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Authoritarian liberalism, ordoliberalism, and the contradictions of European political development

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Abstract

The term 'authoritarian liberalism' covers two crisis-related symptoms of the constitutional and political development of Europe. In the EU and especially in the Eurozone, there is an authoritarian aspect of governance, represented by the binary process of de-democratization and de-legalization, which is related to ignoring parliamentary powers and parliamentary debates, as well as violating the guarantees of the rule of law and protection of social rights. Authoritarian liberalism strives for the rational management of free markets. Institutionally, this is manifested in the constitutional consolidation of economic freedoms and the transfer of control over economic activities to expert bodies and the executive branch of the EU. If authoritarian liberalism focuses on market rationality and economic liberalism, then authoritarian ways of implementing policies are subordinated to the interests of private property, thereby contributing to the further "authoritarian transformation" of the European Union. Thus, the eurocrisis is being transformed into a legitimation crisis and a clash of main political goals: ordoliberalism, market capitalism, European integration, and democratic self-government.

Keywords: authoritarian liberalism, market capitalism, representative democracy, neoliberalism, ordoliberalism, eurocrisis

1 Introduction

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the authority and legitimacy of the state system in Europe have suffered from a number of fundamental problems related to the future of the European project, its values, and the prospects for European integration. The EU economy is relatively stable today (Eurobarometer, 2023); political ideas for ending the experiment in European integration remain marginal, although anti-European pressure is increasing fragmentarily in Hungary and Slovakia, where Eurosceptic parties are on the rise. Existential challenges relate both to the legitimacy of internal regimes and to the very functioning of the EU, which is caused by fragmented pressure from below in the context of

subnational claims to political autonomy. In regions of Europe where there is an increase in support for parties advocating Eurosceptic and autonomist positions, the political mobilization of supporters of independence is occurring on the basis of belonging to a national-territorial community.

The concept of authoritarian liberalism covers two elements of European constitutional development, represented by a binary process of de-democratization and de-legalization, which is associated with a disregard for parliamentary powers and parliamentary debate, as well as a violation of guarantees of the rule of law and the protection of social rights (Bonefeld, 2017; Somek, 2015; Wilkinson, 2015). The terms "executive managerialism" (Joerges & Weimer, 2012) and "emergency Europe" (White, 2015) are also used to understand this binary process. Authoritarian liberalism ignores the ethical dimension of public policy and constructs an ideological barrier to positive liberty, creating conditions for the materialistic reduction of moral imperatives of participatory democracy. Authoritarian liberalism is accompanied by systemic and anti-systemic challenges to the dominant order in the process of searching for EU integration alternatives and enhancing right-wing conservatism and ethnic nationalism, and is leading to populism and illiberal authoritarianism, which is most evident in Central and Eastern Europe, but also reflected in the growth of Eurosceptic parties such as National Rally and Alternative for Germany. The economic and political model of authoritarian liberalism has a contradictory character: in a crisis, neoliberal integration processes can increase instability, creating conditions for the escalation of reactive neotraditionalism and its development into conflicts (Moravcsik, 2004; Slobodian, 2018; Wallerstein, 1995). According to Q. Slobodian, "while neoliberal elites might be organized globally, they remain reliant on the set-up of a national vision, through which any national ruling class can appear as the sole representative of their national people. If we want to know why neoliberalism is now dissolving into this specific nightmare – one of nationalist authoritarianism – this is where we need to look" (Brandes, 2019).

In critical periods when capitalism and democracy enter into explicit conflict, both in terms of interests and values, the state is perceived as a representation of this tension within the sphere of political economy and, in some cases, as an actor in conflict resolution. The reason why we can speak here about the state, and not just about temporarily elected governments, is that all the institutions of the state strengthen and reform the relationship between democracy and capitalism through the military, police, judicial authorities, central banks, socio-cultural institutions, and the media. This "repressive ideological apparatus" in Europe (the European Commission, the European Council, the European Central Bank, the Eurogroup, the European Parliament), without having a strong representative body as a corrective force, evades democratic control (Wilkinson, 2019). Just as modern capitalism and inequality can threaten a democratic state, the democratic struggle for social equality can act as a potential threat to the capitalist state. Democratic movements can threaten a fundamental structural change in politics and economics with a new demand for political and democratic control over the economy (in the case of democratic socialism). In such a context, in order to preserve the status quo, the ideological and repressive apparatus of the capitalist "strong state" offers a more advanced form of neo-authoritarianism. To reflect the conflict dynamics of authoritarian liberalism during critical periods of European development, it is necessary to analyze ordoliberalism as a historical form of the phenomenon under consideration.

2 Ordoliberalism and authoritarian liberalism – other faces of the neoliberal canon: a literature review

The synthesis of political authoritarianism and economic liberalism is not unique within the framework of the eurocrisis; this approach was used in the context of the transformation of capitalism in Southeast Asia and Latin America to denote autocratic and even dictatorial measures aimed at implementing a free-market economy (Jayasuriya, 2001). This type of authoritarian-liberal synthesis is called "authoritarian neoliberalism," which is associated with the transition from the relatively consensual neoliberalism of the "third way" to a new coercive type that arose during the recent financial crisis (Bruff, 2014). The ordoliberal theory of the strong state that underlies authoritarian neoliberalism avoids analyzing conflictual capitalist dynamics, taking market capitalism for granted: ordoliberalism does not resolve the fundamental contradictions between public goods and private interests and does not reduce the structural inequalities inherent in the capitalist state.

Following the constructivist approach in EU studies, the "power of ideas" has been most commonly invoked to explain German policy and the resultant imposition of ordoliberal doctrine throughout the continent (McNamara, 1999). The German commitment to what W. Munchau has characterized as "ordoliberal utopia" (at the expense of potential Eurozone instability) is discursively assumed (Munchau, 2018). J. Bibow assigns critical weight to "Germany's oddly anti-Keynesian views on matters of macroeconomic policy" (Bibow, 2017). Ordoliberal ideas have played a decisive role in all phases of the Eurozone crisis: ordoliberalism has defined a distinctive European approach to the global financial crisis in a region that was once the global heartland of Keynesianism and the social contract. As A. Cafruny and L.S. Talani note, "Germany's material / corporate interests – and its particular domestic and regional predicament – throw[…] up enormous obstacles to the abandonment of ordoliberalism and the adoption of the more expansive Keynesian policies that most observers believe are necessary to sustain the Eurozone" (Cafruny and Talani, 2019, p. 1013). The contradiction between the interests of German capital and those of many of the other Member States makes it extremely difficult to meet the developmental needs of the Eurozone as a whole.

There are three distinct aspects to the ordoliberal tradition: a) the normative standpoint; b) practical policy advice focusing on the rules of the game ("*Ordnungspolitik*" in German); and c) academic research programs, which develop around the question of what a good societal and economic order looks like, how it can be implemented, and what types of institutions and rules work better than others ("*Ordnungsökonomik*" in German, translated as constitutional economics) (Horn, 2022). The German intellectual tradition of ordoliberalism has its roots in the work of economists and legal theorists associated with the Freiburg School in interwar Germany. The Freiburg tradition of ordoliberalism revolves around the concept of the strong state, i.e., a limited government, non-corrupted by private interests. The task of government is to provide, protect, and reliably enforce the non-discriminatory general rules of the game for economic and social interaction without intervening much in the process itself, nor becoming a player itself. While societal order is seen as a complex structure, with the subsystems of the economy, politics, and civil society interwoven and interdependent, it is the legal order, understood as an economic order that must actively be constructed in an enlightened, generally beneficial way (Eucken, Böhm, and Grossmann-Doerth, 1936). This economic constitution not only prohibits political in-

terventions by means of caps or floors and any other meddling with prices, but also calls for a stable currency in terms of both prices and exchange rates, open markets, the protection of private property and freedom of contract, economic accountability, and consistent public policy (Eucken, 1952). As R. Bachmann notes, "there is a natural tendency for German culture to accept, perhaps even admire, ordoliberal economics, because it is a type of economics that is close to continental law: rules- and framework-based [...] Ordoliberals are viewed as good economists because they really are like jurists" (Bachmann, 2019, p. 116). It was the German economic constitutionalists' distrust of popular sovereignty and of the "chaos" of social reformism that subsequently led European ordoliberalism to transform the norms of democratic constitutionalism and representative democracy to support economic commitments to currency and price stability, strict fiscal discipline, and competitiveness. The ordoliberal turn in Europe took place under the leadership of Franz Böhm's most important disciple, Ernst-Joachim Mestmäcker, who argued in 1975 that "the academic school of thought which promotes the Wirtschaftsverfassung (translated as "economic constitution") [...] is not committed to the elaboration of the political potency of the economic, in order to fall into the arms of the democratic regime, but rather seeks to place that regime in a position whereby it can independently and adequately perform its mandated rule of law and welfare tasks" (Mestmäcker, 1975, p. 419).

Early ordoliberalism, as "an orderly and improved" German version of neoliberalism and a historical form of authoritarian liberalism, formed a market-oriented and constitutionally oriented model of the strong state's authoritarian response to the economic and constitutional crisis of the Weimar Republic, resisting the growing pressure of social democracy and European socialist projects. This neoliberal model of authoritarian response to the economic crisis was not unique to late Weimar – countries around the world tried to support the demands of the Gold Standard, resisting social democracy, until they gave up gold, which led to Welfarism in Britain and the New Deal in the United States. As M. Schmelzer notes, it was precisely the matter of capital controls that neoliberal promoters of the Gold Standard and floating exchange rates saw as the key threat to a liberal order. Two recurring points can be regarded as fundamental axioms of neoliberal monetary thought: first, the rejection of any form of currency and capital controls; second, the attempt to use automatic market mechanisms to impede or roll back democratic (and Keynesian) economic policies and thus reintroduce fiscal and monetary restraint. While the rejection of government controls was generally constitutive of liberal worldviews, capital controls were of particular concern for neoliberals (Schmelzer, 2020, p. 204). In the following sections, I will try to trace the development of these debates and analyze the conceptual and institutional relationship between authoritarian liberalism and ordoliberalism in diachronic and synchronic terms.

3 Toward a diachronic analysis of ordoliberalism and authoritarian liberalism

During critical periods of transformation, tensions between democratic and capitalist states increase, which entails a deep constitutional crisis. In late Weimar Germany, the democratic capitalist state reached its apogee due to the growth of a politically emancipated proletariat that began to threaten the political and economic differentiation created and

defended by the Constitution. Since 1930, public power in Germany had been deployed in a highly discretionary and dictatorial manner, bypassing Parliament and repressing spontaneous public debate, with the presidential Cabinets ruling via emergency powers granted by the Constitution against a backdrop of growing extra-parliamentary unrest on the streets. Liberals and conservatives turned to authoritarian government to manage the political and economic turbulence of the period, in an attempt to maintain the illusion of the separation of the political and economic realms. The reaction of the ruling elite to this threat was the convergence of authoritarianism and economic liberalism, as the social democrat and constitutional theorist H. Heller first pointed out in 1933 (Heller, 2015). The term "authoritarian liberalism" was used by H. Heller to radically criticize Germany's attempts to enter into an alliance with big business in the period between 1930 and 1933 in order to maintain economic liberalism at the cost of intervening in politics in favor of capitalist interests (Heller, 2015). In the mid-1920s, H. Heller still imagined the Weimar state as a neutral state, equally open to different governmental regimes, socialist as much as capitalist. As Wilkinson notes, "he had soon speculated, however, by 1928, that the path to dictatorship might be taken by the working class due to the severe socio-economic disparities that were emerging. If we put it in terms associated with Polanyi (whose The Great Transformation would be first published in 1944), Heller thought that the "countermovement" would occur through the turn to an authoritarianism led in the first instance by the proletariat. By late 1932, however, Heller realised that it would in fact be the ruling class that would first defect from the principles of parliamentary democracy" (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 192).

The purpose of the criticism of H. Heller was the centrist policy of Chancellor H. Brüning. The centrist government of H. Brüning ignored parliamentary democracy, using presidential decrees under the cover of an emergency, to impose austerity and protect the basic principles of economic liberalism. This policy was based on disappointment with democratic solidarity for maintaining a capitalist economy during the critical period of post-war deflation, unemployment, and political turbulence. For Germany's early Ordoliberals, the fear, reinforced by the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia, was determined by the potential turn of democracy towards socialism (Cristi, 1998). According to K. Polanyi, the more fiercely the countries resisted social democracy through authoritarianism in the name of economic liberalism, the stronger and harsher was the backlash: authoritarian liberalism ousted democracy, weakening its ability to respond to the fascist threat (Polanyi, 2001).

H. Heller's concept of authoritarian liberalism became part of the criticism of C. Schmitt's political theology and constitutional theory with the formula "strong state, free economy." C. Schmitt recommended Germany a strong state with a free market that opposed the threat of democratic socialism and experiments of economic democracy. A common feature of these doctrines is the recognition of the state as a source of security and social order in capitalist society. In relation to the economy, the state is absolutely the dominant force: C. Schmitt and the German Ordoliberals viewed the state as a "security regime" and characterized it as the main instrument for preventing civil war (Schmitt, 2008). For them, the Weimar Republic was an ineffective political structure that allowed the ruled to influence the strategy of the rulers. According to C. Schmitt and the German Ordoliberals, for the sake of a free economy, the state should have been built as a fortress in order not to become a victim of massive democratic demands for social protection.

C. Schmitt argued his position by referring to the concept of the Leviathan by T. Hobbes as a symbol of dominant power, as well as to the traditions of conservative criticism of the egalitarianism of the French Revolution: Schmitt rejected the idea of social equality and defined lawmaking in democracy as the "rule of the crowd" (Schmitt, 2008).

Ordoliberals argued, based on the political intuitions of A. Smith, that the power of the state is fundamental to the creation of civil society. The state, as legislator, must uphold the law of private property and prevent "bloodshed and disorder" (Smith, 1976). In ordoliberal theory, the state is the political practice of the "market police," where competition is not a category of cohesion and integration (Rüstow, 1942). The market police is obliged to maintain a competition of private interests, which can be reconciled based on common needs for security and freedom through contract and guarantees of property rights. Acting as market police, the state civilizes the behavior of "greedy self-seekers" based on "politically imperative rules of the game" (Rüstow, 1942). The law is a means of social security and a category of personal freedom: individuals are free if they obey the law, but the law does not apply to riots. The rule of law is underpinned by social order as a key political category. For theorists of authoritarian ordoliberalism, the rule of law entails the absolute power of the state as a concentrated force of order: if a situation of choice between law and order arises, the law must be sacrificed for the sake of order (Bonefeld, 2017). According to H. Marcuse, authoritarian liberalism is associated with the existentialization and totalization of the political sphere, when the depoliticization of social relations entails the politicization of the state as the dominant force (Marcuse, 1988).

Early German ordoliberalism expressed the political needs of a free economy in the form of "political theology": it is vital to eliminate all democratic intentions of state policy, especially in the monetary sphere, which should not be run like a switchboard by a weak government directly dependent on a parliamentary majority, or, even worse, by a non-parliamentary group posing as a representative of public opinion (Röpke, 1960, p. 232). In this context, the Ordoliberals argued that the desire for a free economy presupposes a reduction in social democracy and total freedom to make executive decisions. The weakness of democracy in its effective response to economic crises and social unrest leads to the fact that, according to W. Röpke, it must be supported by restrictions and guarantees that prevent democracy from being absorbed by democracy itself (Röpke, 1969, p. 97).

