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**Populist Polarization and Party System Institutionalization:
The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization**

Introduction

While democratic theory often neglects party politics, political science research rarely fails to emphasize the fundamental role played by parties in the consolidation of modern democracies (LaPalombara and Weiner 1966, etc.). Next to structuring the electoral process, parties are supposed to have the functions of articulating preferences and interests, aggregating them into comprehensive platforms, channeling them into governmental policies, socializing individuals into loyal citizens of competitively run polities, disseminating politically relevant information among the public and organizing the work of legislatures and executives. Accordingly, it is assumed that the processes of representation and accountability in modern democracies imply strong, stable, coherent, multifunctional parties.

On the other hand, it is also a well-recognized fact that the relevance and stability of political parties varies across democratic countries. Many utilize practices that are in tension with the ideal-typical model (Katz 1987) of party government. In the United States parties lack unified leadership, in the Scandinavian countries corporative institutions overshadow parties in policy-making, in France individual political entrepreneurs regularly introduce new party-labels, etc. Despite such 'deficiencies,' few would question the democratic character of the respective political systems. However, when the focus is on the consolidation of new democracies, one of the most investigated aspects is exactly the development of a "stable, moderate, socially rooted party system" (to quote a variable from the Bertelsmann Transformation index). This is so because a strong and predictable party arena is seen both as a good indicator and a major cause of a successful transition to democracy (Carothers 2006, Catón 2007). Countries with fragile parties run the risk of being dominated by oligarchs, idiosyncratic and self-serving political notabilities, destructive protest movements, or non-democratic institutions like armies, intelligence services, churches, etc. In such systems decision-makers are not disciplined by a corporate agency, the party, which cares about its long-term reputation, and therefore they are supposed to have short time-horizon. The excessive fragmentation of parliaments hinders the formation of stable

majorities, and therefore is considered to pose a major threat to effective government (Lowell 1896, Hermens 1941, Duverger 1954, Huntington 1965, Sartori 1976, Mainwaring 1993, etc.). In countries with weak parties and fragmented party systems the complex and non-transparent political structures may discourage citizens from participating in the electoral process, who may then turn to informal, and possibly illegal, forms of control over the elites (Mainwaring and Torcal 2006, etc). Finally, the decreased turnout may deprive the regime from popular legitimacy.

These perils to democratic consolidation are apparent in Eastern Europe. The region is often described, at least in contrast to established democracies, as being characterized by relatively weakly institutionalized, fragmented, even atomized, feeble and unrepresentative parties and party systems. It has been repeatedly documented (Tavits 2005, Birch 2003, Powell and Tucker 2008) that fragmentation contributes to the exceptionally high electoral volatility in the region.

Additionally, parties in the region are often found to be ideologically amorphous, personalistic, lacking a strong presence across the entire country, short of funding, and unable to create stable coalitions (Carothers 2006: 27). In general, their overall role within the political structures appears as less central than in Western Europe. The so-called parties of power in the less democratic countries of the region are better organized. But this is so simply because they function as the representatives of the government, and not as autonomous actors, and therefore they can fulfill the linkage function only in a very limited fashion. The relationship between parties and citizens is often soured further by the elitist character of party politics, the symbiosis of parties with the state, the importance of back-room deals and by the concomitant weakness of accountability, inviting the application of the 'cartel party theory' to the analysis of post-communist politics (Lewis 2000).

If the above given account is correct, and the principal vices are elitism, feebleness, ambiguity, fragmentation and volatility, then the virtues to be pursued are also defined, and they are: stability, discipline, organization, ideological divergence and mobilization based on the emotional identification of large segments of population with political parties.

The present article draws attention to the fact that achieving the above listed attributes is no guarantee for democratic consolidation. Furthermore, I argue that if polarization combines with populism in the way it does in Hungary, then this combination creates far more dangerous environment than the fragility and fragmentation of party politics or the collusion of the elites. In

such situations the strength of parties rather amplify than mitigate the potential for democratic backsliding.

The first part of the article is devoted to the analysis of the most extreme case of backsliding in Eastern Europe, Hungary. The second part uses the Hungarian case as a platform to elaborate on the phenomenon of populist polarization, and it makes a first attempt to apply the concept to other countries.

The Hungarian Puzzle

Hungary is an extreme case in terms of the development of party system and of democracy. The country has the most institutionalized party system of the region (Enyedi and Casal Bértoa 2011) and used to be the frontrunner of post-communist democratization (Herman 2015). At the same time nowhere was the decline in the quality of democracy during the last decade as spectacular as in this country (Kornai 2012, Bozóki 2015, Scheppele 2013, Innes 2015, Ágh 2013).

