Majoritarianism*: The second element is the assertion of all populists to represent a people which is a silent majority against those outside the chosen definition of ‘people’ which are the minority. Populism defends the many against the privileges and benefits granted to the few, to the elite as much as to the ones placed on ‘the bottom’, if following the two-dimensional model of Brubaker. Actions and discourses involving minorities protection or diversity (may it be cultural, economic or regarding the class status) are perceived as damaging and undermining for what it is claimed to be the majority.

3. *Selective anti-institutionalism*: populism is not contrary to institutionalism and representation per se. Populism does support representation and institutions, as far as they defend and endorse the right people and promote the right actions, where ‘right’ indicates the people that they identify as the true and majoritarian one and the practices needed to defend their interests. However, it is always present an element of distrust towards the existing institutions, and populists try to circumvent them (especially the media), establishing a direct contact with their supporters. What is more, being populism an expression of anti-pluralism, they denounce the pluralist attitudes of the actual or previous institutions and their lack of transparency and accountability to *the* people.

⁷³ Brubaker, R. (2019) *Why Populism?* In: Fitzi, G. Mackert, J. and Turner, B. *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Routledge

4. *Protectionism*: we have pointed out many times how populism claims to protect *the* people and its interests, not only against the elite but also against menaces coming from outside and from the bottom, threatening both the material benefits and well-being and the moral integrity of the people. Economic protectionism emphasizes for instance the menace that foreign products can represent for the local enterprises or the threat of cheaper labour coming from abroad, while cultural and securitarian protectionism, more common on the right side of the hemicycle, warn respectively about crimes and terrorism that can come from the ‘outside’ or ‘bottom’ dimensions and about the possible disruption of the common way of life because of different cultural traditions gaining space in the traditional society.

5. *The populist style*: common to all kinds of populism is the style with which the previous arguments are exposed and spread. As described during the analysis of the performative approach, Ostiguy identifies a socio-cultural component on the high-low axis which cover manners and personal style of populist representatives. Populism is placed on the low where “people frequently use a language that includes slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, are more demonstrative in their bodily or facial expressions as well as in their demeanour, and display rawer, culturally popular tastes. Politicians on the low are capable of being more uninhibited in public and are also more apt to use coarse or popular language. They appear—to the observer on the high—as more ‘colourful’ and, in the very extreme cases, somewhat grotesque.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Ostiguy, P. (2009). *The High and the Low in Politics: A Two-Dimensional Political Space for Comparative Analysis and Electoral Studies*. Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series of the International Association of Political Science (IPSA)

Chapter II

THE POPULIST WAVE

2.1 The rise of populism in Europe

Already in 1969, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, wrote that there was a spectre haunting the world: populism.¹ Populism has become more than a spectre in Europe, developing into a concrete and loud presence. It has manifested itself in numerous ways, entering existing political parties and establishing new forces. As a matter of fact, in the last two decades, we observed a growing diversity in the manifestation of the populist phenomenon. Especially since 2000, a growing body of literature has been dealing with the participation of populist actors in government and has been questioning the entrance of populism in the mainstream. This section does not aim to be an exhausting assessment and examination of the entirety of parties identified as populist in Europe, it would fall beyond the scope of this dissertation. On the contrary, it would like to trace a comprehensive profile of the rise of populism in Europe and how it should be understood, using cases of European populism selectively and illustratively. The parties used in order to conduct the analysis of the state of populism have been selected using the classification of the Populism Tracker, a continuously updated database investigating trends and popularity of populist parties in the European Union.² The Populism Tracker is operated by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and appears to be the classification that mostly represents the volatile consensus on the categorization of European parties as populist or not. In line with the view of populism provided in this dissertation in the first chapter, the Foundation for European Progressive Studies classify populism mainly on the basis of the ideological approach, considering populism as a thin-centred ideology or discourse, involving the dichotomy ‘us versus them’ and anti-pluralist instances. Moreover, it combines the ideational definition with the analysis of several criteria such as the rhetoric and campaign slogans, drawing therefore from the socio-cultural approach of Ostiguy. Relevant academic literature has also been taken into consideration, following the labelling of political scientists and analysts.³

¹ Ionescu, G. and Gellner E. (1969). *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

² Foundation for European Progressive Studies. (2018). *State of Populism in Europe*. Policy Solutions

³ Rooduijn, M. et al. (2019). *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*. Available at: < www.popu-list.org > Last accessed: 22/05/2019

2.1.1 Modern European populism

In Europe, after the first instances outlined in chapter one, populism remained silent for the first three decades after World War II. What we can name ‘modern populism’, started to emerge in confused and disorganised forms in the late 1970s and 1980s, but flourished only in the 90s when we assist to a renewed wave of interest for the concept also in academic research, matching the diffusion of the phenomenon in the political realm. Many of the parties that today are labelled as populist have their origins in the 1970s, in the anti-tax movements or in nationalist organizations such as the Danish People’s Party, founded in 1995 by Pia Kjaersgaard but which actually has its roots in the Progress Party founded in 1973. The French *Front National* and the Swiss People’s Party were founded respectively in 1972 and 1971. Or again, the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) has its origins in the *Vlaams Block*, created in 1978. After the crisis of the 1970s, the way out from stagflation was found in the abandonment of Keynesian policies, in favour of a policy aimed at controlling inflation through the raise of interest rates, with no attention to the consequences that these measures could have on employment.

The United Kingdom of Margaret Thatcher has been the first European government to apply the early neoliberal recipe, encouraging entrepreneurship, the privatization of the public sector and deregulation of finance and industry, the cut of top income taxes and the promotion of foreign inflow. In the same years in France, the socialist François Mitterand decided to pursue a clear Keynesian economic path through expansive policies, trying to boost growth and full employment. Despite an initial growth in the first two years, a growing trade deficit, capital flights and an imminent devaluation of the franc forced Mitterand to turn towards more neoliberal policies, sanctioning the abandonment of Keynesianism as the driving policy.

In the following years, the systematic waiver of a strong public sector in favour of a neoliberal attitude continued to spread, undermining the confidence of the working class towards the governments. This weakened confidence will constitute a niche for the birth and growth of new appeals to the workers, together with the space left by the dissolution of the Communist parties in France and Italy after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴ It is in fact from the late 1980s and through the early 2000s that older parties, such as Front National or the Austrian Freedom Party, started to gain consensus and that new future

⁴ Judis, J. (2016). *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports

populist parties such as Sweden Democrats or Lega Nord were born. Europe's populist parties expanded their political base, increasing their support thanks to the working classes which were witnessing a growing gap between the top earners and the middle-low income classes. The Austrian Freedom Party, which had originally been a firm defender of economic liberalism, became a supporter of the welfare state, taking advantage of a greater discontent among the workers after a massive privatisation move envisaged by the dominant parties. With the 47% of the electorate being formed by blue-collar workers, the Freedom Party obtained 26.9% at the legislative elections of 1999, with fifty-two seats, nineteen seats more than a decade before.⁵

The financial crisis that spread in Europe in 2008 and recession gave new impetus to European populist forces. In the northern and central European countries, populism continued to exist in its right-wing form, not because the financial crash hit as forcefully as it did in Southern Europe, but mainly for fear of being struck by its consequences in the future. In 2011, in the elections following the financial crash, the Finnish *Perussuomalaiset* (True Finns) scored 19%, fifteen points more than the previous elections in 2007, the Dutch Party for Freedom increased its electoral score of ten points from 2006 to 2010. The Austrian Freedom Party obtained 20.5% in 2013, against the elections prior to the crisis in 2006 when they obtained 11%. Some years later, the rise of immigration and the consequent so-called migrant crisis of 2015 fuelled especially right-wing populism. We will further explore the issue of immigration in the following paragraph, however we can already see how for instance the Danish People's Party jumped from an average of 12% in the previous two decades to 21.1% at the elections of 2015. The Sweden Democrats passed from a 2.9% in 2006 to a 17.5% in 2018. *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) created in 2013, at the 2017 legislative elections ranked third and obtained 94 seats.⁶

In Southern Europe, where the Great Recession struck stronger, we assist to the rise of the until-then mostly absent left-wing populism, sparked by austerity measures and addressed against what they identified as 'EU's false promises of prosperity'.⁷ In Greece,

⁵ Bundesministerium für Inneres, Nationalratswahlen, data accessible at: <www.bmi.gv.at/>

⁶ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

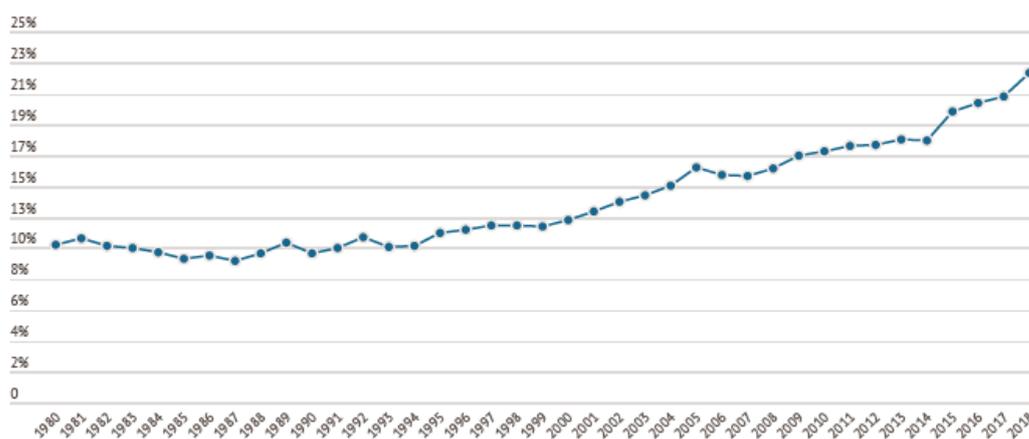
⁷ Judis, J. (2016). *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports

at the June elections of 2012, SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left) led by Alexis Tsipras reached the 26.9% of consensus, against the 4.6% in 2009. In 2011 in Spain, the *Indignados* movement started protesting against unemployment, spending cuts and corruption. In 2014, Podemos channelled this protests and energy in the formation of a party, which at the general elections of 2015 obtained 20.7% with 69 seats. After the Eurozone crisis, Italy witnessed the rise of populist movement as well. *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement) was founded in 2009 and at its first general elections in 2013 reached 25.6% of vote share and obtained 109 seats, while the *Northern League* – now simply called ‘Lega’, acquired more and more populist traits along with the rise of immigration and the leadership of Matteo Salvini.⁸

The Eastern European region is probably where populism rose faster in a shorter time frame. The Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) from a 9.5% of support in 2001, reached 37.5% at the last elections of 2015. All four Visegrád countries are governed by populist, with Hungary being one of the most paradigmatic cases of populism.⁹

Thanks to the classification of the Swedish think tank Timbro, we can figure the rise of the average share of votes for European populist parties as in the following picture.

Fig 2. Average Share of Votes for Populist Parties 1980-2018



Source: Timbro. (2019). Authoritarian Populist Index

⁸ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

⁹ Ibid

There is not a consensus on the exact share of aggregate populist votes because of the volatility of the concept of populism itself and a consequent wider or stricter classification of different parties as populist. However, the upward inclination of the average populist share is seldomly contested.¹⁰

2.1.2 Recent tendencies in the EU

According to Populism Tracker, one of the largest databases on populism in the European Union, at the end of 2018, 30.3% of likely voters would have casted their ballot for a populist party, that is to say, more than one in four voters.¹¹ In 2018, six European countries held general or parliamentary elections, namely Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Sweden, Latvia and Luxembourg. In all the six countries populist parties gained strength. In Italy, compared to the elections of 2013, *Movimento 5 Stelle* increased its share of 7.1 points, while the League gained 13.3 points, forming a populist coalition government. In Hungary, *Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance* obtained a striking majority, reaching 49.3% of consensus, while the far-right populist *Jobbik - Movement for a Better Hungary* gained three additional seats as compared to the elections 2013. The Slovenian National Party and the Latvian *Kam Pieder Valsts* (Who Owns the State?) obtained parliamentary representation for the first time and the Sweden Democrats added 13 seats. The Luxembourgian *Déi Lénk* only slightly increased its voter share (0.6%).¹²

As far as the first semester of 2019 is concerned, Estonia, Finland, Spain, Belgium and Denmark went to the voting booths. Only in Denmark the populist *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party) lost ground registering a decrease of support and falling from 21.1% in 2015 to 8.7%. The True Finns Party maintained its position, the Estonian EKRE (Conservative People's Party) doubled its percentage of vote share and the Belgian *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) tripled it. In Spain, while *Podemos* lost 29 seats, Vox obtained parliamentary representation for the first time obtaining 24 seats and jumping from 0.2% to 10.3%.¹³

¹⁰ Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. (2017). *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

¹¹ Foundation for European Progressive Studies. (2018). *State of Populism in Europe*. Policy Solutions

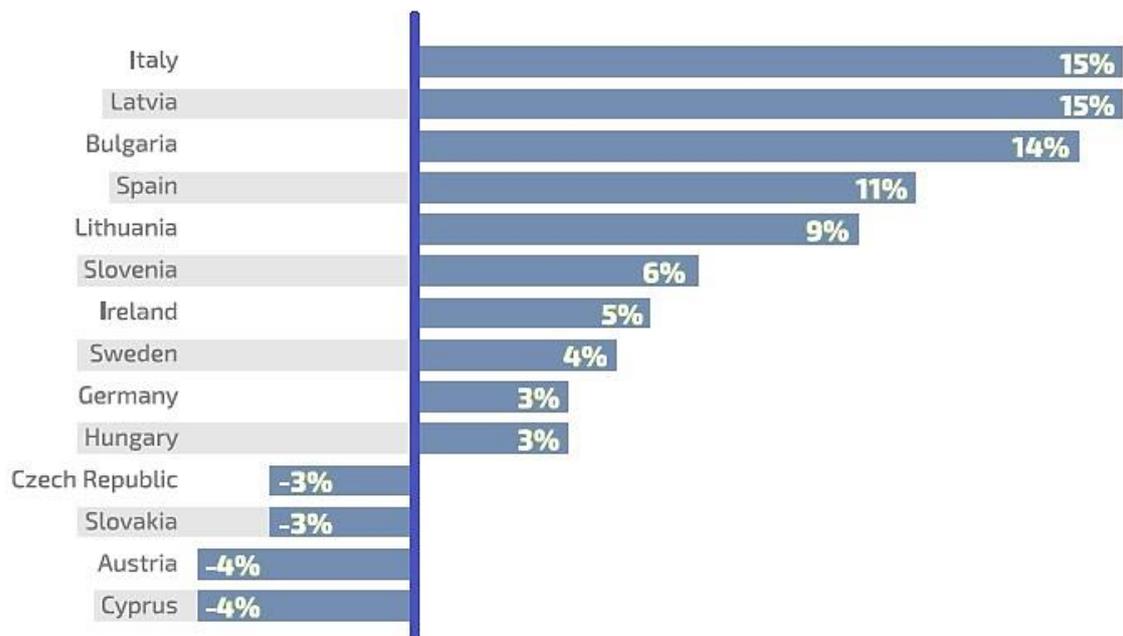
¹² Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

¹³ Ibid

Taking into account the second quarter of 2019, among the European Union Member States the countries that registered the highest aggregate support for populist parties have been Hungary, Poland, Italy, Czech Republic and Bulgaria.¹⁴ In all five countries, the government is formed by populist parties, reflecting the fact that the anti-establishment feature is not an inherent characteristic of populism, especially in its modern forms, and that the loss of consensus is not an inevitable consequence when populism reaches power.

In 2018 only in four countries populism registered a significant loss of support, however, while populism did not globally withdraw from the majority of the European countries, only in six countries it registered an increase of over 5%.

Fig 3. Countries with significant change of support for populist parties in 2018 (In percentage points)



Source: Populism Tracker

¹⁴ Foundation for European Progressive Studies. (2018). *State of Populism in Europe*. Policy Solutions

When calculating both aggregate populist support and aggregate populist vote share, it is however important to keep in mind that in most cases, it does not represent the consensus for one single party but that it is indeed, aggregate. Taking into account for instance its last elections in 2016, Slovakia reached an aggregate populist vote share of 34.2%, ranking in the first ten European countries with the highest populist support.

Considering singularly the four parties categorised as populist by the Populism Tracker, the maximum vote share has been 11% (obtained by the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), while the only populist party in the cabinet, the Slovak National Party, obtained 8.6%.¹⁵ The aggregate results therefore do not always truthfully reflect the actual power of populism in a country since the different populist parties often hold different ideologies and do not constitute a united front.

If we consider singularly the last legislative election results of each of the sixty populist parties present in the member states of European Union, twenty of them significantly increased their share (namely more than 3 percentage points), ten significantly lost ground while all the others stagnated or did not obtain parliamentary representation.¹⁶ After the collapse of the Austrian government formed by a coalition between the *Österreichische Volkspartei* (Austrian People's Party) and the populist Freedom Party in May 2019, nine countries currently have one populist party forming part of the government namely Bulgaria, Finland, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Italy, Estonia and Latvia. However, only in Hungary and Poland the government is not formed by a coalition. With the exception of Italy, where the government is composed by a coalition of two populist parties, the other populist forces could not reach power alone and in Finland and Slovakia the populist party in the cabinet did not overcome the 9% of vote share in their last elections.¹⁷

Limiting the research to the results of the elections on a national level is not sufficient in the analysis of populist results in European member states. The European level needs to be taken into account, especially because it is most often the ground where the Euroscepticism that characterize several populist parties is debated. This year, between

¹⁵ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

¹⁶ The last national elections taken into consideration are the Greek legislative elections, held on the 7 July 2019

¹⁷ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

23 and 26 May, European citizens were called to go to the ballots in order to elect the new European Parliament. In the following table the national results of the 2014 and 2019 European elections are reported, along with the seats obtained by each populist party in the two constitutive sessions. Only the parties that obtained parliamentary representation are included in the table.

Tab 1. European Parliament elections 2014/2019- National results

Country	Party	%EP		Seats	
		2014	2019	2014	2019
Austria	FPÖ	19.7	17.2	4	3
Belgium	Vlaams Belang	4.3	11.7	1	3
Bulgaria	GERB - Coalition	30.4	31.7	6	6
Cyprus	AKEL	27	27.5	2	2
Czech Rep.	ANO11	16.1	21.2	4	6
Denmark	DF	26.6	10.7	4	2
Estonia	KE	22.4	14.4	1	1
Finland	True Finns	12.9	13.8	2	2
France	RN	24.8	23.3	23	22
Germany	AfD	7.1	11	7	11
Greece	SYRIZA	26.6	23.7	6	6
Greece	Golden Dawn	9.4	4.9	3	2
Hungary	Fidesz	51.5	52.1	12	13
Hungary	Jobbik	14.7	6.4	3	1
Ireland	Sinn Féin	19.5	11.7	3	1
Italy	M5S	21.1	17	17	14
Italy	Lega	6.1	34.3	5	28
Latvia	National Alliance	14.2	16.4	1	2
Lithuania	DP - Labour Party	12.8	9	1	1
Poland	PiS	31.8	45.4	19	26
Slovakia	OĽaNO-NOVA	7.5	5.2	1	1
Spain	UP (Coalition)	8	10.1	5	5
Sweden	SD	9.7	15.3	2	3

Data source: European Parliament

The European elections saw the entrance in the European Parliament of seven new populist parties. The Dutch Forum for Democracy, the Spanish VOX, France Untamed, the Croatian *Živi Zid* (Human Blockade), the People's Party Our Slovakia, the Estonian Conservative People's Party and the Brexit Party.

Big losses have been registered by the United Kingdom Independence Party which did not obtain any European representation in Strasbourg, following the downward trend of the last House of Commons elections in 2017 (when it lost ten percentage points and did not reach the minimum threshold). In the Netherlands, the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom) lost its four seats in the European Parliament, reaching a 3.5% of vote share. Also, the Danish People's Party lost significant support like in the national elections, falling from 26.6% to 10.7%.

