

# Authoritarian Populism in Comparative Perspective

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## **Abstract**

Studies on populism in Latin America discussed dysfunctional economic policies resulting in crises. Recently, populists are more pragmatic. Populism is a political strategy based on distributing economic privileges creating a stable clientelistic base, and facilitating authoritarian entrenchment. However, this perspective, based on interests, needs to be supplemented with focus on ideas. While, support for populism in Southern Europe may be explained by weak economic performance coupled with features of income distribution, this does not explain in full the rise of populism in Central Eastern Europe. Qualitative comparative analysis suggests that adding to economic factors, a combination of Communist heritage, and a branch of Catholicism that unlike that in the West is not associated with support for human rights, explains cases of populism in the region.

## **Key words**

Populism, Clientelism, Communism, Catholicism, Hungary, Poland

# Authoritarian Populism in Comparative Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. The question

Between 1989 and 1991 the Soviet system imploded in Central and Eastern Europe. This, alongside democratisation and liberalisation processes in other parts of the world, led Fukuyama (1989) to argue that it was the ‘end of history’, in the Hegelian sense. The global scale of peaceful transformation witnessed was indeed unprecedented. It also transformed the European Union (EU), both with EU enlargement towards Central Europe and the Balkans, and through a drive towards more integration, which was perceived as necessary to keep the enlarged EU viable.

Yet at the time of writing, a generation after democratisation and liberalisation in Central Europe symbolised by leaders such as Lech Wałęsa and Vaclav Havel, we see Victor Orbán in Hungary proclaiming the new, pan-European transition to ‘illiberal democracy’, and Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland aiming to follow the same path. Moreover, elsewhere in the EU, the political order seems to be questioned by some other leaders.

There has been a steady, long-term increase of electoral support for authoritarian populism, as documented by data from the Timbro Institute<sup>2</sup>, but the future direction of the process is not settled. While anti-systemic, populist movements in the EU gained local successes, they were also defeated by voters in a large number of countries, not only in the ‘old’ EU, but also in new member states, with Slovakia’s and Croatia’s presidential elections being recent examples. The question to be considered here is thus that of factors of success for authoritarian populism across Europe. This will be the subject of Section 5. Before we move to this, however, we will first describe the phenomenon of populism in Section 2, and discuss its features based on empirical examples, first of classic Latin American cases (Section 3), and then discussing the features of populism in Hungary and Poland (Section 4).

## 2. Populism

Müller (2017) points to two key elements of populist ideology: it is both ‘anti-elitist’ and ‘anti-pluralist’. He argues that the anti-elitism, the criticism of elites, is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a movement to be called “populist”, as it is a more widespread trait in political debates. Only when it is combined with the second element does it make the populist ideology complete, closed. This second element is anti-pluralism. That is to say that populist politicians make a distinctively moral claim to the exclusive representation of the people. Rosenblum (2008) describes this as ‘holism’, the notion that the polity should no longer be split and the idea that it is possible for the people to be one and for all of them to have one true representative. As further explained by Müller (2017), populism requires a ‘pars pro toto’ (a part taken for the whole) argument, and a claim to undivided representation, described in a moral, as opposed to an empirical sense. The populist party represents and therefore substitutes for the people, and the leader substitutes for the party. This is also reflected in the internal structures of populist parties, in which

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude for valuable comments I received from the editors of this volume, and from the participants of the conferences and seminars at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw; St. Antony’s College, Oxford University; and Aston University, Birmingham.

<sup>2</sup> <https://populismindex.com/>. I will refer to this data throughout the chapter.

the role of the leader is particularly strong.<sup>3</sup> Populist programmes are thus implemented by fundamentally authoritarian parties. Politics is personalised and the 'will of the people' is seen as strongest when concentrated. In the words of Dahrendorf (2007): populism is simple, democracy is complex.

The assumed direct link to the people implies that populism has anti-systemic traits: a disregard for the constraints within the institutional system is not only justified, but necessary: breaking the constitutional limitations is required to implement 'the will of the people'. This is, for example, what Jarosław Kaczyński implies when he criticises 'legal impossibilism'.

This also explains the typical scenarios observed once these political parties are in power. First, the autonomy of the state administration is destroyed, as the administration becomes the tool of the ruling populist party, directly controlled by its nominees. Second, there is a drive towards centralisation, as the autonomy of the local authorities is presented as another institutional obstacle to implementing the 'will of the people'. Third, the independence of the judiciary comes under threat, as it represents a major constraint on power. Fourth, there are efforts to suppress civil society and non-governmental organisations.<sup>4</sup> Fifth, 'those who represent the people' should also dominate the media, so that control over the media is expanded and independent outlets are taken over or marginalised. Of course, outcomes will always differ, at least somewhat, from these blueprints: in some countries populist leaders make little progress in destroying the constitutional order, when they encounter strong opposition. In other countries they advance further.

The anti-pluralism identified by Müller (2017) as a core populist trait has an old tradition in modern European thought. Some of these ideas can be traced back to Rousseau (2018 [1762]), who emphasised the unified 'general will' of the people, in contrast to Montesquieu's (1989 [1748]) stress on the balance of powers. Similar views emerged later, both on the left and the right of the spectrum of political ideologies. Marx (2008 [1875]) is probably the most influential 19<sup>th</sup> century proponent of dictatorship, which he argued would be necessary, at least temporarily, to impose the will of the people, replacing liberal democracies that, in his view, are only a façade for capitalist interests. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideas of Schmitt (1988 [1923]) remain influential, despite the fact that these were the same ideas that led him to support the Nazi takeover of power in Germany. Schmitt emphasised the notion of 'the people', a deep, existential phenomenon beyond all political forms and formations; and promoted a conceptual split between the 'substance' of the people on the one hand and the empirical outcomes of a democratic process. His ideal was a government based on identity with those governed (Müller, 2017).<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, these ideas did not remain unanswered. Müller (2017) emphasises the arguments of Kelsen (2013 [1929]), for whom an unambiguous popular will is in fact impossible to discern, and the 'organic unity of the people', from which some policies could be interfered, amounts to 'metapolitical illusion'. As a consequence, democracy needs to be a pluralistic system, where

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the Law and Justice party in Poland has a statute that makes any initiative to change its leader next to impossible, including imposing supra-majority conditions across regional organisations as a requirement.

<sup>4</sup> This is an effective policy if entrenching power becomes an objective. Boeri et al. (2018) demonstrate that individuals belonging to associations are less likely to vote for populist parties.

<sup>5</sup> Schmitt's ideas played a direct role in the ascent of populism in Central Europe. Jarosław Kaczyński's PhD from the University of Warsaw was gained under the supervision of Stanisław Ehrlich, who had significant influence on the intellectual formation of the future Polish populist leader. Ehrlich was a prominent Communist legal theorist, who in turn drew a lot of his ideas from Schmitt, whom he admired (Mazur, 2016).

people's ideas and interests should be mediated by multiple political parties. This corresponds to the view, expressed much earlier by Bagehot (1965 [1872]), that "a parliamentary government is essentially a government by discussion". Its modern counterpart is the argument developed by Sen (2009), who sees the core of democracy in the process of public reasoning and debate.

After this brief overview of populist ideas, we now turn to their implementation.