In 2003 the Bertelsmann Foundation placed Hungary at the very top of the list of 120 'developing' countries in terms of quality of democracy. The country received 10 out of 10 for its 'democracy status' and its overall status-index was 9.71. By 2014 Hungary's 'democracy status' score dropped to 7.95 and its overall status index decreased to 8.05. For the first time, the country was labeled 'defective democracy' and the 2014 country report registered the „dismantling of democratic institutions" in Hungary.[1] On the World Bank's 'voice and accountability' index between 2003 and 2013 Hungary's score declined from 87 to 70, on the rule of law index from 78 to 67[2]. On Freedom House's Nations in Transit democracy index between 2005 and 2014 Hungary moved an entire unit, from 1.96 to 2.96. The only other country with a similarly steep deterioration was Azerbaijan.[3] With regard to Freedom House's principal civil liberties and political rights indices, Hungary dropped from the first to the second category[4] and by the end of the period its press was labeled 'partly free'.

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[1] http://www.bti-project.org/reports/regional-reports/east-central-and-southeast-europe/
[2] http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.aspx#reports
[3] https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Data%20tables.pdf
[4] https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/01152015_FIW_2015_final.pdf

In 2014 a large number of human right associations, including Transparency International, condemned the governmental intimidation of NGOs. The 2014 report of Human Rights Watch reported that the "Legal changes introduced by the government continued to threaten the rule of law and weaken human rights protection."[5] The organization's 2015 report entitled 'Hungary: Outstanding Human Right Concerns' pointed out that "the Fidesz government has stepped up its pressure on media and civil society."[6] In the Press Freedom index of Reporters without Borders Hungary held the 23rd place in 2010, but by 2015 it dropped to the 65th position[7]. In a recent article Jan-Werner Müller (2013) argues that developments in Hungary (and in Romania) put "squarely on the EU agenda" the questions whether there could be a dictatorship in an EU member state and if so whether Brussels should intervene. Abby Innes (2015) concludes that Hungary cannot be considered a democratic country any longer.

At most rating agencies the scores started to decline in 2006, when demonstrations and riots organized against the left-wing government were suppressed by the police, and began to free-fall after the 2010-landslide victory of Fidesz. While most of the criticism targeted the elimination of checks and balances, soon the integrity of the electoral aspect of democracy was also questioned. The OSCE report on the 2014 election stated that "The main governing party enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the State."[8]

This backsliding occurred in the context of an open, market-oriented economy, an elaborate institutional network carefully designed to constrain the executive power and to protect individual rights, and following a long series of confirmations by the relevant international agencies which attested the country's progress in the development of pluralistic media environment, minority protection, rule of law, and transparency of governing. The reform indices based on factors such as the degree of privatization, liberalization, bank reform, and market

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[5] http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/european-union?page=2#hungary
[6] http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/2015_HUN_BriefingPaperFeb.pdf . Similarly, the democracy-index of the Economist registered a drop from 7.21 (2010) to 6.96 (7.21) and the magazine considered Hungary as a prime example of the decline in the quality of democracy among the new member states. http://www.eiu.com/Handlers/WhitepaperHandler.ashx?fi=Democracy_Index_2013_WEB-2.pdf&mode=wp&campaignid=Democracy0814
[7] https://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html
[8] http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/121375. The present article lacks the space to investigate the validity of the specific claims concerning the decay of democratic rule. For my purpose it is suffice to point out that according to a wide array of monitoring agencies the decline was radical.

competition featured Hungary as a top performer during the 2000s (Frye 2010: 75, 89). As a result of the rapid institutional and economic transition Hungary was among the first countries to be accepted by EU and NATO and it was swiftly included into the Schengen zone.

A number of eminent, or at least much-discussed, perils, like the unwillingness of the Communists to give up power after 1990, the development of a corporatist hybrid system or the institutionalization of an authoritarian regime by the 1990-1994 right-wing government, turned out to be unfounded. The country's economic achievements have been precarious, but Hungary remained well above the threshold of wealth necessary in order to make a democracy "impregnable", assuring that it will „live forever" (Przeworski et al. 1996:41).

Even more relevantly for the current article, the decline of democratic quality happened vis-à-vis the background of an institutionalized party system, dominated by well-established parties. The above discussed pitfalls of post-communist party politics, fragmentation, fragility, extreme volatility, or the central role of bribable individual legislators, etc., have been avoided. The obvious question that follows is: why hasn't the relatively consolidated arena of party competition prevented the decay in the quality of democracy?