Hungary, Poland and Italy reported the strongest victories also at the European level, reconfirming the fact that populist parties do not necessarily lose support when in power. Fidesz increased its already striking majority reaching the 52.1% of vote share, Law and Justice (PiS) added seven seats from 2014 and the Italian *Lega* more than quintuplicated its support and seats in the European Parliament. Also the Brexit Party obtained impressive results obtaining 29 seats and the 30.7% of support.¹⁸

Globally, as far as the vote share is concerned, the majority of the populist parties that obtained parliamentary representation at the last European elections increased their support, including the parties that entered the European Parliament for the first time. Only six parties that maintained their presence over the last five years consistently lost consensus, while the rest stagnated. On the other hand, looking at the seats obtained in the hemicycle, and therefore at actual representation, half of the parties maintained their position or slightly varied the number of MEPs (where slightly is intended as one additional or reduced seat). On the other half, the majority of the parties gained representation (including the parties that entered the European Parliament for the first time) and only four parties lost more than one seat. The parties overall maintained the trend that they reported on their last national parliamentary elections, with the exception of the Dutch *Forum voor Democratie* (Forum for Democracy) which at their first national

¹⁸ European Parliament. *2019 European Election National Results. Constitutive session*. Available at: <election-results.eu/national-results-overview/> Last accessed: 20/07/2019

elections in 2017 had reported a scarce 1.8%, while it more than sextupled their vote share at the European elections.¹⁹

2.1.3 A European populist explosion?

From 2015, events such as the so-called migrant crisis, the referendum representing the will of the United Kingdom to departure from the European Union, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States or the run of the populist Norbert Hofer in the Austrian presidential elections, had many scholars and journalists speak of a populist explosion or populist attack that would have spread across the continent. In light of the analysis conducted both at national and European level in the previous sections, can we talk of a populist breakthrough in the European Union?

At national level, populism has steadily gained support and political representation, being now at its highest levels in the European Union. Aggregate vote share and aggregate support are on the rise and the national parliamentary elections of 2018 and the first semester of 2019 saw almost the totality of populist parties gaining consensus or not losing their position as compared to the previous elections in the country. However, when considered singularly, the position of the majority of populist parties stagnated and while we witnessed the entrance into government of populist forces in nine countries, most of them have done it entering coalitions with other non-populist forces and hold a minority of the vote shares inside the coalition. The different parties do not have common foreign and internal policies, most of the time holding very diverse or opposed host ideologies and not forming a united front.

At European level, seven new populist parties entered the parliament and populist forces overall obtained more than one fourth of the seats. The ninth European Parliament term saw the launch of a new political group, Identity and Democracy (ID), succeeding the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group (ENF), formed in the previous term. The ID group, formed solely by right-wing populist parties obtained seventy-three seats, doubling the

¹⁹ Ibid

result of its predecessor which with thirty-six seats was the smallest group in the 2014-2019 legislative period.²⁰ However, while the majority of populist parties that obtained representation in the European hemicycle increased their support in terms of vote share, considering the actual translation of the vote share into representation, the populist scene did not extensively change in the last years. Only the Brexit party in the UK and Matteo Salvini's League in Italy reported an incredible breakthrough.

What is more, the increased representation registered by the Identity and Democracy group, mostly derives from the acquisition of parties that were previously members of other groups, such as the Danish People's Party and Alternative for Germany, both initially part of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR) and from the single outstanding gain of seats of the League, rather than from a general increase of support of the previous members of the ENF. The ID group do not represent the majority of populist parties and it is only the fifth largest political group in the European Parliament out of seven. Populist parties remain divided also at European level, weakening their influence and are not the sole reason of the blunting of the traditional centre-right and centre-left. For the first time since 1979, the European People's Party (EPP) and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D) no longer have a majority together, also and primarily thanks to the boost of the Greens and liberals.

To conclude, over the last three decades, populist parties jointly have more than tripled their backing and they are not showing signs of being declining on the whole. Nevertheless, it has been a gradual rise and especially in the last years they appear to be mostly stagnating. Therefore, we cannot talk of a breakthrough or explosion, but rather of a slowly mounting populist wave or tide, rising from different fronts.

²⁰ Ibid

2.2 The root cause and main catalysing agents of populism

The root causes of the rise of populism have long been debated, identifying its origins in the most diverse arguments. The emergence of this phenomenon has often been attributed to the passage from an industrial to a post-industrial society or to the spread of neoliberalist policies as mentioned in the first section of this chapter. More recently, a ‘globalisation losers theory’ pointed at the changes of labour in an era of growing interconnectedness, in which those whose jobs are menaced by the latest changes turn to populist parties, discarding the most traditional ones.²¹ We argue that all the explanations indicated as causes of the populist phenomenon can actually be traced to one single root cause, common to all populists phenomena, namely the perceived unresponsiveness of a party system which could not adapt to a changing electorate and to its different requests or expectations. In other words, populism arises when citizens feel that the political system is not paying attention or ignoring their demands and a gap between the awaited reactions of the ruling elite and the actual implementation of these reactions opens. Consequently, the people or a part of it, no longer feels represented by - and satisfied of - the traditional parties and, abandoned by the existing political options, turns to alternative choices, such as populism. Historically, the beginning of a political crisis and representation deficit has been identified in the end of the connection between ideology and party. The secularisation process brought not only an ideological and organisational transformation of the society but also to an evolution of the party system which progressively abandoned their ideological stances in order to compact the consensus of the electorate, forming the so-called *catch all parties*.²² The new type of parties are said to have lost their role of conjunction between politics and society, and they are accused of having betrayed both the people because of their inability to interpret their changing needs, and the central power, not being able to ensure political stability.²³ These conditions would lead to a progressive distrust in institutions and the need of new forms

²¹ Hawkins, K. Read. M. and Pauwels, T. (2017). *Populism and its causes*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. The Oxford Handbook of Populism. Oxford: Oxford University Press

²² Kirchheimer, O. (1996). *The Transformation of the Western European Party System*. In J. La Palombara, & M. Weiner (Eds.), *Political Parties and Political Development*. Princeton University Press

²³ Ilari, D. (2014). *La deriva populista delle democrazie occidentali*. Youcanprint Editions

of direct political participation, creating the ideal soil for the emergence of populist instances which claim a more direct relationship between representatives and represented.

An array of different issues can awaken the expectation of the people of a certain reaction by mainstream parties. These issues are commonly understood as the causes of the rise of populism, even though they are only the causes and catalysing agents of the sentiment of lack of representation and disappointed expectations, actual root cause of the demand and success of populism. We will identify the main catalysing agents of contemporary European populism in the next paragraphs, however, all agents share a set of specific elements. Populism is triggered when there is a widespread perception of the presence of a threat that menaces the existing society.²⁴ For instance, a catalysing agent can be understood to be the response of a corrupted political system which threatens democratic governance. Where corruption is pandemic, citizens do not feel represented anymore by the political representatives, no longer protecting the interests of the people and the functioning of democracy in favour of individual and particularistic benefits. The so-called *Tangentopoli* scandal (term in use from 1992 in order to indicate a widespread system of political corruption of the early 1990s in Italy) is often used to explain the rise of Silvio Berlusconi, whose party has been often considered populist.²⁵ The rise of populism is also associated with the presence of negative emotions, where anger is the main emotional driver and emotional connection between populist attitudes and vote choice. Anger has been proved to consistently enhance the odds both for populist parties and attitudes to emerge and to be supported at the polls.²⁶

Populism does not arise simply because of its popular demand and a fertile ground of which populist forces take advantage. Often, they actively contribute to the creation of that feeling of loss of representation and disappointed expectations, by emphasising and inflating the presence of a threat. Creating a sense of crisis, populists lend imperativeness to their message and highlight the lack of a prompt response of the ruling parties to a threat which would need immediate reaction, expected by the people and offered by the populists. Emotional states of anger are magnified, highlighting blames and injustices.

²⁴ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Rico, G. Guinjoan, M. and Anduiza, E. (2017). *The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism: How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes*. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(9)

The next paragraphs will explore three main catalysing agents of the root cause of populism. They all refer to a sense of crisis, *de facto* existing or inflated by populist forces, which draws from fears posed by economic change and loss of welfare, identity loss and national sovereignty loss. It is important to note that the agents that we are going to outline focus particularly on contemporary European populism and, especially if considered individually cannot explain the entirety of populist manifestations. The sentiment allowing the emergence of populism is mostly caused by a combination of the following agents or specific forms of populism might be caused by specific conditions of the country.

2.2.1 *The economic thesis*

Many current studies on populism draw from an economic theory, identifying the emergence of populism “in a medium-term failure of established parties to respond to the demands of their electorate in the face of socioeconomic change”.²⁷ This socioeconomic change has originally been understood to be in the systematic adoption of the neoliberal recipe which created a gap between the political elite and the expectations of the working class. The abandonment of policies of full employment and its substitution with inflation targeting, a focus on shareholder value maximisation rather than on policies favouring growth and reinvestment, an increasing globalisation and a larger market flexibility, led to a diminished job security, rising inequalities, a higher degree of monopoly and the concentration of wealth into the hands of fewer people.²⁸ Longer term trends such as lower productivity growth, lower investment rates and a deflationary tendency in the global economy were heightened by the financial crisis of 2008. The people, increasingly dissatisfied with the ineffective solutions envisaged after the crisis, started to perceive the established party system as incapable of answering to their needs and unfit to respond to their expectations, but simply maintaining a flawed system of economic governance which only defended and related to the elites. While the political mainstream parties were

²⁷ Hawkins, K. Read. M. and Pauwels, T. (2017). *Populism and its causes*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 329

²⁸ Montier, J. and Pilkington, P. (2017). *The deep causes of secular stagnations and the rise of populism*. GMO White Paper

offering repeated solutions, considered as unable to face the socioeconomic change, populist found the necessary gap to enter the political scene as an alternative. A striking economic downturn, the traditional policy failure to respond to it and the presence of a dysfunctional economic governance represented the threat menacing the existing society and the catalysing agent for the birth of populism. The Great Recession is commonly understood to be at the bottom of the emergence of populist forces in southern European countries, where the crisis hit stronger and it is used to explain the rise of parties such as the Spanish Podemos, the Greek SYRIZA and the Italian Five Star Movement.²⁹

The already fertile breeding ground for the root cause sentiment of populism and perception of crisis has been actively employed by populist which often captured and gave impetus to the already present dissatisfaction. Steve Bannon, ex Chief Strategist, Counselor to the President Donald Trump and partisan of the construction of a global populist movement, in an interview by Giuliano Da Empoli affirmed:

“[...] the financial elites are the ones that caused the 2008 financial crisis, creating weapons of mass economic destruction, of which they did not even master the complexity. Since then, central bankers have flooded the world with liquidity to save their peers, but they have done nothing for normal people. That is why the time has come to take up your destiny again [...] Italy is the only country in the world where ordinary people talk about the spread! But it is the central bankers who have put a meme in your head to brainwash you! I come from Goldman Sachs, I am a capitalist, I am not saying that we should be irresponsible. But who was irresponsible and who had a bail-out after the financial crisis? They, the bankers who caused it!”³⁰

In the words of Bannon, we find the core of the economic populist theory whose simplicity makes a counterattack problematic. It is difficult to deny that the financial elites, the accumulation of wealth in fewer hands and high private debt levels had a dominant role in the crisis. The populist thesis is also incredibly superficial, but its directness is also what makes it so appealing to the people. The responsibility of the crisis

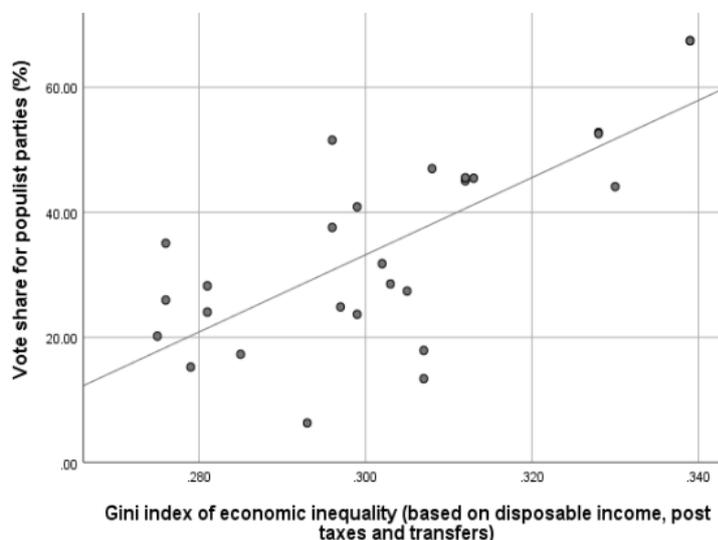
²⁹ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser. C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³⁰ Empoli, G. *Il Diavolo Veste Bannon*. Il Foglio. Issued: 01/10/2018. Available at: <<https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2018/10/01/news/il-diavolo-veste-bannon-216448>>Last accessed: 12/08/2019. Translated from the Italian version from the author of this thesis

is ascribed to a bad financial management from bankers that could not master the complexity of the mechanisms that they were creating, and which afterwards did not face the consequences, letting the normal people bearing with them. In such a situation, “the elites have offered only but the management of the decline”³¹ while populist forces have offered action, “what the people want”.

Going beyond the specific dynamics of the 2008 crisis, the economic thesis makes reference not only to socioeconomic change but to socioeconomic conditions per se, identifying a relationship between populist success and socioeconomic dissatisfaction, whether if caused by an economic crisis or other factors. The European Economic and Social Committee requested a study analysing the correlation between populist voting patterns and socioeconomic indicators.³² The study explores the performances of ten populist parties, both at regional and national level, of four EU Member States: Austria, France, Italy and Poland. At the national level, results report a remarkable positive relation between the populist vote share and the Gini index measuring economic inequality, based on disposable income.

Fig.4 The relationship between income inequality and populist vote share at national level



Source: EESC Study. Societies Outside Metropolises

³¹ Steve Bannon in: Empoli, G. (2018). *Il Diavolo Veste Bannon*. Il Foglio, 1st October 2018. Translated from the Italian version

³² Lessenski, M. et al. (2019). *Societies Outside Metropolises: The Role of Civil Society Organisations Facing Populism*. The European Economic and Social Committee. Diversity Europe Group

Also at the regional level, the study revealed that to a decrease in disposable income was associated an increase of support for populist parties.³³

2.2.2 *The mass society thesis*

While the economic thesis identifies the triggering agent of populist demand in socioeconomic dissatisfaction and generally in adverse economic situations, the ‘mass society’ thesis focuses on a perceived threat to culture and identity loss. According to this account, a more and more fragmented society leads to an inability of the people to stay cohesive and to maintain some set of values that are considered as traditional. Particularly when party identification is fragile and citizens no more find an unifying agent on the traditional political level, people will find an identity and a unifying agent in populist politics, recalling Weyland’s political-strategical theory.³⁴ Populists set up a popular identity which is constructed both positively, making reference to who the people are and to which features characterise them, and negatively, in contrast to what the people are not. We discussed different ways in which popular identity is positively interpreted in chapter one, while exploring the concept of ‘the people’. However, most recently the construction of an identity has mainly been built negatively, identifying an ‘other’ which embodies different values from *the* people and which endangers their identity. This approach especially pertains to right-wing or far right populist parties with nativist traits. Despite not being single-issue parties, right-wing populist parties are united in their anti-immigration grievance, actively instrumentalising and using anti-immigration rhetoric set of fears of the people on the topic.³⁵

Immigration is not a new phenomenon. During the boom years northern European countries such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands opened their borders actively seeking for guest workers in order to ease the labour shortage. However, from the 1980s and 1990s, also the number of asylum-seeking and immigrants from non-European countries started to increase and feelings of fear and anger followed. In fact, the

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Hawkins, K. Read. M. and Pauwels, T. (2017). *Populism and its causes*. In: Rovira Kaltwasser, C. and Taggart, P. and Ochoa Espejo, P. and Ostiguy, P. The Oxford Handbook of Populism. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³⁵ Ivarsflaten, E. (2006). *What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-examining grievance mobilization models in seven successful cases*. Nuffield College. University of Oxford

phenomenon accelerated following the conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa and the arrivals increased rapidly in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These feelings blended and increased together with the most traditional racist beliefs towards ethnic or religious minorities which were already present in the territory. The anti-immigrant sentiment started rising also towards European immigrants mainly after 1989, with the fall of the so-called Iron Curtain towards Eastern European workers, recognised as economic migrants, which became target of traditional xenophobic accusations, such as the ‘theft of jobs’.³⁶

The major part of the fear and anger over the influx of immigrants can be reconducted to the economic thesis, that is to say to the perception that the immigrant absorbs the already scarce resources of ‘the people’ to the detriment of the natives because of an increase in public spending and decrease in job opportunities. The loss of welfare and benefits due to immigration is a classic argument of populist rhetoric. However, a part that goes beyond economic fears remains. Especially after the September 11 attacks, Muslims and generally non-European migrants started to be perceived as a danger and the ‘different’ as image of threat spread rapidly, restrictive migration policies increased, together with different forms of racism. A European Social Survey study in 2016 analysed attitudes towards immigration in Europe. The respondents were asked to indicate their perception of the impact of migration on a series of topic. ‘Crime problems’ ranked as the first complaint between the respondents as 40% of the interviewed people affirmed that immigration had made crime problems worse.³⁷ The initial lack of responsiveness of mainstream parties which did not pose the problem of immigration at the centre of the political agenda opened a gap which favoured the emergence of populist phenomena.

A Danish People’s Party campaign already in 1999 displayed in its poster: “Your Denmark: A multi-ethnic society with rapes, violence, insecurity, forced marriages, oppressed women, gang crimes”³⁸, which costed the dismissal of the party and its leader Pia Kjaersgaard. In the aftermath of September 11, the People’s Party consistently increased its vote share and obtained nine seats more as compared to the previous

³⁶ Wodak, R. (2015). *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*. SAGE Publications Inc

³⁷ European Social Survey (2016). *Attitudes towards Immigration and their Antecedents: Topline Results from Round 7 of the European Social Survey, ESS Topline Results Series. Issue 7*

³⁸ Judis, J. (2016). *The Populist Explosion. How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*. New York: Columbia Global Reports

elections in 1998, contributing to the loss of the majority of seats of the Social Democratic Party for the first time.³⁹

The outbreak of civil war in Libya in 2011 and the progressive deterioration of the Middle-East scene led to the so-called European migrant crisis and to a progressive intensification of nativist sentiments, entailing a combination of nationalism and xenophobia. Right-wing populism engages in an identity politics characterised by a division where the ingroup is pure and the outgroup is ‘corrupt’ and demonised. While the economic thesis continues to be preponderant in the anti-immigrant sentiment together with security concerns, a more radical ethno-religious perception of immigration and of ethnic minorities as a threat to the Western society expanded among far-right populist parties.⁴⁰ Anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia stay at the centre of the far-right populist propaganda, stressing the cultural and religious incompatibility of Islam which clashes with European or native principles. Especially among Western European countries, anti-Islam positions led populist radical right parties to a new emphasis on the Christian roots of Europe and to an alleged ongoing invasion and Islamisation of the Western society, menacing the traditional cultural and religious European identity. These positions translated in anti-Muslim initiatives such as movements opposing the building of mosques or an increasing number of ‘anti-Muslim incidents’, for instance in Austria or France.⁴¹

In Eastern European countries, where mass immigration from Islamic countries is not prevalent, anti-Muslim sentiments are not yet central in populist discourses which focus on the demonization of a more generally defined immigrant and most of all of ethnic minorities such as the Roma, targeted as internal enemy. Besides the widespread prejudice that the Roma are intrinsically criminal and social parasites (argument which falls on the fears on security and economic issues discussed above), the most commonly heard fears towards the Roma refers to their ‘primitivity’ and social organisation which would undermine the European and nativist democratic identity and social order⁴².