### **3. Classic populism: Latin America**

#### **3.1. Context: framework conditions for political instability**

According to the assessment of Freedom House 2019<sup>6</sup>, out of the seven largest Latin American countries, as defined by population, four are classified as politically free: Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru. Of those four, Chile has a very high score on the index, followed by Argentina, while both Brazil and Peru are borderline cases (i.e. just above the partially free threshold). The three other largest Latin American countries are not considered to be stable democracies: Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela. Colombia and Mexico are also borderline cases, but this time below the threshold separating partly free from politically free countries. Venezuela is an outlier, not only in this group, but in the Americas as a whole, and is seen at the time of writing as one of the most oppressive regimes in the world, as well as one characterised by exceptional economic failure. It is also probably the best-known recent exemplification of the populist cycle—a cycle that has yet to be broken, implying that the economy has still to run all the way down towards humanitarian disaster. The authoritarian military regime, supported by coercive know-how imported from Cuba, Russia and China, has become sufficiently entrenched, and the situation has been transformed into a state of permanent crisis, with no immediate solution in sight.

An influential account explaining the political economy of many Latin American countries is provided by Acemoglu and Johnson (2012). They point towards long-term history, and the specificity of colonial institutions that were organised around extraction of concentrated rents from natural resources. The core logic of this institutional setup was inherited from colonial times by the independent states that emerged in the region. Extractive institutions often lead to political instability. This is because huge concentrated rents imply that there are always significant gains from overthrowing a current regime. As a result, political change in the region has often taken a military form, with the opposition seizing power by violent means instead of via elections. In Latin America, military officers have played a significant role in governments across the political spectrum. The classic examples are Juan Perón in Argentina, Augusto Pinochet in Chile and, more recently, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

Thus, while international conflicts have been relatively infrequent in Latin America, compared to other parts of the world (Fukuyama, 2015), weak political frameworks have often resulted in violent clashes, which have taken the place of rule-constrained political competition. In some countries, protracted civil wars have gone on for many years, often blending with criminal activities such as drug trafficking and kidnapping. Colombia until recently, and Peru in the past, are examples. Even where political frameworks are able to deliver a democratic vote, politicians who win elections often take advantage of the political power they gain to entrench their position by harassing opposition

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/map>, as accessed on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October 2019.

politicians, by controlling the media, and, if necessary, by failing to recognising the electoral outcome in the next round.

In some countries, such as Mexico, organised crime plays an important role, infecting politics. What often fuels organised crime is political instability that makes the government ineffective, and economic rents (e.g. drugs) that provide local mafia structures with resources. From that point of view, neighbouring the US may be less of a blessing and more of a curse, as the latter country, just across the border, is a large and lucrative market for narcotics.

### 3.2. Outcomes: economics and its limitations; the populist cycle

Political instability may help to explain the short-term political horizons and political-economic cycles that became associated with populism, as argued by Dornbush and Edwards (1989; 1990; 1991); see also Sachs (1989). I start with an account of a macroeconomic cycle of populist policies, which Dornbush and Edwards (1989) based on their analysis of the economic policies of Salvador Allende and his government in Chile in 1970-1973, and those of the Alan García in Peru in 1985-1990. Figures 1 and 2 below present the GDP paths of these two countries.

(Figures 1 and 2)

Dornbush and Edwards' (1989) discussion of the cycle can be summarised in the following way. We start with the initial position, where typically growth and living standards are negatively affected by stabilisation implemented after some earlier macroeconomic crisis. Given the stagnant economy, there is public dissatisfaction. This creates political demand for a radically different set of economic policies. Meanwhile, the preceding stabilisation is improving both the budget and the external balance, and rebuilding foreign exchange reserves sufficiently to provide scope for a shift away from stabilisation policies. Yet, such a shift could proceed in more than one direction, and the classic populist programme has some distinctive features.

The first premise of the populist programme, as described by Dornbush and Edwards (1989), is that there is idle capacity in the economy. The populists argue that this can provide room for expansion without inflation. Along this line of argument, the spare capacity and decreasing average costs curves, along which production may expand, imply that there will be no cost pressures. Furthermore, profit margins in 'big businesses' are argued to be excessive, and the chosen solution to the problem is to squeeze them by price controls, containing inflation. This way, the population is to gain at the expense of 'big capitalists'. Parallel to that, there is to be redistribution of income via wage increases. This is expected to stimulate demand, as workers spend more than they save, utilising an argument that can be traced back to Kalecki (1954). This change in domestic demand is also expected to result in a restructuring of production; sectors producing for workers are seen as more competitive, and likely to respond positively to stimulus, thereby increasing production. That in turn implies there is no need for additional imports to match higher demand, and could even lead to savings on foreign exchange. Furthermore, the risk of public deficit finance is dismissed as unfounded. Overall, it is expected that fast growth without inflation should follow. This constitutes a typical populist economic promise, on which they come to power.

What follows initially from this programme is the first phase of the cycle, that of stimulus. An increase in wages comes with output and employment growth, confirming expectations. Demand and consumption expand. However, imposed price controls, combined with a fixed exchange rate, ensure that inflation does not emerge. Price controls imply that some shortages appear temporarily, but these are covered by imports, drawing from sufficient currency reserves, which therefore decrease. At the same time, the level of inventories in industry decreases as well.

During the second phase of the cycle, more serious bottlenecks emerge. Strong expansion in demand continues, but the low level of inventories now constrains domestic supply and, at the same time, the capacity to increase imports gradually becomes more restricted, as foreign exchange reserves dwindle.

Populist politicians respond to these challenges with specific policy tools. On the domestic market, controlled prices are realigned to eliminate some of the imbalance. To pre-empt a collapse in currency reserves, devaluation is introduced, now combined with exchange controls so that access to foreign currency becomes rationed. Imports are discouraged by further protectionist measures. As a result of these policies, inflation increases, but wages are not controlled, in line with the core political promise, so that they keep rising. Ultimately, this leads to the emergence of a wage-price spiral. High wages, combined with price controls imposed on production, result in decreasing profitability. The latter is restored by targeted subsidies, which worsens the budget deficit.

At some point, this second stage of growing imbalance is transformed into the third stage of full-scale economic destabilisation. Now, the shortages under price controls become extensive, which results in widespread black markets. Internal disequilibrium is also associated with external disequilibrium. Both an overvalued currency and increasingly uncertain economic prospects lead to capital flight abroad. Inflation becomes so high that it results in the demonetisation of the economy: there is very little demand for the domestic currency. The latter is crowded out by widespread unofficial use of foreign currency in transactions. With no demand for domestic money, the seigniorage gains from printing money shrink as well. The budget deficit deteriorates rapidly. This is also due to the decline in tax collection and the increasing costs of subsidies. The government has an option to escalate fully into hyperinflation, or to slow down its emergence. In any case, the real value of government spending is decreasing; the question is whether this is done in a chaotic way or whether the government chooses to prioritise spending cuts. The government may decide to retain some control over the process by cutting subsidies that it considers less strategic, and to engage in real depreciation. Yet this implies that nominal wage increases no longer compensate for the nominal loss in the value of the domestic currency. In other words, there is a significant fall in real wages, either resulting from explicit decisions by the government, or from hyperinflation. Ultimately, the massive fall of real wages leads to destabilisation. The government is changed either by democratic or undemocratic means.

With this, the political-economic cycle enters its final phase. A new government enacts a stabilisation programme, typically supported by foreign assistance. Real wages decline further; as observed by Dornbush and Edwards' (1989), typically to a level that is lower than when the cycle began. The decline in real wages is likely to persist, as economic and political uncertainty leads to low investment and to capital flight, and there is no guarantee that the programme will succeed. It takes time for the economy to respond positively to stabilisation. The most striking outcome of the cycle is that while the initial populist policy objective was to redistribute towards workers, in the end the poor are hit hardest. The large scale of decline in incomes results from the fact that while capital is mobile across borders, labour is not, or at least less so than capital. Capital can and does flee from incompetent policies, but labour, and especially the poor, are trapped.