The main argument of H. Heller is that social inequality is incompatible with constitutional democracy, since it requires a high degree of social homogeneity, or at least the prospect of it, for maintaining political legitimacy (Heller, 2015). However, constitutionalism still underestimates the challenges to democracy from economic liberalism and sees democracy as a threat to capitalism. After the Second World War, political theory substantiated the key idea of the constitutional protection of liberalism, neglecting the studies of power structures that can formally undermine democracy in a capitalist state (Hailbronner, 2015). Constitutional theorists involved in the design of legal and political institutions developed internal, international, and supranational institutional mechanisms for controlling majoritarianism and "democratic irrationality." According to K. Horn, "it is true that the historical ordoliberals grappled with the idea of party democracy at first. Fairness requires one to bear in mind, though, that their academically formative years, the beginning of the interwar era, were the first time that people from the shattered former Austrian and German empires experienced modern democracy. Without wanting to restore mon-

archy, some of them, looking back at the protection of individual rights that had been secured under the empire, were worrying whether the new type of parliamentarism would live up to the challenge" (Horn, 2022, p. 551).

Independent technocratic institutions, such as constitutional courts, commissions, and central banks, are becoming the norm and are gradually taking root in liberal consciousness. European integration is becoming an integral part of the post-war liberal-constitutional process of building a "militant democracy": J. W. Muller offers the concept of "constrained democracy" as a representation of this phenomenon (Muller, 2011). The principle of the militant defense of liberalism in the name of democratic consolidation is due, primarily, to concern for economic liberalism, rather than the goals of protecting political liberalism and strengthening representative democracy. In contemporary constitutional theory, the focus is on analyzing the challenges and dangers posed by unfettered democracy, rather than addressing the obvious effects of unfettered capitalism on social and economic inequality, as warned by H. Heller and K. Polanyi.

The Glorious Thirty years of the welfare state facilitated the contradictions between capitalism and democracy. Post-war democracies were created not just in opposition to state terror or aggressive nationalism, but also in opposition to the totalitarian concept of spontaneous historical action carried out by collective political actors, such as the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. In response, Western Europeans built a highly controlled form of democracy, marked by the stamp of a deep distrust of popular sovereignty and even of traditional parliamentary sovereignty. Liberal theory has sought to resolve the majoritarian dilemma by restricting democracy, both institutionally (constitutional control) and ideologically (the concept of reasonableness by J. Rawls) (Rawls, 1993). Thus, contemporary constitutional theory is moving away from critical interaction with political economy. European integration is seen as an aspect of the constrained democracy project, and not as a further stage of reconstructing the relationship between politics and economics.

The post-war development of Europe was characterized by a new vision of not only technocratic management functions, but also management relations, in particular, the nature and limits of economic management. The Freiburg Ordoliberals, for whom both unfettered capitalism and disorderly democracy were threats, proposed a new concept of the economic role of the state and a social market economy based on neoliberal competition. C. Friedrich, in analyzing the ideological significance of neoliberalism, noted a fundamental theoretical turn in German ordoliberalism with its idea of transforming people's sovereignty into individual freedom as a tool to legitimize constitutional order (Friedrich, 1955). For European Ordoliberals, economic constitutionalism, based on individual rights and competition, was intended to ensure the complete elimination of class and ethnonational conflicts from the political sphere. From this point on, the self-identification of subjects of constitutional relations in Europe (in particular, the European Court of Justice and the European Commission) was to be determined by the ideology of economic rationality and the logic of market competition.

Ordoliberalism identifies the economic constitution of a free labor economy as "an explicit and uncompromising decision" about the founding principles of a capitalist social order (Röpke, 1982, p. 39). The economic constitution determines the fundamental character of a definite form of society, its constitutive principles, basic regulatory rules, sociocultural values and commitments; furthermore, it determines both the scope of legitimate

parliamentary law-making and the style of political interventionism. The ordoliberal argument is that the capitalist economic constitution does not permit discretionary intervention in the freedom of contract and excludes "an economic policy that seeks to improve outcomes directly, by way of specific interventions in the economic process" (Vanberg, 2015, p. 29). Instead, "all governmental decisions that might affect the economy should flow from the economic constitution" (Gerber, 1994, p. 47). There is thus no scope for a mixed economy, in which the state intervenes both for the system of private property and against its logic.

Ordoliberalism is the doctrine of "liberal interventionism": According to this conception, the state does not intervene for specific social ends; rather, it intervenes to ensure the undistorted exposure of economic agents to competitive market pressures (Rüstow, 1963, p. 252). Liberal interventionism is meant to sustain and secure the conditions of the free economy in every concrete situation. Therefore, ordoliberalism recognizes as indispensable the role of the state in setting and enforcing the "conditions under which the "invisible hand" that Adam Smith had described can be expected to do its work" (Vanberg, 2015, p. 29). As W. Bonefeld notes, "since 'nobody is authorized to abandon' the freedom of competition on the world's labor markets, and other commodity markets, everybody has to comply with the demands of that freedom" (Bonefeld, 2019). In the ordoliberal conception, the buying and selling of labor power is dependent on a state that is not bound by public opinion, subject to mass democratic aspirations and undisciplined parliamentary majorities, and paralyzed by powerful demands for special treatment and protection from competitive pressures. Rather, it entails the fettering of the democratic ideal to the liberal principle, to achieve the "independence of political will" (Eucken, 1989) upon which the politics of liberal interventionism depends. Sustaining the free economy might in fact require as "many economic interventions as in a policy of [Keynesian] planning"; indeed, the "freer the market," the "more rules" are needed to sustain the freedom of competition (Miksch, 1947, p. 133, p. 327).

In the context of the European sovereign-debt crisis, ordoliberalism has internationally come to be held responsible for Germany's stern official attitude, especially toward Greece (Ryner, 2015). In the realm of fiscal policy, ordoliberalism is associated with an unrelenting insistence on budgetary commitments and financial responsibility (no bailouts), leading to unnecessary hardship through austerity, while strictly restraining the task of central banks to the maintenance of price stability. With the beginning of the eurocrisis, liberal centrism tries to stabilize but increasingly becomes the subject of growing political disputes from the standpoint of state power. Having lost faith in the power of institutional tools, the European state system begins to resort to coercion in an attempt to maintain order. Since democratic support for liberal centrism remains weak, it can compensate for it in other ways, presenting its criticism as an irrational and anti-European force. As a result, authoritarian liberalism today must support not only de-democratization in order to strengthen the liberal economic order, but also justify hegemonic relations between the capitals in the new "German Europe," where each country should be similar to Germany, despite the impossibility of such a requirement (Wilkinson, 2015). In essence, the ordoliberal rules of economic liberalism established by the Economic and Monetary Union conflict with democratic and social movements against austerity (in the case of Greece, this conflict reached a limit after the election of a pro-European government opposing austerity).

Austerity in Greece took an "unprecedented form": this is because Greece was the worst of all peripheral countries in terms of both internal (budget deficit) and external liabilities (current account deficit) (Fouskas & Dimoulas, 2017). As a result, the crisis took a very acute form. Under the triple discipline of the Troika (IMF, the ECB, and the European Commission), Greek cabinets have since 2010 pursued a most peculiar and acute form of bondage, that of internal devaluation, and by way of accepting a direct colonial regime within Greece proper. The crisis in Greece revealed that even specific departments and branches of the Greek state are controlled directly by the creditors, or the Troika. When Y. Varoufakis tried to test his "Plan B" when he was Minister of Finance from January to July 2015, he found out that even the General Secretariat for Public Revenue based in his Ministry of Finance was controlled by these creditors, who refused to provide him with the tax codes he wanted in case Greece's negotiations with the Troika failed (Varoufakis, 2017). This resembles aspects of formal-colonial imperialism of the 19th century (Fouskas, 2019).

4 Authoritarian liberalism and democracy in the crisis processes of EU development

The ordoliberal free economy presumes the state to be an independent power in society that promotes competition in the face of "quarrelsome workers and reluctant captains of industry": according to the ordoliberal paradigm, the political state does not compete with the invisible hand of the market; in the words of W. Bonefeld, "it depoliticises […] social relations to achieve a law[-]governed exchange society and in this manner it facilitates the operation of the invisible hand" (Bonefeld, 2015, p. 6). The conceptual foundation of the ordoliberal "market police" is the independence of the state from economic interests and democratic majorities – it presumes government as an exercise in the "independence of political will" (Eucken's concept) (Bonefeld, 2019). In fact, the ordoliberal state is the concentrated power and organized force of capitalist social relations. Its role is to secure the freedom of capitalist society through the politics of order (*Ordnungspolitik*), the politics of both economic order and social ordering – the politics of ordoliberal market rationality. During the eurocrisis, the European Council, comprising the Heads of government of the EU, came to the fore as the executive committee for managing the common affairs of the eurozone. It asserted itself as Europe's sovereign political decision maker and therewith showed itself as Hobbes-Schmitt's strong state of "executive federalism" and "authoritarian managerialism." The European ordoliberal institutions make monetary policy, set the framework conditions for the conduct of fiscal policy in the Member States, introduce austerity, and impose the condition of enhanced market competition upon the Member States, who implement Union requirements as enfeebled agents of supranational necessities. In a monetary union, EU Member States find themselves, as C. Engel put it, "under a regime of imposed liberty" (Engel, 2003, p. 431). Engel welcomes this because "a market economy is not a vaccination against [the democratic] disease. Even if the [Member] States have not succeeded in setting up a proper economic constitution internally, one is imposed on them from the outside" (Ibid).

The debt crisis hit Greece in May 2010, leading to massive austerity as the price of bailouts and debt reduction. During the fall of 2011, Greece experienced the full force

of what has aptly been called "Eurozone fiscal colonialism" (Legraine, 2014). Having announced plans to conduct a national referendum on the Troika's bailout proposal, Prime Minister G. Papandreou was replaced by a "national unity government" of technocrats led by the unelected former Vice President of the ECB, L. Papademos, when France and Germany threatened to withhold financial support. The result was the wholesale restructuring of Greek society and economy under the diktat of the Troika. The Troika's diktat applies not only to Greece but also to Italy, a founding member and the third-largest economy in the EU. In 2011, Prime Minister S. Berlusconi was compelled to resign under pressure from Brussels and the financial markets in favor of the "technocrat" and former European Commissioner for Competition, Mario Monti. As a result of the austerity faced by Italy under the technocratic governments of Monti, Letta, and Renzi, Italian populism rose to power, winning the elections of March 2018 (Cafruny & Talani, 2019).

Efforts to combat the systemic eurocrisis and its implications for public debt financing have profoundly changed the legal framework of the Economic and Monetary Union. The essence of these reforms is manifested in the active and deep involvement of the European Commission in the economic and budgetary planning of the Member States through the European Semester, which gives the Commission broad access to the entire field of domestic policy planning. The Member States of the Eurozone should not only submit to the Commission and the Eurogroup a draft budget planning for the coming year, but, under certain conditions, following the results of the work of fact-finding missions, they may be sanctioned in connection with the failure to implement the recommendations based on the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact. Constitutional reforms and the creation of new European integration institutions are accompanied by two fundamental problems that have accompanied the entire post-war European project. The first issue is the legal authority and competence of the Union and the Member States to take appropriate action. The second is related to the prospects for European crisis management in relation to the existing "democracy deficit" (Craig, 2012; Menendez, 2014; Somek, 2015). Here, the contradictions between national and supranational legal competences inevitably lead to a greater deficit of democracy. The democratic deficit is that none of the areas in which the European Parliament specializes – trade liberalization, monetary policy, the removal of non-tariff barriers, technical regulation in environmental protection, and others – appear on the list of issues of interest to voters (Moravcsik, 2004).

In liberal-democratic regimes, the political sphere is mainly the sphere of liberalism, and the social sphere is the sphere of democracy: democracy is more than liberalism, in the socioeconomic sense, but less than liberalism, in the political sense (Sartori, 1993, p. 210). The political is the sphere of limiting the powers of the state and the protection of the rights and freedoms of the individual; the social is the democratic space for the redistribution of welfare. Today, the new left advocates a cultural liberalism that promotes individual rights and equality of opportunity, while the new right advocates an authoritarian economic and political liberalism that protects the free market, freed from the "shackles of the bureaucratic state." These competitive forms of liberalism reinforce each other and contribute to the convergence of market individualism, authoritarianism, and social atomism, leading to the depoliticization of society, making it dependent on market rationality, limiting the freedom of democratic choice, destroying previous social ties, and activating right-wing conservatism.

The process of European depoliticization as the main factor of authoritarian liberalism reached its apogee in the centrism of T. Blair's New Labour, which proposed an alternative to economic neoliberalism, but in many cases deepened it. European integration has strengthened centrism through consensus-based lawmaking procedures and institutional support for market liberalism. In the absence of a sustainable system of supranational democracy, Member States are left with "the politics but without policies," and the EU "with policies but no politics" (Mair, 2013). Western representative democracy breaks the ties between voters and party elites, who previously provided the system's legitimacy. Labor and socialist parties have fewer connections with grassroots organizations and act as technocratic organizations created to manage the system regardless of voters' preferences. Capitalist globalization creates structural pressure on left-wing governments to limit the welfare state and increase incentives for private investors. As W. Streeck notes, where there are still democratic institutions in Europe, there is no economic governance that will not be seized by non-capitalist interests; where there is economic governance, there is no democracy (Streeck, 2015a).

The authoritarian tendencies of European integration are becoming increasingly apparent in political practice, which G. Majone and S. Meunier call "crypto-federalism" and "integration by stealth." Crypto-federalism is federalism without a federal constitution, when the forces and subjects of political integration do not operate openly in the direction of the federal constitution – the main goal of neofunctionalism – but pursue a strategy of minor steps and grand effects. Crypto-federalism secretly and non-publicly launches the integration process, while political integration takes place under the guise of economic integration (Majone, 2009, p. 72). The strategy of "integration by stealth" makes democracy irrelevant and provides key solutions to European elites (Meunier, 2017).

J. Becker and C. Fuest attribute the sovereign-debt crisis in the Eurozone mainly to institutional failure: "The euro crisis was caused by overly lax banking regulation, ineffective sovereign debt rules, and a lack of institutions able to deal with crises" (Becker & Fuest, 2019, p. 142). These shortcomings are symptomatic of a "commitment problem" of Member States' policy; it is difficult for politicians to commit themselves, to keep promises, and to act sustainably because new problems have to be solved and desires arise. At the European level, it is the independence of institutions such as the ECB that mitigates the problem, while at the national level, it is political competition. "What does not work, on the other hand, is agreements and promises made at the intergovernmental level during EU summits in Brussels" (Becker & Fuest, 2019, p. 144). This setting liberates the representatives of the Member States from political liability at home for decisions taken jointly; they can shift the responsibility to the other Member States. "The medium- and long-term damage inflicted on political culture is considerable because the general public inevitably gets the impression that it is being governed remotely by Brussels" (Becker & Fuest, 2019, p. 145).