³⁹ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

⁴⁰ Abromeit, J. (2017). *Transformations of populism in Europe and the Americas. History and Recent Tendencies*. Bloomsbury Publications

⁴¹ Lazaridis, G. and Campani, G. (2017). *Understanding the Populist Shift Othering in a Europe in crisis*. London and New York: Routledge

⁴² Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

In a society which allegedly faces increasing security risks and the risk of identity loss, where identity can be intended culturally, religiously or as the democratic political structure, populism presents itself as the sole defendant of the true people, channelling sentiments of anger, fear and disappointment towards the mainstream party system.

2.2.3 *Loss of national sovereignty*

Along with important economic changes and the expansion of migrant influx, Europe in the 1980s and 1990s went through significant political changes, mostly related to an increasing European integration. Samuel N. Eisenstadt⁴³ identified the erosion of national sovereignty, in terms of both political and monetary power, as one of the main factors influencing the emergence of distrust and discontent towards the mainstream political system and the consequent rise of the contemporary European populism.

Criticism towards the EU has functioned as a glue for many populist parties. For instance, in Poland in 1998 several tiny populist parties united in a single group, the Polish Agreement (*Porozumienie Polskie*), opposing the accession of Poland to the EU. The same process led also to the emergence of the National Party in Czech Republic, standing against European membership.⁴⁴ The construction of the European Union is the first and main factor associated with the weakening of national sovereignty, perceived as abandoned in favour for an “elite driven process marred by democratic deficit and corruption.”⁴⁵ The main theories advocating a democratic deficit in the European Union include secondary or domestic deficits, that is to say deficits that emerge within the member states, highlighting the difficulties of a partial relocation of power from the national to the European level. They occur when the member states experience a shift of authority and observe a reduction of domestic control.

Populist parties often accuse the European Union of having extended its duties into more and more spheres of politics and particularly stress the loss of hold of national parliaments on the EU policies. The growing expansion of the powers of the EU governance is said

⁴³ Eisenstadt, S. (1987). *European Civilization in a Comparative Perspective: a study in the relations between culture and social structure*. Norwegian University press

⁴⁴ Mudde, C. (2017). *The Populist Radical Right. A Reader*. London and New York: Routledge

⁴⁵ Ivarsflaten, E. (2006). *What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-examining grievance mobilization models in seven successful cases*. University of Oxford

to be slowly invading areas of competence of the national governments and imposing a centralised management which subtracted autonomy to the state. These arguments have been often used by populist forces emphasising how the ruling elites were only responding to rules imposed from above, in league with ‘Brussels’, neglecting the real interests of their people. What is more, critics advocating a European democratic deficit focus on the imperfections and omissions in the institutional architecture of the EU, insisting on the inadequacy of the checks and balances system and of objective democratic controls, judging the main EU bodies as unaccountable.

Euroscepticism is not a characteristic common to all populist phenomena, and recently rather than a strong European opposition, we observe a ‘soft Euroscepticism’, namely “where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.”⁴⁶ Soft Euroscepticism is frequently part of the populist political repertoire, which opposes national interests against the interests of the European union perceived as an elite and therefore in dichotomy with the people. European institutions are frequently described by populist forces as composed by non-elected bureaucrats who could extend their charges without having to deal with any public scrutiny. The technocratic and bureaucratic configuration of European institutions, together with the austerity policies imposed for compliance with fiscal parameters, gave populism the opportunity to exploit public disaffection, especially during times of crisis. The distance between citizens and European institutional bodies often makes it difficult for the people to identify the European Union as the producer of many policies. The EU is therefore often employed as a scapegoat, that is, national agents take credits for popular decisions and blame the EU for unpopular ones.⁴⁷

Together with a deepening European integration, the states engaged in an increasing international cooperation, deregulation of international relations and an increasing economic interdependence boosted by globalization. Agreements and regulations which were initially limited to the governing of economic and strategic policies were seen as

⁴⁶ Taggart, P. Szczerbiak, A. (2008) *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*. Volume 1. Case Studies and Country Surveys. New York: Oxford University Press

⁴⁷ Bang, H. Jensen, M. and Nedergaard, P. (2015). ‘*We the People*’ versus ‘*We the Heads of States*’: *The Debate on the Democratic Deficit of the European Union*. *Policy Studies*, 36(2), 196-216

progressively expanding and becoming the leading source of national power. This process has been judged to further shift political power from the national to the international level, leading to a de-construction of the traditional state and call into question of the ruling elites. These political changes have been judged to have created a further grievance and disillusionment with mainstream politics, benefiting outsider parties such as the populist ones.

2.3 Populism and democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy has always been ambiguous and characterised by opposing opinions. The analyses on the nature of their relation range from describing populism as a constitutive pillar of democracy and essential source of democratic renewal, to defining it as a spectre haunting democracy and as one of the biggest threats to the democratic system.

On one side for instance, Mackert identifies populism “as a constitutive though pre-democratic political strategy in democratic regimes” and as an intrinsic characteristic of any kind of democratic form.⁴⁸ According to his view, from the beginning of the democratic age up until the present days, populism has always been present and it is re-activated in times of societal crisis. As a matter of fact, he argues that early democratic forms were not created democratically or by democratic means. Democratic politics could not possibly emerge immediately after revolutionary upheavals against pre-democratic regimes, the first step in order to reach modern democratic forms would have been the institution of populist regimes which only progressively could become democracies. In fact, both before and during democratic revolutions, contentious attitudes and social biases could not have produced an immediate democratic consensus, but rather highly exclusionary strategies, namely a populist politics that later transformed into democratic politics. Populism therefore plays a critical role in the emergence of democracy, being its roots, it stays part of democracy and resurface under precise conditions. On the same lines, Margaret Canovan underlining the strict relationship between populism and democracy, asks: since democracy etymologically and on its wider acceptance means

⁴⁸ Mackert, J. (2019). *'We The People' Liberal and Organic Populism, and The Politics of Social Closure*. In: Fitzi, G. Mackert, J. and Turner, B. *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Routledge

‘government by the people’, “how could a genuine democracy be other than populist?”⁴⁹

The concepts of popular power and popular decision are fundamental as much in populist rhetoric as in the original concept of democracy and speaking of a populist democracy would therefore be a pleonasm. Theorists labelling populism a pillar and as a necessity for real democratic regimes to survive, usually focus on the abandonment by the mainstream parties of the principles of popular sovereignty. They claim that the society went through an oligarchisation and which the denounce and re-politicisation of some areas of debate is fundamental for the maintenance of a truly democratic society, task that is carried by populist forces. The promotion of a progressive populism would push a recovery and expansion of democratic ideals. On this matter, Yannis Stavrakakis underlines how anti-populist positions might be the real threat to democracy, since they encourage indifference towards the wide array of progressive populist projects and erase the egalitarian political impact, as well as their emancipatory potential for excluded groups, that they might have on contemporary politics.

On the other side, many political scientists do not identify populism as a constitutive element of democracy, but rather as a pathology or as an unwanted guest. Benjamin Arditi describes the place occupied by populism with reference to the democratic system, through an analogy with the annoyance provoked by a drunken guest at a dinner:

“He is bound to disrupt table manners and the tacit rules of sociability by speaking loudly, interrupting the conversations of others, and perhaps flirting with the wives of other guests. The hosts might not be particularly happy with the awkward visitor, but having invited him they probably cannot get rid of him either, so they will do their best to downplay his antics in order to make the rest feel as comfortable as possible”⁵⁰

Populism therefore is still identified as an internal element of the democratic space (the guest had been invited) but it is placed on the internal periphery, on the edges of democratic politics, where it is conceived as a destabilizing phenomenon, a blurred

⁴⁹ Canovan, M. (1981). *Populism*. London and New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, p.173

⁵⁰ Arditi, B. (2005). *Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics*. In: Panizza, F. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London and New York: Verso. p.90

territory which might stay within the boundaries of democracy but which might enter into conflict with it and exit the democratic limits.⁵¹

While researching the problematic relation between democracy and populism, assessing whether and to which extent populism should be considered a threat, some necessary distinctions need to be explored. As a matter of fact, analysing the body of literature on this debate, we can notice that opposing opinions are dictated from different initial standpoints, which the often superficial analysis of the media overlooks. Antagonistic positions mostly derive from different premises and normative assumptions on how democracy should function, making the debate on the relation between populism and democracy preliminary a theoretical issue and only on a second phase a real empirical question.

Therefore, the first necessary distinction to be made regards the type of democracy that is taken into consideration. Authors considering populism not as a constitutive though of democracy and as a danger, normally envisage a model of *liberal* democracy and representative politics, where populist forces are represented as a flaw in the liberal democratic system. Populism is assumed to be a disruptive force, infringing individual rights, minority rights and disregarding institutions. On the other hand, authors adopting a radical approach to what democracy is, will tend to have a more positive outlook on the impact of populism on the democratic system, underlying how populist forces might strengthen political participation and be the only true democrats. Being populism integral part of democracy, if not its true expression, in this approach the question posed shifts from asking how and to which extent populism might menace democracy, to asking which is the degree of populism in a certain democratic system⁵². For instance, a radical perception of democracy led Laclau to identify populism not only as intrinsic to democracy but as its purest form, crucial for the existence of politics itself: “Since the construction of ‘the people’ is the political act *par excellence* – as opposed to pure administration within a stable institutional framework – the sine qua non requirements of

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012). *The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy*. Democratization, 19(2), 184-208

the political are the constitution of antagonistic frontiers within the social and the appeal to new subjects of social change.”⁵³

Besides different normative assumptions on democracy, the antagonistic positions over the relationship between populism and democracy derive from which type of populism is taken into consideration. This dissertation has tried to treat populism as a single phenomenon, identifying common characteristics to all populist manifestations. However, in order to better understand the debate on the nature of the relationship between populism and democracy, it is necessary to distinguish at least between two couples of different forms of populism, namely inclusionary versus exclusionary and progressive versus reactionary populism. As a matter of fact, theorists adopting negative stances on how populism affects democracy generally envisage an exclusionary and reactionary populism, most typical in Europe, while those considering populism positively, most commonly consider inclusionary and progressive populism in their analysis.

The first couple of types of populism (inclusionary and exclusionary) refers to the degree of inclusiveness in the democratic system accepted by populist actors, in material, political and symbolic terms and mainly relates to divergent understanding of ‘the people’. Inclusionary populism will tend to identify ‘the people’ with the *demos* and to include the citizens present in the national territory and which are not part of the elite. The inclusionary approach will therefore consider exclusively the vertical dimension of Brubaker’s approach in the definition of ‘the people’, explored in the first chapter, and it displays a higher degree of inclusiveness in the political system. Commonly, inclusionary populism is associated with leftist positions and used therefore to describe left-wing populism. Contrarily, exclusionary populism is most commonly associated to right-wing populism with nativist traits as it will adopt a vision of ‘the people’ which corresponds to an *ethnos* and include the horizontal opposition of Brubaker’s approach between an inside and an outside⁵⁴.

The second dichotomy, progressive and reactionary populism, incorporates the characteristics and the understanding of ‘the people’ described respectively by the

⁵³ Laclau, E. (2005). *On Populist Reason*. London and New York: Verso. p.154

⁵⁴ Mudde, C. Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2013). *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America*. *Government and Opposition*, 48(2), 147-174

inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism. As a matter of fact, progressive populism sees ‘the people’ as a group which is not fixed or ethnically or biologically determined, but rather as an ongoing process in history, while reactionary populism sticks with a concept of ‘the people’ which cannot change as it is a transgenerational body, not object of a possible reassignment of boundaries and meaning.⁵⁵ This distinction however goes beyond the degree of inclusiveness to the democratic system and encompasses more characteristics. Progressive populism is generally described as focusing on the rational interests of the people, as being less dependent on the figure of a charismatic leader and as having a more moderate mistrust or rejection towards intellectuals. What is more, progressive populism involves spontaneous mobilizations and a greater populist demand, emphasising redistribution of power and favouring equality. Reactionary populism is mainly characterised by a broader focus on emotional issues, dependence from a strong leader and by stronger anti-intellectual propensity. In addition, it is perceived as a top-down mobilisation, whose politics emphasise the presence of a personalised enemy and denote xenophobic and not egalitarian stances.

These characterizations of populism establish ideal types rather than a rigid separation among the populist phenomena, since no populist movement will present characteristics strictly pertaining only to one kind of characterization. In any case, ideal distinctions are helpful in order to establish necessary premises and understand whether similar elements are being presented as preconditions when conducting a comparative inquiry on different studies and answers trying to explain the relationship between democracy and populism. The reader should bear in mind these distinctions and search for normative assumptions when comparing different analysis on the subject, since, as mentioned earlier, distinct positions may derive from distinct initial premises. Opposing opinions might simply be determined from the fact that diverse elements are being analysed. Conducting the same experiment twice without using the same initial materials could unavoidably lead to conflicting results.

⁵⁵ Abromeit, J. (2017). *Transformations of populism in Europe and the Americas*. History and Recent Tendencies. Bloomsbury Publications

By presenting the divergences between the link of different understandings of democracy and different ideal types of populism, we analysed predominant paths in the studies of the relation between the two concepts. In the body of literature exploring the subject, we observed that populism is primarily considered as generally negatively influencing democracy where democracy is intended as liberal democracy or where populism is intended as exclusionary and reactionary. Conversely, when a radical stance on the definition of democracy is adopted or when populism is analysed in its inclusionary and progressive forms, populist forces tend to be considered as positively affecting the democratic system. Nevertheless, we are not claiming that understanding democracy in its liberal acceptance, nor selecting exclusionary or reactionary populism, inevitably and thoroughly means negatively considering the impact of populism on democracy. The same applies to the choice of progressive populism or radical democracy as elements of inquiry.

As a matter of fact, in the next section we will explore the impact of populism on the democratic system in its *liberal* acceptance, emphasising how populism can represent both a threat and a corrective to liberal democracy, depending on its electoral power and under specific variables. The choice of analysing the realm of liberal democracy has been dictated from the fact that it is the most diffused and dominant model of democracy in the area of inquiry of this dissertation, namely the European Union. What is more, the day-to-day usage of the term democracy is made with reference to a liberal connotation rather than to democracy *per se* in a radical understanding. The following paragraph will firstly outline a definition of liberal democracy. Secondly, it will explore how the liberal democratic system can be both positively and negatively affected by populist forces, and under which circumstances.

2.3.1 Populism and liberal democracy: threat and restorative

In 1942, in his book ‘Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy’, Joseph Schumpeter criticising the classical doctrine of democracy, described it as: “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to

assemble in order to carry out its will”.⁵⁶ This minimalistic definition reflects what is the common understanding of democracy *sans adjectives*, a definition of democracy *per se* that combines two elements, namely majority rule and popular sovereignty.⁵⁷ The minimal definition sees democracy as a method, where the people select their own rulers through elections by majority rule. However, when the term democracy is employed especially in Europe, most of the times it is used with reference to the dominant model of *liberal* democracy, rather than with reference to the core and classical meaning of the term. The concept of liberal democracy, understood as a political system, is more articulated and complex. Before analysing how populism can positively or negatively influence liberal democracy, we need to build a clear picture of what liberal democracy is.

One of the most accepted theoretical frameworks for the studies on liberal democracy comes from Robert Alan Dahl. Dahl identifies democracy as an utopic project and ideal, since democracy cannot refer to a fully achieved and ultimate state, but the democratisation process is continuous and dynamic.⁵⁸ In order to analyse and understand how actual structures of existing democratic systems are or should be, he proposes the concept of ‘polyarchy’, a political unit analogy of a country, which is structured around two dimensions and intrinsic elements of democracy: ‘public contestation’ – the possibility to oppose the government and develop political competition, and ‘political participation’ – the possibility to be involved and included in the political process. The first dimension therefore encompasses a series of rights and opportunities such as freedom of expression and of inquiry or the freedom to participate in electing representative through free and fair elections which allow diverse points of view. The second dimension might be understood as the degree of inclusiveness in the political system. It refers to an actual participation in the political life and the wider or stricter opportunity to take part in the first dimension.⁵⁹ Exploring further these two dimensions, Dahl identifies a minimal set of political guarantees and characteristics which indicate and are necessary

⁵⁶ Schumpeter, J. (1943). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London and New York: Routledge. p.250

⁵⁷ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁵⁸ Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012). *The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy*. *Democratization*. 19:2, 184-208

⁵⁹ Dahl, R. (1999). *The Past and the Future of Democracy*. Centre for the Study of Political Change. Siena: CIRCAP n.5

for a democratic government to be labelled as such. For instance, the selection of elected officials should be frequent and open to every adult permanently residing in the country; citizens should have the right to express themselves without fear of punishment and the right to institute independent associations or political parties; the right to access sources of information which are not under the control of the government or group influencing public political beliefs.⁶⁰

Coppedge, besides the two dimensions identified by Dahl, adds two more, namely the 'division of powers' and the 'scope of democratic authority'. The former is based on the division and separateness of responsibilities, the latter "reflects the agenda of issues that the democratic government may decide without consulting unelected actors"⁶¹, making reference to the level and quantity of constraints on governmental authority imposed by non-governmental bodies such as international organisations, business entities, religious groups. The fewer the issues on which unelected actors are involved in final decision making, the wider the scope of democratic authority, which allows a meaningful and real participation of the citizens in the decision-making process.

Ultimately, liberal democracy can be defined as a political regime which surely includes the radical and minimal definition of democracy, therefore popular sovereignty and majority rule, but which also envisages the presence of independent institutions which ensure the preservation of a set of characteristics, corresponding to the four dimensions discussed above, namely public contestation, political participation, division of powers and a broad scope of democratic authority. In addition, liberal democratic systems should protect of a set of fundamental rights, among which the protection of minorities, freedom of press, freedom of expression, freedom of association and the right to participate in free and fair elections. Liberal democratic values might also be understood as the values on which the European Union is founded, as provided by Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union which states:

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and Research Methods*. Cambridge University Press. p 25

States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”⁶²

With an outline of the definition of liberal democracy, it is easier to understand why adopting the radical definition we cannot say that populism is distant from or can threaten democracy. However, when adopting the liberal acceptation, more undersides and possible areas of conflict emerge between populism and democracy. Therefore, populists might rightfully claim to respect democracy *per se*, nevertheless populism is more likely to represent a threat and be at odds with liberal democracy. As a matter of fact, populist actors often criticise independent institutions and can jeopardise some fundamental rights proper of the liberal democratic model. As we will explore on the third chapter analysing the Hungarian populist government of Viktor Orbán, independent institutions such as the media and judiciary are the most prone to being put at risk by populist forces. Especially the media landscape is likely to be transformed, through the reduction, or in extreme cases annihilation, on the one side of rights such as freedom of press and expression and on the other side of the right to find and access impartial sources which are not under the control of the government. The dimension of public contestation might be further endangered by the populist promotion of policies which discourage political opposition and capacity of competition, strengthen the position and broaden the authority of populist forces when in power (also jeopardising the dimension concerning the division of powers).⁶³ What is more, populist theory and praxis based on popular sovereignty might also weaken and erode the system of governmental check and balances and establish political cleavages which make extremely difficult the formation of new coalitions and the achievement of agreements.⁶⁴

As far as the political participation dimension is concerned, especially when exclusionary populism is taken into consideration, populism might undermine the already precarious equilibrium between the majority needs and the defence of minority rights, by invoking

⁶²Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I Common Provisions - Article 2. Available at Official Journal of the European Union, C 202/17: <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12016M002>>

⁶³ Rovira Kaltwasser. (2012). *Scholars should not just assume that populism is bad for democracy, but should instead concentrate on explaining populism's positive and negative effects*. The London School of Economics and Political Science

⁶⁴ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

principles of majority rule. Indeed, defining ‘the people’ on an ethnical basis as right-populism does frequently, political participation in terms of breadth and fullness of inclusion is reduced and minorities’ protection and inclusion is disregarded or limited. However, on political participation, populism can also positively impact democracy. Re-politicising some issues and mobilising large sectors of society, populist forces can reinvigorate political participation understood as the actual exercise of political rights by the citizens, such as the right of going to vote. We should not forget that in 2014, the European election turnout reached the lowest level since 1979, when the European Parliament has been directly elected for the first time, a worrying downward trend which revealed a progressive apathy and indifference towards politics.⁶⁵ In the last European elections in May 2019, the turnout increased to 50.6%, the highest level since 1994. In addition, particularly inclusionary populism might widen political participation in its degree of inclusiveness acceptance, giving voice to and improving the integration in the political system of groups that do not feel represented by the mainstream parties.⁶⁶ Inclusionary or left-wing populism in fact normally defines the people on the basis of a socio-economic rationale, including disadvantaged and underprivileged groups going beyond a nativist discourse.