Party system characteristics

In order to address the puzzle one needs to examine first the developmental trajectory of the party system. The stabilization of the party landscape happened in Hungary earlier than in the other countries of the region. In 1990 and in 1994 the same six parties entered the Parliament. In the subsequent years the popular support to four of them gradually dwindled and at the turn of the millennium elections became centered on a choice between the two remaining parties, the increasingly right-wing Fidesz and the ex-communist and reformist MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party). In 2009 the rise of the extreme-right Jobbik contributed to a more complex pattern[9], but the number of relevant parties remained low, and the fragmentation at the governmental level declined further as coalitions were replaced by single-party [10] governments after 2010.

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[9] The extreme right had some marginal success between 1998 and 2002 through the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP).

[10] Nominally the winning electoral list belonged to both Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP), and both parties have their own group in the Parliament, but KDNP does not compete on its own and its

Throughout the post-communist period the stability of the governments was exceptional, no early election has ever been called. At the same time Hungary was rather typical of the region within which government-parties tend to lose elections. The regular defeats of governments upended many of the longer-terms reform-plans, but they assured a high level of electoral accountability.

As opposed to most countries in the region, the menu of parties changed little between elections. The percentage of MPs belonging to parties which have been organized prior to 1990 has never fallen below 70%. Independent candidates had only marginal role, virtually never making it into the Parliament. The discipline of party factions remained high, the survival of governments did not depend on deals with individual MPs. Although electoral volatility has been high compared to Western standards, most of the vote shift happened among the established parliamentary parties. As opposed to the neighboring countries, where newcomer parties, organized a few months prior to the elections, often win electoral contests, in Hungary Jobbik was so far the only example of a new party obtaining the status of a major party, and even this party had to spend its first seven years of existence outside of the national legislature.

The alliance-structures among parties also indicate considerable stability. One may distinguish only three phases within the history of the 25 years of post-communist politics. Until 1994 the right, the left and the liberals constituted three competing poles. Between 1994 and 2010 the left-liberal camp faced a united right. Since 2010 three blocs, the right (Fidesz), the radical right (Jobbik) and the fragmented left compete against each other.[11] Parties belonging to separate blocs have never joined forces in government. The only major realignment was triggered by the change in the character of Fidesz after 1994, when the party replaced its erstwhile liberalism with conservativism, and its centrist position with a preference for right-wing coalitions. In the very same year the liberal SZDSZ (Alliance of Free Democrats), without fundamentally altering its ideological platform, joined the Socialists in government and subsequently became part of the newly formed left-liberal conglomerate. Since then only the conflict between two right wing parties, Fidesz and MDF (Hungarian Democratic Forum), constituted a deviation from the ideologically-fixed patterns of alliances, but because the MDF supporters deserted their

candidates are selected by the Fidesz leadership. The KDNP never disputed the claim of Prime Minister Orbán according to which his government is *not* a coalition government.

[11] The only party that is difficult to place into these groupings is LMP, a green party that exists since 2009, regularly polling around five percent.

innovative party leadership and the party was subsequently disbanded, the short-lived rivalry of these parties simply reconfirmed the inertia of the bloc patterns.

Anti-party sentiments have always been strong in Hungary and parties continue to be among the least trusted political institutions, but these sentiments have rarely been articulated in a politically consequential fashion. Parties proved to be able to organize large scale demonstrations repeatedly, involving tens of thousands (at some occasions even hundreds of thousands) of participants. The comparison of expert placement of parties and the self identification of party voters show a relatively high degree of congruence between elites and masses (Kitschelt et al 1999). Changes in government policies, as in other countries of the region, are relatively closely related to shifts in public opinion (Roberts 2009).

The darker aspects of the system

This above given account illustrates that Hungary successfully avoided the dangerous road to chaotic, volatile and fragmented party politics and operated a fairly representative and institutionalized party government. There were a few factors, however, that limited the positive contribution of parties to consolidation. First, parties have never been able to turn a substantial number of citizens into party members. The membership levels hovered around three percent, which figure is not radically different from the numbers known in other European countries, but it shows that the parties have not been in the position to play a major role in the everyday life of ordinary citizens.

The second factor concerns polarization. The expert judgment-based indices showed a considerable degree of left-right polarization during the 2000s: 3,9, in 2002, 5 in 2006 and 3.4 in 2010 on a 1-10 scale. The citizens registered an even larger distance: in 2003 they saw the two main parties 5.9 units apart. This distance increased further by 2009, to 7.2 units (Enyedi and Benoit 2011). These are astronomic figures, placing Hungary among the most polarized countries in Europe (Cf. Dalton 2008).