The main conditions of the euroregime imposed by the Member States of the Eurogroup, as well as the Troika institutions (IMF, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission), are neoliberal austerity measures (privatization, liberalization, labor market reforms, regressive taxation). This requires extreme state intervention in society, breaking social contracts and existing relationships. In analyzing institutional changes in the authoritarian management of the Economic and Monetary Union, in particular, the

new powers and authority of the Eurogroup and the European Central Bank, it is important to note that the neoliberal trend is a symptom of long-term trends in constitutionalism (Kaupa, 2017). T. Biebricher sees the constitutionalization, legal limitation and technocratization of politics as the core of ordoliberalism and points out that this raises some serious legitimacy problems – especially when distributional issues have to be decided upon: "these are then decisions of an inherently political nature in a twofold sense: not only are they contested vehemently within the realm of science but they [exact a toll on] particular groups of the population and therefore require a much stronger democratic legitimation than a presumably pareto-optimal politics of regulation would" (Biebricher, 2019, p. 197). The democratic pressure to which the ECB and the European Commission are exposed has decreased as a result of new mechanisms such as the European Semester and budget monitoring.

Systematic interference in national law is observed within the framework of the European Semester in order to develop a mechanism for reporting macroeconomic imbalances in Member States. The checks by the European Commission and the European Council cover all areas of public policy and areas over which the Union has no jurisdiction. Due to the influence of the Union on budget planning, the Member States are left with a "core of sovereignty" (Somek, 2015): national parliaments are not the main participants in decision-making against the backdrop of the growing influence of the European Parliament and supranational executive bodies. According to W. Streeck, "where national democratic institutions are neutralized by international 'governance,' as under European Monetary Union, their de-politicized empty spaces are likely to be filled with new content, which may be public entertainment of the 'post-democracy' kind (Crouch, 2004) or some politically regressive sort of nationalism. Under the auspices of the emerging consolidation state, politicization is migrating to the right side of the political spectrum where anti-establishment parties are getting better and better at organizing discontented citizens dependent upon public services and insisting on political protection from international markets" (Streeck, 2015b). The measures taken in response to the eurocrisis can be described as violating various constitutional norms that are stipulated in European treaties and constitutions: authoritarian liberalism leads to deconstitutionalization, which is the flip side of excessive neoliberal constitutionalization: Post-war constitutional regulation in Europe reflects this authoritarian attitude, which is the systemic fear of popular sovereignty and democratic constitutional power. Various measures associated with attempts by democratic politics to strike back at the principles of authoritarian liberalism at the national and subnational levels are rejected and condemned by neoliberal constitutionalists as populist.

In the context of democratic criticism, neoliberalism ignores the danger of authoritarian rule, not limited to the socioeconomic sphere. Liberalism takes for granted the existence of a lively democratic culture, underestimating its fragility and evading the recognition of threats arising within the capitalist economy: the logic of individualism and market competition can lead to the erosion of social solidarity that democracy needs (Cohen, 2008; Polanyi, 2001; Rawls, 1971). Constitutional theorists also avoid the question of the nature and consequences of economic liberalism in capitalist society by analyzing the general problems associated with the legitimacy of a constitutional review of legislation to protect civil liberties (Alexander, 1998). According to M. Sandel, the celebration of

the metaphorical "market of ideas" does not concern the actual market for goods, capital, services, and, in a broader sense, the impact of commodification and market behavior on social relations (Sandel, 2012, p. 42).

The reduction of democracy to a neoliberal economic regime became the main goal of authoritarian liberalism in the post-war period. These attempts have included empowering European constitutional courts to rule on the legitimacy of parliamentary law, subjecting parliamentary law to the primacy of judicial oversight, declaring the majority system invalid, and using debt ceiling regulation as a constitutional constraint on parliamentary power in the current European crisis. Since the early 1980s, there have been institutional attempts to remove and reduce democratic oversight of political decision-making of technocratic institutions such as central banks, which have been given wider independent powers. Q. Slobodian argues that Hayek's authoritarian-liberal ideas have largely informed contemporary neoliberalism and liberals – for all that the road to this was "a twisting one of diplomacy, political economy and power politics" – and therefore identifies it as "the last episode of the twentieth-century neoliberal search for an institutional fix in a world they saw as always threatened by spasms of democracy and the destructive belief that global rules could be remade to bend toward social justice" (Slobodian, 2018, p. 258).

F. Hayek's concept of interstate federalism ("the abrogation of national sovereignties and the creation of an effective international order of law is a necessary complement and the logical consummation of the liberal program" (Hayek, 1948, p. 269), which underlies European ordoliberalism, was embodied in the European economic constitution, according to which federal states operate within a supranational framework of economic rights and restrictions that dominate national decision-making and legitimize the de-democratization of lawmaking. In the Eurozone, the ordoliberal idea of an effectively governed community that should limit the "democratic excesses of a mass society" manifests itself in a federal form, including a supranational economic constitution agreed by all Member States. This megastructure reduces national democratic regulation of monetary policy, restricts fiscal policy, and ensures free competition and territorialization of the labor market, establishing the "supranational regime of imposed liberty" (Bonefeld, 2017, p. 757). The crisis management of the Economic and Monetary Union shows the administrative character of the cosmopolitan constitution of the Member States. This type of constitution obliges states to present their results through a peer review process: the administrative dimension of authoritarian liberalism is associated with the growing importance of transnational decision-making processes, such as technocratic mechanisms and tools of control and/or coercion. In the context of the eurocrisis, the principle of the proportional exercise of powers is replaced by the principle of the proportionality of powers to unpredictable tasks (Somek, 2015).

During the COVID-19 crisis, the main goal of the EU did not change, i.e., the reproduction of the capitalist economy (Anisin, 2023). The need for the European countries, which had austerity programs during the financial crisis, to recover, is crucial to ensuring a continuum of economic and social development. As Casquilho-Martins and Belchior-Rocha note, the implications of these responses require a political commitment for them to contribute to sustainable recovery and development: "the influence that the economic and financial crisis of 2008 had on the EU is remarkable and did nothing to ensure that… societies will be prepared for a new global crisis" (Casquilho-Martins & Belchior-Rocha, 2022, p. 36).

The separation between political and economic spheres reflects tensions between democracy and capitalism as real political and social forces. According to W. Streeck, in the post-war period, the capitalist state is being transformed from "a tax state" through "a debt state" associated with the neoliberal era into a new "consolidation state" combined with the principle of austerity (Streeck, 2013). The modern state continues to develop as a democratic state; its constitutional authority essentially depends on its connection with the people. The "people" here signifies the rhetorical and symbolic power of sovereignty, which reflects the relative autonomy of the political sphere not only from a classical theocracy in the context of modern secularization, but also from economic power. This is not only a modernist worldview, but also infers a continuous and fragile process of modernization due to the social struggle against the merger of political and economic power and class society. This narrative includes class, feminist, anti-colonial, racial, and ethnonational movements, as well as other forms of political struggle for social equality and recognition. The capitalist state can still be seen as a manifestation of an unresolved but more class-modified and deeply rooted contradiction between democracy and capitalism, internationalism and nationalism, solidarity and individualism.

Transnational solidarity can become a democratically effective and legitimate tool for resolving the contradictions of market capitalism and representative democracy, but the EU is developing in line with "a neocolonial paradigm" in accordance with the relations between the core and the periphery between creditor countries and debtor countries, and inevitably transforming into a neocolonial regime of European integration (Wilkinson, 2019). Political equality and transnational solidarity become illusory, since relations between debtor countries and creditor countries resemble the conditions of unconditional surrender. Supranational constitutions are based on fundamental rights and freedoms, legal principles and sanctions, which grow out of democratic processes aligned with the development of law and politics and prove their suitability within the framework of democratically organized national states.

5 Conclusion

Authoritarian liberalism becomes actualized during periods of economic crisis and is a structural element of post-war constitutional regulation in Europe based on doubts about democracy and popular sovereignty, and in large part because of the threat it can pose to the neoliberal order. In the context of the current European crisis, it is necessary to talk about the politically authoritarian style of management of the Economic and Monetary Union, even if this managerial authoritarianism does not bear traces of direct repression. Hidden authoritarianism strengthens economic liberalism, which, in turn, strengthens the further liberal authoritarian transformation of the EU. Authoritarian liberalism limits traditional forms of representative democracy, contributing to the resuscitation of populism and political radicalism. Authoritarian restrictions on representative democracy may lead not only to the strengthening of market capitalism but also to the revival of reactionary forms of new nationalism and illiberalism. De-democratization is grounded in the fact that distribution and production issues are derived from the public sphere of poli-

tics and are determined by market rationality and technocratic bodies. When politics and reformism are reduced to economic logic and constituent power, the autonomy of the political is reduced to the perspective of the revolutionary breakthrough of right-conservative fundamentalism.

The autonomy of the economic sphere, acting according to the logic of depoliticization of inequality, the commodification of social relations, and the erosion of solidarity, affects the legitimacy of the political dimension of democracy and the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. Neoliberal theory shies away from analyzing these dynamics, taking market capitalism for granted: it does not resolve capitalist contradictions between public goods and private interests, nor the structural inequalities inherent in the capitalist state. Authoritarian liberalism embodies the structure of capitalism's dominance over democracy, prioritizing economic liberalism and assigning a "technical role" to political authoritarianism. Due to the presence and dominance of the values of liberalism, authoritarianism in this structure is not repressive or monocentric; it is subject to sharp democratic criticism in relation to the supranational overregulation of European integration processes. The adoption of the ordoliberal model of constitutionally limited democracy in post-war Europe would have been impossible without two conditions: first, the development of the welfare state, which guaranteed each member a certain share of social wealth; second, the processes of liberalization and integration that unfolded in the 1950s and 1960s that impose restrictions on the national sovereignty of European democracies through the creation of supranational institutions.

European ordoliberalism as an enhanced form of authoritarian liberalism manifests itself in the constitutional consolidation of the primacy of economic freedoms in relation to legislatures and trade unions, as well as in institutions (European Commission, European Council, ECB, Eurogroup, and European Parliament) that transfer control over economic and monetary management from parliaments to supranational expert bodies and executive power. European ordoliberalism is not formally a strict constitutional constraint, and the internal electorate may not agree with the idea of the absence of alternatives to neoliberal reforms, but today this idea is imposed as dominant. Authoritarian liberalism is becoming both a transforming and conservative idea and principle of constitutional order in Europe: the post-war Euroregime has mutated from a nominally rule-based structure accompanied by market discipline to a discretionary regime reinforced by bureaucratic power; the purpose of this mutation is to preserve the ordoliberal constitution and its underlying market-based principles.

Ordoliberalism and authoritarian liberalism are reduced to the conceptualization of the free economy as a political practice of latent authoritarianism: European ordoliberalism proceeds from the idea of the insufficiency of political liberalism and controls the democratic organization of power. Today, the ordoliberal rules of economic neoliberalism established by the Economic and Monetary Union are in conflict with democratic and social movements against austerity. Democracy and the rule of law, including the protection of social rights, are also nominally protected in EU treaties and the Charter of the European Union. The ambivalence of European politics is leading to the transformation of the eurocrisis into a crisis of legitimation and a conflict among the political values of ordoliberalism, market capitalism, European integration, and democratic self-government.

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On the nexūs between populism and geopolitical rhetorics: Evidence from the Visegrád Four

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Abstract

The article argues that the repeated use of geopolitical rhetoric by populist actors of various breeds is directly connected to the structural and conceptual affinities through which populism and geopolitics present themselves as discourses, thereby demonstrating a shared grammar of self-presentation. It relies on the available evidence from the Visegrád Four countries in order to survey identitary and technocratic populisms and the multiple ways in which they co-opt geopolitical reasoning. While the discussion of the V4 is based on previously published research, the study also zooms in on the post-2023 developments in Slovakia to present a new perspective. Examining the case of the most recent (as of 2025) democratic backsliding tendencies in the region, the paper demonstrates how local identitary populism has become (re)connected to a historically rooted 'civilizational' geopolitics of pan-Slavism.

Keywords: Czech Republic, Geopolitics, Hungary, populism, realism, Slovakia, Visegrád Four

1 Introduction

This paper surveys the multiple conceptual interlinkages between populist and geopolitical discourses. It argues that there are a number of possible ways in which the two can become mutually attached and reinforcing, and that these links are, indeed, not accidental. There are several ways in which the rhetorical self-presentation of populist politicians and geopolitical reasoning share an inherent narrative structure or grammar, thus making them typical bedfellows. The first part of the analysis is dedicated to a discussion of the general interlinkages, which relies predominantly on examples from the Visegrád Four (V4) (sub)regional grouping.

The second part zooms in on one V4 country, Slovakia, as a case study that illuminates the connection between a local form of identitarian populism and the geopolitics of what has been accurately identified as 'Pseudo-Pan-Slavism' (Marušiak, 2023). Slovakia is chosen as a case study both by virtue of its illustrative value and because, as of the time

of writing (2025), these are the most recent salient developments in the Visegrád Four as far as the populist erosion of democratic norms and institutions is concerned. While Slovakia, with its unique features, has also been generally understudied compared to some of the other countries in the grouping, the post-2023 political turn offers vast amounts of new material. While all of this is certainly impossible to cover in one article, mapping the trends that are likely to shape future developments is a necessary start. At the same time, the article does not focus exclusively on Slovak developments but places them in the context of shared (sub)regional trends, viewing V4 politics as sharing many common denominators. This includes both these countries' earlier post-1989 self-positioning as the most reformed and Westernized ones, best prepared to embrace the Western order (Vachudova, 2005), and the subsequent 2015 joint rebellion against some elements of the European order, combined with growing 'anti-systemic attitudes' (Poznar & Havlík, 2025). These shared trends and a keen sense of historical traumas and unresolved identity issues that are often instrumentalized in populist discursive strategies are thus something that brings the V4 together as a group of similar cases, despite the countries' significant and persisting differences.

The structure of the argument developed in the article is as follows. First, I highlight ways in which populist discursive strategies can form synergies with geopolitical reasoning by plugging into constructed images of the world as a dark and dangerous place of ruthless competition between powers. This is congruent both with Social Darwinist assumptions inherited from classical geopolitics and with the ideas about international anarchy and self-help promoted by representatives of the contemporary realist school of IR. In the identitarian strand of populism, this corresponds to negative othering and antagonistic frontier-drawing through which a populist narrative about a threatened and victimized people is usually sewn together.

I next discuss another point of intersection, which has to do with depoliticization strategies. Both realism and classical geopolitics have been characterized by a pretense of access to some pre-political reality, allegedly formed by the 'objective' facts of the distribution of power in space. Consequently, both the populist and the realist-geopolitical rhetorics profess the same inherent grammar of self-positioning. At its core is the pretense of having a monopoly on representation and truth, respectively. In the same vein, populism also offers itself as a depoliticizing 'commonsensicalism' and solutionism, supposedly based on simple truths that are ignored by the 'establishment' or the 'elites' (political, intellectual, media) either because of their ineptitude or deliberately, with a malign intent to deceive and keep the 'ordinary people' in the dark.