Populism might function as a corrective and restorative tool for the liberal democratic system also with respect to the scope of democratic authority dimension. By emphasising the principle of popular sovereignty and ‘bringing back politics to the people’, populism raises questions on who is controlling the implementation of some policies, other than the people through elected bodies. In other words, unelected bodies that might influence and control the government, questioning which actually the extent of democratic authority is. In this way, democratic accountability can increase “because it does not matter how a government was chosen if it has no power to carry out its decisions.”⁶⁷

Thus, the ambiguity of the populist impact on liberal democracy is evident, however, it is necessary to distinguish under which conditions populism can represent a threat or a

⁶⁵ Griggio, E. (2016). *The European Democratic Deficit still exists: Lack of interest and participation of the population in the European policies*. Ca’Foscari University of Venice. Final Thesis

⁶⁶ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁶⁷ Coppedge, M. (2012). *Democratization and Research Methods*. Cambridge University Press. p.25

corrective, since its negative or positive influence may heavily depend on different variables, such as the political strength of the populist party and the international framework in which the country is inscribed.

Political strength or political power plays a fundamental and central role on the extent of the impact that populism can have. The dangerous and alarming aspect of populism emerges if it has the opportunity to move from a political movement, or party, to reaching power in government.⁶⁸ When populist forces strengthen their political power so that they can arrive to be the leading party in the government, the outcome of the decisions of a populist government will probably be to bend the state to the interests of ‘the people’, defined according to the specific populist actor, against the interests of other parts of the society, namely the minorities (may them be economic, cultural, religious or ethnic). Moreover, populism is impatient towards the mechanisms of constitutional democracy, favouring more direct and prompt actions. If populism acquires a parliamentary majority, it might count on a qualified parliamentary majority and relatively restricted counterbalancing forces. As it happened in Hungary, populism might arrive to change constitutional principles and bend the electoral playfield, endangering the division of powers and the multi-party system, threatening particularly the public contestation dimension. Populism can therefore play a double role, depending on its political power. A populist movement or a populist party in opposition to the ruling government might actually improve the quality of the democratic system, contesting the ruling parties, demanding more transparency and increasing political participation. However, when in power, it might consistently weaken and erode liberal democratic principles. Paradoxically, at the beginning populism might represent a moment of deep democratisation to later become an element of its limitation.⁶⁹

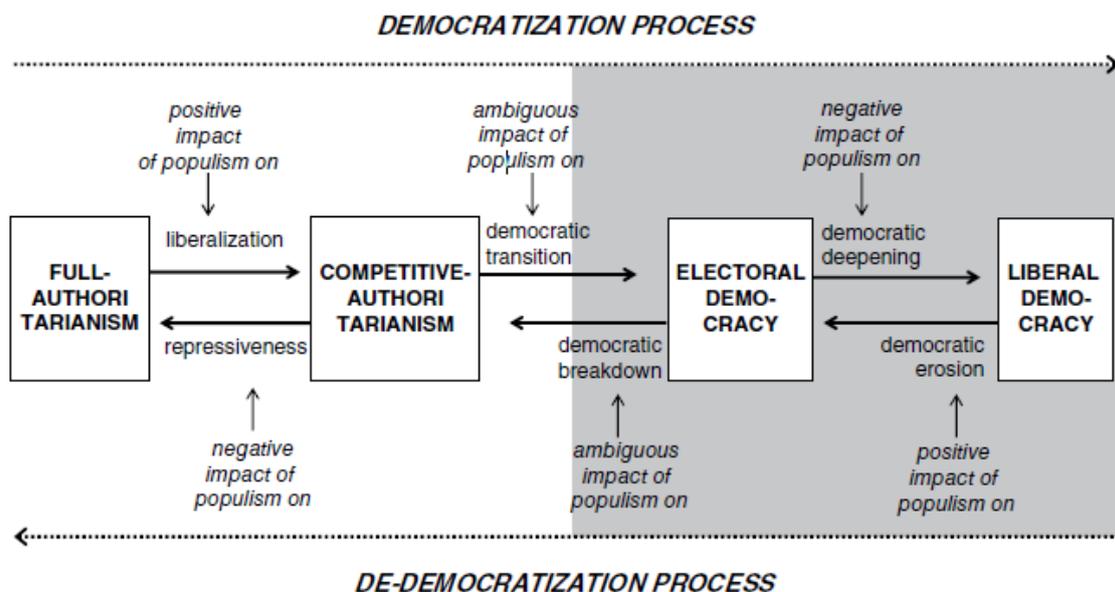
Secondly, the extent of the impact of populism on the democratic system might depend on the international framework which surrounds a country. The European Union is a strong network of liberal democracies, an environment which is likely to limit and restrain the possibility of populist forces to corrode liberal democratic principles without major repercussions. However, international backlash might not be immediate, and the limitative action of a well-integrated democratic realm might not suffice.

⁶⁸ Urbinati, N. (1998). *Democracy and Populism*. *Constellations*. 5(1), 110–124

⁶⁹ Anselmi, M. (2018). *Populism. An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge

Finally, the impact of populism on liberal democracy might depend from the stage of a country in its democratisation process. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser envisage a democratisation path, even though a paradigmatic and common to all countries track of democracy does not exist. They distinguish between an authoritarian and democratic camp, where the process of democratisation starts from full authoritarianism and ends with the ‘arrival’ to liberal democracy. Populism might initially positively affect liberalisation and the democratic transition from authoritarian regimes towards a liberal democratic system. Nevertheless, it might negatively influence democratic deepening, the final transition to a fully-fledged liberal democratic regime, stage where institutions protecting fundamental liberal rights are enhanced.⁷⁰ On the other side, looking at the de-democratisation process, populism is more likely to have a negative impact on already established liberal regimes, perpetrating democratic erosion by means that we have previously analysed. On a later stage however, it might help limiting democratic breakdown and the repressiveness characterising the transition towards full authoritarianism.

Fig. 5 Impact of populism on different stages during processes of democratisation and de-democratisation



Source: Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

⁷⁰ Mudde, C. and Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

To conclude, populism is not at odds with democracy *per se*, but it can represent a threat to the *liberal* democratic order, as well as representing a restorative tool, depending on different variables such as the degree of populist power, the international context and the stage of a country in the democratisation process. The European liberal democratic system is characterised by fundamental freedoms and rights and by the presence of supranational institutions guaranteeing this order. Populism through re-politicisation can draw attention on some troublesome issues that political elites might want to avoid in public discussion and bring back a conflictive dimension, asking for more transparency and on some levels boosting a re-democratisation of liberal democracy. Nevertheless, when in power populism might jeopardise and weaken political institutions which are necessary for the protection of fundamental rights proper of the liberal democratic order and trigger a process of democratic erosion. Especially nativist or protectionist behaviour, common to many populist parties, may undermine liberal ideology and the future of integration of the European Union.

Arditi's description of populism as the internal periphery of the liberal democratic order, perfectly captures the ambiguity of the impact of populism on democracy. Being at the periphery it maintains the relation of belonging to the democratic space and it might become a mirror where democracy is reflected and can see its undersides. However, being at its outer edges, as any frontier territory, populism might enter conflict with democracy and endanger its liberal order.⁷¹

⁷¹ Arditi, B. (2005). *Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics*. In: Panizza, F. *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London and New York: Verso

Chapter III

THE CASE OF HUNGARY

3.1 Fidesz - Magyar Polgári Szövetség

The Hungarian parliamentary elections held on the 8th of April 2018 saw the victory of the outgoing government coalition led by Viktor Orbán and composed by the populist Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance and KDNP - Christian Democratic People's Party. With 49.3% of vote share, Fidesz has regained a two-thirds majority in Parliament, winning 133 out of 199 seats, securing the third consecutive term as a Prime Minister for Viktor Orbán. The overwhelming success was determined by a simple and direct campaign that leveraged on what had been built over the last four years: economic growth, wage increases made possible by a substantial reduction in business taxes and a narrative against immigration. During the past nine years, the government of Viktor Orbán, who had already been in office from 1998 to 2002, stood out for initiatives and positions that raised many questions and critical reactions both in Hungary and in Europe. The large parliamentary majority has in fact allowed a series of measures which ultimately led to the European Parliament to vote for the first time to trigger Article 7(1) of the Treaty on the European Union. Article 7 TEU, the so-called ‘nuclear option’ is a mechanism of protection activated when appears a “clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State”¹ of the core values and principles of the European Union. In order to exemplify how populism can represent a threat to European democratic values, Hungary and specifically Fidesz appeared therefore as the best case study. Moreover, Fidesz is one of the first instances of contemporary populism gaining public support and reaching power in the European Union. Taking into consideration the last national elections of the European Member States, Fidesz is the populist party which gained the wider consensus, even if on its third mandate. Fidesz and its leader Orbán are now completing their ninth consecutive year in the government. Before analysing in the next paragraphs how the Hungarian government progressively undermined democratic values with the project of an illiberal democracy, we will overview its historical background, how Fidesz was born and which

¹ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I Common Provisions - Article 7 (ex Article 7 TEU). Available at < <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/>>

are the conditions that led Fidesz to gain power, both in 1998 and in 2010, conditions that can be interpreted as the catalysing agents and the cause of a rise of a demand side of populism.

3.1.1 The birth of the party and the first mandate

On March 1988, Viktor Orbán with other thirty-six law and economics students founded an independent youth organisation called Fidesz, acronym for *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, the Alliance of Young Democrats. The initial manifesto of Fidesz, stated the will to create a youth association, independent from the communist regime. As a matter of fact, in order to become part of Fidesz the two prerequisites were an age limit, fixed to thirty-five, and the prohibition to be a member of the Young Communist League. In the first month of existence, Fidesz counted one thousand members.² One year later, when Mikhail Gorbachev announced to the Hungarian Prime Minister that the Kremlin would have tolerated a multi-party system, the process of democratisation in Hungary began and the Socialist Worker's Party (the party ruling at the time) began Round Table Talks with the opposition groups. Viktor Orbán together with the founding fathers of Fidesz, actively participated in the negotiations towards the establishment of a democratic parliamentary republic. To take part in the first free elections to be held in 1990, Fidesz changed its status, from a youth association to a political party. The former group of students gained twenty-two seats out of 386 with five candidates: Viktor Orbán, Gábor Fodor, János Áder, József Szájer and László Kövér.³ With the exception of Fodor, they are all still in key positions with Fidesz. Áder is president of Hungary since 2012, Szájer is Member of the European Parliament since 2004 after being vice-president of Fidesz until 2003 and vice-chairman of the European People's Party in 2009 and 2014, and Kövér is presiding officer of the Hungarian National Assembly since 2010. This point is important to grasp the uniqueness of the dynamics of the Fidesz party. Lendvai underlines how in any Western democracy we witnessed the presence of a government where so many leading positions are occupied by a group whose members have known and worked with each other for the past thirty years.

² Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

³ Ibid

The first freely elected government in 1990 inevitably was not prepared for the burden and tensions of such a transition. A decline therefore started, and the Hungarian society suffered important economic downturns. The GDP decreased of 20%, inflation rose, as well as unemployment, and real wages fell. Moreover, the elected Prime Minister Antall, who started his battle with cancer soon after his election, was unable to fully carry out his duties and to impose the political design he had in mind. The period preceding the Antall government saw a Fidesz party which was still the extension of that youth organisation born in the corridors of the Bibó College in Budapest, loyal to liberal ideals and policies, critical of a relationship between politics and the Church, and of the nationalist connotations which were surrounding the coalition government. Orbán in 1992 even became vice-president of the Liberal International federation, position quite distant from the tones that later the party would have assumed. First president of Fidesz, during his speeches Orbán clearly expressed his stances, speeches which are often quoted today by the opposition in order to underline the departure from its early beliefs and the contradictions with his actual positions. Speaking about *Magyar Demokrata Fórum*, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, ruling party at the elections of 1990, he stated: “Sometimes, in moments of enthusiasm, they have the feeling that their power is not the consequence of a one-off decision of a certain number of Hungarian citizens but that they express, in some mystical manner, the eternal interests of the entire Hungarian people.”⁴ The departure of the positions of Orbán and of its party from the ones of a liberal association reflects the influence of some preliminary events. Orbán’s life under Communism led not only to the rejection of the communist ideology, but also to a progressive belief that the Hungarian Left was nothing but its successor, disguised as a democratic party. From 1992 an internal debate and political differentiation within Fidesz began between Orbán and Fodor. While Fodor wanted to maintain a closer alliance with the Free Democrats (SZDSZ) – a party mostly formed by left-wing intellectuals, Orbán, Kövér and the majority of the party leadership insisted on the maintenance of the full independence of Fidesz. In 1993-4 the Free Democrats moved towards the post-communist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and formed a coalition with them. Orbán and the Fidesz faction supporting full independence of the party rejected any kind of

⁴ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*. Oxford University Press, p.12

cooperation and association with the post-communists and this move sanctioned the break with the Free Democrats. Fodor and other two MPs of Fidesz quit their position and party in November 1993. It also sanctioned the start of the journey of Orbán and Fidesz to a right-wing conservative stance.⁵ At the seventh Fidesz party congress in 1995, Orbán endorsed the political shift to the right:

“In my view, the formation of blocs, the emergence of a socialist centre-left and a moderate centre-right dominated by the middle classes is in the interest of the country ... In the centre we have, if we stand alone, no chance against either left or right. To my mind there is no possibility of cooperating with the left. My answer is that Fidesz must seek cooperation with the forces politically right of the centre.”⁶

Fidesz popularity had risen rapidly after the elections in 1990 and the weakness of Antall's party. However, after the dispute with Fodor, at the elections of 1994 Fidesz obtained only the 7% of vote share with twenty seats, instead of the at least sixty that they had envisaged. On the contrary, the much hated by Orbán post-communist Socialists obtained through the coalition with the Free Democrats the majority in the Parliament, with over 72% of the seats under the leadership of Gyula Horn. Fidesz saw the right as the only possibility to reach success against the left. Only four years later, at the elections of 1998, Fidesz jumped from 7% to 29.4% of consensus, with 148 seats (128 more than in 1994) and Orbán became Prime Minister for the first time. Surely Fidesz was greatly helped by its adversaries. Horn's government was characterised by many infights and internal divisions which slowed down any proposition. In 1995 the so-called Bokros (the new Minister of finance) package was approved. It consisted in a series of austerity measures which, according to some economists such as László Gazdag - Hungarian professor at the University of Pécs, single-handedly caused a new economic crisis that would not had happened otherwise. Another school of thought judged the manoeuvre as the salvation of Hungary to bankruptcy.⁷ However it might be read, the package

⁵ O'Sullivan, J. (2015). *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

⁶ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press, p. 36

⁷ Balogh, E. (2009). *The Bokros Package: Pro And Con*. Hungarian Spectrum. Issued: 12/03/2019. Available at: <<https://hungarianspectrum.org/2009/03/12/the-bokros-package-pro-and-con>> Last accessed: 19/08/2019

downsized the exports to half of their preceding volume, economic growth stopped and inflation started to rise. Real wages and pensions were reduced along with social benefits, while unemployment increased. While the measures attracted foreign capitals, since the Hungarian National Bank had to raise interest rates in order to control the growing inflation, living standards of the Hungarian population dropped. Considering Bokros package in economic terms, it probably really saved Hungary from its indebtedness and led to financial stabilisation. The budget deficit in fact was reduced to 4.2% of GDP in 1998 from 10%. Nevertheless, in political terms, it was considered a suicide.⁸ In addition, public confidence in the government was further undermined by allegations of high-level corruption, involving some Horn's personal friend. Firstly, in 1995 it came the "Oilgate scandal", involving suspicious deals for the covering of a Russian debt towards Hungary of about \$800 million.⁹ The following years, the "Tocsik Scandal" saw the shady payment of about five million dollars to an external consultant agency to negotiate deals on behalf of the State Privatisation and Holding Company.¹⁰ Both coalition parties benefited from these deals, for party founding as much as for personal revenues. In contrast, a progressively developing new right, among which Fidesz, was promoting the image of a nation which was committed to the public good and to citizens' participation in the state. Orbán smartly exploited his adversaries' negative position, questioning and attacking the government. We discussed in chapter two of this dissertation how socio-economic changes and scandals which create disillusionment within the people can favour the emergence of populist forces. This happened with Fidesz. Orbán in 1998 at the age of thirty-five became the youngest Prime Minister of Hungary.

Orbán's first mandate further boosted Fidesz's shift to the right. It convinced him that the Hungarian transition to democracy had not gone along with a transformation of the structures of the communist state. Bureaucracy and institutions were still fundamentally post-communist.¹¹ A paragraph of the 1998 government programme stated: "The civil–

⁸ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

⁹ Hancock, D. Logue, J. (2000). *Transitions to Capitalism and Democracy in Russia and Central Europe: Achievements, Problems, Prospects*. Greenwood Publishing Group

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ O'Sullivan, J. (2015). *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

democratic government will realize a new type of government; not losing sight of the will – which was known but not sufficiently realized until then – of the constitutional practice which developed during the renewal of the structure and after the transition.”¹² This will be one fundamental argument for the adoption of a new constitution in 2011, whose controversies we will discuss later. The first mandate also witnessed an increasing centrality of the role of the Prime Minister and looser mechanisms of check and balances from the Parliament. For instance, cabinet meetings were not recorded, and minutes were replaced by summaries.¹³ In its first term, Orbán tried to move towards a more open economy and a stronger participation in European economic affairs. He supervised the entrance in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1999. However, in contrast with the pre-election classic liberal discourse promoting a strong civil society connected to a weak state, the idea of a ‘state with muscles’ emerged. A strong state was needed in order to have a strong civil society and a strong democracy. And the strength of the state had to start with the strengthening of the Prime Minister role. The new government:

“makes it possible for the prime minister, besides shouldering general constitutional and political responsibilities for the performance of the government, to use the rights and means of realizing the programme. [...] For the sake of productive government, it will define the strengthening of the central initiative and co-operating work as well as the improvement of quality of it as its precondition. The restructuring of the prime minister’s office as the basis of the work of the prime minister serves this purpose”¹⁴

For the first time, communication officers started to look after the media image of the Prime Minister. This was far from assuming propagandist tones. However, the presence in the media was something that his predecessors had overlooked, and which can help explaining his later success. An additional trend which emerged in these years has been the appointment to important positions of personalities ideologically and politically faithful to Fidesz. In 2000, Fidesz appointed Ferenc Mádl as President of Hungary, which they had previously proposed as nominee in 1995, Járαι Zsigmond as governor of the

¹² Programme of the Orbán cabinet as accepted by the Parliament on 28 June 1998, translated by Bozoki András (2005) in *Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Right in Hungary*. Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs

¹³ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*. Oxford University Press

¹⁴ Programme of the Orbán cabinet as accepted by the Parliament on 28 June 1998, translated by Bozoki András (2005) in *Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Right in Hungary*. Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs

Hungarian National Bank, one of the most important Orbán's economic allies, and Péter Polt as Chief Prosecutor of Hungary, re-appointed for the same position when Orbán will return to power in 2010.