The way the political crisis that follows from these policies is resolved is of critical importance. In Chile, the populist government was overthrown by a military coup, and the human cost of the

subsequent dictatorship far exceeded the cost of the misguided economic policies of Allende<sup>7</sup>. Peru is Chile's neighbour, and the human cost of the violent response to populism in Chile was not overlooked in the country. Thus, when García embarked on his own populist path in Peru, there was nobody willing to replace him with an oppressive dictatorship. As a result, the Peruvian economy continued into the spectacular free fall that can be detected on Figure 2. Ultimately, political change was achieved by elections.

As the more recent case of Venezuela documents, however, these two scenarios are not the only ones possible. Two factors helped to entrench the populist regime in Venezuela, despite the collapse of the economy. One was that for some time it could draw on the rich oil sector, making the regime immune to popular pressure. The second one was its strategy to import efficient coercive technology and expertise from nearby Cuba, and to a lesser extent from Russia and China. By the time its resources were depleted, the government's coercive technology was already successfully institutionalised, allowing the regime to survive.

Dornbush and Edwards' (1989) classic account, as sketched above, suggests that what we face here cannot be modelled simply as a result of the interplay of interests of different social groups. Ideas matter as well, and misguided policies based on these ideas lead to suboptimal outcomes. Furthermore, their account of the populist cycle implicitly assumes some strong dose of either incompetence or irrationality. Yet in the sequence of events characterising developments after populists gain power, their projects may well have some rational interpretation, being more than just a bundle of misguided policies. We may think about it in the following way.

A political entrepreneur embarks on a project along which economic benefits are distributed to the population, securing social support. These policies may appear economically irrational, but their primary function is to gain time, and from that point of view, the account presented above by Dornbush and Edwards (1989) is incomplete. Following the early economic results, support for populism initially increases (Goldberg, 1975), and this is used to legitimise breaking the constitutional order and entrenching the new type of regime, where political competition from the opposition becomes increasingly difficult. When public dissatisfaction increases, the regime may be already entrenched (as in Venezuela). Such a programme may or may not succeed, but this risk-taking is not irrational for the political entrepreneurs: they gamble on gaining and securing power over an extended period of time.

If we adopt such a rational, economic model of populism, interpreted as a device to entrench political power, all that remains to be explained is the behaviour of the voters. Here, we can fall back on an assumption of widespread political ignorance (Somin, 2016) that itself can be seen as an exemplification of the collective action problem. Alternatively, we could assume voters' decisions to be focused on the short term under conditions of uncertainty: the initial gains are real, and the initial redistribution is real. Those gains typically do not last for very long, but while they last, they are tangible.

My tentative conclusion from the discussion of classic Latin American populism is that the description of economic policies leaves us with more questions than answers. And if we are unwilling to assume myopic behaviour from political entrepreneurs, populism may be better conceptualised as a technique of gaining power, where initial economic policies are offered to buy support. These policies produce some temporary gains, and this gives populists sufficient time to entrench power.

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of the Pinochet regime in Chile, see Spooner (1999).

Adopting such a perspective will enable us to make the link between the Latin American and the Central Eastern European experience, to which I turn next.

#### **4. Populism in Central Europe**

The pattern of initial economic gains leading to increased support, where the latter is used to gain time and entrench political power by weakening or even demolishing democratic institutions, can be detected in Vladimir Putin's political project in Russia since 2000, or that of Viktor Orbán (who learned some techniques from Putin) in Hungary since 2010, and of Jarosław Kaczyński (who learned some techniques from Orbán) in Poland since 2015. However, the macroeconomics of these projects does not resemble that of classic Latin American cases just described. In particular, it is hard to identify the self-defeating pattern of a "boom and a bust" cycle. Yet the microeconomic features of a power entrenchment scenario, something that Dornbush and Edwards (1989) did not pay sufficient attention to, are shared, and so is clientelism. The main characteristics of the populist programmes in Hungary and Poland are explained below, based on the account presented by Bałtowski, Kozarzewski and Mickiewicz (2020), who propose six major features of the populist political strategy in the two countries.

For Bałtowski et al. (2020), the analysis needs to start with an investigation of the populist project's beneficiaries. What is characteristic of those projects is not just the extent of government intervention, which can be fairly wide in stable democracies of developed economies as well, but the unsystematic character of the intervention, the fact that it is not rule-based, and has a clientelist flavour. In this sense, populism may be seen as a return to more primitive forms of modern political systems (Fukuyama, 2015). This is also consistent with Ádám's (2019) analysis, in which he describes the phenomenon as 're-feudalising democracy'. The way that this perspective links with the conclusion to the Latin American section that I proposed above is as follows. If we accept populism to be a technique of gaining and entrenching power, the clientelist features of the populist policies can be explained by their functional role in locking in social support. Basically, the more arbitrary and selective the redistribution is, the more it depends for the recipients (clients) on the populists staying in power. This is a strong effect that locks in support.

Bałtowski et al. (2020) proceed to present the following six features of the economic aspects and the main beneficiaries of the populist programme in Central Eastern Europe.

First, a specificity of the post-Communist economies relates to the tangible size of the state sector and the overall degree of state involvement in firms' decisions, especially with respect to the largest companies. Indeed, for a number of these large companies, although the government has only minority stakes, legal provisions and corporate government arrangements place them under government control. While strengthening direct micro-level government control has been one defining feature of the populist programme since Allende (Goldberg, 1975), in Central Eastern Europe the Communist heritage and unfinished privatisation programme left the state sector an especially attractive place for entrenching power. But there are also wider historical analogies. For example, Italy that after the Second World War emerged from another totalitarian project, this time fascist, from which it inherited a wide, concentrated state sector that continued to be used as a source of rents, corrupting politics (Aganin and Volpin, 2005).

Compared to Hungary, the residual state sector is bigger in Poland. It implies that the politicisation of state firms also plays a more important role. The existing stock of state-owned companies is treated by government agents as a source of economic rents. Often, it boils down to appointing



high-ranking state or party officials (as well as individuals chosen by them) to positions on the supervisory and management boards of state enterprises or offering them (well-paid) jobs in state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The politicisation of SOEs also involves state enterprises funding, through advertisement or sponsorship, of events and activities that improve the image of those in power, especially during elections.

Second, and specific to post-Communist countries, the state sector may be so strong in some cases that government policies are captured by the interests of specific firms or branches of industry. The coal mining sector in Poland is a prime example of such scenario. Well-organised employees of state enterprises, often hand in hand with their senior executives, exert pressure on politicians and the government in order to preserve the privileges held, or to arrest the necessary restructuring processes that would usually entail lay-offs. Politicians' susceptibility to pressure from SOEs is the cost – paid from the budget – of easing tensions or of buying specific voters' support.

Third, parallel to state firms, businesses outside the state sector may also be beneficiaries. Typically, 'crony' private entities are contracted, usually without a tendering procedure or after one that is a mere sham, to provide services and goods to the public sector. These include tasks such as legal and image-building services, the sale and distribution of products on a fee basis, general contractor services for public projects, construction, as well as facilitating selective access to loans granted by state banks.

Four, oligarchy represents a more consolidated form of cronyism. The difference between the two phenomena consists firstly of scale: not only are the benefits reaped greater, but there is also a more persistent pattern of reaping. While the beneficiaries of cronyism are private agents who are anonymous to the public, the enterprises controlled by oligarchs are among the largest private enterprises. Second, and most important, oligarchs display – unlike the beneficiaries of cronyism – close relations with the ruling elites, and have a real, direct influence on the shape of economic policies. In its full-fledged form, members of the ruling elite or individuals closely related to them (that is, family and friends) become indirectly or even directly such oligarchs. These phenomena are more visible in Orbán's Hungary than in Poland at time of writing, possibly partly because the former regime is already more entrenched.