Those researchers who focus on the conflict between hardline communists and right-wingers consider Hungary among the less polarized countries (Frye 2010). But the Hungarian case makes it abundantly clear that it is wrong to treat the presence of communist forces as the only possible source of deep ideological divide in the post-communist world. In Hungary the opposition

between cosmopolitan liberals and nationalists was at least as important as the conflict over the legacy of communism. The 1994 alliance of the liberals and reformed ex-communists superimposed the two conflicts on each other, leading to a particularly simple and powerful ideological conflict-structure among the elites. Due to the fact that the two camps questioned, from the very beginning, the other's legitimacy, the system was simultaneously stable and on the verge of implosion (Enyedi 2007).

The hostility between the two elites, and the large distances between the parties on cultural issues, was coupled with intense competition as measured in terms of distance between the frontrunners: at the national elections between 1998 and 2006 the margin of victory was around 1-2 percent. Contrary to the relevant theories, the high degree of competitiveness did not force politicians to cater to the long-term interests of the voters. Being scared of the possibility of the other's victory, they rather turned to irresponsible populism, a game of outbidding that led to a swift increase in state expenditures and to an increasingly imbalanced budget. Due to the high level of animosity the losers of the elections felt ousted not only from office but also from the entire political regime.[12] The defeated party repeatedly questioned, particularly in following the 2002 and the 2014 election, the integrity of the elections and labelled the winners usurpers. Given how important the consent of the losers is for maintaining a democratic regime (Anderson and Gillory 1987, Anderson et al 2001), the relationship between the parties continued to pose a threat to the consolidation of democracy in spite of the fact that the incumbents proved to be ready to accept defeat.

Tellingly, the relationship between government and opposition turned particularly sour in 2006, the year when a government was re-elected for the first time. The unfamiliar prospect of spending two electoral cycles under the same government added to the bitterness of the losers and probably contributed to the street riots in 2006.

The alienation of the losers of competition is closely related to the fact that the scope of party politics extended further than is usual in contemporary liberal democracies. The replacement of parties in government entailed large-scale changes in the leadership of theaters, sport clubs, museums, etc. Careers in administration, business, culture, or sport became increasingly shaped

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[12] This fear was made explicit by the principal advisor and ideologue of Fidesz, Gyula Tellér (2009).

by party-connections. The existing patronage system was taken to the extreme by the Fidesz government under which the neutral character of the state was openly rejected. One of the first decisions of the new government in 2010 was to annul the law that required justification for the sacking of government employees. From that point on only a narrow circle of business enterprises with party ties were able to win government contracts, including those projects that were based on the development funds of the European Union. Companies owned by the state or cooperating with the state stopped the sponsorship of institutions (particularly media outlets) with ties to the opposition. Artists who ambitioned to receive state recognition and support became expected to join an organization which campaigned through the previous years against the left and in favor of Fidesz and consequently was elevated into the new Constitution as a national institution.

Under the conditions of extreme polarization the frequent and regular alternation in power between 1990 and 2010 failed to nurture the development of loyalty towards the regime among the parties. Leaders on both sides recognized that the irresponsible spending could be continued but saw no way out of this vicious circle under democratic conditions. Tellingly, two factors had to happen to end the accumulation of debts: the financial crisis, which left no alternative to austerity policies, and the development of a political climate in which the government party was left without hope to win the upcoming election.

Finally, one must examine the counter-intuitive idea that the stabilization of major parties also contributed to the destabilization of the political regime. The Socialist party (MSZP) managed to accommodate itself to the conditions of market economy and political competition, but it was never able to get rid of the stigma of Communism, and its relative popularity discredited the new regime in the eyes of hard-line anti-communists. When in 2006 an unprecedentedly strong scandal erupted, triggered by the economic decline and the speech of the Prime Minister and party president in which he confessed to lying to the public, the political climate changed radically, but the institutional sphere was unaffected: the leadership of the Socialists (and of the government) stayed in office and the party remained in government for almost four more years. The institutional rules (e.g. the constructive vote of non-confidence) and the political culture created institutional and personal continuity, but they also contributed to a growing discrepancy between society and politics.

The stability of the other actor, Fidesz, is even more remarkable. The party is led by the same person since 1988. The latter fact already indicates that the party is extremely centralized, dominated by its charismatic leader. In fact, Hungarian parties in general lack pluralistic internal structures that could channel social demands in a transparent fashion. With the exception of one single (and invalid) vote in 2011 in the MSZP, party members have not been given the chance of directly influencing party-decisions. The party congresses revealed internal divisions only when the parties were in crisis, otherwise they tended to function as well orchestrated campaign events.[13] The lack of internal competition contributes to the unique stability of Hungarian party politics, but also contributes to the system's dysfunctionality.