In view of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2002, in 2001 Fidesz opted for looser budgetary policies, raising minimum wages, pensions and family allowances among other measures. Fidesz consolidated its image and power, and its Prime Minister was quite popular among Hungarian citizens. Economic indicators however did not show an encouraging situation and Fidesz, his leader in particular, was not immune from attacks by the opposition on opaque transactions and presumed corruption. In particular, Viktor Orbán's father, Győző Orbán, in 1999 had been involved in an affair involving transactions to a company owned by Lajos Simicska, at the time still a close allied of Viktor Orbán and among the twenty most influent personalities in Hungary.¹⁵

Despite the popularity of Orbán, in 2002 Fidesz lost the elections.

3.1.2 The opposition years and the return to power

Taking into account pre-election polls in 2002, nobody would have expected the defeat of the centre-right led by Fidesz and the return to power of the Hungarian Socialist Left (MSZP), even though by a small margin. Fidesz obtained 188 seats together with the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), while the new coalition of MSZP with the Free Democrats, 198. The right-wing coalition even accused an election fraud. The reasons of this defeat can mainly be attributed to two causes. Firstly, Fidesz focused on gathering right-wing votes during the campaign, and favouring the image of a united right-wing field, it failed to successfully distance itself from the radical right and anti-Semitic positions of MIEP, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party. Fidesz left a space at the centre of the political sphere and MSZP gathered the votes of those whose position was more moderate. Secondly, an aggressive and confrontational political style of Fidesz and Orbán in first place, presumably made the still hesitant voters to opt for the more cautious and

¹⁵ In 2015, Simicska and Orban had a public disagreement and open conflict which resulted in the loss or sale of all Simicska's businesses and media outlets within the following three years. An insight of Simicska's story can be found in an article of Pethő and Szabó, *Inside the fall of the oligarch who turned against Viktor Orbán*. Available at: <<https://www.direkt36.hu/en/feltarul-simicska-bukasanak-titkos-tortenete/>>

temperate personality of Péter Medgyessy, which became the new Prime Minister.¹⁶ A further shift to the right and radicalisation had in fact been caused by the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States.

The 2002 elections saw one of the highest turnouts with the 72% of the electorate voting, a strong large-scale mobilisation campaign and a strong polarisation, as well as a highly tense and emotionally charged competition for the first time. Other authors, attributes the surprising defeat of Fidesz to the simple fact that in the pre-election polls, people did not have the courage to reveal their true opinion and that those opposing Fidesz “simply did not dare to speak their minds.”¹⁷ Another factor that was later recognised by the right, was the availability of assets of MSZP on which the relatively new right could not count. The Socialist Left, successor of the communist Worker’s Party (MSZMP) ruling before the transition to democracy had at its disposal lists of names of the ex-members of MSZMP Party. This allowed a door to door and telephone campaign. The office Medgyessy is said to have sent more than 3.8 million letters to potential voters.¹⁸ In addition, they disposed of experts which the new right did not have and strong position in the foreign media panorama.

In the aftermath of the victory, the emergence of new scandals did not delay. Medgyessy admitted having been a counterintelligence officer in the communist secret services under Kádár regime, detail which puzzled both his voters and the Free Democrats (SZDSZ) coalition ally. An additional element which contributed to the decline of the left was the actual compliance with its electoral promises. Even though it may sound paradoxical, the ‘100-day Agenda’ promoted by MSZP, envisaged a welfare enhancement and modernisation project which aimed at reaching Western European living standards. It included an increase of pensions and the public sector salaries, more resources to villages and peripheries, scholarships and family allowances. The problem was that the Hungarian financial situation could not back this programme, it was not sustainable, and the budget deficit started to increase further and further, also under the demands of the opposition, asking for the full implementation of the promised Agenda and waiting for the

¹⁶ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*. Oxford University Press

¹⁷ Bozoki, A. (2005) *Consolidation or Second Revolution? The Politics of the New Right in Hungary*. Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, p.20

¹⁸ Szolomayer, B. (2015). *The Leftist Experiment*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

government to collapse. The situation was worsened by the fact that the government still had to bear expenses of the previous Orbán's government which had started for instance the development of new motorways.¹⁹ Medgyessy soon turned out to be an inconvenient character for both sides of the coalition. In 2004, Hungary entered the European Union and had to face its first European Parliamentary elections. The Prime Minister proposed to run with a single united list. This led to the gaining by the right of thirteen seats out of twenty-four, with nine seats to MSZP and two to SZDSZ. What is more, he proposed a reduction of MPs and direct elections for the President of the state.²⁰ Medgyessy was forced to resign in 2004 and was substituted by Ferenc Gyurcsány, one of the richest politicians of the left, married to the daughter of one of the most influential communist families. Lendvai describes him as "the most capable, controversial and unpredictable (and certainly the richest) politician on the left, he has gone down in Hungarian history as one of the very few prime ministers in Europe who has publicly and completely unnecessarily committed political suicide"²¹ It was mainly thanks to Gyurcsány that the Left won also the elections of 2006. He was also a charismatic leader and probably the only one that could successfully face Orbán during the campaign debates. This second defeat of Fidesz was also due to the growing divisions in the Right. While the parties of the Left were becoming more and more cohesive – at least as a façade, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) which had previously run with Fidesz, now refused to join forces. The MSZP- SZDSZ campaigned with a renewed welfare programme, similarly called 'the 100 Steps Agenda', even though they were fully aware that they could not have respected their promises as Medgyessy had done. On the contrary, austerity measures were going to be necessary in order to save Hungary from bankruptcy. Fidesz instead campaigned with what revealed to be an ineffective message, insisting on the fact that the situation of the country was deteriorating because of the policies of the Left. Financially speaking it was true, however the perception of the average citizen was opposed as they had received many benefits and consumption and standards of living had increased. In addition, MSZP- SZDSZ had concealed and falsified budgetary data to the European Union and postponed the publication of the Central Statistical Office report in order to not influence the elections. Therefore, the claims of the right not only resulted

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

²¹ Ibid p. 22

unfounded for the citizens but also gave the image of a right which stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the situation and the achievements of the Left.²² Elections took place in April 2006 but only some months later it became clear that MSZP- SZDSZ had lied in their campaign and that the financial situation was so critical that they had to introduce austerity measures right after their elections before the summer. However, it was once again a major scandal which marked the end of the left. On September 17 of the same year, excerpt of a private speech of Gyurcsány made in May at the congress of the Socialist party were leaked, broadcasted by radios and TV channels and uploaded to the Internet. The speech was renamed the 'Őszöd speech', the 'Lie speech'. As a matter of fact, Gyurcsány admitted the lies of its party and was trying to convince the MPs that the immediate adoption of painful reforms was necessary and inescapable.

“We had almost no other choice [than the package of cuts] because we fucked up. Not just a little bit but totally. No other country in Europe has committed such stupidities as we have. It can be explained. Obviously we have been lying our heads off for the last one-and-a-half, two years. It was quite clear that what we were saying wasn't true ... And in the meantime, we have, by the way, been doing nothing for the past four years. Nothing. You can't name me one single important government measure we can be proud of, apart from pulling the government out of the shit again in the end. If we were forced to give an account of what we've been doing in the past four years, what could we say? [...] I've almost killed myself the last one-and-a-half years having to pretend that we were governing. Instead we've been lying morning, noon and night.”²³

The speech caused a wave of protests in front of the Parliament, asking for Gyurcsány to resign and numerous political rallies were organised by Fidesz. However, the Prime Minister won the vote of confidence as he could count on the majority of the Parliament. More than 100,000 people gathered again to protest and in the following months the situation peaked on the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the revolution of October 23 against the Red Army. Demonstrators were dispersed by the police with incredible violence and a disproportionately harsh response to what was happening. The European Union failed to express any worries for citizens' rights after this episode, which will contribute to the lack of concern

²² Szolomayer, B. (2015). *The Leftist Experiment*. In: O'Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

²³ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

about respecting the Western understanding of democracy in the following years of Orbán's government.²⁴

Orbán exploited the political situation as it had happened with Medgyessy, continuously confronting the government with the promises they had made during the electoral campaign as opposed to the austerity measures that they were implementing now. What is more, Orbán used full-scale media attacks towards the Prime Minister and his government, even though it was clear that the ruling parties had completely lost the confidence of the Hungarian people. In addition, austerity measures directly fell on the shoulders of the citizens which had to carry the mistakes of the government. Reforms included the introduction of a co-payment in healthcare, which mostly affected pensioners, a wide portion of the Left voters. The smaller post offices and railway stations were closed. Wages were decreased and prices started to rise. Orbán made use for the first time of an instrument classical to the populist actors: a plebiscite. In 2008, he initiated the so-called 'welfare plebiscite' which included questions asking for the abolishment of the hospital fees, university tuition fees and the co-payment for medical visits. It proved to be a success with a turnout of more than 50% and more than 80% of the respondents agreed with the abolishment of the measures approved by the government. Constant and growing anti-government rhetoric and propaganda finally led to the collapse of the coalition government after the plebiscite. Fidesz had presented a strong line, increasingly supported by the Churches (in the next paragraph we will explore Orbán's and Fidesz's approach to religion) and citizens associations, and asked for anticipated elections. Despite the divided coalition, Gyurcsány refused to resign and from May 2008 he led for over a year a minority government. The spreading of the financial crisis in September 2008 worsened the already precarious Hungarian financial situation and in March 2009, Gyurcsány stepped down from his Prime Minister position. A 'technocratic' government led by Gordon Bajnai was able to start the negotiations for funds from the European Union, International Monetary Fund and World Bank which costed a further reduction of pensions, salaries and family allowances.²⁵ The heavier and heavier austerity measures, paired with the

²⁴ Szolomayer, B. (2015). *The Leftist Experiment*. In: O'Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

²⁵ Ibid

loss of confidence in the ruling party destroyed every prospect of victory in the upcoming elections. At the European elections of 2009 Fidesz obtained the 56% of votes, while MSZP 17%.²⁶ The following year, at the parliamentary elections of 2010, the coalition Fidesz-KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party, considered as a satellite party of Fidesz and whose support standing alone cannot be measured) reached the 52.7% of consensus with more than 2.7 million votes and 263 seats out of 386, meaning more than a two thirds majority in the Parliament. Such a majority was enough for Fidesz to present itself as the true representative of Hungary and of its united people. Moreover, such a majority shaped a new system over the past nine years of Fidesz's uninterrupted government. As a matter of fact, Orbán's party won both the following elections of 2014 and 2018, both with 133 seats out of 199, obtaining in the last elections the 49.3% of consensus after eight years of government.²⁷

3.1.3 Orbán's Hungary after the 2010 elections

During the eight years of opposition, Orbán had the time to understand that Hungary was not only going through an economic crisis but that the Hungary was facing a multi-faceted crisis, concerning the Hungarian society as a whole: levels of education were decreasing, the health system was witnessing a large emigration of doctors towards Germany or England because of the low Hungarian wages, employment rate stood below 55%, the lowest in the European Union, while the EU average at the time was above 64%.²⁸ Family policies had to be reformed as well, fertility rates were showing that in 2010 Hungary had reached the lowest birth rate in the EU and the lowest in Hungary at least in the previous sixty years. After the 2010 elections, Fidesz two-third majority adopted the so-called 'Programme of National Cooperation', envisaging a new social and economic system based on "work, home, family, health, and order" as the pillars of the future"²⁹ The

²⁶European Parliament, Results of the 2014 European elections. Available at: <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/country-results-hu-2009.html>>

²⁷ Nordsiek, W. *Parties and Elections in Europe*. Data accessible at: <www.parties-and-elections.eu>

²⁸ OECD Data. *Hungary - Employment rate*. Available at: <<https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>>

²⁹ Office of the National Assembly. (2010). *The Programme of National Cooperation*. Document H/47. Available at: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/00047/00047_e.pdf>

measures implemented by Orbán in his second mandate laid the foundation for a renewed Hungarian society and they aimed towards two complementary wide goals which had to redesign and reconstruct the five pillars identified by the Programme of National Cooperation. Firstly, a re-nationalisation of the economy in order to bring back from the control of international actors to the Hungarian control, capitals, goods and services; secondly, large scale welfare policies necessary for the re-assertion of the traditional values of the Christian culture: work, family and human dignity (intended as the elimination of poverty and equal possibilities to every citizen). One of the first manoeuvres of the Orbán government in order to obtain the necessary funds in order to implement a large-scale social policy as it was planned in the Programme of National Cooperation has been the nationalisation of private pension funds.³⁰ As a matter of fact, almost one third of the mandatory pension contributions was managed by private insurance companies or banks. The nationalisation allowed the re-appropriation of the government from the private sector of about 12.3 billion US dollars and consistently helped the complete and ahead of schedule repayment of the obligations to the IMF in 2013, an over 11 billion US dollar loan that had been allocated to Hungary under the socialist government.³¹ Without having to follow the crisis management guidelines imposed by international organisations, the government was freer to implement its own program without external financial restrictions. Another manoeuvre which both tackled the problem of the lack of funds and supported the reconstruction of a society based on work and human dignity has been a drastic change in the unemployment benefits scheme. The previous government had worked on the implementation of welfare policies which aimed at helping the poorest sectors of society through subsidies but without providing other means for an actual improvement of their condition and in some way making the choice of staying under the state financial aid programmes more desirable than finding an employment. Fidesz objective to build a society based on work had to confront all the inactive segments of society, clearly starting with the unemployed. From 2012, the government started to cut unemployment benefits, both reducing the period of entitlement

³⁰ Elo, A. (2015). *The Art of Equilibrium*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

³¹ International Monetary Fund. (2013). *Press Release: Hungary Repays Early Its Outstanding Obligations to the IMF*. *Press Release No. 13/306*. Issued: 12/08/2013. Available at: <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/14/01/49/pr13306>> Last accessed: 7/08/2019

for an unemployment subsidy from nine to three months and reducing the amount of monthly welfare payments.³² While cutting aids for the poor in order to help the poor might seem a paradox at first sight, the government employed the funds obtained from such cuts in order to finance public works, developing a community work program and training modules, imposing even stricter restrictions to those refusing to take part of it, foreseeing a better and independent from the state future for the weakest sectors of the society. The program planned incentives for companies hiring people who were previously under the national social benefit scheme and established different minimum wage categories in order to stimulate the research of a job outside the community work scheme. As a matter of fact, initially the basic wage of a worker was not much higher than the wage paid to the community worker, but the workload of the latter was much lighter, pushing people to stay under the national working program. What is more, in the effort to improve education and reduce the number of uneducated children - and therefore more likely to be unemployed, Fidesz undertook the nationalisation of the school system. With a centralised education program, the goal was providing the same level of education to every district of the nation. Homelessness started to be regarded as a punishable offense in many areas and personalised programs aimed at conduct individuals out of that condition were started.³³

The first big set of reforms concerned therefore work, education and poverty. The second set involved family policies. Resuming the construction of a work-based society, employment was made a condition in order to receive new family benefits, trying to contrast the trend of destitute families to give birth to many children only in order to receive allowances without being able to properly care for the children. On the contrary, new benefits such as tax reduction and an increased maternity leave were given to working parents. In addition, parents which decided to go to work after one year after the birth of the child were allowed to keep both the maternity leave and the wage received at work.³⁴ On March 8, 2019, the Human Resources Minister Miklós Kásler presented a new ‘family support bill’ to the Parliament, whose benefits will be available to couples or women with at least two working years behind. Katalin Novák, Minister for Family

³² Elo, A. (2015). *The Art of Equilibrium*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

³³ O’Sullivan, J. (2015). *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

³⁴ Ibid

Policies, announced that the support plan will cost about 472 million per year and will consist on among other measures on the possibility to obtain interest free loans for women who get married under the age of forty with the possibility to suspend the repayment of the loan in case of the birth of a child (the repayment would be entirely cancelled in case of birth of a third child), and the possibility to employ the loan also for the purchase of used houses (the previous legislation allowed only the purchase of new buildings). In addition, every woman with at least four children will not have to pay income taxes, grandparents who choose to look after their grandchildren will be granted the same benefits granted to parents, including two years of parental leave, together with a new project in order to create more kindergarten places.³⁵

The last country reports of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission highlighted mixed results. The main concerns that emerge from the OECD study are the territorial inequalities which still characterize Hungary. Foreign investments are concentrated in the northwest region of the country and the poorer regions do not seem to be involved in efficient integration policies. What is more, the Organisation recommended the adoption of a series of measures that will allow the maintenance of an adequate pension system (most Hungarian pensioners currently receive a pension that do not overcome the poverty threshold).³⁶ In spite of the reforms adopted in order to improve the health and education system, both areas are underperforming. Healthcare public spending remains low and the quality of care received is highly dependent on socio-economic factors, while enrolment rate in secondary and tertiary education has been declining since 2011.³⁷

However, in other respects, Orbán policies did prove successful. The economy is continuously on the rise and in 2018 GDP growth reached a level of 4.9% year on year,

³⁵ Hungary Around the Clock – HAC. *Family Support Bill Submitted*. Issued: 11/03/2019. Last accessed: 25/08/2019

³⁶ OECD. (2019). *OECD Economic Surveys: Hungary*. Economic and Development Review Committee. Issued: 01/2019. Available at: <<http://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Hungary-2019-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>>

³⁷ European Commission. (2019). *Country Report Hungary 2019*. COM(2019) 150 final. Brussels, 27 February 2019. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/2019-european-semester-country-report-hungary>

starting from the 0.7% of 2010 when Orbán took office.³⁸ Most of the groups in the labour market experienced a wage increase thanks to labour shortages and the general strong economic outlook: in February 2019 the average gross wage rose by 12.1% and in general by 80% since 2010. The unemployment rate, at 12% in 2010, reached 3.7% in 2018 and dropped to an historical low 3.3% in July 2019.³⁹ Also fertility rates started to improve after reaching an historical minimum in 2011, presumably also thanks to Fidesz's family policies. While Hungary remains a country characterised by deep contrasts and still one of the lowest scoring European countries as far as life satisfaction is concerned, policies such as the Public Work Schemes and family support are relevant elements which contribute to the explanation of Fidesz's victories in the past nine years.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Fidesz is most popular in villages, the countryside and the poorest regions of Hungary. For instance, breaking down the election results of the last parliamentary elections of 2018, Fidesz won in ninety-one districts out of one hundred six. Thirteen of the districts where Fidesz did not obtain a majority are constituencies located inside Budapest, the richest region of the country. In Budapest Fidesz won only in six districts out of eighteen, highlighting a significant relation between the socio-economic situation and the choice of voting for Fidesz.⁴¹

3.2 Fidesz – Pillars and populist traits

The previous paragraph explored the conditions that led to the creation of a demand of populism. Corruption scandals, critical socio-economic conditions due to both a bad internal governance and the global financial crisis, and finally the loss of confidence and faith in a government that had openly admitted to have lied, functioned as catalysing agents of the root sentiment of the demand side of populism, the sentiment of lack of representation and disappointed expectations from the ruling class, as explored in chapter

³⁸European Commission. *Economic forecast for Hungary*. Data available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-performance-and-forecasts/economic-performance-country/hungary/economic-forecast-hungary_en>

³⁹OECD. (2019). *Unemployment rate (indicator)*. Data available at: <<https://data.oecd.org/unemp/unemployment-rate.htm>>

⁴⁰OECD. *Better Life Index: Hungary*. Data available at: <<http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/hungary/>>