Fifth, clientelism also arises where wider groups of voters are beneficiaries of some type of government transfers. In contrast to the systemic, rules- and entitlement-based social policy, these transfers are constructed as specific channels of patronage, with ruling politicians handing out goods to their clients, expecting reciprocity by way of political support. For example, a paradoxical aspect of the populist project in Poland has been that the share of those living in extreme poverty has increased in 2017 and 2018 (Central Statistical Office), despite a massive increase in government transfers. This is because those transfers were not based on income criteria, but instead targeted typical conservative voters (families with more than one child).

SOEs may also serve to reward a well-identified group of voters, sometimes working in close association with politically affiliated trade unions, making the system close to the models of corporatism or Latin America's Peronism (Fukuyama, 2015). This links back to the second feature of populism in Central Europe, as identified above.

Last but not least, economic nationalism occurs where the government exerts an impact on the economy with the declared objective of enhancing the state's political capacity, military power or 'international importance'. In this respect, the state administration itself may be treated as the major beneficiary. The role of SOEs, especially that of the so-called 'national champions', is again

significant here: they are important tools for building power and ‘national pride’, and they are meant to ‘protect’ the national economy against ‘exploitation’ by foreign capital. Such a narrative corresponds to defending some specific local interest groups. This goes hand in hand with nationalisations. A characteristic feature of both Orbán’s and Kaczyński’s programmes was that such nationalisations were not driven by a need for post-crisis bailouts, but by well-focused political objectives: following an earlier pattern established in Putin’s Russia, the media sector was targeted, along with banks.

Economic nationalism often goes hand in hand with constructing cleavages based on ‘us’ and ‘aliens’, introducing forms of political clientelism that are based on ethnicity, declared ideological beliefs, or political party affiliation. Overall, for right-wing authoritarian populism, nationalism is an overarching phenomenon with multiple beneficiaries. It also suggests that it is important to look beyond the economy when considering factors of populism—the issue to which I will turn next.

## **5. Factors behind populism**

Considering the factors behind populism, the first, consistent with the discussion so far, is the (narrowly defined) economic interpretation of the ascent of populism, as articulated by Rodrik (2018), for example. “It’s the economy, stupid”: there are some economic developments that people do not like, and therefore they turn to populists, prioritising the destruction of the “political-economic” arrangement in place, and hoping that change will be for the better. In this account, while the economic effects appear with different strength in different countries, the common denominator relates to the processes of globalisation and technological change, which bring with them an unequal distribution of social costs. However, not everybody agrees on the impact of globalisation. For example, both Harrison, McLaren and McMillan (2011) and Bjørnskov (2019) argue that the implications of international trade for the distribution of income are uncertain and conditional on a range of other factors; similarly, Dumas (2018) emphasises the impact of technological change over globalisation.

Consistent with the narrow economic approach, non-economic factors are of secondary importance. In particular, shared cultural identity matter only because it facilitates the collective action of populists (Rodrik, 2018). Thus, in this interpretation, a combination of poor socio-economic outcomes and availability of effective means of mobilisation result in populism’s success.

However, other economists take formal institutions more seriously. This leads to a second narrative explaining the emergence of populism. Here, some authors argue that there are long-term formal institutional traditions of doing things, of attitudes and of behaviour that are taken for granted. For example, Clague et al. (2001) show that common law legal origin makes democracy more likely in developing countries. More generally, the legal origin theory (La Porta et al., 2008) posits that the common law tradition is one of decentralised decision-making and adaptation, in contrast to the centralising features of the civil law tradition. It is in the latter environment, therefore, that authoritarian populism finds it easier to take root. This is the institutional economics approach to sources of populism.

Third, explaining the ascent of populism in some countries, we may need to reach even further beyond economics. In this interpretation, we may focus on informal institutions (social norms and values) that are often shaped, even if never entirely determined, by history. These shared norms are more than devices to facilitate social and political mobilisation based on shared socio-cultural identity: their content matters as well.

It is here that the Communist past may become a factor. It left a legacy of atomised societies, which were highly organised, but that organisation was imposed entirely from above, by a Soviet-type state. Sztompka (1996) labels this inherited social characteristics the 'bloc culture'. The capacity for self-organisation was weak, and remained so after the collapse of the Soviet system, given that social attitudes are persistent and are passed to the next generation via family structures. Applying a terminology of Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (1996), we may say that these societies are characterised by weak civic capital. We argued above that populism is a centralising project, where 'the people' are claimed to be uniquely represented by the populists. Relatively atomised societies that can be shaped into new forms fit such a project well.

While a Communist past may play a role, there is more. The globalisation narrative, as discussed above, is typically limited to economic aspects, but culture may be important to many people alongside economic welfare. Recently, we have faced not only fast-paced economic change, but also rapid cultural change, and this may be deeply objectionable to a certain percentage of citizens (Müller, 2017), generally to those who hold conservative values. Perception that one's identity is being endangered by pluralism (Fukuyama, 2018) leads directly to support for populism, with its promise to replace pluralism with (traditional) cultural homogeneity, as discussed above.

These are themes in political conservatism; however, populism is by no means the only political path able to express them, and is actually alien to political conservatism - in so far as conservatism implies respect for the rule of law, in the tradition of Burke (1986[1790]). Indeed, conservative leaders choose different strategies when confronted with the ascent of populists. As observed by Ziblatt (2017), the consolidation of democracies in Europe depended crucially on the choices of conservative elites. As further argued by Müller (2017), there is not a single case of a right-wing populist party that came to power without cooperation offered by local conservative elites.

But what shapes the attitudes and political strategies adopted by conservatives in different countries? Looking at differences between countries, one encounters cultural tradition as primarily represented by religion. Here, Catholicism is seen by some as a hierarchical religion that could be associated with authoritarian traits, such as a 'social dominance orientation', for example (Hiel and Mervielde, 2002). Or is it?

The complicating issue is that the nature of Catholicism may differ across countries. For example, Maltese and Polish societies may be characterised by very similar values of social conservatism, yet may radically differ with respect to broad views on political order. In the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western Catholicism undertook a radical transformation, in response to the tragedy of the Second World War inflicted by totalitarian regimes. It became far more appreciative of democracy, as originated in the work of Maritain (2012 [1942]), for example, one of the co-authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. In contrast, in countries like Poland or Hungary, Catholicism had fewer chances to evolve in that direction under the Soviet-type regime. While some Western influences were present, and some Catholics from those countries, especially Poland, could even actively participate in global changes in Catholicism, at the same time the Central European local churches were subject to the strong influence of the environment they functioned in. In Poland right after the war, for example, the Communist authorities found common language with the leader of the most extreme, totalitarian wing of the pre-war Polish Catholic movement (The National Radical Camp), for whom Western liberalism and 'the Jews' were more dangerous enemies than the Soviets. Saying that, this was not the line taken by the Polish church hierarchy, which actually played an important role giving shelter to democratic opposition, especially in the 1980s during the Martial Law period, even if the radical, nationalist, totalitarian traits in Polish Catholicism remained visible.

The Soviet-type system had also more indirect impact on local churches, even if they actually resisted Communism. Under the Communist regime, Catholicism absorbed some features of the political environment. This is an exemplification of institutional isomorphism - that is, of organisations adjusting their features to the environment in which they operate (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Compared to countries outside the Soviet block, these churches remained highly hierarchical, with a very limited role played by self-organisation of local parishioners, and cultivating a culture of distrust of the outside world. In other words, it was the Soviet-type regime that reinforced the hierarchical features of the Central European Catholicism, making it more receptive to populist logic.

This discussion leads to a three-dimensional framework that may be applied to explain support for populism. It comprises economic dimensions, formal institutions, and informal institutions. I will now turn to an empirical illustration that applies it.