The stability of the major parties, and the stability of the entire party system, receives a robust support from the institutional environment. In addition to factors already mentioned, the breakthrough of newcomers was hampered by the constructive vote of confidence, high electoral thresholds, the single member district elements of the electoral system, state finance of established parties, and the colonization of mass media by party elites.

The tensions between the short-term benefits and the long term disadvantages of institutionally-induced stability are particularly well illustrated by the 2006-2010 period. The size of the loss of popularity of the government parties in 2006, and the profoundness of the political scandal of that year, would have led to changes in government in virtually any European country. Not in Hungary. The government stayed in place until 2009, and the new elections were organized in 2010. The vast majority of the society, within which the opposition commanded firm support throughout this period, inevitably experienced this stability as the lack of responsiveness.

Of course, the listed institutions alone cannot account for the survival of the major parties. For this outcome it was necessary that the majority of the voters embraced one of the antagonistic world-views offered by the established parties and rejected those political entrepreneurs who offered more centrist policies or novel political identities - while about one third of the voters walked out of electoral politics altogether.

One of the important social issues that did not gain representation through the competing parties was the Roma issue, and the related concerns of crime and safety. During the 1990s and during

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[13] Due to its commitment to internal democracy LMP allowed open debates until 2013, but one may argue that LMP was in a continuous crisis during these years.

most of the 2000s none of the major parties gave voice to the growing hostility that targeted the supposedly Roma perpetrators of crime. This issue, together with the corruption of the political elite and the shocks of the financial crisis, finally allowed a new party, Jobbik, to establish itself as a relevant actor. The change, however, was limited, because Fidesz, in spite of its presence in Hungarian politics since 1988, was also able to increase its electoral base. The explanation for this counter-intuitive phenomenon has much to do with the populist turn of Fidesz.[14]

Populist strategies feeding polarization

Polarization can be related to populism in various ways. One plausible connection takes the lack of polarization as independent variable, and explains the rise of populism by the fact that the established parties are hardly distinguishable in the mindset of citizens (Smilov and Krastev 2008). The Hungarian case seems to present a different pattern, showing that the polarized atmosphere can incentivize parties to develop populist strategies.

The change in the strategy and discourse of Fidesz was rooted in the narrowly-lost election in 2002 (Enyedi 2005). In subsequent years the leadership invested great energy into organizing not only the party itself but also social movements around the party. In spite of its right-wing character, expressed through the demand for a radical decrease of income tax, the reduction of red tape, the accountability of the governing Socialists, and the trimming of state subsidies to the irresponsible citizens, the party also attacked the banks, the elites and the multinationals and called for a stronger, more centralized and more caring state. Its earlier nationalism became combined with economic populism. Largely thanks to this attractive combination of demands, and also to the terrible performance of the left-liberal governments, in 2010 Fidesz received the absolute majority of the votes, and achieved constitutional majority.

Of course, Fidesz was not alone in the post-communist world in being propelled into governing position by populist strategies. The peculiarity of the Hungarian case lies in the fact that Fidesz implemented in government many of its populist ideas. The new government adopted a new constitution, curtailed the powers of the Constitutional Court, levied new taxes on the bank sector

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[14] Prior to this period populism was represented in the party system by the Smallholder Party (FKgP), but this party has never managed to play a major role in government.

and on foreign multinationals in the service sector, increased the size of state property, intervened in price regulations, lowered the prices of utilities like gas and electricity, halved the size of the Parliament, gave citizenship to more than half a million of Hungarians living outside of Hungary, and entered into sharp diplomatic conflicts with the EU and the United States. The institutions of checks and balances weakened, and as a result of both institutional engineering and replacement of top decision-makers in virtually all sectors, no institution remained that could effectively object to the decisions taken by the Prime Minister and his advisors. Even in cases where the regulations haven't changed much, like concerning ad-hoc parliamentary committees which supposed to scrutinize the governments' wrongdoing, the government found ways to obstruct their activities or to prevent their establishment. Concessions to the opposition were rejected as corruptions of the national will. Many Hungarians felt that Fidesz, just as it promised, liberated politics from the constraints of international organizations and elite conventions.

The magnitude of Hungarian dissatisfaction with the status quo is well illustrated by the fact that next to Fidesz there was room for a Jobbik-like party. The two parties shared a number of ideological positions, most relevantly attitudes towards leftist and liberal elites. Their populist posture was most clear in the professed defense of ordinary Hungarians against multinational corporations, international agencies and foreign powers. They both attacked, from the vantage point of common sense, the cosmopolitanism and the 'political correctness' of intellectuals, argued for the superiority of the manufacturing sector over the financial and service sectors, criticized the colonialist attitude of Brussels and Washington, and decried the profits ('usury') made by the banks at the expense of small people. Jobbik, as an outsider party, placed a larger emphasis on the critique of the entire establishment than Fidesz. It differed from Fidesz also by embedding its Euroskepticism more unequivocally into an anti-Western narrative, by stressing less the charismatic qualities of its leader, and by revealing more enthusiasm for pre-democratic political structures (Enyedi 2015, 2016).