⁴¹ Static Valasztas. Election Of Parliamentary Representatives, 8 April 2018, Individual Constituency (OEVK) Results. Data available at: <<https://static.valasztas.hu/dyn/pv18/szavossz/hu/oevker.html>>

two of this dissertation. Citizens therefore opted for the alternative offered by Fidesz in 2010, which showed to actually listen and take into consideration the needs of the people. However, we have also seen how populism does not simply arise and take power because of a fertile ground and its popular demand. Populist forces actively take part in the creation of those feelings, emphasising a sense of crisis. In addition, besides positively identifying ‘the people’, populism creates a narrative which identify the presence of some enemies, essential for negatively defining who ‘the people’ is not. As a matter of fact, the central defining element of populism is the identification of a pure people, whose will should be represented by legitimate representatives, in opposition with a corrupt elite. Orbán’s speeches and Fidesz documents offer several examples of this narrative. First of all, Fidesz linked the 2010 elections to a revolutionary narrative. After the 2010 victory, in his speech Orbán said: “Revolution happened today in the polling booths [...] Hungarian people today have ousted the regime of oligarchs who misused their power, and the people have established a new regime, the regime of national unity.”⁴² Describing the victory as a revolution, Orbán identified the previous government as the oppressor of the Hungarian people, and as the first internal enemy and corrupt elite, and Fidesz as the legitimate representative who came back to power.⁴³ In the foreword of the Programme of National Cooperation, Orbán declared: “I am also aware that my government and I must represent three thirds of the country - the Hungarian nation as a whole [...] Through this declaration we acknowledge the will of the people, and make it the compass of the future.”⁴⁴ In these statements we find both some of the cornerstones of populism and some fundamental pillars of Fidesz policies. First of all, the role of Fidesz as the bearer of the will of the people is loudly expressed in the forward declaration to Programme of National Cooperation. Furthermore, we can observe the representation of the Hungarian nation as a whole, hinting the presence of anti-pluralism typical of populist actors. Recalling the quotation of Müller in the first chapter: “There can be no populism, in other words, without someone speaking in the name of the people as a whole.”⁴⁵

⁴² EURACTIV. (2010). *Voters Give ‘Revolutionary’ Victory To Hungary’s Centre-Right*. Issued: 26/04/2010. Available at: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/voters-give-revolutionary-victory-to-hungary-s-centre-right/815767/>> Last accessed: 26/07/2019

⁴³ Palonen, E. (2011). *Rupture and Continuity. Fidesz and the Hungarian Revolutionary Tradition*. Institut D’histoire De La Révolution Française

⁴⁴ Office of the National Assembly. (2010). *The Programme of National Cooperation*. Document H/47. Available at: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/00047/00047_e.pdf>

⁴⁵ Müller, J.W. (2016). *What is populism?* Philadelphia: University Of Pennsylvania Press, p.22

As far as Fidesz policy pillars are concerned, we can identify only from these two extracts, three out of the five pillars of Fidesz ideology identified by Krasztev in ‘The Hungarian Patient’⁴⁶, namely the practice of belief in revolutionary circumstances, a change of elite and a rhetoric of national unification. The practice of belief in revolutionary circumstances, as stated above, emerges from the idea that Fidesz brought a revolution in the ballots and that its first accomplishment had been therefore the destitution of a corrupt government which represented the successor of the Communist regime. This belief is strictly linked to the change of elite. The need of a change of elite is in fact clear primarily in the fervent anticommunism characterising Orbán’s rhetoric, from which it is derived the necessity to dismantle the presence of post-communist officers in the government as much as in the political, economic and cultural institutions, substituting them with personalities affiliated to Fidesz. One of the fundamental elements of Fidesz ideology is in fact the elimination of the post-Communist legacy which is identified as the oppressive elite and whose acts were illegitimate.⁴⁷

Whether the first two pillars help us to identify the elite in opposition to the people, the rhetoric of national unification represent an element which allow us to identify *the* people positively. While national unification might at first lead to think of ‘the people’ as a nation, and therefore to those living inside the borders of Hungary, this interpretation is misguided on a double front. Firstly, the national unification inside the borders actually includes only native Hungarians, it is a unification based on an ethnical, religious and cultural distinction, ‘the people’ as *ethnos* rather than as the whole nation. The Roma minority for instance is not included in the “three thirds” of Hungarians. The Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights expressed deep concerns on the level of exclusion, discrimination and intolerance especially towards this minority, including not only verbal but also physical violent expression of the anti-Gypsy sentiment in Hungary, reporting numerous ‘incidents’ in this sense. Moreover, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities signalled consistent

⁴⁶ The other two pillars are the creation of a central area of power, which refers to a system where the most important institutions and elements of power must be under Fidesz’s control, and the practice of power politics, namely the maximisation of power and the confrontational character of Orbán’s politics.

⁴⁷ Krasztev, P. and Van Til, J. (2015). *The Hungarian Patient. Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*. Central European University Press Budapest

inequalities in numerous spheres such as access to health, social and political life, employment and education.⁴⁸

Orbán promoted a Christian national unity of the Hungarians, based on values of work, family, order and home, excluding from the idea of ‘the people’ whoever diverged ethnically, religiously or culturally from those values. The religious character assigned to ‘the people’ might particularly surprise. In its first years, Fidesz members had been openly anti-clerical and had protested against the presence of religion in schools. Orbán himself had decided to marry in an office registry, without a religious ceremony.⁴⁹ With the progressive abandonment of liberal principles for more conservative ones, Orbán started also to move closer to religion, intensifying more and more contacts with high level representatives of the Church. In 1992, at the Catholic Bishop Conference Orbán told his trusted pastor: “I was not aware that the Church is so important, such an important part of Hungarian life. I cannot talk to the people about politics if I don’t understand that!”⁵⁰ Orbán’s religious journey started here, however, he only openly spoke about it almost a decade later, when after the 2002 defeat him and other Fidesz heads prayed together.

The second misguided understanding of the national unification rhetoric is in the idea of the nation itself, which might lead to think of the physical borders of Hungary. In reality, the idea of nation, and therefore of ‘the people’, in Fidesz narrative goes beyond the material border of the country, but it is extended to all those Hungarian minorities living outside Hungary. In 2010, the Parliament modified the Act on Hungarian Citizenship, starting a naturalisation process for Hungarian minorities living abroad (over two million people without taking into consideration Serbia and Ukraine), that is to say granting Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians without a residence in Hungary, in the name of a nation beyond national borders. In 2014, the non-resident citizens, or called also dual citizens, were entitled to vote for the first time for Hungarian parliamentary elections and the 95.5% of them voted for Fidesz.⁵¹ The extension of voting rights consistently led to

⁴⁸ European Parliament. Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. Rapporteur: Judith Sargentini. *Report on a proposal calling on the Council to determine, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded (2017/2131(INL))*. 4 July 2018

⁴⁹ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*. Oxford University Press

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 20

⁵¹ Majtényi, B. (2018). *"Only Fidesz" – Minority Electoral Law in Hungary*. Verfassungsblog On Matters Constitutional. Issued: 31/03/2018. Available at: <<https://verfassungsblog.de/only-fidesz-electoral-law-in-hungary/>> Last accessed: 26/08/2019

an enlargement of Fidesz voting base. What is more, in December 2018, the Hungarian Parliament extended the right of vote of non-resident citizens to the European Parliament elections.⁵² Before the elections mobilisation campaigns are run by the government through several rounds of letters sent to ethnic Hungarians, encouraging both the registration for citizenship and the participation in the upcoming elections. In view of the 2018 Hungarian elections, a letter of Orbán to dual citizens recited: “The unification of the nation across borders was not only a gesture on our behalf — a past due reparation — it was more of an everyday act to allow us to shape our destiny together, to determine our own future [...] I’m counting on you!”⁵³ Therefore, we assist to a definition of ‘the people’ as a nation whose material borders are virtualised, in favour of the creation and bolstering of ethnic ones. More recently, on June 18, 2019, the Hungarian Parliament approved a bill to declare 2020 the ‘Year of National Cohesion’ on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Trianon Treaty. Signed on June 4, 1920 at the end of the First World War, the Trianon Peace Treaty reorganized the territorial structure of the Kingdom of Hungary following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the commemorative speech on the Day of National Cohesion held on June 4, the Hungarian government recalled the event as an unjust punishment by the winners of the war, which led to the disintegration of the political, economic and military system and social of Hungary. The proposal was put forward by the National Parliamentary Cohesion Commission and it aims to preserve identity and foster national cohesion in Hungarian communities living in neighboring countries. The document identifies the 1920 Peace Treaty as a trauma suffered by Hungary, which has had economic, political and legal problems that have remained unresolved. Furthermore, it also refers to the need to protect the rights of these ethnic minorities in order to guarantee their survival, with particular regard to the principle of self-determination.⁵⁴ In this sense, a series of commemorations and programs will be organized in Hungary, in the Carpathian Basin and in other parts of the world aimed at reinforcing the national sentiment of the Hungarian communities

⁵²Pogonyi, S. (2018). *Report On Political Participation Of Mobile Eu Citizens: Hungary*. Global Citizenship Observatory (GLOBALCIT) Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies in collaboration with Edinburgh University Law School

⁵³ Bayer, L. (2017). *Viktor Orbán courts voters beyond ‘fortress Hungary’*. POLITICO. Issued: 22/08/2017. Available at: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-courts-voters-in-transylvania-romania-hungarian-election-2018/>> Last accessed: 26/08/2019

⁵⁴ Hungary Around the Clock – HAC. *Parlt Declares 2020 Year Of National Cohesion*. Issued: 19/06/2019 Last accessed: 27/08/2019

residing abroad, once again reinforcing the idea of a nation which extends its borders beyond the physical ones. Following the resolution approved by the Hungarian Parliament, neighboring countries released some statements. For instance, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia and Romania, with official announcements, declared to have found the allegations about problems arising from the Trianon Treaty unfounded. On the contrary, they argue that this International Treaty is an essential element of current European geopolitics, part of the series of Peace Treaties signed in 1919 which allowed the end of the First World War. Furthermore, both agree on the proposal holding unjustified allegations concerning the deprivation of rights and freedoms to Hungarian minorities residing in neighboring countries, and ensure their total commitment in compliance with international human rights standards, trying to downsize and bring to perspective the sense of threat created by the Hungarian Parliament.⁵⁵

Fidesz populist appeals to a people beyond borders united by religion, ethnicity and values, goes further, creating not only an opposition between those belonging to ‘the people’ and those who do not, but creating an internal moral division between ‘good’ Hungarians and ‘bad’ Hungarians, in what we might call a selective nationalism. This division is particularly evident in voting rights, which are not equal for non-resident Hungarian citizens, generally ethnic Hungarians granted a dual citizenship but permanently living in neighbouring countries, and Hungarian citizens which maintain a residence in Hungary but that live abroad, generally economic migrants. As a matter of fact, the former group is allowed to vote by mail while the latter is only allowed to vote at a diplomatic mission, procedure which might entail greater difficulties since embassies or consulates might be located considerably far from the actual residence of the voter.⁵⁶

Thus far, we have analysed the creation a Hungarian ‘pure people’ and we have positively defined of who this people is, namely a Christian Hungarian people united by a culture

⁵⁵ The official statements of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia and Romania have been sent to diplomatic missions and be publicly found at:

<<https://www.facebook.com/SlovakEmbassyUS/posts/statement-of-the-ministry-of-foreign-and-european-affairs-of-the-slovak-republic>> and

<<https://www.hirado.hu/kulfold/kulpolitika/cikk/2019/06/22/megalapozatlannak-tartjak-a-romanok-hogy-magyarorszag-a-nemzeti-osszetartozas-evenek-nyilvanitotta-2020-at>>

⁵⁶ European Union – Your Europe. *Home country elections – Hungary*. Available at: <https://europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/residence/elections-abroad/home-country-elections/hungary/index_en.htm>

based on work, family and order. In opposition to the ‘pure people’, we have already characterised the ‘corrupt elite’ as the previous Socialist government and the external enemy negatively defining the people in diverse ethnical minorities such as the Roma. These distinctions appear from the first years of government in 2010. The second political mandate of Viktor Orbán represents therefore a central moment for the construction of a new identity both of Fidesz and the Hungarian nation, while the third term (2014-2018) represents a radicalisation of the ideology and the identification of new enemies of the people. Recalling Brubaker’s positioning of ‘the people’ in a bidimensional model, in the third mandate Fidesz added to the vertical axis of opposition between the people and the elite not only the old post-communist elite but also the Brussels political élite. Furthermore, while the Roma and other minorities could be placed at the bottom always of the vertical axis, the horizontal one saw the addition of immigrants (especially after 2015), identified as new threats.

Fidesz rhetoric on the European Union is not characterised by a hard Euroscepticism, but rather by its soft form, wanting to reshape the European Union rather than to destroy it. Recalling Taggart definition outlined in the first chapter of this dissertation, we can talk of soft Euroscepticism “where there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but where concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or where there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is currently at odds with the EU’s trajectory.”⁵⁷ Fidesz denunciation and opposition of European policies, and a consequent identification of ‘Brussels’ as an enemy is strictly interweaved with immigration policies. Anti-immigration rhetoric and the identification of the immigrant as the enemy is easily attributable to ethnical, religious, cultural and economic causes, discussed both in the first chapter of this dissertation and in the positive definition of the Hungarian ‘people’. In view of the European Parliament elections, Fidesz announced its program to stop migration and save Christian culture, articulated as follow: “responsibility for dealing with migration must be taken away from Brussels bureaucrats and given back to national governments; no country should be forced to take migrants in against its will; no one without valid documentation should be allowed into Europe; migrant bank cards and migrant visas must be eliminated; no more

⁵⁷ Taggart, P. Szczerbiak, A. (2008) *Opposing Europe? The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism*. Volume 1. Case Studies and Country Surveys. New York: Oxford University Press

money should be given to organisations associated with George Soros which assist immigration, and the money should instead go towards reimbursing the costs of border protection; no one in Europe should be discriminated against for declaring themselves to be Christian; EU institutions should be led by people who are opposed to immigration.”⁵⁸

In relation to immigration, the European Union is identified as a corrupt elite and enemy as it is said to be concealing plans of an immigrant invasion in league with pro-immigration forces led by George Soros (the Hungarian born billionaire financier president of the Open Society Foundation), a secret plot in order to replace European population and in order to destroy the Christian culture, successfully polarising the European elections on a pro/anti-immigration campaign. In a discourse in 2015 after the attack to the French Charlie Hebdo, Orbán declared:

“zero tolerance against immigrants [...] As long as I am prime minister and as long as this government is in power, we will not allow Hungary to become the destination of immigrants by planned actions steered from Brussels. We do not want to see in our midst any minorities whose cultural background differs from our own. We want to keep Hungary for the Hungarians.”⁵⁹

The Brussels élite and Soros’ evil plans have been at the centre of an extensive government-led ‘information campaign’ through newspapers, letters and giant billboards, aimed at revealing to the Hungarian population Brussels real intentions. In February 2019, in Brussels started to appear billboards at bus or tram stops and along the biggest streets portraying Jean-Claude Juncker – former president of the EU Commission, and George Soros. The government announced the start of this campaign writing on the official Facebook page of the Government of Hungary (*Magyarország Kormánya*) on the 18th February 2019: “The government is launching an information campaign on immigration plans in Brussels. Everyone has the right to know what current proposals are fundamentally endangering Hungary's security”.

⁵⁸ Office of the Prime Minister. *EP elections – Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announces programme to stop immigration*. Issued on: 07/04/2019 Available at: <<http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/ep-elections-prime-minister-viktor-orban-announces-programme-to-stop-immigration/>> Last accessed: 31/08/2019

⁵⁹ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press, p.67

The writing on the billboard on the picture reported above asserts: “You also have the right to know what Brussels is preparing to do” and “They want to introduce compulsory quotas. Weaken the border protection rights of the Member States. Facilitate immigration with the introduction of migrant visas.” Dozens of posters have been covered in view of the visit to Budapest on March 11 of Manfred Weber, leader of the European People’s Party, and the week afterwards they started to be removed, following Weber’s ultimatum to halt the anti-EU campaign and apologise to the EPP as a last attempt to keep Fidesz in the Parliamentary group.⁶⁰

Fig. 6 Anti-EU information campaign poster. Budapest, March 1, 2019



Source: Photo taken by the author of this dissertation

To conclude, in Fidesz and Orbán, we find all the elements characterising populism. Besides a distinction between a pure homogeneous people (identified by Fidesz according to the above-mentioned criteria) in opposition to a corrupt elite (understood both as the previous socialist government and the Brussels elite), we can recognise in Fidesz the five additional elements outlined by Brubaker⁶¹ and analysed in chapter one of this dissertation: *antagonistic or contentious re-politicisation* involves the claiming back of control from Brussels primarily over immigration policies; we can see *majoritarianism* in the belief to represent the Hungarian nation as a whole, with the exclusion of minorities which escape from Fidesz’s personal definition of ‘the people’ and which are perceived as damaging and undermining what it is claimed to be the majority; *selective anti-institutionalism* in the dismantlement of what was considered the institutional legacy of communism and post-communist structure of the state; *protectionism* in the claim to be the defenders of the people’s interests and values against, for instance, the plans of

⁶⁰ Hungary Around the Clock – HAC. *Weber issues ultimatum to Orbán*. Issued : 06/03/2019 Last accessed: 29/08/2019

⁶¹ Brubaker, R. (2019) *Why Populism?* In: Fitzi, G. Mackert, J. and Turner, B. *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*. New York: Routledge

external powers; finally, the *populist style* is mainly to be found in Orbán's character, whose personality is briefly depicted in the following paragraph.

3.2.1 Orbán as the populist charismatic leader

Nowadays, with the growing use of television and social media as tools within the dynamics of the electoral campaign and, more generally, for political communication, the party as an entity began to stay more on the background, leaving room to the image of single representatives or candidates. This process of personalisation of the party, where the party is therefore identified with one or more representatives, is stronger if a charismatic leader is present, becoming a process of 'leaderisation', which brings to a further retreat of the party behind their leaders.⁶² The parties become an extension of its political leaders, who are no longer an expression of the forces for which they are candidates, but they become those forces themselves. Undoubtedly, much of the success of Fidesz and of the initiatives of its government depended and still depend from Viktor Orbán and his personality, which embodied the charismatic leader and whose personal beliefs or decisions became the beliefs of the party itself, so much that the name 'Fidesz', especially outside the European Union is rarely recognised and associated with Hungary, while Orbán is largely known as the Hungarian Prime Minister.⁶³ Surely a great role is played by the media which insist on the representation of a single person and on their characterisation, but Orbán's strong character and determination emerges in multiple descriptions, even dating back prior to his political successes. Tibor Fischer, a British writer, describes his first encounter in 1988 with Viktor Orbán, at the time only twenty-five years-old, as follows: "It soon became obvious Orbán wasn't having lunch with us (Fischer and two television producers). We were having lunch with Orbán. Back in the office one of the producers said to me 'Christ. How long before he's running the country?"

⁶² Cocco, J. (2018). *I populismi sono tutti uguali? La comunicazione politica e i vincitori delle elezioni politiche del 4 marzo 2018*. Università degli Studi di Padova Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

⁶³ Comparing the volume of searches in Google between 'Fidesz' as a political party and 'Viktor Orbán' from 2010, we can see how nowhere in the world the term 'Fidesz' is searched more than 'Viktor Orbán'. Excluding Hungary, the maximum percentage of searches for 'Fidesz' is Ukraine with the 21% of the searches for Fidesz and 79% for 'Viktor Orbán'. In the rest of the countries, the percentage of searches for 'Fidesz' stays below the 20%. Data available at: <<https://trends.google.it/trends/explore?date=2010-01-04%202019-09-18&q=%2Fm%2F0248k5,%2Fm%2F03860h>>

Twenty years?’ ‘More like ten,’ I countered. I wish I had taken out a bet.”⁶⁴ Already in 1994, László Lengyel – popular Hungarian political commentator – compared the young politician to a tiger: “The tiger can’t help being born the way it is, living off meat, and not green leaves. Viktor Orbán has a tiger nature. A soft tread. He circles his victim. He plays with it. Pitilessly kills it. There are those who don’t like that lack of pity. There are those who don’t like tigers. That’s a matter of taste.”⁶⁵ It clearly emerges that Lengyel was not an admirer of Orbán, being the comparison quiet unflattering, however it is also clear how from the beginning of its political career, Orbán was perceived as a capable strategist and politician, tenacious, persistent and attentive to every detail, attracting feelings of admiration mixed to subjection. Both Lendvai and Fisher, whose books and descriptions make the reader glimpse opposing feelings towards Orbán, report his precision and stubbornness towards the objective showing from the littlest details. Lendvai for instance described how Orbán told him to have repeated several times and shortened his speech at the Europa Forum in 1999 in order to stick to the schedule that the organisers had provided, while the other speakers had far exceeded their allocated time.⁶⁶ On the contrary a different episode is reported by Fisher, when Orbán obliged him in 1988 to walk twenty minutes on the outskirts of a small Hungarian town in order to buy a bus ticket when he realised they could purchase it from the bus driver. Fisher described how at the time in Hungary nobody would have cared to buy a ticket, probably nobody would even have thought about it, as Fisher himself had done, but Orbán did, because in the possibility he was caught without a ticket, they would have used it against Fidesz. The author wrote: “And this, ladies and gentlemen, is why Orbán runs Hungary. I can categorically assure you no one else in Fidesz, no one else in the D would have bothered to get a ticket.”⁶⁷

Recalling the description of populism by Pierre Ostiguy analysed in the first chapter of this dissertation, we can recognise the key characteristics of Orbán as the populist leader.