### 5.1. Factors of populism in Europe: a set-theoretic analysis

A measure of populism is illustrated by Figure 3. It reproduces the shares of electoral support for authoritarian populist parties in the EU countries. These numbers were assembled by the Swedish Timbro Institute. They combine support for both right-wing and left-wing populist parties, albeit at present the former dominate over the latter in Europe, as the proportions between the two reversed around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More details can be found on <https://populismindex.com/>. Hungary, Greece and Poland are the three EU countries with the largest support for populist parties at time of writing.

(Figure 3)

The explanatory dimensions included will correspond to the factors discussed in the previous section. First, on the economic side, I will have the unemployment rate (from Heritage/Wall Street Journal database). It was highlighted in recent work on factors of populism by Algan et al. (2017). To this I will add Gini coefficient to capture income inequality (from Eurostat); both dimensions represent potential economic sources of social discontent. However, they will be complemented by the proportion of government spending as a share of GDP (Heritage/Wall Street Journal) and the median income based on purchasing power parity (PPP; Eurostat), the latter corresponding to the level of economic development. Government spending and growth may act as moderating factors with respect to the two former dimensions (inequality, unemployment).

Second, as discussed above, legal origin is taken as a formal institutional dimension that makes some countries less susceptible to authoritarian populism. Accordingly, based on La Porta et al. (2008), countries are classified as either based on civil law or common law legal tradition. There are four countries in the EU representing the second group: Cyprus, Ireland, Malta, and the UK.

Third, informal institutions and the history that influences them are captured by two dimensions discussed above. We classify the countries as either having historical experience of Communism or not. This classification follows directly from the one presented by Douarin and Mickiewicz (2017). Last but not least, we include the percentage of population who are Catholic (from PEW Research Center), consistent with the discussion in the previous section.

All the data used in the analysis are presented in the Appendix, Table A1. Patterns revealed by this data will be simplified using set-theoretic analysis. For readers who are not familiar with this method, a brief explanation follows.

### 5.1.1. Method

I have data on 32 European countries, which are either EU member states or in the process of negotiation to join (excluding Turkey). Given the range of factors considered above, there is insufficient degree of freedom for the effective use of country-based regression analysis. However, we can move beyond case studies by applying set-theoretic analysis, and in this case its fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis variant (fsQCA), where the adjective ‘fuzzy’ simply relates to the feature that partial set membership is allowed. In the set-theoretic approach there are no longer variables, as there is no assumption of stochasticity. Furthermore, performing the analysis based on set membership implies that the dimensions considered for analysis need to be transformed into the 0-1 range, where 1 implies full membership in a set defined by a given dimension.

The method relies on fuzzy set logic and is able to identify configurations of dimensions sufficient for a specific outcome to emerge (Ragin, 2008). Any configuration of such dimensions is seen as sufficient for an outcome if fuzzy set membership in the outcome is higher or equal to the fuzzy set membership level for each of the dimensions that constitute this configuration (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

It is not only data limitations that directs us towards fsQCA. The method has advantages over regression; an important one is that it is able to handle situations where more than one configuration of dimensions is associated with a given outcome (equifinality). In our case, the outcome relates to share of votes for authoritarian populist parties, and our previous discussion has identified seven explanatory dimensions, for which raw data (before transformation) are presented in Table A1.

As mentioned above, for each country, each dimension is defined as membership in a set representing a given characteristic, but this membership can be partial (fuzzy), therefore taking any value between 0 and 1. The share of the populist vote does not require any transformation, and likewise for both Post-Communism and common law legal origin; as the latter two are zero-one variables, or crisp sets in set-theoretic terminology. The other five explanatory dimensions either do not fit a zero-one range, or the distribution is skewed. For these reasons I have ranked-ordered all of these dimensions and standardized them between zero and one utilising the algorithm recommended by Longest and Vaisey (2008) in the context of fsQCA. That is, denoting  $X$  as an initial score of a case in a given dimension, the following formula was used for this transformation:

$$(\text{rank of } X - \text{min rank of } X) / (\text{max rank } X - \text{rank of } X) \quad (1)$$

The data for all these dimensions after transformation is available on request. After the zero-one standardisation is applied, this data table, with rows representing cases and columns representing explanatory dimensions and the outcome, becomes what is called a *truth table* in set-theoretic terminology (Ragin, 2008; Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). It is utilised in this form in fsQCA, to which I turn next.

I performed fsQCA on the truth table, applying the *Fuzzy* module for Stata designed by Longest and Vaisey (2008). The module utilises fuzzy sets logic (Ragin, 2009) to identify the alternative configurations of dimensions (solutions) consistent with the outcome (which in our case is defined by the share of electoral support for authoritarian populist parties). These solutions are next simplified. This is achieved by eliminating the dimensions that are spurious: when they appear both

in a positive and in a negative form, then two particular solutions can be combined into a simpler one, eliminating the dimension for which all its range is allowed. The latter situation implies simply that they play no role in explaining the outcome.

Importantly, unlike the standard regression technique that is based on correlations and assumes symmetry (positive outcomes need to be associated with positive, and negative with negative), fsQCA does not have the symmetry restriction. Instead, fsQCA is consistent with the set-theory and the formal logic requirements, because it does not follow that if *A* implies *B* then *not A* implies *not B*. Thus, the standard regression technique is logically flawed wherever the zero point is meaningful and the range contains both positive and negative values; fsQCA is not, and the mid-point (0.5) in transformed data corresponds to the zero point and is called maximum ambiguity (or crossover) point, because there is evidence neither for a given set (dimension) membership nor for a lack of it (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

The solutions (the simplified configurations of dimensions consistent with the outcome) should be interpreted as *sufficient conditions*<sup>8</sup> for the outcome (in the sense of the definition given above), and there may be many of them; that is, there may be many paths or configurations associated with a given outcome. This important feature is termed equifinality (Ragin, 2009; 2014).

### 5.1.2. Results

The results are presented in Table 1 below, in a form that has become conventional in the applied literature; see Decker, Estrin and Mickiewicz (2020), for example. A black circle implies that a dimension is present as a sufficient condition for the outcome (the share of support for authoritarian populist parties), while a white circle implies that an absence of a dimension is a sufficient condition for the outcome. Empty space implies that the dimension plays no role in a given solution.

(Table 1 - About here)

The configurations (solution sets) that I present in the rows of Table 1 are conservative. It is common in fsQCA to simplify the solutions further by utilising additional assumptions related to the counterfactual and possible outcomes of combinations not presented in the data (see Ragin, 2009). However, these simplification methods are often questionable (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). Moreover, I did not feel that I had strong enough priors for any simplifications. Hence, the solutions are solely based on the information in the data and, as a result, they remain relatively complex. At the same time, without going beyond the results obtained in the analysis, we can still present some interesting lessons.

First, the results are consistent with empirical work coming from political science on the role of legal origin. Clague et al. (2001) estimate that common law legal origins increase the probability of democracy by 0.368 (*Ibid.*, 2001: 27). Consistent with this, all five of our solutions include civil law legal origin as associated with higher electoral support for populism.

Second, solutions 1 and 2 offer very clear economy-based paths to populism which explain patterns that can be found in Southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain). For both of these solutions, we have high unemployment and high income inequality as two important

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<sup>8</sup> In fsQCA, it is also possible to perform the analysis in terms of necessary conditions. A condition is interpreted as necessary if set membership in it is either equal to or larger than each case membership in the outcome (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012).

dimensions. This is consistent with regression results obtained by Algan et al. (2017). Nonetheless, it is not a complete picture. These negative social outcomes need to be combined either with a low level of government redistribution or with low level median incomes to result in support for populism.