The three blocs (Fidesz, the radical right and the left-liberals) shared one commonality: they all agreed that the electoral competition is about the rivalry of alternative political regimes, and not the competition of different policy alternatives. They also agreed that a radical restructuring of the political class is a more important precondition for economic development than the implementation of economic reforms. This orientation inevitably led to an uncompromising and uncivil attitude among the parties.

Transitions back and forth

After the first wave of skeptics (Jowitt 1992, Przeworski 1991, Offe 1991, etc.), most of the later accounts considered the transition of the Eastern Central European countries successful (Roberts 2009, Grzymala-Busse 2007, Clark 2003, etc.). Witnessing the most recent setbacks across the region, one is tempted to agree with the skeptics and to stress the length of time needs for building high-quality democracies. But this interpretation would be, at least to some extent, misleading, because it would imply that backsliding can be directly traced back to the survival of Communism-rooted structures, mentalities and habits. In most cases, however, it is more plausible to identify the triggers in contemporary events and treat the heritage of Communism as a background factor, alongside with the legacies of feudalism, empires, peasant societies, etc.

This is particularly so in countries like Hungary, which is deeply integrated into the Western world, possesses elaborate democratic institutions, and has met all the formal criteria of EU accession. Obviously, the rapid regress in the quality of democracy implies that liberal democratic practices and institutions were insufficiently embedded, otherwise the attacks against them would have been rejected by the voters. But the case also demonstrates that the development of the institutions of party competition, rule of law, pluralistic media, minority protection, transparency, etc., while necessary, are definitely not sufficient conditions for the consolidation of democratic rule. Such institutions can be hollowed out, marginalized and even dismantled by an all-out war among the party elites and by the indifference of the citizens. As Lise Herman argues (Herman 2015) since the state of the institutions of liberal democracy have been all put in place and consolidated in Hungary during the 1990s one should look for the roots of backsliding rather in attitudes and discourse (especially in the mentality of the leading political parties), and not in the classical structural and institutional predictors of democratization and democratic quality.

This is not to deny that a number of structural factors, such as relative economic wealth, high level of education and openness of the economy, can help understanding why Hungary was among the best performers in the region, while another set of structural constraints, such as the lack of an established multi-party tradition, the historical traumas of 1919/20, 1944/45 and 1956, the weakness of the bourgeoisie, authoritarian value-orientations and the shallowness of working-

class institutions can explain the ambivalence felt by Hungarians towards Western-style liberal democracy. But the radical pace of the changes casts doubts on structuralist explanations. Neither modernization nor political culture theories can account for the extreme temporal variation in the quality of democracy.

It seems rather that Hungary's 'pole position' during the 1990s was due to the specific characteristics of 'goulash-communism', a pragmatic regime that depended on Western loans even prior to the fall of Berlin Wall. The Westernization of the institutional environment was further supported by paying off the losers of the economic reforms with early retirement and generous pensions (particularly disability pensions). During the first two decades high party system polarization coexisted with the elite-managed conversion to Western standards. But once economic growth failed to keep up with the growing costs of generous state subsidies, there was growing demand in the society for revisiting the framework of post-communist politics. At this point it became consequential that the major parties did not accept each other's legitimacy, the institutional environment allowed for landslide victories, the power of parties possessing constitutional majority in the parliament was virtually limitless and Fidesz's organizational infrastructure and its leader's charisma could produce such majorities.

The weakness of structuralist explanations to account for Hungary's particular trajectory does not mean that the transitologist paradigm is vindicated. First, the investigated changes happened not in the course of the establishment of democratic structures but well after these structures were already tested at a number of elections. Second, it is important to acknowledge that the actors, while also coming up with innovative strategies, have been informed and even constrained by historically-inherited mental and behavioral patterns. The mentalities of the Communist period, and even more so, the ideological discourses of the pre-Communist era, have reemerged and structured relations among the actors. The traditions of a deeply divided country, which went through a number of right-wing and left-wing dictatorships in the 20th century and produced intense rivalry between internationalists and nationalists, contributed to the absence of inhibitions constraining elites and allowed the formation of appealing alternatives to the liberal status quo.