⁶⁴ Fisher, T. (2015). *The Hungarian Tiger*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit p.12

⁶⁵ Fisher, T. (2015). *The Hungarian Tiger*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

⁶⁶ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary’s Strongman*. Oxford University Press, p.18

⁶⁷ Fisher, T. (2015). *The Hungarian Tiger*. In: O’Sullivan, J. *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit, p.17

Populist leadership – placed on the low end – represents a stronger, more personal form of dealing with decision-making in politics, preferring resoluteness and immediate, prompt actions against a more formal and procedural way of managing authority. Explaining why he had not participated in pre-elections debates in 2010 and 2014, Orbán right away denoted his strong and concrete approach to politics. He said:

“No policy-specific debates are needed now, the alternatives in front of us are obvious [...] I am sure you have seen what happens when a tree falls over a road and many people gather around it. Here you always have two kinds of people. Those who have great ideas how to remove the tree, and share with others their wonderful theories, and give advice. Others simply realize that the best is to start pulling the tree from the road [...] We need to understand that for rebuilding the economy it is not theories that are needed but rather thirty robust lads who start working to implement what we all know needs to be done”⁶⁸

What is more, populists reflect a more ‘colourful’ style, perceived as closer to the people, less polished and rigid but more spontaneous and unconstrained by formalities. Orbán’s style at least at the beginning of its career was rough and he was aware of it, as well as he was aware that it could not be a disadvantage, even though giving the possibility to many of the opposition to have more grounds on which attacking him. He recognised it also in an interview to the journal *Mozgó Világ*, when he said: “[...] by origin I am not a sensitive intellectual of the twentieth generation and this throws up some questions of style; there is in me perhaps a roughness brought up from below. That is no disadvantage as we know that the majority of people come from below.” As a matter of fact, Orbán was born on a small village, Alcsútdoboz, and lived his childhood in strict economic conditions, at least until he was fifteen years-old when the social rise of his family. The hard work of the father, whose dedication to work and to achieving a better life became a model for Orbán, and the instauration of the Kádár regime allowed the family to improve their economic and social conditions and move to a bigger town where Viktor was accepted in a better school. Populism is associated also with the home pride, with a strong bond to the local and the original culture of the people, emphasising the closeness of the leader to the

⁶⁸ Zsolt E. (2015) *Plebeians, Citoyens and Aristocrats, or Where Is the Bottom of the Bottom-up? The Case of Hungary*. In: Kriesi H. and Pappas T. *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester, ECPR Press, p. 239–40.

people. As a matter of fact, Orbán's humble origins have been greatly emphasised by the media which described at length his life at the village, his extraordinary passion for football, trait that equated him to a vast portion of the Hungarian population, and his afternoons playing at the pitch of the village.⁶⁹ Orbán himself actually and effectively paid particular attention to the people he claimed to defend, especially at the beginnings of its career, when it was still possible for him to conduct campaigns based on personal contacts with the people. During the 1998 campaign, before his first electoral victory and government, Orbán visited even the most remote towns and wining village by village. His staff reported that "he went to places no one had ever heard of", that he went to talk to the people personally giving instances such as that "he talked to two little ladies and a dog for an hour."⁷⁰ Viktor Orbán can correctly be understood as the charismatic populist leader and strongman common to many populist phenomena, where the leader becomes the embodiment of the party itself and of its policies.

3.3 The Illiberal turn

In 2019, Hungary has been declared the first 'Partly Free' country among the European Member States. As a matter of fact, the Freedom House downgraded the country from its 'Free' status due to from Fidesz and Orbán's attacks to democratic values and principles, allowed by the supermajority that he gained in Parliament since 2010. The classification of the Freedom House, however is only the last unequivocal acknowledgement of the depart of Hungary from European democratic principles. In July 2018, Judith Sargentini – Member of the European Parliament, submitted a report investigating the need to trigger Article 7(1) of the Treaty on the European Union. The procedure detailed in Article 7 TEU might finally lead to the suspension of certain rights pertaining to the Member State in question, such as the suspension of the voting right of the Member State government in the European Council.⁷¹ On September 12, 2018, the European Parliament adopted a

⁶⁹ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

⁷⁰ O'Sullivan, J. (2015). *The Second Term of Viktor Orbán: Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm*. London: The Social Affairs Unit

⁷¹ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I Common Provisions - Article 7 (ex Article 7 TEU). Available at Official Journal of the European Union, C 202/19: < <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/>>

resolution with 448 votes in favour, 197 contrary and 48 abstentions, endorsing Sargentini's report and triggering Article 7(1) TEU, a preventive mechanism "inviting the Council to determine whether there is a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values referred to in Article 2 TEU and to address appropriate recommendations to Hungary in this regard."⁷² Article 2 TEU states:

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail."⁷³

Over the accused violations of the rule of law and EU principles, on March 20, 2019, the European People's Party (EPP) suspended Fidesz's party membership with 190 out of 193 delegates voting in favour of the suspension. The decision entailed the interruption of the possibility of Fidesz to participate in EPP's meetings, voting for internal elections, proposing candidatures and the formation of an internal committee in order to assess a potential future reintegration of Fidesz.⁷⁴

However, the recent developments and deliberations should not be an unforeseen surprise. Already back in 2014, Orbán announced the need to distance Hungary from the liberal model of democracy at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp in Băile Tușnad, Romania. In his speech Orbán said:

"We needed to state that a democracy is not necessarily liberal. [...] What all this exactly means, Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen, is that we have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing a society, as well as the liberal way to look at

⁷² European Parliament - Legislative Observatory. *Text adopted by Parliament, single reading - 2017/2131(INL)* - 12/09/2018. Available at: <<https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/summary.do?id=1552104&t=e&l=en>>

⁷³ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Title I Common Provisions - Article 2. Available at Official Journal of the European Union, C 202/17: <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12016M002>>

⁷⁴ European People's Party. *FIDESZ membership suspended after EPP Political Assembly*. Issued: 20/03/2019. Available at: <<https://www.epp.eu/press-releases/fidesz-membership-suspended-after-epp-political-assembly/>> Last accessed: 23/08/2019

the world. [...] in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.”⁷⁵

In this speech, referred to as the ‘illiberal speech’, Orbán laid out the expectations of the Hungarian people for the government to form a new state organisation that would have made Hungary competitive once the era of liberal democracy would have come to an end, suggesting to look at other systems that are “that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies, and yet making nations successful”⁷⁶ and citing China, Singapore, Turkey, India and Russia as examples. Orbán’s idealisation of the illiberal state clearly exposed the fact that it did not deny the foundations of liberal principles such as freedom and human rights but that simply it should not have been the central ideology of the state. However, on the same occasion in 2019, Orbán’s speech appeared much more radical. An even deeper rooted majoritarianism appeared in his statements when, asserting that Hungary had managed to create a new state model (the Cristian illiberal state) he said: “individual freedoms can never encroach on the interests of the community. There is indeed a majority that must be respected, that is the foundation of democracy.”⁷⁷

The concept of illiberal democracy might appear as an oxymoron, because the main understanding as well as dominant model of democracy is liberal democracy.⁷⁸ Democracy without adjectives is mainly referred simply to majority rule and popular sovereignty, principles that populism does not contravene. What populism might violate are the principles of *liberal* democracy, such as the presence of independent institutions, the protection of fundamental liberties and rights, the separation of powers and the rule of law. As anticipated in chapter two, in the next paragraphs we will exemplify how populism in power can represent a threat to liberal democratic values. We will analyse

⁷⁵ Full text of Viktor Orbán’s speech at Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014 at the XXV. Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp. Available at: < <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>>

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Zoltán, K. (2019). *Orbán: Individual Freedoms Can Never Encroach Upon The Interests Of The Majority*. INDEX. Issued on: 27/07/2019 Available at: <https://index.hu/english/2019/07/27/viktor_orban_hungary_tusvanyos_illiberal_liberal_national_transiti on/> Last accessed: 29/08/2019

⁷⁸ See Chapter Two of this dissertation.

different freedoms and values of liberal democracy and how Fidesz and Orbán's adopted policies endangered them.

3.3.1 Freedom of expression

Freedom of expression and information appear as constitutionally protected. The Venice Commission in 2015 adopted an Opinion on Hungarian Media Legislation. As a matter of fact, in 2010 the Hungarian Parliament approved two laws (Act CLXXXV, the so-called Media Act and Act CIV, the so-called Press Act) which established new regulations for the media sphere, and which raised strong criticism over the negative effects that this 'media package' could have had on media pluralism and independence. Already in 2013, the Human Rights Watch had expressed concerns over media freedom in Hungary, as well as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. The main worries concerned the lack of clear regulations over contents considered 'illegal', the concentration of powers in the hands of the highest authority on the field, the Media Council, which could attribute untenable high sanctions to media outlets or journalists and the excessively broad role of the State in the management of the public media outlets.⁷⁹ Since 2015 however, the Hungarian media market has radically changed, going towards a deeper and deeper centralisation of the media sphere, endangering more and more freedom of press and the availability of independent sources especially outside the capital and in the poorest zones. In his first years of Government, Orbán had relied on the newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* and the *HírTV* television channel, controlled by Lajos Simicska, a friend of the Hungarian PM and former Fidesz treasurer. Simicska, following a public dispute with Orbán, had become a fierce critic of the government and his media outlets started to publish opposition contents. In 2018, Simicska has been forced to close the *Magyar Nemzet*, as well as *HírTV*, for lack of funds and sell his media assets. Simicska's business interests and media outlets have been acquired by his former business partner Zsolt Nyerges, who

⁷⁹ European Commission For Democracy Through Law. *Preliminary Opinion On Media Legislation (Act CLXXXV On Media Services And On The Mass Media, Act CIV On Freedom Of The Press, And The Legislation On Taxation Of Advertisement Revenues Of Mass Media) Of Hungary*. Opinion no. 798 / 2015. Strasbourg, 5 June 2015. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2015\)015-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2015)015-e)>

has remained close to Orbán. Both *Magyar Nemzet* and HirTV reopened, returning to publish contents aligned to government's policy. Almost symbolically, *Magyar Nemzet* reopened on February 6, 2019, the anniversary of the public accusations and insults of Simicska against Orbán. In 2016, one of the biggest independent daily newspapers, *Népszabadság* was bought and later closed by a big multimedia government friendly group, MediaWorks. In September 2018, the *Századvég Foundation* published an article criticising Orbán's management of benefits in public assistance programs and wealth redistribution.⁸⁰ The 'offending' issue has been deleted from the website of the Foundation and the editorial staff fired. In 2018, the Hungarian magazine Figyelő published a 'blacklist' of Hungarian media outlets and journalists. These are only some of the many instances of how the media sphere changed over the last decade.

Following the rift with Simicska, the Prime Minister began building a network of pro-government media companies under Fidesz's direct control, divided between five or six entrepreneurs. In December 2018 more than 450 national and local media companies have been donated to a foundation created the previous September, the Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF). The control of a single entity over so many information channels created an unprecedented concentration of pro-government media outlets, further endangering media pluralism and the access to independent sources. In February, the chairman of CEPMF Istvan Varga resigned, denouncing the low quality of right-wing conservative journalism in Hungary and after confessing to reading independent media before reading the pro-government media. He declared: "I don't want to hear news channels saying that everything is perfect, and the government only makes flawless decisions. It's not propaganda, it's not a press, it's something quite different and that should change"⁸¹ Further developments in March 2019 saw the media companies which had been donated to the CEPMF passing under the control of an holding company controlled by Mediaworks, a company owned by Lőrinc Mészáros, close friend of Orbán and one of the most powerful Hungarian business men, completing a process of centralisation and control over the over 450 media outlets involved. As a matter of fact,

⁸⁰ Hungarian Spectrum. *The Orbán Regime Silences Criticism*. Issued on: 29/09/2018. Available at: <<https://hungarianspectrum.org/2018/09/29/the-orban-regime-silences-criticism/>> Last accessed: 05/08/2019

⁸¹ Intellinews PRO. *Head Of Hungary's Powerful Right-Wing Media Portfolio Resigns After Bashing Pro-Government Journalism*. Issued on: 05/02/2019. Last accessed: 29/08/2019

they will have unified IT and financial system, coordinated legal and marketing and personnel management activities.⁸²

Today there is not a complete control over the media and independent outlets still exist. However, the growing centralisation and often hostile conditions that critical journals face undermine the public contestation dimension of liberal democracy identified by Dahl, such as the freedom of expression, of inquiry and the right to access information sources reflecting different views and opinions. As a matter of fact, the 2019 World Press Freedom Index ranked Hungary 87th out of 180 countries in the world.⁸³

3.3.2 Freedom of association and freedom of religion

In 2011 the Hungarian government promulgated a new legislation on the status of the Churches (Act CCVI of 2011), with which about 300 religious communities were deprived of their legal personality and only fourteen Churches or religious groups on the Hungarian territory were indicated as legally recognized.⁸⁴ The number has been increased to thirty-one following international pressure. While the Act encourages the separate operation of State and churches, the decision over the denial or approval of the applications submitted in order to regain legal status is competence of the Parliament. Among the prerequisites in order to be registered as a church, the operations of the church in an organized manner for at least twenty years in Hungary or at least 100 years internationally, and a proof that the church counts at least one thousand members (the proof consists on a list of names, Hungarian domiciles and signatures). The range of requirements was judged excessive and based on arbitrary criteria by the Venice Commission.⁸⁵ Particular worries had been raised in connection with Section 16

⁸² Gábor, K. (2019). *Titokban igazi vállalatbirodalommal alakult a fideszes media*. HVG.HU Issued on: 07/03/2019. Available at: <https://hvg.hu/kkv/20190307_Titokban_igazi_vallalatbirodalommal_alakult_a_fideszes_media> Last accessed: 21/08/2019

⁸³ World Press Freedom Index, 2019 Ranking. Available at: <<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>>

⁸⁴ Act CCVI of 2011 on the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion and the Legal Status of Churches, Denominations and Religious Communities of Hungary. Entered into force on 01/01/2012.

⁸⁵ European Commission For Democracy Through Law - Venice Commission. *Opinion On Act CCVI Of 2011 On The Right To Freedom Of Conscience And Religion And The Legal Status Of Churches, Denominations And Religious Communities Of Hungary*. Opinion 664/2012. Strasbourg, 19 March 2012. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2012\)004-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2012)004-e)>

paragraph 4 which stated: “Communities for which in the course of their operation the competent state organ has established that they present a risk to national security shall not be registered a churches, even if the conditions laid down in Section 14 are fulfilled.”⁸⁶ In a climate of mounting racism and xenophobia and a in light of a Constitution which states to “recognise the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood”, international actors worried that any religious minority could be declared as a risk for national security. What is more, the Venice Commission opinion recognised the “to some extent discriminatory” nature of the Act and the deregistration process of previously legally registered churches as “hardly in line with international standards”. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights recognised a violation of Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights (protecting the right to freedom of assembly and association) in relation Article 9 establishing the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion.⁸⁷ Following the judgment, in 2015 the Hungarian government presented the new draft of the law in Parliament, without obtaining the two-thirds majority necessary for its approval.

Furthermore, in relation to the freedom of association, concerns have been raised on the Transparency of Organisations Receiving Support from Abroad law of 2017. The law introduces the status of "foreign-funded organization" for all Hungarian associations and foundations that receive from foreign sources (be they foundations, private individuals, humanitarian government agencies or direct EU funding) funds exceeding 7.2 million Hungarian forints (approximately € 23,500) in a fiscal year. These organizations must communicate to the Court the registration of their new status which will be published in the Register of Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and on the electronic portal of the Ministry of Human Capabilities. The wording of "organization funded from abroad" must also be present on the websites, publications and brochures of the organizations. The CSOs will be having to provide additional information obligations on their foreign resources, for example it will be mandatory to report for each transaction donors contributing for more than HUF 500,000 (about € 1,600) in a fiscal year and provide the donor's personal data, such as name and address. Failure to comply with the law will be

⁸⁶ Act CCVI of 2011 on the Right to Freedom of Conscience and Religion and the Legal Status of Churches, Denominations and Religious Communities of Hungary. Entered into force on 01/01/2012.

⁸⁷ ECtHR - *Case Of Magyar Keresztény Mennonita Egyház And Others V. Hungary* (Applications nos. 70945/11, 23611/12, 26998/12, 41150/12, 41155/12, 41463/12, 41553/12, 54977/12 and 56581/12) JUDGMENT (Merits) Strasbourg 8 April 2014

punishable by sanctions and possibly the dissolution of the association. The Act is said to be intended to safeguard the country's economic and political interests and to fight money laundering and the financing of terrorist activities, however, international actors worried that the new legislation was secondarily intended to stigmatise foreign funded organisations and mark them, and more effectively control them, as organisations working against national security but supporting foreign actors against the interests of the nation.⁸⁸ This is especially the case of NGOs working with migrants, which section 3.3.4 will explore further.

3.3.3 Academic Freedom

Despite the great outcry and the strong criticism raised over the last year, in what was called ‘the year-long struggle’, the President of Hungary ratified on July 5, 2019, a reform bill for the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), presented in Parliament in June 2019 by the Minister of Technology and Innovation, László Palkovics. Based in Budapest, the Academy is an autonomous public body that from 1825 represents the largest research network in Hungary. Already on 12 July 2018 the Parliament had approved an amendment to the law regulating the Academy’s budget, establishing a reallocation of 70% of the budget of the MTA (about € 85.6 million) in favour of the Ministry of Innovation and Technology (MIT). The Academy, had accepted the Government proposal on the new organizational structure, driven by the financial cuts made by the Ministry, as long as the institutions remained under the control of the Academy and the basic founding was guaranteed.⁸⁹ However, the bill passed in July 2019, removed the control of the research network from the Academy, appointing a new umbrella-organisation, the Eötvös Loránd Research Network (ELKH). Its governing body will consist of twelve members, six belonging to the Academy and six delegated by the government. The president will

⁸⁸ European Parliament. Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. Rapporteur: Judith Sargentini. *Report on a proposal calling on the Council to determine, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded (2017/2131(INL)).* 4 July 2018. Available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0250_EN.html?redirect>

⁸⁹ Hungarian Academy Staff Forum. *Briefing on the negotiations between the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Ministry for Innovation and Technology.* Budapest, 23 May 2019. MTA Humanities Research House

have to be named by both the Academy and the MIT, however he will have to be appointed by the Prime Minister. The new leader of Eötvös Loránd Research Network appointed by Orbán is Miklós Maróth, scientist close to the Prime Minister.

The new council will manage incoming funding, will decide research programs or the closing of institutes and will play an important role in strategic issues. The reform also includes the possibility for private companies to become minority shareholders of research institutes, as well as of special programs aimed at private companies in the field of R&D and innovation.