Finally, there is one more distinct aspect that brings together populism and the tradition of geopolitical realism (realist geopolitics). Whether drawing inspiration from Social Darwinist ideas or from the statesman's cynicism of *raison d'état,* the realist-geopolitical line of reasoning leaves little room for moral considerations, at least when it comes to international politics. Consequently, for populism, this becomes a convenient justification for its political transgressions of standard decorum. Thus, part of the appeal of populism can be seen as produced by the deliberate transgression of norms in favor of an opportunity to be openly cynical and shameless and to finally shed the shackles of morality, which, as the populists tend to suggest, has been largely hypocritical anyway.

The second part of the article zooms in on one V4 case, discussing the post-2023 developments in Slovakia. It shows how its particular articulation of identitarian populism

is connected to geopolitical discourse through essentialist-culturalist 'civilizational' ideas with roots in the 19th century. On the one hand, of course, the Slovak case is at best only partially idiosyncratic, and many similar points of intersection between the discourses can be easily found in other V4 countries and beyond. On the other hand, the broader survey of the region provided in Section 3 also shows that this is but one way in which populist and geopolitical discourses can form mutually legitimizing and reinforcing synergies, thus demonstrating that there is no fixed template concerning how the two may be married.

2 Concept and method

The article adopts a fairly broad definition of its key categories. Naturally, neither 'populism' nor 'geopolitics' is a fully stable term, with 'geopolitics' being a particularly fuzzy buzzword, so a brief terminological excursion is also in order here. One existing distinction that the discussion relies on is the one between identitarian (right-wing) and technocratic or 'centrist' populisms. The two are united by the common denominator of frontier-drawing (Laclau, 2005) but tend to use different 'host ideologies.' To some extent, the variety of possibilities through which populism allies with geopolitical reasoning hinges on the specific breeds of the geopolitical and populist discourse in question. Without pretending to give a comprehensive survey of the debate, I rely on some of the insights of previously published work. Thus, one way to approach populism is to see it as a distinct political style, characterized by the promise and performance of authenticity (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2020). This performance naturally includes strong elements of emotion and various forms of transgression, identified by some as the 'carnival culture' of populism (Gaufman, 2018). Antagonistic frontier-drawing, which is a distinctive trait of the populist style, can also be subsumed under the authenticity package. Thus, the distinction between the 'underdog' people and the elites bears the promise of both the 'real people' ('ordinary people,' 'simple people') and their 'real' representation coming from the populist. In fact, it is also implied to be the only real and authentic one, as in this respect the populist typically claims exclusive agency. Populists can thus exploit different themes and host ideologies: it is not a type of actor but a political style with an inherent grammar of frontier-drawing and a 'thin' rather than 'thick' ideology.

In turn, 'geopolitics', which is, arguably, a rather strong candidate for being an empty or floating signifier, can be understood in a variety of ways. The article distinguishes between geopolitics in a narrower sense and the discourse of geopolitical realism – alternatively, realist geopolitics or realist grand strategy. In a narrow sense, 'geopolitics' refers, historically, to the so-called classical geopolitical doctrines that strove to apply notions developed in natural sciences to understand human societies. Thus, states were conceived as 'geographical organisms' engaged in a struggle for so-called 'living space' (Dodds, 2005). The Social Darwinist logic underpinning them and their subsequent association with Nazism through the notorious figure of Karl Haushofer and the Nazi discourse of *Lebensraum* had made the word 'geopolitics' highly controversial. Yet, the term made a triumphal comeback through the discourses of realist statesmen like Henry Kissinger, who asserted the primacy of the 'geopolitical approach' understood in the realist terms of an 'equilibrium of power' (Bull, 1980; Kissinger, 1979). Realism and geopolitics have thus been long intertwined, often leading to their discursive conflation as the meaning of the

latter also became increasingly fuzzier As historians of geopolitical thought point out, the post-WWII use of the term crystallized during the decades of the Cold War in an environment shaped by the global rivalry between the US and the USSR and the ideas of containment policy that, in terms of strategic planning, had distinctly geographical global and regional dimensions (Dodds, 2005, pp. 35-41). These generations of authors would not be typically characterized by having 'a detailed appreciation of the term's tortured intellectual history,' and, to them, 'geopolitics' may rather have been 'a useful shorthand (and apparently self-evident) term to highlight the significance of territory and resources' or 'an apparently useful moniker to highlight the significance of geographical factors in shaping political and military developments' (Dodds 2005, pp. 35, 37). In sum, the term often came to refer to a realist mode of global strategic thinking epitomized by well-known pundits like Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzeziński. Finally, in a broader sense, the geopolitical discourse, as deconstructed by the critical geopolitics school, could mean any representation of spaces within which the relations of power were also typically embedded (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). This can also include, for example, popular geopolitics, which takes an interest in spatial representations produced and promoted by mass culture (Dodds, 2005).

Theoretically and methodologically, the present paper sticks to this social constructivist understanding of geopolitics as developed by the critical geopolitics school. It discusses ways in which populist discourses co-opt both the biologizing and Social Darwinist tropes and those notions that are associated with the realist school of international relations theory, as well as the ways in which the two discourses can mutually reinforce each other. Here, it should naturally be acknowledged that the relationship between realism and 'geopolitics' understood in the narrow sense, i.e., as an assemblage of Social Darwinist concepts and doctrines, is, of course, a complex one. While from the historical and ontological points of view, the two should naturally not be conflated, there are at least two key points to be kept in mind here that ultimately do not allow us to decisively divorce them either.

First, as Specter (2022) argues, academic (neo)realism, which presents itself as an objective positivist theory, suffers from a 'broader amnesia' about its imperialist origins. Some of its key concepts (e.g., 'great power'), in fact, originate in the classical geopolitical discourse that used to underpin imperial expansion policies. Second, while academic texts enjoy a relatively narrow readership, it is the realist scholars' popular commentary, actively broadcast by the media, that tends to gain traction with the public. The genre of realist popular commentary typically presents particularly oversimplified explanations and analyses of global events, which do not always live up even to the methodological standards of realist academic theorizing itself. This popular discourse is subsequently co-opted by populist actors, and it then intermingles with other themes and tropes, including the biologizing and Social Darwinist geopolitical imaginaries.

Methodologically speaking, the article adopts a mixed approach. While its overarching methodology is an interpretivist one, Section 3 does not owe its contents to any original research design but is rather based on desk research into published scholarship on recent political developments in the Visegrád Four. The section thus draws on cases that have been previously analyzed in order to illustrate the different modalities in which populist strategies and geopolitical discourses become interlinked. Session 4, which zooms in closer on one V4 country, brings together both previously published scholarship on

Slovakia and new empirical material that reflects the post-2023 developments. In that latter point, the article relies on statements by leaders of the post-2023 coalition as reported by major Slovak media. Therefore, the main contribution of the study is, overall, not so much in processing large volumes of new empirical material but in bringing together different examples of discursive strategies from the V4 subregional grouping for illustrative purposes.

3 Populism and geopolitics: shared tropes and conceptual interlinkages

In this section, I explore the conceptual preconditions for the discursive synergies between populism and geopolitics that appear in their various guises. The pivotal point here is the appeal that geopolitical reasoning is capable of having vis-à-vis voters in democratic polities.

For instance, some of the most prominent representatives of contemporary realism have pointed out that, in terms of acceptance by the domestic public in democracies, realist foreign policy doctrines are what one may call a 'hard sell.' Thus, in his classic treatise, Mearsheimer (2001, p. 23) argues that Americans are 'hostile to realism because it clashes with their basic values.' As citizens of democratic polities are largely optimistic and moralistic about politics, the clever cynicism and immorality that realists preach as the basis of their worldview feel unsavory. They are at odds with the general democratic notion of both the international system and domestic politics, which is underpinned by the internalized belief that 'with time and effort, reasonable individuals can cooperate to solve important social problems' (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 24-25).

Schweller, in his comparative examination of the potential of different doctrines as political mobilizers, makes a similar observation. As he argues, fascism (aggressive expansionist nationalism) and its regular bedfellow, the classical racist geopolitics of the first half of the 20th century, were extremely powerful in terms of solidifying national support for the war effort. They 'posited an unrelentingly dangerous world and championed as a remedy for this intolerable condition wars of expansion to maximize the nation's power at the expense of others,' with 'brutality and ruthlessness' being portrayed as 'necessities for the victimized group's survival' (Schweller, 2006, p. 117). Fascist geopolitics thus turned out to be the perfect mobilizer, even if ultimately very poor political 'software' for clever balancing because of its highly irrational and imprudent character. In comparison, realism lacks such a powerful emotional appeal. Absent 'an ideology for whipping up nationalist sentiment,' 'there is there is nothing about the realist creed that would stir the passions of average citizens in support of the state, much less cause them to rise up as one without regard to hardship' (Schweller, 2006, p. 115).

To be sure, this self-portrayal of realist scholars as occupying a speaking position that tends to be marginalized in an environment where normative – liberal or other moral value-laden – language has a hegemonic position might have some truth to it. However, I would argue that this does not give us the full picture, in particular, as the relationship between realism and 'geopolitics' is also a complex one. For starters, the mobilizing effect of nationalism and strong negative othering, whether ethnic, religious, or gendered, is

naturally a central element of contemporary right-wing identitarian populism. This goes hand in hand with the geopolitical image of the world as an essentially dangerous place, cast in Social Darwinist terms, as outlined by Schweller and other realists.

However, there also seem to be very different modalities by which the 'dangerous world' could be framed, and some of them clearly invite a juxtaposition of (some forms of) realism and geopolitics understood as a primordialist approach that relies on biologizing analogies and a language that is reminiscent of the 19th century scholarship that projected concepts borrowed from natural sciences onto relations between human societies and culture. This type of populist discourse combines the primordialist language with an appeal to basic emotions, such as fear, that is invoked with the help of Social Darwinist categories. One vivid example here is the locally well-known case of Karla Maříková, a Czech MP for the right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) who came under police investigation in 2020 following a comment about migration she left on her Facebook page. According to Maříková, it was 'forbidden to bring non-autochthonous, invasive species of animals and plants to the EU. Muslim migrants are also non-autochthonous, and as with other invasive species, this means that they will spread in an unpredicted manner and will gradually displace the autochthonous European population' (ČTK 2021).

Obviously, this version of geopolitical discourse that relies on a biologizing language stands world apart from the approaches practiced by the key authors of structural realism such as Kenneth Waltz (1979), whose image of the world is informed by the macroeconomic scientific paradigm with its assumptions of utilitarian rationality, or from neoclassical realists like Schweller (2006), who draw on a comparativist approach to dissect domestic politics in a systematic manner in order to account for the seeming irrationality of foreign policies vis-à-vis the stimuli generated by the structure of the international system. The Social Darwinist elements in the geopolitical discourse of the populists make this version of geopolitics border on biopolitics, an image of the world that reduces humans to their bare physical existence, placed outside the legal and sociopolitical frameworks and their complex rationalities. Thus, for theorists of biopolitical approaches, the category of 'zoe' or 'bare life' becomes paramount (see Makarychev's 2022 take on the geo- and biopolitics of populism). Incidentally, biopolitical images also resonate rather well with the drive for authenticity that is inherent in many populist strategies (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2020).

It may also be worthwhile noting here that this involves not merely a radical difference in ontologies between contemporary academic scientific realism, which relies on rational choice theory models to account for state behavior, on the one hand, and the biologizing or Social Darwinist discourse of the populists on the other. There is also the ensuing difference in approaches and end goals. 'Geopolitics' understood as geopolitical realism in the spirit of Kissinger implies a particular political style practiced by an apt statesman, who, while accepting the broadly pessimistic interpretation of the world as a dangerous place driven by conflict, works to minimize the negative effects of anarchy through clever even if cynical or morally dubious solutions, often seeking the 'lesser evil.'

To a significant extent, the intellectual project of the academic realists is also about actively rationalizing what Hans Morgenthau (1978) called the 'deficient reality' and about translating established political practice originating in the 19th century into 'scientific rules' (Guzzini, 1998, p. 11). Morgenthau's (1978) 'human nature' realism departs from an understanding of humans as driven primarily by fear and *animus dominandi* (the spirit of

domination), i.e., an essentialist anthropology that would certainly overlap with the basic techniques of the populist political style, with its constant appeals to the primordial and the emotional. Yet, in the end, the realist endeavor is, by and large, an attempt at rational and prudent management of the deeply imperfect world. On the contrary, populist and nationalist projects seem to have been very much about eagerly giving in to it. As Schweller (2006, p. 105) puts it, 'there are two very significant differences between fascism and realism, however: fascists did not believe in the balance of power and they activated realist principles with a racist ideology that, unfortunately for humankind, succeeded in mobilizing the passions of the multitudes.'

In the present-day context, one needs only to replace 'fascism' with 'right-wing populism' (or, in some cases, 'neofascism'), while the element of the emotional seduction of the masses obviously remains central. This has also motivated the recent 'emotional turn' in comparative politics, with researchers exploring the role of emotional appeal in populist rhetoric. Whilst it has been argued that right-wing populist forces can appeal to both negative and positive emotions (Gazarek & Uhrecký, 2023), issues pertaining to international politics and foreign policy are often framed in a negative way. A typical negative othering strategy here is directed at migrants and international migration, with fear being a powerful driver. For example, in Central and Eastern Europe, where migration from the Middle East is largely absent, right-wing populist othering is directed at the so-called 'imaginary migrant' (see Tabosa, 2020), and, consequently, as Kissová (2017) puts it, the Muslim Other can represent 'the essence of the unknown.'

Appeals to a fear of specific, even if practically unknown, others can be supplemented and reinforced by a more general collective anxiety triggered by the rapid dynamics of globalization. It is in this context that an ontological security scholar like Kinvall (2004, p. 747) discusses the idea of homesteading as 'a strategy for coping with homelessness,' which can involve falling back on the national community or the oftentimes largely imagined past (i.e., national Golden Age myths) serving as anchors of stability and certainty in a dangerous and unpredictable world. Thus, in line with the insights of ontological security theorists, populism can be understood as a (peculiar and unhealthy) anxiety management strategy. The local, the autochthonous, the traditional – whether real or invented – stands in juxtaposition to an image of the global that is largely hostile and threatening.

Anti-globalist conspiracy theories that are regular bedfellows of populist rhetoric (Castanho Silva et al., 2017) also naturally become part of this anxiety (mis)management strategy, joining the element of fear with the element of rationalization. Somewhat paradoxically, conspiracy theories also play a rationalizing role. They do so by providing their audiences with an (unfalsifiable) 'explanation' of dramatic and fearsome events, attributing them to a hidden malevolent grand plan, and thus performing an 'ontological security reconstruction' by offering people 'the sense of meaningfulness' (Lauzon Chiasson, 2021, p. 158; see also Fitzgerald, 2022). In the process, populist discourses construct a geopolitical image of the world that is obscure, dark, and dangerous, driven by only vaguely identifiable clandestine forces.