The conceptualization of populist polarization

The article's primary goal was to describe and make sense of the puzzling Hungarian trajectory. While completing this task a configuration was detected, the combination of high polarization, relative stability of party politics and populist strategies. This combination doesn't have a name in the literature although its elements, at least in Hungary, seem to be related and their joint impact on the quality of democracy appears as strong and negative. Therefore I suggest below to complement our conceptual repertoire with a new category, or at least with some modifications of existing categories.

I suggest to call the combination of the intense and aggressive competition between the party blocs, the concomitant rejection of the division of power, the focus on the question who the 'people' are, and the central role of relatively stable and strong parties, 'populist polarization'. The application of the 'populist' label to party systems (as opposed to individual parties) may sound strange. But the Hungarian case showed above that if a party system becomes dominated by parties that pursue populist strategies, then both the relations among parties and the relationship of the party system with its environment will be affected. The attitude that rejects limits on the popularly elected government turns the elections into a choice between competing political regimes.

In the systems of populist polarization the rivalry of the parties is not confined to elite-conflicts, it is either based on, or it produces, genuine ideological differences in the population. In these systems the dominant electoral strategy is the appeal to the opposition between the righteous people and the corrupt (and foreign-minded) elites and to the public's distrust of the institutions of compromise is. In such systems the key figures of the clientelistic and corrupt networks are to be found more among party politicians than among businessmen.

Populist polarization needs to be differentiated from policy-based polarization. In the Hungarian case the secondary relevance of actual policy differences is well illustrated by the fact that the 2010 election-manifesto of Fidesz contained none of the radical changes the party implemented later in government and that in 2014, for the first time, Fidesz hasn't even issued a manifesto. The ideological distances among parties were large, but these differences mainly concerned cultural issues (symbols, historical memories, attitudes to multiculturalism, etc.) and less specific policy issues.

Populist polarization also needs to be differentiated from Sartori's polarized pluralism, i.e. high ideological distance in a fragmented party landscape, with extremist anti-system parties forming bilateral oppositions to the governing parties (Sartori 1976: 132–40). Contrary to Sartori's model, which assumes a multipolar configuration, populist polarization can coexist with bipolar competition and it can occur in highly concentrated party systems.

It is important to point out that populist strategies and polarized relations do not imply, as one would expect, instability in terms of the number and identity of the political players or in terms of the relations between government and opposition. Parties opposed to each other on a number of constitutional or democratic norms can have stable roots in society. If they have symmetrically hostile attitudes towards each other then not even their alternation in office necessarily changes the way how the party system functions.

The above made observations imply that populist polarization and the institutionalization of party politics are compatible with each other. This is true both at the level of individual parties and at the level of the system. Surely, party institutionalization and party system institutionalization are, to some extent, separate phenomena. If parties are stable, well-organized and strongly anchored in party identification and social structures but their relationships often change, then only the first criterion (party institutionalization) is met. If the party landscape is structured into stable social-ideological units, and the relations between these units are predictable, but the organizational expression of these units changes often (e.g. parties merge and split or change their name), then only the second criterion (party system institutionalization) is satisfied. But in practice the two correlate and some degree of party institutionalization appears as a necessary condition for party system institutionalization (Casal Bértoa 2012, Randall and Svåsand, 2002).

One needs to acknowledge that populist strategies and polarized relations, could, in principle, be based on social movements, independent leaders, or politicized religious organizations. It is an important feature of the examined configuration, however, that it was based on relatively stable, organizationally well-articulated political parties. The fact that the struggle unfolds between organizations that prepare for governing does constrain, to some extent, the explosive potential of populist polarization. But it also arms the protagonists with all the ammunition that state power can provide, and, therefore, it provides less possibility for an alternative system to emerge.

The general relevance of the model

After describing and conceptualizing the Hungarian case, one should consider the generality of the detected pattern. The lack of space allows only a few preliminary observations in this regard.

One finds strong parties, relatively low fragmentation, relatively high stability in party labels and an aggressive style of competition (going beyond what is the norm in liberal democracies) in countries such as Montenegro, Romania, Albania, Macedonia, Georgia, Croatia and Moldova.[15]Outside of Eastern Europe Bangladesh, Thailand and Venezuela appear as the best representatives of populist polarization. These are all cases where sharply different views exist about the character of the state, and the centrifugal competition of parties poses a constant threat to the consolidation of democracy.

A closer look at these systems indicates that pluralist polarization does not preclude the occasional alternation in power. But given the deep politicization of the administrative structures such alternations inevitably trigger large-scale reshuffles in the state bureaucracy and the constant suspicion against the retained officials that they work against the government and in favor of the opposition. Alternation tends to lead to a radical switch of roles: the government parties do not become simply members of the opposition, but they become anti-system parties.