Besides removing full control of the fifteen research network from the Academy, the new ELKH will be able to use the building property of the Academy with no compensation or remuneration envisaged for the Academy, and without guarantees from the state that basic funding will be provided. Academy members expressed their deep concerns on the effect that these changes will have on academic freedom and freedom of thought. As a matter of fact, while the decisions formally will be taken jointly between the Academy and the government delegates, concretely autonomy of research will be restricted having the governments members much greater negotiation power. The Academy staff perceived this new law as the umpteenth attack and construction of a tool for strong government control.⁹⁰

The struggle of the Academy against the new reforms joins the probably most famous attack to the Central European University. With Act XXV of 2017, an amendment to the CCIV Act of 2011 regarding university education, the government has imposed new and stricter criteria on the activity of foreign universities in Hungary. In particular, the new legislation states that universities belonging to non-EU countries can carry out training and issue degrees in Hungary only on the basis of an ad-hoc international agreement between their country of origin and Hungary and that foreign universities must have a campus and carry out teaching activities also in their countries of origin. In Hungary, twenty-eight foreign universities are active, seven of which belong to states outside the European Economic Area, but the law has been accused of hindering the activities of one of these, the Central European University (CEU), managed by the Open

⁹⁰ The Hungarian Academy of Science. *International Press Conference*. Budapest, 12 June 2019. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g510dUp8qIY&feature=youtu.be>>

Society Foundation owned by the Hungarian born US billionaire George Soros, so that the law has been referred to as ‘Lex CEU’. He was in fact at the center of several attacks by the Hungarian government, which blames him to interfere arbitrarily in the internal political life of the country.

The actual CEU is accredited in the United States, where it does not carry out any academic activity, but is physically present in Budapest through the Central European University (Közép-európai Egyetem, KEE) to which it is linked by a license agreement which allows the validity of degree diplomas also in the USA. This makes the University very attractive for foreign students, who form 80% of its members.⁹¹ The Venice Commission defined the new requirements introduced by the amendment as problematic, asking to exempt foreign universities from the obligations mentioned earlier and reminding that “these universities and their students are protected by domestic and international rules on academic freedom, the freedom of expression and assembly and the right to and freedom of education.”⁹² The European Commission in December 2017, decided to address the Court of Justice of the European Union over the Higher Education Law, claiming that the law is incompatible with right to education, the right of academic freedom, the freedom to conduct a business and “the freedom for higher education institutions to provide services and establish themselves anywhere in the EU”.⁹³

Despite international pressure and demonstrations in Budapest, CEU was forced to stop the enrolment of new students from January 2019 and in October 2018 it opened a new campus in Vienna, denouncing the Act as an expulsion without any academic ground and reason and as an outrageous violation of academic freedom.⁹⁴

Finally, 2018 saw another concerning turn in the limitation to academic freedom when in August the government proposed the stop of financing to gender studies, hindering not only CEU programs but also the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) a Hungarian public

⁹¹ Lendvai, P. (2016). *Orbán. Hungary's Strongman*. Oxford University Press

⁹² European Commission For Democracy Through Law - Venice Commission. *Preliminary Opinion On Act Xv Of 4 April 2017 On The Amendment Of Act Cciv Of 2011 On National Tertiary Education*. Opinion 891/2017. Strasbourg, 11 August 2017. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI\(2017\)005-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-PI(2017)005-e)>

⁹³ European Commission. Press Release Database. *Commission refers Hungary to the European Court of Justice of the EU over the Higher Education Law*. Brussels, 7 December 2017. Available at: <https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5004_en.htm>

⁹⁴ Central European University. *CEU Forced Out of Budapest: To Launch U.S. Degree Programs in Vienna in September 2019*. Issued on: 03/12/2018. Last accessed: 09/09/2019 Available at: <<https://www.ceu.edu/article/2018-12-03/ceu-forced-out-budapest-launch-us-degree-programs-vienna-september-2019>>

university. The loss of funding and governmental certification of ELTE Gender Studies master's degree program has been judged as another attack over academic freedom and right to education.⁹⁵

3.3.4 Rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

Especially from 2015, international actors such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Council of Europe, started expressing concerns over the mounting xenophobia in Hungary and the depiction of refugees and asylum seekers as a threat to Hungary and the European Union. More concretely, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees started denouncing alleged violations of human right and abuse of refugees and asylum seekers by border authorities and calling EU institutions to take firm action.⁹⁶ Following the construction of border barriers at the frontiers with Serbia and Croatia and the rejection of quota system in 2016, UNHCR newly raised serious concerns about the procedures of treatment and expulsion of asylum seekers, especially after the visit of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) to Hungary, which reported physical mistreatment perpetrated by border authorities. Further developments in 2017 saw the Hungarian government presenting in Parliament amendments of laws relating to the increase in the rigidity of the procedures conducted in the guarded border area, among which the appointment of a 'mandatory residence' for asylum seekers for the duration of the procedure, meaning detention in the transit zone with the exception of unaccompanied minors under the age of fourteen. Hungarian transit zones have been considered zones of deprivation of liberty to all effects.⁹⁷ The European Commission moved forward an infringement procedure

⁹⁵ Hungarian Spectrum. *Information Strike At ELTE For Gender Studies*. Issued: 14/11/2018. Available at: <<https://hungarianspectrum.org/2018/11/14/information-strike-at-elte-for-gender-studies/>> Last accessed: 09/09/2019

⁹⁶ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. *Hungary Violating International Law In Response To Migration Crisis: Zeid*. Geneva, 17 September 2015. Available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16449&LangID=E>>

⁹⁷ European Parliament. Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. Rapporteur: Judith Sargentini. *Report on a proposal calling on the Council to determine, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded (2017/2131(INL))*. 4 July 2018

against Hungary with reference to Hungarian asylum law, judged as breaching EU law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU.⁹⁸

In July 2018, the European commission referred Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union. As a matter of fact, almost symbolically on the World Refugee Day of 2018 (20th of June), the Parliament approved a new set of laws, dubbed ‘anti-NGOs’ or ‘the Stop-Soros’ Act, following the rhetoric according to which the billionaire is manoeuvring international forces included the leaders of the European Union, in order to disrupt Christian values and endanger national security. The new legislative package specifically concerns activities and organisations which support migration or help with asylum procedures. The Stop Soros laws have made new substantial changes to the Hungarian asylum system, considerably limiting the possibilities to request and receive international protection. The legislation establishes the inadmissibility of an asylum request for applicants arriving in Hungary passing through third countries where they do not run the risk of suffering persecution or serious damage. The package introduces in the Penal Code the crime “facilitating illegal immigration”, envisaging a criminal conviction for persons or non-governmental organisations that promote illegal immigration and provide assistance in the practice of requesting political asylum for migrants not considered to be in immediate danger of life, including as a criminal offence the preparation and distribution of information materials.⁹⁹ Only NGOs which obtained a specific permit by the competent minister will be entitled to carry out activities in support of asylum seekers and migrants, and will have to register with the Hungarian Revenue Agency in order to pay a 25% tax on fund from abroad. The general reasoning states: “With the Bill, we want to prevent Hungary from becoming a migrant country”.¹⁰⁰ Hungary’s legislation on immigration policies besides having been accused to be in disagreement with the principles of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and EU law,

⁹⁸ European Commission. Press Release Databate. *Commission follows up on infringement procedure against Hungary concerning its asylum law*. Brussels, 17 May 2017. Available at: <https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1285_en.htm>

⁹⁹ The Government of Hungary. *Bill No. T/333 Amending Certain Laws Relating To Measures To Combat Illegal Immigration Submitted By: Dr. Sándor Pintér Minister Of Interior*. Budapest, May 2018. Available at: <<https://www.helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/T333-ENG.pdf>>

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

in view of the new ‘anti-NGOs’ bill has been judged as once again infringing freedom of association.¹⁰¹

3.3.5 *The constitutional system and independence of the judiciary*

Inscribed in the revolutionary rhetoric and in the discourse of dismantlement of the post-communist structure of the state, Orbán announced in 2011 the drafting of a new constitution which symbolically marked a new beginning of the Hungarian nation and the end of the post-communist legacy. The new constitution, called ‘Fundamental Law of Hungary’, was endorsed only of Fidesz’s MPs, which being the two-thirds of the total Members of Parliament resulted in the adoption of the proposal. The Fundamental Law of Hungary included a deeper ethnic comprehension of the nation, an avowal of faith recognising “the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood, a new focus on the historical path of Hungary, establishing 1990 as the year of restoration of self-determination lost in 1944 and declaring invalid the communist constitution of 1949 as “basis for tyrannical rule.”¹⁰² The initial redrafting did not raise particular criticism from international actors as it regarded a more symbolical dimension than an effective one. However, subsequent reforms strengthening the central role of the state and endangering the separation of powers as well as the weakening of a system of check and balances, raised particular concerns. For example, rights of the Constitutional Court were curbed. The appointment of Justices became single competence of the Parliament (which with a two-third majority of Fidesz was how to say that it became competence of Fidesz) and limited the possibility of the Court to intervene on issues concerning tax and budgetary decisions, decision strongly criticised by the Venice Commission.¹⁰³ The number of

¹⁰¹ European Commission For Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission) and OSCE Office For Democratic Institutions And Human Rights (Osce/Odihr). *Joint Opinion On The Provisions Of The So-Called “Stop Soros” Draft Legislative Package Which Directly Affect Ngos (In particular Draft Article 353A of the Criminal Code on Facilitating Illegal Migration)*. Opinion 919/2018. Strasbourg, 25 June 2018. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2018\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2018)013-e)>

¹⁰² Hungary’s Constitution of 2011. Available at: <https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Hungary_2011.pdf>

¹⁰³ European Commission For Democracy Through Law - Venice Commission. *Opinion On Act CLI Of 2011 On The Constitutional Court*. Opinion 665/2012. Strasbourg, 19 June 2012. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2012\)009-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2012)009-e)>

judges was increased from eleven to fifteen and their mandate from nine to twelve years. Fidesz could immediately appoint five judges close to the party.

Strongly endangering resulted the independence of the judiciary, Act CLXII of 2011 on the legal status and remuneration of judges and act CLXI on the organisation and administration of courts envisaged the institution of a National Judiciary Office (NJO) stripping administrative autonomy from the courts. The President of the NJO enjoys a concentration of powers that the Venice Commission considered unprecedented among the members of the Council of Europe. Tasks of the President included the selection of judges and all the administrative tasks and powers of the former National Council of Justice as well as its President as well as powers such as the possibility to transfer of judges against their will and of selected cases to different courts. Furthermore, the President, elected by the Parliament without any previous consultation with other members of the judiciary, is not obliged to motivate his decisions which are not subject to a veto or to judicial control.¹⁰⁴

In 2018 the judiciary system lost even more independence. On December 12, the Hungarian Parliament approved a package of laws (Parliamentary Act No. 130/2018) establishing a new system of administrative courts in the country. The two laws, presented by the Government on November 6, 2018 (bills T/3353 and T/3354), were approved respectively with 131 votes in favor and two against, and with 130 votes in favor and three against. The new legislation was signed by the Hungarian President János Áder on December 20th. and the new administrative courts had to start carrying out their activities from 2020 until international pressure forced the Hungarian government to postpone the date. The two laws provide for a parallel system of administrative courts, with its own supreme court (the future Supreme Administrative Court or SAC) and its own judicial council (the future National Administrative Judicial Council, or NAJC). The jurisdiction of the new administrative courts ranges from cases of public interest, including elections, to cases of corruption, political asylum, economic issues, taxation disputes, building permits and market competition cases. The Minister of Justice, László Trócsányi, will have the power to appoint judges, both in the lower administrative courts and in the

¹⁰⁴ European Commission For Democracy Through Law - Venice Commission. *Opinion On Act CLXII Of 2011 On The Legal Status And Remuneration Of Judges And Act CLXI Of 2011 On The Organisation And Administration Of Courts*. Opinion 663/2012. Strasbourg, 19 March 2012. Available at: <[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2012\)001-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2012)001-e)>

Supreme Administrative Court, modifying, after interviewing the candidates, the rankings presented by the Administrative Judicial Council. The Minister of Justice will also monitor the promotions and the operating budget of the courts. The legislation therefore places the new administrative judicial system under the firm control of the Minister of Justice. Although the government cites the efficiency of the system as the motivation for the adoption of the two laws, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee stated that the new court system will seriously jeopardize judicial independence in Hungary and undermine the separation of powers in a politically sensitive area. According to the opposition, this legal forum offers judicial control and possible legal loopholes against potentially illegal administrative actions and is perceived as the birth of a private court for Fidesz.¹⁰⁵

3.3.6 Functioning of the electoral system

Finally, some concerns over the electoral system have been raised. In 2018 the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was invited to observe the Hungarian parliamentary elections.¹⁰⁶ The final report described a generally satisfying administration of the elections, where transparency and freedom of voting and of choice were respected. Nevertheless, it reported the elections to have been conducted in an adverse climate. Hampered freedom of expression of the media and limited freedom of association as described in the previous paragraph, restricted the possibilities to access independent sources of information and make a fully-informed choice. Furthermore, the large information campaigns through billboards, posters and advertisements were judged as providing misleading information which might have heavily oriented the voters. Besides the information campaigns, instance of deceitful spread of information can be found in the tool of national consultations repeatedly adopted by the government. In 2017, Fidesz started the '*Állítsuk meg Brüsszelt!*' ('*Let's Stop Brussels!*') national consultation. The government sent to approximately eight million citizens a questionnaire with six questions, introduced by a letter explaining once again that Brussels had envisaged some

¹⁰⁵ Griggio, E. (2019). *The New System of Hungarian Administrative Courts*. Report for Ambassador Massimo Rustico. Embassy of Italy in Hungary, Budapest. Revision of the Deputy Head of Mission Simonetti P.

¹⁰⁶ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. *Hungary. Parliamentary Elections, 8 April 2018 ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw, 27 June 2018

plans in order to threaten the security of Hungary and of national independence. Reporting two of the questions, they asked: “More and more foreign-supported organizations are operating in Hungary with the objective of interfering in the internal affairs of our homeland in a non-transparent way. Their operations could endanger our independence. What do you think Hungary should do?” and “Hungary has committed itself to cut taxes. Brussels is now attacking our homeland because of this. What do you think Hungary should do?”¹⁰⁷ A consistent share of the voters could be therefore considered as misled on crucial matters on which Fidesz was conducting the campaign. The campaign was described as characterised by an intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, not enough space for significant debate or citizen or civil society observation of the election process and characterised by an uneven playing field between. As a matter of fact, “a pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, between government information and ruling coalition campaigns, and other abuses of administrative resources, blurred the line between state and party undermining contestants’ ability to compete on an equal basis.”¹⁰⁸ What is more, even though minority participation in the election is foreseen and minorities lists were recognised, the OSCE Committee registered defamatory statements especially towards the Roma minority and the Committee considered them as vulnerable and threatenable because of their high dependence on state subsidies.¹⁰⁹

From the point of view of democracy and momentarily leaving aside humanitarian considerations, the functioning of the electoral system is the aspect that should worry more. In fact, while we may argue that populism and in this case Fidesz, might be at odds with *liberal* democracy through the non-compliance of liberal principles (such as freedoms and the separation of powers as exemplified above), an undermined electoral system is directly at odds with democracy itself, which populism actually claim to defend and represent. As a matter of fact, free and fair elections are the true expression both of majority rule and popular sovereignty, the minimal attributes of radical democracy. In case of further departures from democracy in this sense, Fidesz more than representing

¹⁰⁷ The entire translation of the questionnaire as well as the Letter of Introduction can be found at: <<https://theorangefiles.hu/the-lets-stop-brussels-national-consultation/>>

¹⁰⁸ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. *Hungary. Parliamentary Elections, 8 April 2018 ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report*. Warsaw, 27 June 2018

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

illiberal populism should be labelled as a populism assuming authoritarian forms, endangering democracy in its most radical sense.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation explored in a first place the concept of populism, its different understandings and conceptualisation, as well as the core elements characterising all populist phenomena, familiarising the reader with the intricacies of the phenomenon. As a matter of fact, populism is a contested concept which tends to escape analytical grasp and it is largely characterised by conceptual confusion. Establishing a definition was necessary in order to build a solid basis and define a theoretical framework within which conduct our analysis. Therefore, this dissertation drew from two prominent theoretical approaches, namely the ideological approach, mainly theorised by Cas Mudde, and from the socio-cultural or performative approach by Pierre Ostiguy. We defined populism as a thin-centred ideology, as Mudde described it, or as a way of perceiving the political world, characterised by an opposition between a homogeneous and pure people, and a corrupt elite, as well as specific sets of external enemies. This way of perceiving the world as separated in antagonistic fields, where populist actors claim to represent the will of a silent majority, manifests through a peculiar style and appeals, as described in the socio-cultural approach. Populist actors normally appear as closer to the people whose interests they claim to defend, through a stronger, and more direct way of dealing with politics, favouring prompt actions rather than bureaucracy. What is more, the closeness to the people is strengthened through a personal and spontaneous way of expression, unmediated by institutional rules, less rigid and polished in comparison with traditional political actors.

After having established an operational definition, this dissertation tried to answer two fundamental questions, which naturally arise firstly because of an overexploitation of the concept of populism by the media and secondly because of an intense debate within the scholar community. Has there really been a populist explosion in Europe over the past five years? And then, does populism really represent a threat to democracy and European democratic values?

In order to answer to the first question, we analysed the election results of populist parties of European Member States, both at national and European level. We firstly compared the results obtained in their last national parliamentary elections with the results of the previous elections of the same type. Secondly, we compared the results of the 2014 and

2019 European Parliament elections. We argued that the European Union in the past five years has not been undergoing a widespread populist invasion or sudden populist explosion. Nationally, when populist parties are singularly taken into consideration, most of them appear as stagnating and most of the populist parties which managed to enter into government have done it holding a minority of vote share inside a coalition. Similarly, at the European level, the populist representation in the hemicycle overall did not largely change from 2014 and the populist front remains mostly fragmented. However, while we cannot talk about a recent populist explosion, we surely can speak about a growing populist wave which has been mounting over the past three decades. As a matter of fact, populist parties jointly have more than tripled their support and, if they did not sharply increase their backing in the last five years, they did not show signs of an overall decline either, being now populism at its higher levels. Aggregate results do not reflect the actual power of populism in the European Union since, as mentioned above, if singularly taken into consideration, the general state of populism did not drastically change recently. Nevertheless, the last developments in the European political landscape are contributing to the general long-term increase of populism. In fact, the almost totality of European Member States which held national elections in 2018 and in the first semester of 2019 saw populist parties gaining consensus, even though in the majority of cases it was a slight increase, and the last European parliamentary elections witnessed the formation of a new parliamentary group, solely composed by right-wing populist parties. The cause of this growing populist wave in the European Union is to be found in the perceived unresponsiveness of a traditional party system which could not adapt to a changing electorate and to its different requests or expectations. Therefore, it lost the trust of the citizens, as well as their feeling of being appropriately represented, sentiment which made them turn to the offered alternatives, such as populism.

We argued that populism might function as a corrective tool for democracy, raising questions about the conduct of the mainstream ruling class, increasing transparency, re-politicising policy areas which had been removed from the national realm, as well as increasing popular participation in politics. However, populism is often at odds with liberal democracy, representing a threat especially in its exclusionary forms and when it arrives to obtain strong political power. As a matter of fact, thus far, populism in the European Union does not represent a threat for democracy *per se*, but it does represent a

menace for *liberal* democracy and therefore to European democratic values and pillars. As analysed through the case of Hungary and Fidesz – the party of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, with the claim of defending the interests of the majority and of the people, populism might endanger rights of the minorities (may them be economic, cultural, religious or ethnic), endanger fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, press or association, and undermine the division of powers as well as a fair multi-party system. In the case of Hungary, should the governing party further depart from liberal values and strengthen the project of an illiberal democracy so much that it is going to additionally jeopardise the functioning of the electoral system, we could not talk anymore of populism endangering liberal democracy but we should acknowledge a transformation of populism towards its authoritarian form and start considering populism as a menace to democracy *per se*, in its radical understanding. The path of Hungarian populism invites to reflect on the pitfalls that this phenomenon presents and on the importance of a continuous monitoring of the state of European populism.

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