A notable example of such discourse is the political rhetoric of Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán. Orbán's so-called 'illiberal' political ideology, which copy-pastes many of its ideologuemes directly from Putin's Russia, combines copious othering of domestic 'liberals' with iterative references to 'globalists,' 'Eurofederalists,' or unnamed

global 'financiers,' who are then also frequently identified as George Soros, a global 'oligarch' in possession of a transnational 'empire.' All these vaguely named enemies are said to be in cahoots, working jointly to undermine Hungarian sovereignty (Enyedi, 2020; Lamour, 2023; Varga & Buzogány, 2020). If, as Fitzgerald (2022, p. 17) puts it, 'all conspiracy theories are applied chains of equivalence,' then Orbán's populist discourse is a remarkable specimen in this respect. Through overarching terms (nodal points) like 'empire' or 'liberalism', it manages to assert equivalence between events and entities as disparate, for example, as the Ottoman Empire and the European Union, weaving them into a single metahistorical narrative of the foreign oppression of the Hungarian nation.

The populist image of the world is thus 'geopolitical' in the sense that it relies on strong feelings of fear and individual and collective vulnerability. The world is a dangerous and hostile place, and the powerful populist leader is the people's best hope in it. This is also closely connected to another aspect of populist discourse, which binds together internal (domestic) and external (international) othering. As Cadier and Szulecki (2020) point out in their examination of Poland, the populist strategy hinges on drawing an antagonistic frontier, constructing 'the people' as the 'underdog' mistreated by the domestic elites ('the establishment') who are also portrayed as connected to foreign centers of power. At the same time, in terms of its 'memory politics,' populism often constructs the nation as a 'historical underdog,' a constant martyr suffering at the hands of its more powerful, predatory, and oppressive neighbors. This is particularly prominent in countries like Hungary or Poland, whose collective memory and memory politics are informed by a rich and dramatic tradition of self-victimization.

This internal-external underdog nexus is not only characterized by mutual reinforcement but also helps solve one practical problem faced by those populists who have already been voted into power. By externalizing the political locus of the purported 'elites' onto the regional or/and global level, they can continue to engage in anti-establishment rhetoric while remaining in government, simultaneously accusing their domestic opponents of being in cahoots with the alleged transnational adversaries.

The cultivated sense of collective victimhood and vulnerability thus logically needs to construct a Social Darwinist geopolitical image of a dog-eat-(under)dog world. The peculiar rationalization provided by conspiracy theories essentially hinges on irrational and emotional perceptions driven by fear; a feeling of uncertainty and confusion. Consequently, as pointed out above, this emotional driver seems to stand in distinct juxtaposition to the cold calculus of cynical rationalism preached by realist scholars and practitioners. However, the geopolitical appeal of the populist is also more complex: it is not limited to conspiratorial rationalizations stemming from fear and confusion, and the realist pretense of a rational grand strategy can also become part of it.

The cooptation of realist geopolitics runs along a different line but also parallels the populist authenticity drive with its promise of presenting a radical alternative to existing concepts, frameworks, and institutions. Here, it is developed into the trope of geopolitics as both a 'smart science' and a 'commonsensical' view of the world cleansed of the ideological delusions that were allegedly imposed on 'the people' by the various intellectual and political 'elites.' To some extent, this trope resonates with the internal grammar of the realists' own self-positioning within the academic discipline and the broader professional world.

Thus, the pretense of a supposedly non-ideological reading of politics seems to be as old as the realist school itself (cf. Morgenthau's [1978] concept of the 'fallacy of ideologies,' for example). As the prominent representatives of realism themselves acknowledge, the realist posture implies putting oneself in a privileged, authoritative position by drawing a frontier between the 'realists' and the 'idealists,' with the latter implying clearly negative connotations (Soomo, 2011). Hence, also the somewhat pejorative language of 'liberal illusions' or 'delusions' employed by some realists in their academic work and/or popular commentary. One characteristic example is a text by Götz (2015) entitled *It's geopolitics, stupid: explaining Russia's Ukraine policy*. The text, published shortly after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the first Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, delivers a standard structural realist narrative. The article juxtaposes this narrative with what 'we are told' about Putin's Russia and, along the way, makes claims about identifying its 'genuine national interest' (Götz, 2015, p. 5).

There is thus an element of intellectual 'populism', so to speak, inherent in the pretentious geopolitical-realist posture, especially when it comes to the popular commentary genre, which, in turn, tends to be less nuanced than the realists' own academic theories. Realists claim privileged access to a 'reality,' which, it is implied, others are either too inept to see or deliberately choose to ignore or even conceal. This inherent grammar of realist self-positioning clearly parallels one of the central features of political populism, which is its claim to the exceptional representation of the people, who are separated by the antagonistic frontier from the 'elites.' Thus, populism 'presumes the existence of a recognizable (and implicitly consensual) universal good, and on the other hand, it claims for itself the ability to identify and defend the good (monopoly on truth). There is something exclusive in the relationship between the people and the populist actor' (Havlík, 2019, p. 317).

Consequently, populist discourse and realist reasoning operate in parallel when it comes to the logics of 'commonsensicalization,' depoliticization, and naturalization. For instance, 'technocratic' entrepreneur populists like Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, who famously promised to 'run the state as a firm,' build their 'anti-political' and anti-party strategy on promises of 'a-political expert solutions that will benefit the "ordinary people"' (Buštíková & Guasti, 2018, p. 304). Depoliticization, performed through claims of exclusive expertise and a managerial rationale, thus works to suspend pluralism and democratic deliberation (Havlík, 2019).

Realist depoliticization operates through appeals to the purported objective – structural or 'natural' factors such as the distribution of material capabilities or geography, which, as classical geopoliticians posited, 'does not argue. It simply is' (Spykman, 1938, p. 236). This allows the realist reasoning to identify 'genuine national interests' (see above) that stem from the allegedly objective reality of geopolitics (stupid!) and not from political deliberation or political choices made, let us say, about international amities and enmities.

Technocratic populism largely parallels what Evgeny Morozov (2013, p. 5) calls solutionism, i.e., 'recasting all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized.' Arguably, a distinctive trait of populism – both the technocratic and identitarian breeds – is the seduction of quick and seemingly smart solutions based on 'common sense.' This is the common sense that the populist typically claims to share with the ordinary people – but not with the 'elites' who are said to be lacking it or deliberately ignoring it in pursuit of their own agendas.

Similar to populism, realism typically positions itself as the voice of practical cleverness and common sense. However, the construction of 'common sense' in realism often also rests on simplifying the complex sociopolitical reality. This is how the realist commentary attracts criticism for its 'epistemic superimpositions' and a selective and inconsistent (pseudo)empiricism that is quick to overlook uncomfortable facts and avoids being exposed to the test of falsifiability (e.g., Dutkiewicz & Smoleński, 2023).

The overlaps between populism and realist geopolitics in terms of their solutionism and 'commonsensicalism' are clear, but the mutual appeal does not end there either. In parallel, there also operates the mystique trope of geopolitics as not only a 'smart' but somewhat sacred or esoteric science. This is closely connected to the visual and performative aspects of knowledge production and its popular portrayals. In this context, Kurowska (2024, p. 9) writes about 'magical realism' as a ritualized performance of international relations expertise which combines academic discourse with a 'ritual mastery' that involves depicting 'authoritative figures' wearing 'wise faces.'

For a proper example of how populism publicly co-opts realism, one can look to the mutual endorsement of John Mearsheimer and Viktor Orbán. The Hungarian P.M. does not merely revert to a geopolitical discourse, for example when he talks about different 'poles' or 'centers of power' in the European context or about his country being 'caught in the crossfire between major geopolitical players' because of 'NATO expansion' and the 'geopolitical significance of the war' (About Hungary, 2022). In 2022, Orbán also invited Mearsheimer, whom the pro-government websites solemnly introduced as 'world-renowned' and 'one of the most influential experts on international relations of our time' (MTI- Hungary Today, 2022), to join him in the Carmelite Monastery in Budapest for 'an informal discussion' on the Russo-Ukrainian war. The meeting was shown taking place in a room against the background of a bookshelf and a giant globe, performing the visual symbolism of geopolitics as a 'serious science.'[1]

Finally, there is yet another way in which populist and geopolitical discourses can mutually resonate. This aspect speaks back to the aforementioned complaints of the realists about the liberal democratic political culture not being particularly receptive to the realists' image of the world (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 24–25). It seems that, in this case, the realists might also be being unnecessarily modest about the outreach of their philosophy. The situation may, in fact, be more complex as, arguably, cynicism and immorality can also have a distinct mass appeal of their own. Thus, though technocratic populism is about drawing a moralistic frontier (Havlík, 2019, p. 370), paradoxically, as researchers have demonstrated, it also releases citizens from moral expectations about their leaders (Buštíková & Guasti, 2018, p. 322).

Being allowed to leave the iron cage of morality, at least for a minute, can, in itself, be psychologically comfortable, but it can also involve an additional element of seduction due to its transgressive nature. Immorality and even deliberate cynicism, understood as a form of transgression, parallel rudeness, obscenity, and other forms of coarse, unrefined behavior. These can be read as forms of populist authenticity, which is also profoundly anti-elitist. In this context, Gaufman (2018, p. 412) discusses 'carnival culture,' which allows

[1] I am grateful to Filip Ejdus for tipping me off about this moment of visual symbolism.

people 'for a short period of time, to experience the freedom an individual is usually deprived of.' The carnival culture of Trumpist populism thus becomes an anti-establishment, anti-official 'counter-culture.'

The geopolitical image of the world, with its international anarchy and dog-eat-dog behavior, sets the perfect stage on which the populist 'sage' can pose as a Nietzschean or Machiavellian figure, shedding the shackles of morality. This relationship has multiple aspects. On the one hand, geopolitics offers populism a transgressive 'freedom' from moral norms. On the other hand, as already discussed above, the geopolitical image of the hostile world is isomorphic to that antagonistic vision of the domestic political order which populism offers to its voters. This is where populists in democracies can have a lot to learn from authoritarian regimes that also employ populist rhetoric. Thus, Viktor Orbán has borrowed massively from the ideological arsenal of Putinism. Yet, arguably, Putinist discourse on international politics, which many are quick to identify as 'realist,' resonates with a particular Russian worldview. That negative, pessimistic worldview is itself informed by the citizens' domestic political experience, which is characterized by oppression, a statist hierarchy, weak rule of law, and the selective application of rules.

4 Slovakia in the Visegrád Four: the geopolitics of a Slavic underdog

This section discusses identitarian populism and Pseudo-Pan-Slavist geopolitical legacies in Slovakia. The case was chosen because of its rich empirics and the fact that Slovakia has, at times, been seen as an outlier in CEE, owing to its somewhat troubled post-Communist transition, which was complicated by nationalist populism in the 1990s. At the time of writing (2024-2025), concerns about Slovakia's democratic backsliding were re-emerging (Maďarová, 2024).

On the one hand, compared to other V4 states often discussed in the context of right-wing populism, Slovakia seems to be defined by the absence of both territorial traumas (Hungary) and historical traumas coupled with nationalistic messianism (Poland), i.e., those ideologies that easily serve as 'hosts' to populism. Arguably, the shared Czechoslovak legacy of the democratic First Republic (1918-1938) also plays a role in shaping the political culture. On the other hand, the comparison with the culturally and historically close Czechs also has its limits, as Slovaks have been known to be both more susceptible to pan-Slavist Russophilia and more socially conservative. This continued to be a central factor in the modus operandi of populist actors and informed the post-EU accession period trends, with a new collective subject – 'the conservative people' coming to life in Slovak politics – a subject constructed as being in a distinct juxtaposition to the 'liberal elites' (Maďarová & Hardoš, 2022).

Following the collapse of the communist dictatorship in 1989 and the 1993 Velvet Divorce that separated Czechoslovakia into two independent states, the Czech and Slovak polities had their own independent trajectories of transition. At the same time, they remained special neighbors, extremely close in cultural, linguistic, and societal terms, and their political systems were, to some extent, communicating vessels, with people, ideas, and discourses migrating frequently between countries. Symbolically, the technocratic

populist Andrej Babiš, mentioned in previous sections, one of the key political players in the Czech Republic from the 2010s onwards, was Slovak by origin, and his somewhat imperfect knowledge of Czech even became an object of public scrutiny and mockery.

Seen at a glance, the two cases may seem similar in virtue of their linguistic proximity, sharing the same Austro-Hungarian and Czechoslovak past, and being small CEE nations. Yet there have also been important differences in terms of their historical development and its lasting impact on the present-day Czech and Slovak political cultures. These differences translate into 'diverging patterns of illiberalism and anti-EU politics' (Guasti, 2021, p. 181). Different here have been the very ways in which the identity of a small country and its positioning in terms of the European core-periphery axis have been conceived in domestic narratives. This predictably impacts both the local populist strategies and ways in which they relate to geopolitical agendas and imaginaries.

Thus, researchers argue that the Czech tradition of the moral understanding of politics, shaped by presidents Václav Havel and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, led to a certain 'anti-geopolitical' mood involving an aversion to geopolitics (see Drulák, 2006). Obviously, this did not mean a complete absence of geopolitics from politics. Populist parties and actors have co-opted geopolitical reasoning into their discourses of danger, often connected to the traditional theme of smallness and vulnerability that is also typical across the region. Thus, Tomio Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), which is known for its anti-globalist and 'sovereignist' stance, has explained its lenient approach to Russia by the wish to avoid dragging the small country into a great power rivalry from which it would inevitably suffer (Kroc, 2021).

This rhetoric has thus functioned much along the lines of the logic discussed above, i.e., connecting images of a dangerous geopolitical world to the notion of an 'underdog' people that the populists have championed domestically. This geopolitical reasoning is typically translated into the promotion of Euroscepticism and, following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the promotion of neutrality and immediate peace negotiations.

The Slovak case naturally exhibits similarities with the Czech one insofar as its smallness is concerned. Among other things, this allowed the local populists to exploit the post-2022 fear of being dragged into war, with some of the discursive strategies in this respect being visibly copied and pasted from the arsenal of the Czech populists (Hopková, 2024). There are important differences, however, that are rooted deeply in history and long-term patterns of identity formation that date back to the 19th century. In comparison to the Czechs, the Slovaks have been much more susceptible to anti-Westernist (pseudo-) pan-Slavist Russophilia, which successfully survived into the 21st century (see Marušiak, 2023). The 19th-century national movement leaders had a tendency to define Slovak identity in juxtaposition to the West. As Bátora (2017, p. 139) puts it, they 'constituted the Slovak nation around an erroneous narrative placing Slovakia on the intersection between "the East" represented by an imaginary Slavic community led by Russia and the West with its feudal and later liberal democratic institutions.' The lasting ambiguity about Slovakia's geopolitical self-positioning manifested itself in the all too well-known words of the populist authoritarian prime minister Vladmír Mečiar, who, in the 1990s, (in)famously responded to international criticism by declaring: 'if they do not want us in the West, we will turn to the East' (Duleba 2005, p. 331).