Third, Central Eastern European authoritarian populism is harder to explain with economic dimensions alone. One distinctive feature that characterises solutions 4 and 5 compared with solutions 1 and 2 is that a high share of Catholics emerge as an important condition. Thus, in the last two solutions of Table 1, we have a combination of post-Communism and Catholicism that proves fertile ground for the authoritarian populist projects in the region. This is the case of Hungary and Poland, the two clear-cut populist governments with authoritarian tendencies. Economic dimensions are present, but there is not such a close match with country characteristics as in Southern Europe. Rather, it is the culture-based theme, as discussed above: a combination of the heritage of social atomisation inherited from Communism, with stress on hierarchy and lack of respect for democratic values embedded in local version of Catholicism.

Last but not least, there is a limit on what the fsQCA we applied could explain. We offer an explanation of why populists gained strength in the Eastern and Southern part of the EU, but from Figure 3 we can see there are also some Northern and Western countries that are not that far behind—for example, Austria, Denmark or France. More work and thinking about a different set of explanatory dimensions may be needed to explain these additional cases.

### *5.1.3. A further empirical illustration.*

Considering the economic dimensions, as confirmed above, we may now focus on high income inequality combined with low government spending. These economic dimensions are illustrated for all European countries in Figure 4. It corresponds to the factors highlighted by Solution 1.

(Figure 4)

On Figure 4, we may identify countries that are at risk of populism. These should be the countries with high income inequality and low level of government spending. We find four former Soviet blocks countries in this group: Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia and Lithuania.

However, we may follow the logic of Solution 2 instead, and emphasise high inequality combined with relatively low level of incomes (Figure 5). Here, we are able to capture a larger number of both Southern European, and Eastern and Central European countries forming a group characterised by high risk of populism. Hungary and Poland are both in the group of European countries with a relatively low level of income. Yet, for both countries the level of income inequality is in the medium range. Thus, while they are now located close to the high risk group, they are still below it in terms of income inequality. It seems that to explain populism we need culture and history as well, as argued above.

(Figure 5)

## **6. Conclusions**

The critical factor is that, so far, the populists in the EU and on its fringes are not engaged in politics of mass violence, even if in terms of rhetoric, they clearly borrow some themes from their more

radical cousins, either Fascists or Bolsheviks. A policy common to all authoritarian populists, both on the right and the left, is the onslaught on the independence of courts and the free media. Whereas populists on the right are engaged in a nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric of exclusion, those on the left define 'us vs. others' in terms of class warfare, even if anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation features position them as natural allies for their nationalist cousins. Thus, both share the same themes and sometimes find common ground. Both left-wing and right-wing populist parties aim to destroy the rule of law, to take over the state administration and the media, and to entrench themselves in power. To achieve this, the modern-day populist relies more on clientelism than on macro-economic cycles with a sequence of initial gains and later economic cost. Yet, they do not resort to mass violence, unlike populists in Latin America (Maduro in Venezuela, for example), which means it is an open question how stable these regimes will turn out to be. While peaceful exit from populism is difficult, it is not impossible in countries like Hungary and Poland, where populists have already scored some local defeats.

Support for authoritarian populist parties in Europe has been steadily growing since the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, according to the Timbro Institute, from an average of 15% to 23% per country in 2019. That would suggest that economic factors have played a role, consistent with the literature (e.g. Algan et al., 2017). Yet there is also a visible jump during the 2015 refugee crisis, which we could not capture in the cross-sectional list of factors above, as it influenced public opinion regardless of whether a given country was directly affected or not. Noticeably, since the refugee crisis, the increase in support for populism has been driven entirely by the growing strength of right-wing populism, which now dominates over the left wing (16.0% versus 6.7%), reversing the proportions observed in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, as illustrated by Figure 3, Romania and Slovakia are the two countries that saw high support for populists in the early 1990s, yet in both cases it decreased significantly later. Thus, changes are not unidirectional.

The analysis I have presented above suggests that the growth of populism cannot be explained by economic factors alone, but that history and some cultural traits also play a role, especially for the Central European countries. Some other traits of collective memory and culture may also play in the opposite direction. Progress in the demolition of democratic institutions has been slowed down by social self-mobilisation in Poland, more so than in Hungary, thanks to the collective and individual memories of the Solidarity movement.

In these two countries, as elsewhere, external attitudes matter. The entrenchment of Orbàn in Hungary, turning his country into what he labels an 'illiberal democracy' and Freedom House describes as a politically partly free system, was facilitated by tolerance and some support of European conservatives who needed Orbàn in the European Parliament. Shouldn't European conservatives think wider? Isn't Europe connected?

It was Orbàn's strategy of weakening democratic institutions, the rule of law and independent media that Kaczyński aimed to copy in Poland, albeit with less success due to a lower level of support. These two political entrepreneurs were helped by the post-crisis recovery. Their resilience to less favourable economic circumstances, such as an economic crisis, has yet to be tested. Besides, the EU institutions now pay more attention to the ascent of authoritarian populism, and as long as these countries remain in the EU, they may be challenged in the future by decisions from the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Commission. As long as the economic gains from EU



membership are high, and there is support from the local population for the EU, it is a factor constraining the local candidates for autocrats, preventing them from adopting more violent political strategies, so distinguishing European populism from that in Latin America, and again making potential exit relatively easier.

More generally, while good economic policies that lead to development with widely shared gains is important in weakening support for populists in opposition, it is not the only dimension, and focusing policies on the economy alone may actually leave space for authoritarian populism to grow, as illustrated by the development in Poland before 2015. The key strength of populist movements is that they offer a sense of unifying purpose, while the democratic parties facing them too often descended into a competing plethora of claims based on identity politics (Lilla, 2018). Ascending populists often face a fragmented opposition with little common ground.

Yet neither cultural traits, nor even economic interests should be considered as given and in some way mechanically represented in the electoral process. As emphasised by Müller (2017), both ideas and interests are formed, modified and shaped by public debate, and by access to objective information. Ultimately, preserving and developing these two features, and the related social skills of reasoning and fact-based decision-making, will be critical for the success of the young democratic project of the last two hundred years of modernity.