The idea that the threat to democracy comes at least as much from such systems as from the fragmented party systems is further substantiated by the covariance between the 'effective' number of parliamentary parties and the quality of democracy, measured through the Bertelsmann democratization index. Considering 17 Eastern European countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia), the correlation between the two variables is .75 (significant at .01): more parties, more democracy.

Within the post-communist world, the most clear counter-cases of populist polarization are the Baltic countries, Poland[16], the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Slovakia, which have fragmented parliaments and relatively high level of democracy according to all rating agencies.

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[15] Some of these countries have a volatile electorate, but they also have major parties which are able to survive volatile elections.

[16] Though recently both the concentration of party systems and the success of populist strategies increased in Poland.

This is not to deny that too much fragmentation can lead to instability (particularly to the instability of the governments) and can make accountability difficult. The example of many inter-war regimes in Europe or the history of the Fourth French Republic makes the capacity of fragmentation to undermine democracy abundantly clear. The point is rather that there are more roads to low quality democracy than one. Next to dominant party systems, which lack proper competition, and next to the under-institutionalized, volatile and factionalized party arenas, which fail to assure accountability, the concentrated, relatively institutionalized and representative systems of populist polarization pose a third, distinct type of threat.

The relative[17] longevity of parties may signal over-institutionalization (Schedler 1995). In these instances stability is not a result of successful integration of societal demands but is a consequence of a mixture of legal, financial and cultural barriers erected against newcomers, an asymmetrical distribution of resources, or the hegemony of elites on the definition of what counts as a legitimate political concern.

Within the party-literature populism is considered to be a temporary force, one that undermines sclerotic party systems, brings new issues to the agenda, removes taboos, and then disappears, leaving behind a rejuvenated party system (Schmitter 2007). But many of the listed cases suggest that populist strategies can crystallize into self-sustaining systems, at least in terms of discourse and ideology.[18]

In these systems the most immediate threat to democracy is the lack of civility and collegiality among politicians. Competition has a winner-take-all logic. While in the context of the established democracies 'winner-take-all' means that the opposition has no formalized influence on policy-making, in the listed cases the stakes are much higher: the authorities may easily treat the losers as public enemies.

Conclusions

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[17] The term 'relative' needs to be repeated because if we use the standards of the oldest democracies then all discussed cases appear as volatile. But if one compares these countries to the average of new democracies, then they appear, on many aspects, as very stable.

[18] The stabilization of specific policies is less likely given that unequivocally populist policies are not viable in long term. Changes in government in these countries tends to lead to the discontinuities of some of the populist practices of the predecessor, but also the introduction of new ones.

The article examined the trajectory of democratic backsliding in Hungary and found the role of political parties in the process to be crucial. The phenomenon of populist polarization seems to provide a better fitting account for the outcome than many of the popular structuralist explanations. The study demonstrated that the institutionalization of party politics has not provided an obstacle in front of anti-pluralist forces, it actually rather strengthened their influence. The road to democratic backsliding started with elitist polarization, followed by the phase of populist polarization, and culminating in an illiberal democratic regime based on a dominant party system. While polarization has been present across all the phases, populism amplified its consequences.

The case-study of Hungary led to the introduction and generalized discussion of populist polarization. The concept appears as capturing a pattern that exists in a number of post-communist (and non-post-communist) societies, a pattern that is sharply different not only from what characterizes concentrated party systems of consolidated democracies but also from the fragmented and instable configuration of many new democracies.

The fact that polarization can pose a threat to democracy is, of course, not new (Linz 1978, Sani and Sartori 1983). Most of the known examples of polarization undermining democracy, however, come from Latin America and the threat is manifested through coup d'etats by forces that are external to established party politics. The Hungarian case showed that within the contexts of post-communist transition and of European integration the dynamics of backsliding is different. Instead of a wholesale replacement of democratic rule the outcome is the maintenance of the party-centered electoral democracy, within which one of the established parties systematically drains the resources of its rivals and weakens the power of checks and balances.

In the examined case the parties have not failed to fulfill their tasks of structuring the electoral process, disseminating politically relevant information, recruiting political elites or organizing the work of parliaments and governments. But they have not built an integrated political community and a set of informal norms of conduct either.

One may argue that these are not the tasks of parties anyway. It is difficult to distribute responsibility among various actors, but one should indeed acknowledge that the primary functions of party politics, to support governmental stability, to provide a simple system of intermediation, to help accountability via disciplined behavior, to provide ideological alternatives

and to mobilize the voters, can be achieved at different levels of democratic quality. Party politics and democracy are two related, but ultimately different aspects of social life.

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