Consequently, right-wing populists and neofascists in Slovakia repeatedly questioned its Western orientation. Thus, the Slovak National Party (SNS) has presented itself as 'an antiestablishment nationalist party' whose approach has been characterized 'by skepticism toward foreign policy elites and Slovakia's established mainstream foreign policy agenda' as well as by Russia-friendliness and an adherence to 'pan-Slavism.' SNS castigated the EU for exerting 'excessive influence to the detriment of nation-states, contributing to a loss of autonomy, security, and cultural identity and putting Slovakia in a "subservient" position' (Kudzko, 2024).

For the sake of objectivity, it should be noted here that not all actors that have been labeled by researchers as populist in Slovakia embraced anti-Western Russophilia, and the possibilities of a pro-Western populism remained open (see Pažma & Hardoš, 2023). However, the most radical identitarian populism does tend to adhere to this pattern (see Gyárfášová, 2018; Paulovičová & Gyárfášová, 2024). Thus, People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), a party with distinctly neofascist origins, launched petitions to organize referenda on leaving the EU and NATO, which the party called 'a criminal organization.' ĽSNS propaganda materials were particularly rich in conspiracy geopolitics, drawing antagonistic frontiers between Slovakia and the rest of the world, which was said to be ruled by 'financiers,' 'Zionists,' and other 'global elites' (Kazharski, 2019, p. 400).

Furthermore, starting from the 2015 European migration crisis, which served as a trigger (Braun, 2021), mainstream parties in Slovakia and other countries of the region started coopting identitarian agendas that were traditionally the bread and butter of far-right political forces. This also applied to those parties that officially declared themselves to be left-wing. Thus, Robert Fico's Direction-Social Democracy, which was long characterized by a 'misalignment between its proclaimed social democratic orientation and the significant conservative orientation of its political practice,' shifted drastically in the direction of 'the agendas of conservative and right-wing populist parties' (Marušiak, 2021, pp. 39, 43), relying increasingly on nationalism, anti-liberal and anti-progressivist rhetoric, and strengthening its pro-Moscow position (Marušiak, 2023, p. 345). Its vice-chairman, a self-proclaimed leftist and anti-globalist philosopher, Ľuboš Blaha, was well known for his strong anti-US and pro-Russian public statements (Marušiak, 2023, p. 343). Fico himself, now frequenting obscure disinformation media platforms, laid blame on the West and Ukraine for starting the war, co-opting Kremlin propaganda tropes about 'Ukrainian Neo-Nazis' and 'the murder of the Russians in the Donbas' being the causes of the war (Čorej & Hrivňak, 2024).

Following its victory in the 2023 parliamentary elections, the winning coalition halted Slovakia's military assistance to Ukraine. SMER-SD and their allies capitalized on the fear of war and mimicked the strategy of the Czech populists in terms of presenting their rivals as 'candidates of war' while using peacenik rhetoric and promises 'not to send a single Slovak soldier to Ukraine' (TASR 2024). SMER-SD also predictably embraced the Mearsheimerite narrative that normalized and rationalized Russia's aggression by talking about Moscow's 'legitimate' security concerns in the face of 'NATO expansion.' According to Fico, as a Slav himself he felt sad that 'Slavs were being slaughtered (*kántria sa*) because of some geopolitical interests' (TA3, 2024). On the second anniversary of the full-scale invasion, the prime minister reiterated that military victory over Russia was impossible and that 'Slavs were killing Slavs' while 'the West was supporting that' (Rusnáková, 2024).

There is a recurrent trope in the Slovak discourse, typically picked up by the anti-Western far-right, about the EU and NATO striving to victimize Slavs, to impoverish and 'enslave' them (Krekó et al., 2015, p. 39). It can refer to Slovakia or Russia, but also to Serbia, presented as another victim of the West. In 1999, NATO's Operation Allied Force became the subject of domestic political debate in Slovakia owing to the incumbent government's decision to provide Slovak airspace for the strikes. Some parties actively played 'the Slavic card' (Mesežnikov, 2001, p. 26), with 'the nationalist-populist forces speaking about the values of Slavic solidarity and preventing Islam from infiltrating Europe' (Slávikovᡠcit. in Marušiak & Gniazdowski, 2015, p. 108).

The ghost of pan-Slavism thus continues to haunt Slovak politics into the 21st century. However, its peculiar nature stems from its 19th-century origins. Firstly, the 'Slavic community,' as envisioned by the national revivalists, was most certainly 'an imaginary one' (Bátora, 2017, p. 139), as it grouped the Slovaks together with the Russians based on the linguistic criterion and set them apart from their immediate neighbors, such as the Austrian Germans or Hungarians, with whom they had more in common in cultural and political terms in comparison to the more distant Russians. Secondly, it was also predominantly Russo-centric. As Marušiak (2023, p. 331) has put it, 'Slovakia is an example of a country in which Slavophilic discourse has amalgamated with pro-Russian discourse.' Consequently, he is most accurate in identifying it as pseudo-Pan-Slavism (PPS) as, in its imagination, it overlooks other Slavic-speaking nations that may not necessarily be historically on good terms with Russia and thus do not fit into the Russophile imaginary (e.g., Poland). In some cases, this pseudo-pan-Slavist discourse can even deny other nations that speak other Slavic languages the right to an independent existence separately from Russia (e.g., Belarus or Ukraine).

Finally, the PPS imaginary preserves a visible continuity between the 19th and the 21st century in terms of the self-victimization mentioned above. The 19th-century Slovak Russophiles looked up to Russia as 'a protector of the interests of the oppressed Slavic nations in Central and Southeastern Europe' (Marušiak, 2013, p. 44). In a sense, not much has changed: 21st-century identitarian populism presents 'the Slavs' as victimized underdogs who are threatened by the West – either through direct military aggression or indirectly, through undesirable cultural influences such as 'gender ideology' (Maďarová & Hardoš, 2022). Therefore, PPS becomes not only a 'geopolitical doctrine the essence of which is a programme of cooperation between Slavic states' but also 'very much part of the protest mood.' It amounts to 'an identitarian and civilisationist response to the liberal version of globalisation and European integration, appealing to tradition and belonging on the basis of the linguistic and constructed cultural proximity of Slavic peoples in opposition to Western, non-Slavic peoples' (Marušiak, 2023, pp. 330, 335).

On the one hand, this situates the populist PPS geopolitics within the broader trend of identitarian ethnopopulism, characterized by its multiple new others (Vachudova, 2020), and on the other, places it in the context of so-called 'civilizationism' and 'civilizational geopolitics.' These discourses have also been popular in Russia in different forms since the 19th century (see Neumann, 2017). In the post-Soviet period, they developed into the doctrines of the 'Russian world,' used to legitimize Moscow's neo-imperial policies (see Laruelle, 2008; Kazharski, 2019). In line with the general 'ethnopopulist' trend, the traditional othering of neighboring nations is complemented or partially substituted here by

new others, e.g., gendered ones (see Gaufman, 2022). While it is true that much of PPS geopolitics in Slovakia is a development of the autochthonous 'political culture of "Slavic nationalism"' that is not necessarily directly sponsored by Moscow (Krekó et al., 2015, p. 39), multiple intimate connections do exist, both in terms of the historic origins and the more recent development of these discourses, which, in turn, facilitates the borrowing of Russian-originating pro-Kremlin narratives by the respective Slovak cultural and political milieus, sometimes even at the level of state-funded institutions (see Golianová & Kazharski, 2020).

5 Conclusion

One purpose of this article was to demonstrate that the connection between populist and geopolitical discourses in their various guises is far from accidental. They have multiple overlaps and points of attachment because they often share an inherent grammar. These points, however, cannot be reduced to one conceptual link. Thus, for example, conspiracy-theory-bred fear and identitarian othering, on which right-wing populism capitalizes, plug into the geopolitical discourse in a way that is distinct from the depoliticizing managerial rationale and 'solutionism' of technocratic populisms. The latter, in turn, overlaps with the self-presentation of geopolitics as an 'objective' science with a practical application, which many allegedly ignore to their own detriment. At the same time, it can be argued that these strategies also have a common denominator. They hinge on anti-establishment and anti-elitist frontier-drawing, as the ultimate villain in these strategies is the 'elites' – those domestic and 'global' elites who allegedly ignore or even actively try to mask geopolitical logics while pursuing their own selfish agendas.

The Slovak case study in the second part of the article demonstrates one way in which identitarian populism can be rooted in a 'civilizationist' geopolitical discourse. In Slovakia, the Russocentric nature of its pseudo-Pan-Slavism has resulted in it being repeatedly used to justify the country's connection to the 'East' and to Russia, framed as the authoritarian or 'illiberal' alternative to the liberal-democratic 'West.' This lingering pseudo-Pan-Slavist discourse is akin to the Russian civilizationist discourses, with their nativist, biologizing, and racist 19th-century origins. This, in turn, situates the Slovak case within the broader trend that some classify as 'ethnopopulist,' with links between identitarian populism and geopolitics remaining strong.

At the same time, the regional survey provided in the first part demonstrates that identitarian-civilizationist populism is but one possible way in which populist and geopolitical discourses can synergize. In this sense, we cannot speak of a uniform template, and the attachment between the two is likely but not always necessary – and nor does that attachment exhaustively characterize populism as such. Being a 'thin' ideology or a political style with an inherent grammar but lacking a consistent doctrine, populism can naturally avail itself of a broader repertoire of tropes and ideas, and can, of course, also be infused with moralistic (as opposed to realist, technocratic, or transactionalist) rhetorics. One can also fairly easily imagine an anti-geopolitical populism. A broader survey of the interplay between these varying attachments seems to be a promising agenda for future research.

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Measuring populist style in visual communication: The case of Viktor Orbán

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on the style of populists by focusing on the visual and textual elements of Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication. Orbán is one of the most prominent figures associated with contemporary populism, and his 14 consecutive years in power make him a unique case for the study of the bimodal populist style. To this end, all his image-based posts (N = 492) were collected over a three-year period (2018-2020), covering campaigns, the COVID-19 crisis, and slow news ('cucumber') periods. The results of the quantitative visual and verbal content analyses reveal the primacy of visual content in transmitting populist signals, suggesting that Orbán's relationship with 'the elite' is predominantly positive, contrary to expectations about negative populist communication about elites. Although the results indicate only moderate differences in the use of populist style elements across the three time periods, the findings suggest that visual elements are used in populist communication to convey different messages than textual ones.

Keywords: visual politics, populism, bimodality, Facebook, content analysis, social media

1 Introduction

Although there is increased interest among academics in the study of populist communication, most approaches to populism (e.g. de Vreese et al., 2018; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004) define the concept in a way that emphasizes only verbal messaging. In this study, we argue that Moffitt's (2016) populist style approach, with its strong emphasis on the performative dimensions of communication, can be applied to both visual and textual communication. While the performative aspect of political communication has already been addressed in some analyses (see Bucy and Dumitrescu, 2017; Hall et al., 2016), Moffitt (2016) places it at the center of populist communication through three main elements: 1. appeals to 'the people' vs. 'the elite', 2. crisis, breakdown, and threat communication, and 3. bad manners.

Therefore, we translated Moffit's (2016) conceptual framework into a bimodal (image-based and verbal) coding scheme[1] and tested its viability by examining one of the most prominent figures associated with contemporary right-wing populism (Körösényi & Patkós, 2017; Mudde, 2016) in the form of Viktor Orbán's visual Facebook communication. To obtain a comprehensive and complex understanding of Orbán's populist style, the research spans a three-year period that includes elections, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and several slow news months without election campaigns or crises, known in media politics as cucumber time or season.

Orbán's anti-elitist approach is often discussed in the literature based on his verbal communication (see Enyedi, 2016). However, in this study, we aim to provide a broader picture and understand (RQ1) how his visual and textual communication on Facebook fits the populist style approach (Moffitt, 2016). Specifically, we focus on (RQ2) the differences between verbal and visual components of posts to see whether populist elements are communicated differently across modalities, and we investigate (RQ3) how the application of populist communication is conditioned by political situations (campaign, COVID-19, cucumber time).

Findings indicate that Moffitt's (2016) categories appear to different degrees in Viktor Orbán's social media communication. One of the three main categories, i.e., *Appeals to 'the people' vs. 'the elite'*, was represented particularly well in Orbán's posts but with a rather unexpected twist. Although we found no remarkable differences across the investigated periods in the use of populist elements, the results show that the most frequently used populist features were more extensively communicated via visual cues than verbal expressions. Further, our study indicates that the visuals in populist communication are used to deliver different messages than verbal elements, e.g., the supposedly 'bad elites' are not as negatively depicted visually as verbally, and enemies do not appear in the visuals.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Approaches to populism

The concept of populism has always been essentially controversial (Canovan, 1981). The variety of approaches defines populism as, among other things, a *thin-centered ideology* (Mudde, 2004), a *political strategy* (Weyland, 2001), a *discourse* (Laclau, 1977; Hawkins, 2009), a *communication phenomenon* (de Vreese et al., 2018), and a *style* (Moffitt, 2016). One of the most important commonalities of these conceptualizations is the emphasis on the opposition between 'the elite' and 'the people.' However, the different approaches yield distinct analytical frameworks for studying populism, with varied ideas about who can be considered a populist, how populism emerges, and what its sources are.

By applying Mudde's (2004) *actor-centric minimal definition*, and the examination of party manifestos, speeches, or the content of political actors' websites (Pauwels, 2017), scholars have been able to identify and compare populist parties and leaders with

[1] See the coding scheme here: https://osf.io/5wuv4/?view_only=54b6d5240e0c43d393546ff213faadda

non-populist actors in different countries (see Akkerman et al., 2016; Mudde, 2007). The *strategic approach* focuses on how leaders seek and maintain political power under different national, economic, and social circumstances (Weyland, 2001). By applying fuzzy-set theory (Weyland, 2017), it is possible to define the level of populism among political actors. Although the origins of the *discourse approach* (Laclau, 1977) include visual symbols, in current populism research, the primary focus remains on the appearance of verbal messages that create a divide between ordinary people and elites across time and countries (Hawkins, 2009). From a different perspective, de Vreese and colleagues (de Vreese et al., 2018) describe populism as a communication phenomenon, a combination of ideological and discursive dimensions, and focus on the frequency of content and style features. By applying content analysis, the degree of populism on different platforms can be described (Engesser et al., 2017a; Ernst et al., 2017).

Accordingly, although some approaches describe visual elements as part of the populist toolkit, most of these are rooted in the operationalization of verbal communication: their empirical focus is mostly limited to the verbal content elements of communication. This is a crucial shortcoming since scholars such as Schill (2012), Barnhurst and Quinn (2012), and Grabe and Bucy (2009) have highlighted the importance of visuals in politics for more than a decade. Recently, researchers have started to recognize the urgency of investigating visuals in political communication, or, as Bucy and Joo (2021) call this area of study, "visual politics." As Moffitt (2022b) argues, it is time to take visuals seriously if we want to get a "full picture" of populism.

2.2 Visual populist communication

Recently, scientific efforts have been made to define and operationalize visual populism. Images – just like verbal messages – are used to negatively emotionalize through the negative depiction of "the others" (Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), to amplify negative implicit social stereotypes (Arendt et al., 2015), and to broadcast symbolic and economic threats (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). This means that visual elements can effectively reinforce the negative image of certain enemies of 'the people.' Furthermore, not only can the visual depiction of negative emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment be disseminated without national or language barriers (Hokka & Nelimarkka, 2019), but images are also able to blur and camouflage explicit radical populist narratives by not providing explanations of the cultural context of the scenes therein depicted (Freistein & Gadinger, 2020).