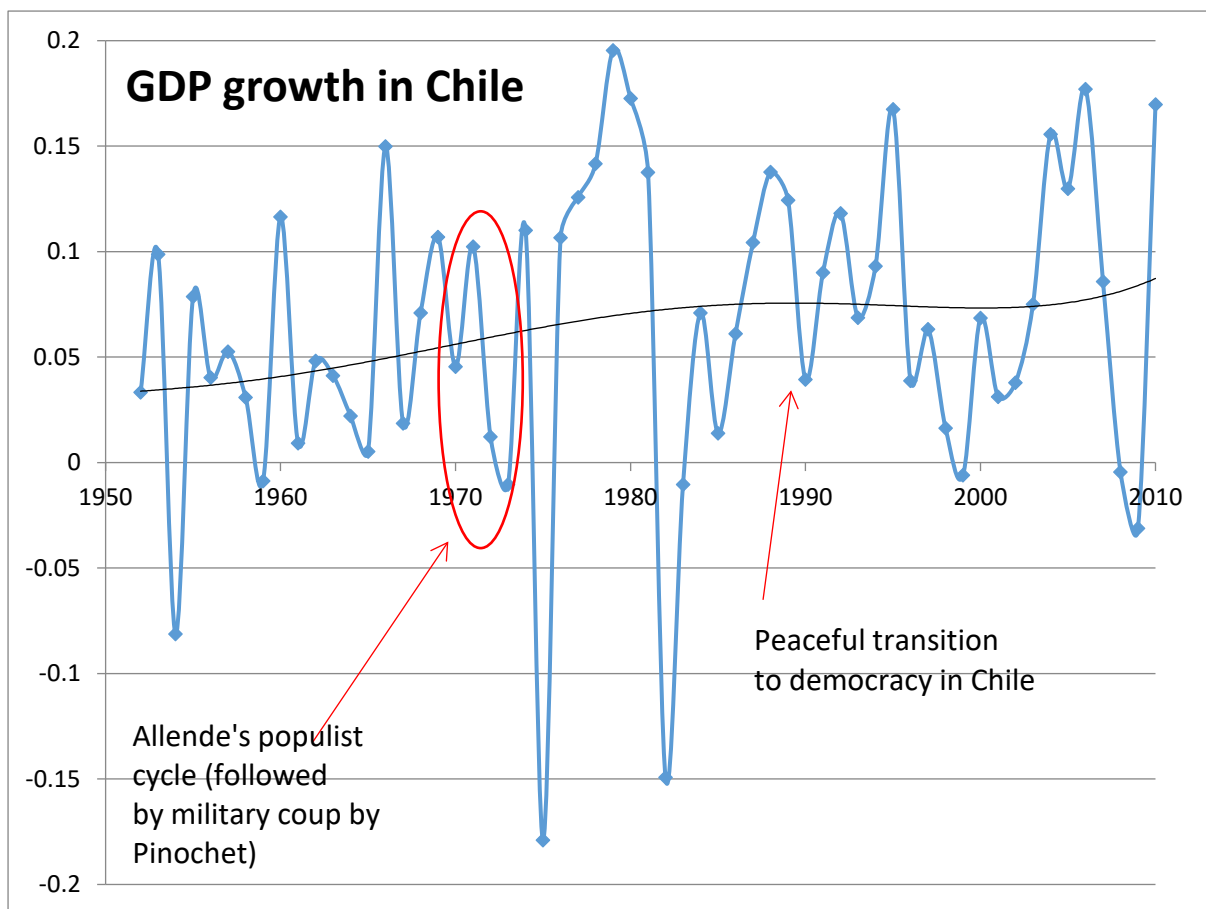
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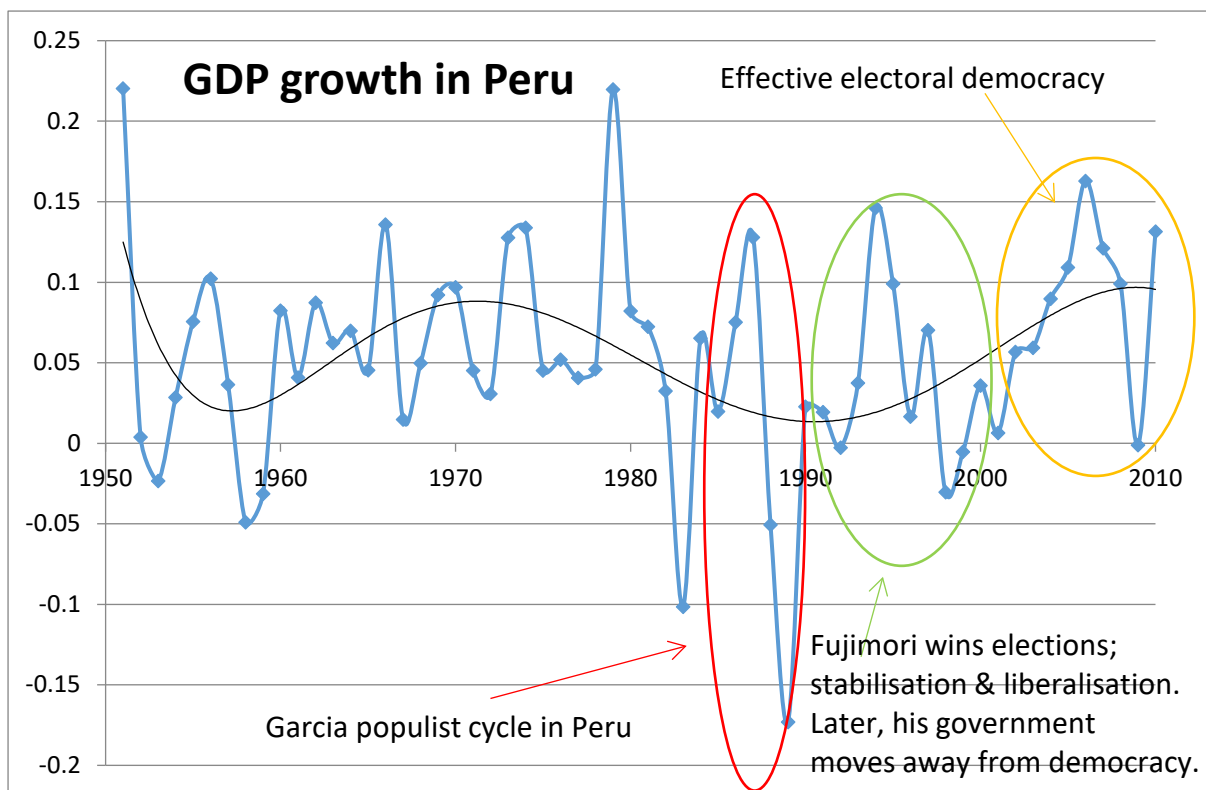
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Figure 1. Populist cycle in Chile



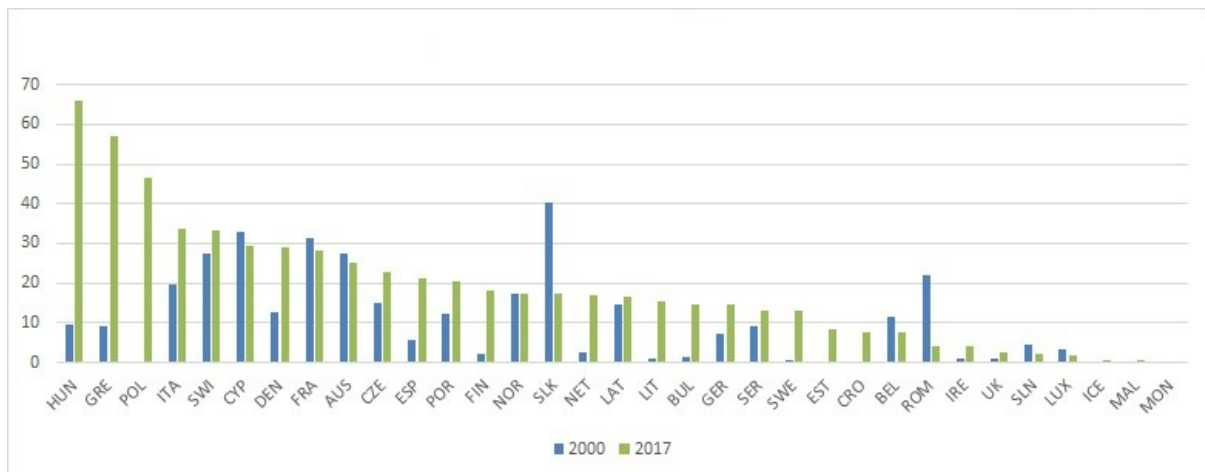
Note: Real GDP growth rate taken from World Bank.