Accordingly, images are useful tools for conveying messages that are not even verbally expressed and can be understood without specific language skills. Visuals are also used to highlight populists' closeness to 'the people' (Gimenez & Schwarz, 2016). Visual markers and signifiers in populist communication are clearly tools for depicting "us and them" (Salojärvi et al., 2023). Moreover, there are differences in the depictions of 'the people' by left- and right-wing populists: the latter depict a more homogenous image of 'the people' than the former (Moffitt, 2022a). Another visual populist feature is the frequent depiction of the leader (Herkman, 2019), whose appearance – including clothing, facial expressions, etc. – symbolizes and embodies both ordinary and extraordinary traits (Casullo, 2020; Mendonça & Caetano, 2020). Although the leader-centric nature of pop-

ulism is also known in the literature, with a focus only on verbal elements (Engesser et al., 2017b), studies on the visual elements of populism could add nuance to this finding (see Piontek and Tadeusz-Ciesielczyk, 2019).

As useful as these fragmentary findings are, they do not provide a comprehensive or integrated understanding of populist communication. They highlight certain crucial visual elements associated with populist communication, but they are less connected to any of the more general conceptual frameworks of populism.

To this end, we apply Moffitt's (2016) conceptualization of populism as a political communication style. This approach can fill gaps related to both multimodal analysis and theoretical soundness through describing the populist style as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 46). The main advantage of Moffit's (2016) approach is the detailed, theoretically grounded description of style elements, built on a comprehensive theoretical review of populism as a style. Reference to populist style here includes not only substantive elements of communication but also a focus on how it is performed, thereby providing a multimodal interpretative framework. According to Moffitt's (2016) description, populism is "not a particular entity or 'thing' but a political style that is done" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 155). Its three main characteristics are: 1. appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'; 2. 'bad manners'; and 3. crisis, breakdown, or threat. These main dimensions encompass a variety of subcategories of populism, such as leader-centeredness, the leader's ability to simultaneously display ordinariness and extraordinariness, closeness to 'the people' and distance from 'the elite,' the creation of crises and enemies, and an oversimplification of complex social and political issues. These features can be communicated through both verbal and visual cues. Consequently, the style-based approach allows researchers to include both verbal and visual aspects of populism by focusing on performers, audiences, stages, and *mise-en-scènes*.

2.3 Viktor Orbán's populism

As of 2025, Viktor Orbán has been the Hungarian Prime Minister for 15 years with a supermajority in parliament. Accordingly, Orbán's longevity in power and his charismatic, populist leadership have attracted the attention of academics from varied perspectives. His populism is mainly described from the perspective of ideology and discourse (Bozóki, 2015; Enyedi, 2015), being characterized as nationalist, anti-liberalist, and anti-elitist, with signs of both left- and right-wing populism (Enyedi, 2015). From the communication perspective, Orbán's rhetoric is based on fear, dread, and hatred (Sükösd, 2022), while the main enemies of Hungary are Brussels, Soros, the liberal opposition parties, the LGBTQ community, and migrants (Metz, 2022). His populist stylistic verbal elements include frequent references to common sense, a personal tone, slang phrases, and bad manners with non-conformism (Körösényi et al., 2020). These findings are mainly based on campaign research. However, it is also known that Orbán's verbal communication on Facebook during the COVID-19 period was heavily characterized by ordinary language and simplification (Bene & Boda, 2021), as well as the use of war-related metaphors (Szabó & Szabó, 2022).

Moreover, a recent visual discourse analysis revealed that the Prime Minister is constructed through his images on Instagram as an "everyday macho [person], who enjoys traditionally masculine food and adores football" (Szebeni and Salojärvi, 2022, p. 826). Another multimodal analysis showed that Orbán strategically builds his charismatic image on Facebook (Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2023). Consequently, Orbán's communication can be described as highly strategic and populist, and he employs multiple modalities to create his unique image, making him a suitable case for testing the populist style approach (Moffitt, 2016) and its dynamics. We expect all three dimensions of the populist style to emerge in Orbán's communication.

3 Research questions

Due to their different theoretical and analytical approaches, academic studies have so far only provided isolated insights into visual populism. We attempt to fill this gap by testing Moffitt's (2016) theory using the bimodal Facebook communication of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, a high-profile example of a populist political actor. The first research question underlying the research described in the paper is therefore as follows:

> RQ1: How well does Viktor Orbán's visual and textual communication on Facebook fit Moffitt's populist style approach?

Moffitt's (2016) political communication style provides a springboard for a more comprehensive investigation that allows the now scattered observations to be integrated into the framework of a theoretically grounded approach. Observations on both rhetorical and visual elements of communication can be treated as elements of populist style. Accordingly, our second research question is related to the visual and verbal elements of populist communication and is formulated as follows:

> RQ2: What differences are there between the visual and text messages in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts?

Although the current political context might influence the application of populist style, there is little knowledge about the temporal aspect of populist communication. Therefore, a further research question related to the use of populist communication over different periods is formulated. It is now known that verbal populist communication is often used as a strategic tool and is applied more actively before elections than after them (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). In the COVID-19 period, populist communication was used to reinforce the context of the crisis, create and highlight enemies such as the media and the elites (Burni & Tamaki, 2021), amplify the strong leadership and the leader's ordinariness, and emphasize the need to fight for national interests (Bene & Boda, 2021). However, this issue has not been studied in the context of specific political actors, and there is limited knowledge about populist communication outside of election campaigns. Accordingly, we formulate the following open research question:

> RQ3: Were there differences in Viktor Orbán's Facebook communication during the election campaign period, the COVID-19 crisis period, and the non-campaign period?

4 Method

This study can be described as a bimodal quantitative content analysis that assessed Viktor Orbán's use of populism in his Facebook image posts over three years to test the coding instrument we created, which may be a useful tool in a wider examination of populist style in the future. As moving images (GIFs and videos) require different methodological approaches (Rose, 2001), they were excluded from the present study. A coding instrument was developed comprising 92 verbal and visual categories. These are largely derived from Moffitt's (2016) conceptual work and supplemented by some other descriptive variables, such as the valence of posts, number of people depicted, and the actors who are depicted, which were taken from pre-existing content analyses of populism (Farkas et al., 2022). Further, the production characteristics of the images were also coded. These additional categories aimed to contextualize Moffitt's (2016) categories and help examine the basic visual characteristics of the posts. Our decision to focus on Orbán's Facebook profile is motivated by the popularity of this social media platform in Hungary and the prominent role of this site in Viktor Orbán's communication (see Merkovity et al., 2021). As for the audience, 76 percent of the Hungarian online population uses Facebook, and 53 percent of these users consume news on the platform (Newman et al., 2023). In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has been the most 'followed' political actor since he registered on the platform in 2010 (Bene & Szabó, 2021), with 1.1 million followers as of the end of 2020.

4.1 The sample

Given the aim of gaining insight into visual populism, this study treated individual image posts on Viktor Orbán's Facebook profile as the sampling units. Text posts that accompanied the sampled image posts were included in the sample. Therefore, the sample frame excluded text posts that appeared without images or posts that contained videos rather than still images. The sample was identified using CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook. A total of 495 still image posts were identified on Viktor Orbán's profile between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2020, representing 46 percent of all posts he published during this period. These three years were chosen for convenience (access to archived material) and strategic reasons. The time frame included two major events (elections and the emergence of COVID-19) that posed challenges to the leadership, thus presenting an opportunity to monitor populist trends on social media. As a basis for comparison, this period also provided ample opportunity to examine quiet news periods, known in media politics as cucumber time.

Three election campaigns took place during the study period: (1) the Hungarian Parliamentary (02/17/2018 – 04/08/2018), (2) European Parliamentary (04/06/2019 – 05/26/2019), and (3) Hungarian Local (08/23/2019 – 10/13/2019) election campaigns. The sample also included the entire first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (03/04/2020 – 07/17/2020) and more than half of the second wave (07/18/2020 – 12/31/2020). The COVID-19 periods were determined based on the work of Uzzoli and colleagues (2021), while the campaign periods are the official, legally defined timeframes for the election campaigns. Periods between

elections and before the pandemic were treated as cucumber time. The Campaign Period produced 86 image posts, the COVID-19 Period 176, and Cucumber Time was represented by 230 posts.

a) Coding instrument

The units of analysis were the individual posts from Orbán's Facebook account. An image post contained at least one image and typically included accompanying text content (96 percent with text). Most categories were applied separately to the image and text content. Superimposed text on the image was treated as part of the image and coded accordingly.

A few categories were designed to obtain descriptive insight. These include the valence (positive, negative, neutral, mixed) of posts as well as production variables related to the camera shot angle (high, eye-level, low) and the shooting distance (long, medium, close). The category system employed to assess populism was based on three dimensions conceptualized by Moffitt (2016) as 'the people' versus 'the elite', bad manners, and crisis, breakdown, and threat, but several individual categories that could easily be linked to this conceptualization were taken from prior content analysis (Farkas et al., 2022). Table 1 provides a summary of the operationalization of Moffitt's (2016) dimensions into individual categories, their frequencies in the posts, and their intercoder reliability scores. As mentioned earlier, most categories were operationalized to have both visual and verbal equivalents, allowing for comparison between the two modalities. In most cases, the presence or absence of a populist trait was captured by 'Yes' and 'No' options within the categories.

Table 1 Summary of the coding system based on Moffitt's (2016) populist style

Main categories		**Visual F (%)**[b]	**Verbal F (%)**[b]	**Visual K-α**[c]	**Verbal K-α**[c]
Appeal to 'the people' vs. 'the elite'					
Closeness to ordinary people[d]		27.0		0.90	
Sub-categories[a]	Individualized physical attention to people	1.6	0.4	1	1
	Approving audiences	0.6	0	1	1
	Vox pops	0	0	1	1
	Performative gestures/expressions of the leader	0.8	15.9	1	0.85
	Leader engaged in performative rituals	3.9	8.1	0.83	0.87
	Leader visiting the people	0	0	1	1
	Leader attentive to children of ordinary people	2	0.6	0.89	1

Table 1 *(continued)*

Main categories		**Visual F (%)**[b]	**Verbal F (%)**[b]	**Visual K-α**[c]	**Verbal K-α**[c]
Ordinariness[d]		79.5		0.96	
Sub-categories[a]	Rural setting	7.9	7.5	0.9	1
	Ordinary food	5.7	2.8	0.92	1
	Ordinary leisure	4.7	1.4	0.70	0.85
	Family of the leader	5.7	1.4	0.92	1
	Animals	0.8	0.2	1	1
	Sport events/language	0.8	1.2	1	1
	Humble personal background	0.4	0.4	1	1
	Agricultural activities	0.2	0	1	1
	Leader carrying a backpack	2.6	0	1	1
	Leader in informal clothing	33.7	0.2	0.96	1
	Leader in athletic clothing	0.2	0	1	1
	Leader associated with national symbols	37.2	10	0.86	0.84
	Religious symbols	11	13	0.89	0.98
	Leader denying expert opinions	0	0	1	1
Extraordinariness[d]		39.0		0.91	
Sub-categories[a]	Presence of celebrities	4.9	3	0.84	0.88
	Presence of other populist leaders	8.5	3.7	0.84	0.92
	Fitness/health displays	0.2	0.2	1	1
	Masculinity	5.3	0.6	0.85	1
	Graphication	1	0	1	1
	Accomplishments of the leader	3.7	13.2	0.85	0.87
	Mediatization of the leader	10.8	4.3	0.85	0.87
Elites[d]		67.7		0.92	
Sub-categories[a]	Setting signifying wealth	31.1	2.2	0.80	1
	Presence of the elite	50.8	31.7	0.84	0.84

Table 1 *(continued)*

Main categories		**Visual F (%)**[b]	**Verbal F (%)**[b]	**Visual K-α**[c]	**Verbal K-α**[c]
Bad manners		1.8		1.00	
Sub-categories[a]	Slang	0	1.2	1	1
	Swearing	0	0	1	1
	Political incorrectness	0.6	0	1	1
Crisis, breakdown, threat					
Enemies[d]		2.2		0.94	
Sub-categories[a]	Migrants	0	0.6	1	1
	Brussels	0	0.2	1	1
	George Soros	0	0	1	1
	Ferenc Gyurcsány	0	0	1	1
	Gergely Karácsony	0	0	1	1
	COVID-19	0	0.4	1	0.66
	Elites	0	0	1	1
	Other enemies	0.2	1.4	0.66	0.85
	Media	0	0	1	1
Priming threat[d]		15.7		0.92	
Sub-categories[a]	Border	0	1	1	1
	Armed forces	7.9	2.6	0.89	0.90
	Sounding the alarm	0.4	5.1	1	0.82
	Simplification	0	3.5	1	0.89

[a] The descriptions of the categories and examples are provided in the coding book: https://osf.io/5wu-v4/?view_only=54b6d5240e0c43d393546ff213faadda

[b] Frequency (Valid %)

[c] Krippendorff's alpha

[d] Not directly measured umbrella category based on the aggregation of the visual and verbal subcategories. Krippendorff's alpha values are based on this aggregation.

As the coding instrument is an essential element of the study, a summary of the three main dimensions and their sub-dimensions with some illustrative examples of posts is given below.

The people versus elites

To assess how Orbán represents 'the people' and 'the elite', four sub-dimensions were identified, each measured by several categories. First, the categories for closeness that were assessed demonstrated his comfort with regular people, signaling that the leader is one of them through physical access to him. Physical attention to ordinary people, being among them, visiting their homes and neighborhoods, paying attention to the children of regular people, giving voice to them, and using nonverbal gestures and expressions to acknowledge people, were included here. Figure 1 presents a visual example of individualized physical attention to ordinary people.

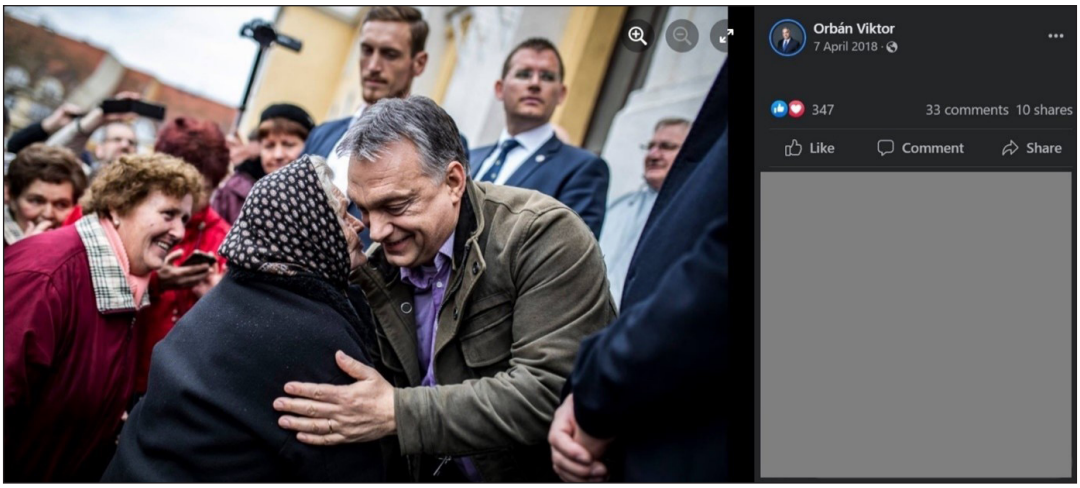

Figure 1 Example of visual closeness (individualized personal attention). Viktor Orbán's Facebook post, 04/07/2018.