Figure 2. Populist cycle in Peru



Note: Real GDP growth rate taken from World Bank

Figure 3. Support for Authoritarian Populism in EU countries



Source: Timbro Institute, Authoritarian Populism Index

Figure 4. Inequality and government spending in Europe, 2017

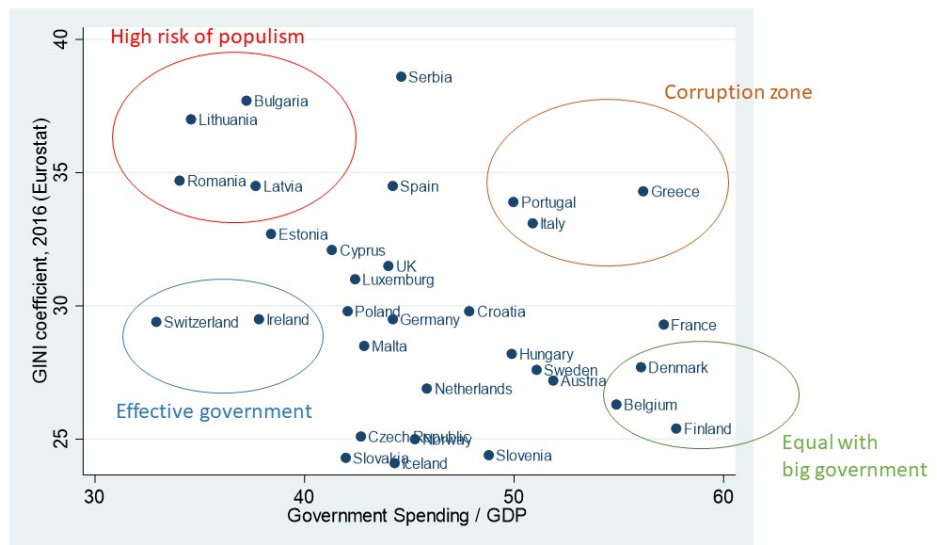


Figure 5. Inequality and level of development in Europe, 2017

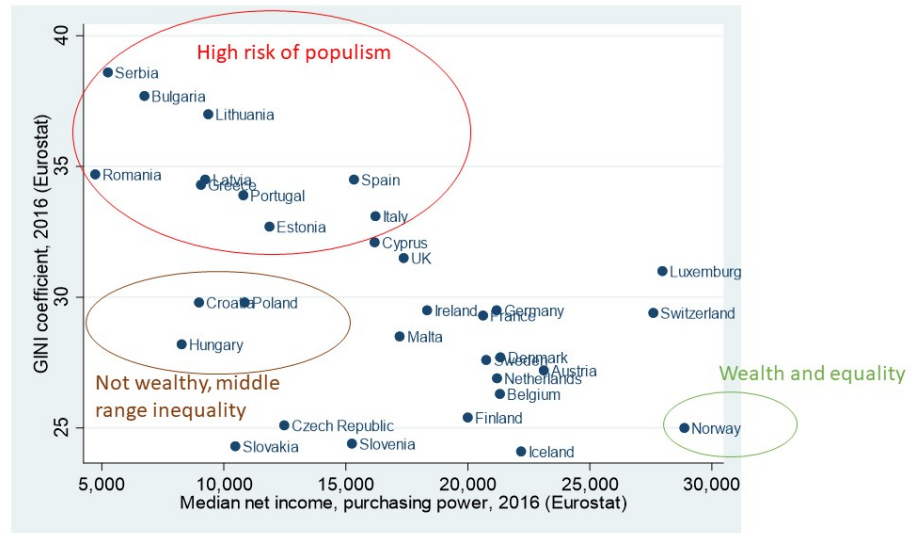




Table 1. The configurations of dimensions (solutions) associated with the share of support for authoritarian populist parties in Europe

Dimension	Solution				
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Civil law origin	●	●	●	●	●
Post-Communist	○	○	○	●	●
High share of Catholics			○	●	●
High unemployment	●	●		○	○
Income inequality	●	●		●	●
Government spending	○			○	●
High median income		○	○	○	●
<i>Best fit</i>	Greece, Italy, Portugal	Greece, Portugal, Spain			
<i>Consistency</i>	0.871	0.910	0.901	0.806	0.818
<i>Coverage, raw/unique</i>	0.329/ 0.048	0.291/ 0.007	0.238/ 0.031	0.085/ 0.023	0.081/ 0.019

Notes:

(1) Poland and Hungary are the closest fits in the data for solutions 4 and 5 correspondingly, but with the following differences. In both countries income inequality is in the medium rather than high range. Likewise, government spending has been in the medium range for Poland and Hungary, but higher for Hungary, and median income has been relatively low in both countries (all as of 2017). In other words, here the fit is driven more by institutional dimensions than economic factors.

(2) Solution consistency indicates a better fit, where a perfect fit would imply a value of 1. A conventional benchmark for consistency to be considered acceptable is 0.75 (75%).

(3) Raw coverage shows how much of the outcome is covered by a given solution (with the upper limit being 1, or 100%). Unique coverage for a given solution is a part that is covered only by a given solution and not by others.

**Appendix. Table A1. Data used in the analysis (in the initial format)**

Country	Populist vote in 2017 (Timbro)	Civil law origin (La Porta et al., 2008)	Post-Communist (Douarin & Mickiewicz, 2017)	Share Catholic, 2017 (PEW)	Unemployment 2016 (Heritage/WSJ)	GINI coefficient, 2016 (Eurostat)	Government Spending/ GDP (Heritage/WSJ)	Median net income, PPP, 2016 (Eurostat)
Austria	20-30%	1	0	74%	5.7	27.2	19.3	23,112
Belgium	0-10%	1	0	49%	8.7	26.3	9.6	21,313
Bulgaria	10-20%	1	1	1%	9.8	37.7	58.4	6,746
Croatia	0-10%	1	1	84%	16.1	29.8	31.3	8,982
Cyprus	20-30%	0	0	3%	15.6	32.1	48.8	16,178
Czech Rep.	20-30%	1	1	21%	5.2	25.1	45.3	12,476
Denmark	20-30%	1	0	4%	6.3	27.7	5.7	21,333
Estonia	0-10%	1	1	1%	5.9	32.7	55.8	11,870
Finland	10-20%	1	0	0%	9.6	25.4	0.0	19,995
France	20-30%	1	0	60%	10.6	29.3	2.0	20,624
Germany	10-20%	1	0	42%	4.6	29.5	41.4	21,179
Greece	50-60%	1	0	0%	24.9	34.3	5.4	9,063
Hungary	50-60%	1	1	56%	7	28.2	25.3	8,271
Iceland	0-10%	1	0	4%	4.4	24.1	41.1	22,182
Ireland	0-10%	0	0	75%	9.5	29.5	57.1	18,330
Italy	30-40%	1	0	78%	12.1	33.1	22.3	16,213
Latvia	10-20%	1	1	23%	9.8	34.5	57.4	9,234
Lithuania	10-20%	1	1	75%	9.5	37.0	64.1	9,360
Luxemburg	0-10%	1	0	67%	5.9	31.0	46.0	27,973
Malta	0-10%	1	0	89%	5.4	28.5	44.9	17,204
Netherlands	10-20%	1	0	20%	6.1	26.9	37.0	21,195
Norway	10-20%	1	0	1%	4.2	25.0	38.5	28,875
Poland	40-50%	1	1	87%	7.4	29.8	46.9	10,854
Portugal	20-30%	1	0	77%	12.1	33.9	25.1	10,799
Romania	0-10%	1	1	5%	6.9	34.7	65.3	4,728
Serbia	10-20%	1	1	4%	19	38.6	40.3	5,248
Slovakia	10-20%	1	1	66%	11.3	24.3	47.2	10,469
Slovenia	0-10%	1	1	74%	9.3	24.4	28.6	15,249
Spain	20-30%	1	0	60%	21.9	34.5	41.4	15,333
Sweden	10-20%	1	0	2%	7.4	27.6	21.7	20,752
Switzerland	30-40%	1	0	55%	4.3	29.4	67.5	27,602
UK	0-10%	0	0	17%	5.5	31.5	41.9	17,369