Second and third, to capture the complexity of populist leaders positioning themselves as both one with the people and exceptional in comparison to ordinary people, self-depictions of ordinariness and extraordinariness were documented. The categories of ordinariness focused on the persona of the leader who shares the values (e.g., religion and national pride), passions, and interests of ordinary people. These include consuming food and drinks typically consumed by 'the people,' engaging in leisure activities that they enjoy (e.g. attending sporting events, spending time with family, caring for pets), wearing informal attire (e.g., sportswear, jeans, carrying a backpack), and dismissals of high-mindedness and expertise or embracing common sense. Emphasizing a leader's humble personal background and attachment to or appreciation of agriculture were also among the categories of ordinariness, as shown in Figure 2.

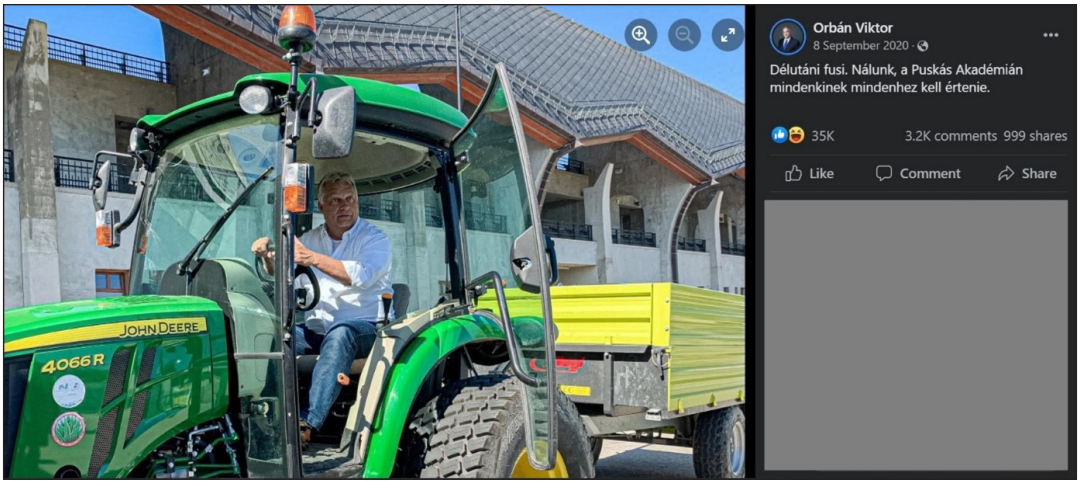

Figure 2 Example of ordinariness (appreciation of agriculture).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 09/08/2020 (Text post: "Afternoon moonlighting. Here at the Puskás Academy, everyone has to be competent in everything.")

The items on extraordinariness documented the self-representation of leadership qualities and personal prowess. As Figure 3 illustrates, with a depiction of Chuck Norris and the members of the Counter Terrorism Centre, familiarity with celebrities and masculinity were coded here, and the categories of physical fitness, media interest in the leader, and accomplishments were also considered indicative of extraordinariness.

Figure 3 Example of extraordinariness (celebrities, masculinity).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 11/27/2018.

Fourth, populist relations with the elites were tested using categories measuring their presence in the posts as well as settings that signal wealth and privilege. These two categories are shown in Figure 4.

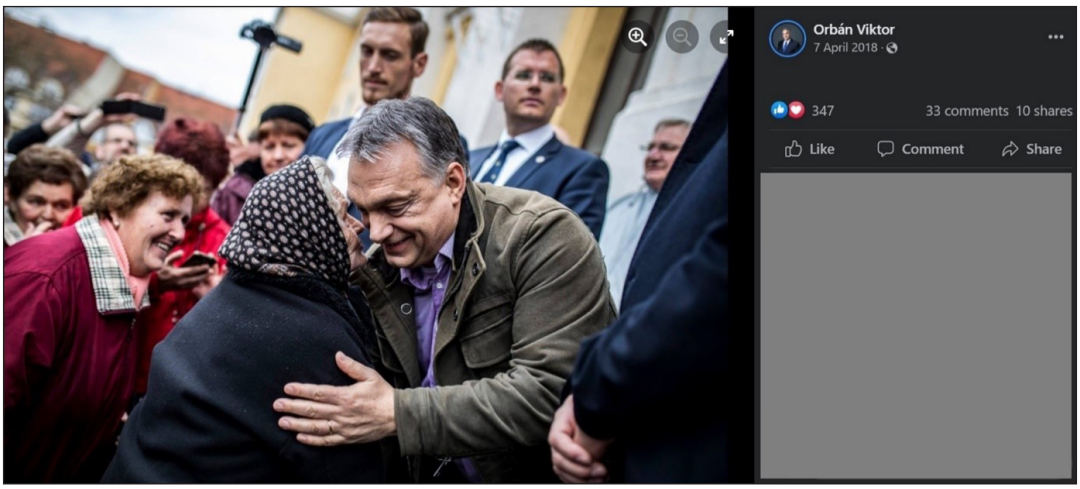

Figure 4 Example of the presence of the elites and setting signifying wealth. Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 02/04/2020

Bad manners

Three categories were developed to capture how populists distance themselves "from other political actors in terms of legitimacy and authenticity" (Moffitt, 2016, p. 60) by breaking unwritten rules. The use of slang, swearing, and politically incorrect statements was recorded in verbal posts. Visual images featuring written signs (e.g., held by supporters or depicted in graffiti) or visual manifestations of politically inappropriate behavior (e.g., inappropriate physical contact) were also counted here; the latter is demonstrated in Figure 5.

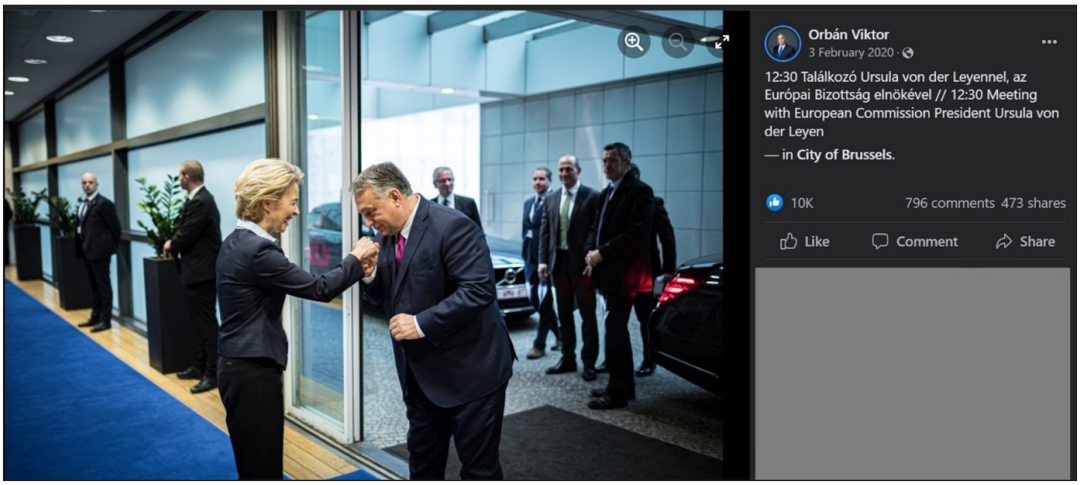

Figure 5 Example of visual bad manners (politically inappropriate behavior). Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 02/03/2020

Crisis, Breakdown, Threat

This dimension encompasses the populist tendency to create and maintain crises by communicating perceived or real threats. It was operationalized through four techniques: Constructing groups and individuals as threats, reminding followers of how a crisis is mitigated, exaggerating threats, and offering simplistic solutions to complicated problems. In Orbán's case, people and groups potentially on his 'enemies list' are migrants, George Soros, Brussels, two Hungarian opposition leaders, Ferenc Gyurcsány (ex-PM) and Gergely Karácsony (Mayor of Budapest), the media, and elites. COVID-19 and other unspecified enemies were also added to capture threat appeals. Threat mitigation included signals of protection from danger. Visual or verbal cues to the country's border and armed forces were recorded. Figure 6 is an example of the depiction of armed forces.

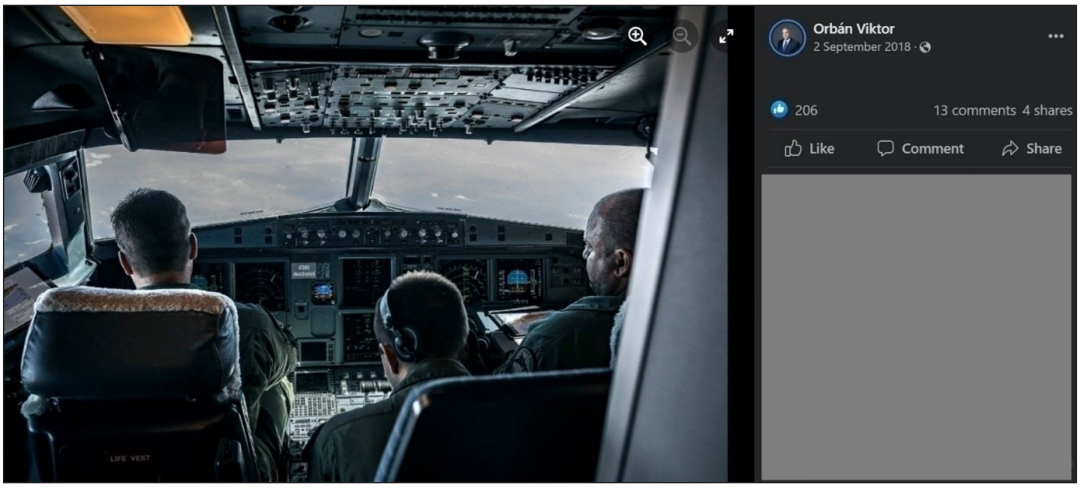

Figure 6 Example of crisis, breakdown, and threat (armed forces).
Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts, 09/02/2018

Alarmist posts that dramatize or exaggerate crises and dangers, as well as simplified and sweeping solutions to threats, were also coded.

As can be seen from the examples, it is possible to code a post into several categories. For example, the image of closeness not only depicts Viktor Orbán's physical closeness to people, but also his ordinariness through the Prime Minister's casual, everyday clothing.

b) Data collection

Posts were coded by two coders, a student of political science and one of the authors of this article. After two coder training sessions, a random subsample of 187 posts (38 percent of the total sample) was subjected to an intercoder reliability test, which yielded a mean Krippendorff's alpha of 0.91. Three variables that did not reach the acceptable value of 0.8 (visual leisure, verbal COVID-19, visual other enemies) were excluded from the data analysis.

However, in all cases where there were no observations for a variable, the intercoder reliability value was 1, meaning that both coders agreed on the absence of a particular aspect. The data were collected over the course of four weeks.

5 Results

a) Preliminary descriptive findings

Of the 495 image posts included in the sample, three images contained only text (e.g., only statistics, diagrams, or screenshots of laws and regulations) and were therefore excluded from analysis. Of the remaining 492 image posts, almost 96 percent were accompanied by a separate text post, and a further 1.8 percent contained text superimposed on the image posts.

Descriptive insights about the depicted actors suggest that Viktor Orbán's Facebook page is highly individualized and avoids presenting political enemies, as Figure 7 shows. The leader is presented in 77 percent of the posts, which means visual depiction in all cases, and verbal self-references are present only in five posts. Interestingly, the second most frequently depicted actors are the elites (57 percent), indicating that Orbán often presents himself with political and economic elites. In contrast, 'the people,' other populist leaders, and Brussels appear only in 10 percent of the posts. Supposed enemies of Viktor Orbán, such as George Soros, Ferenc Gyurcsány, and Gergely Karácsony, do not appear in the posts either verbally or visually at all, and even migrants are present in fewer than 1 percent of the posts.

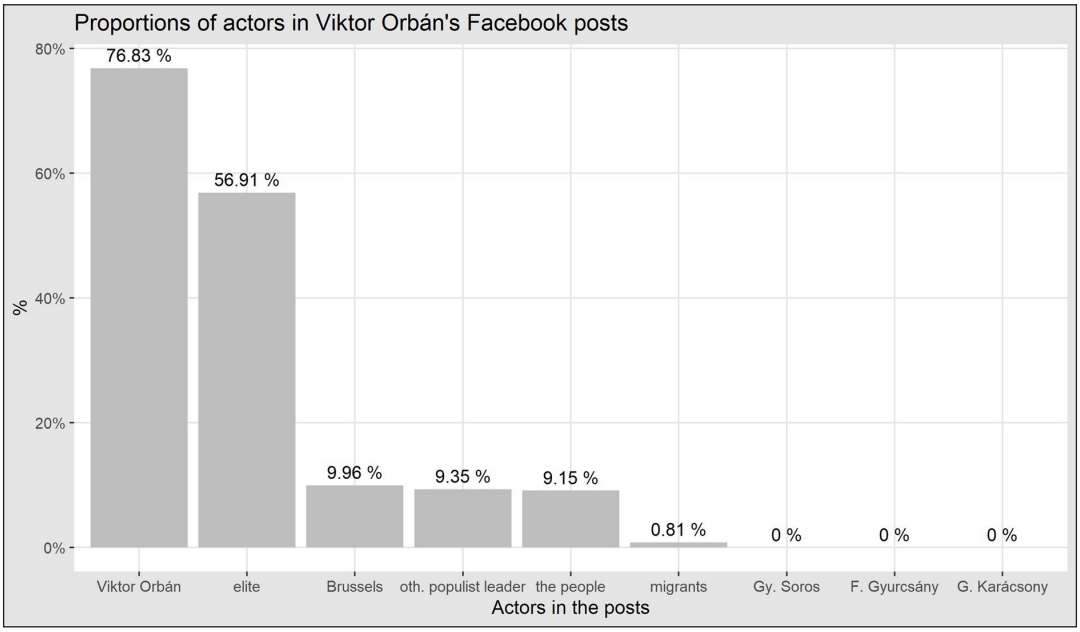

Figure 7 Actors presented in Viktor Orbán's posts

In posts featuring Viktor Orbán, these actor types appear in very similar proportions. The only significant difference relates to the elites: Orbán prefers to present himself in the company of other elite actors, as 68 percent of the posts show him with other important political or economic figures.

In terms of valence, the majority (63 percent) of posts were positive. Negative and neutral posts each accounted for 15 percent of the total, and 7 percent of posts contained a mixture of positive and negative tones. However, posts depicting the Prime Minister were significantly more emotional ($\chi 2 = 25.006$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$): While 55 percent of the posts that do not show Orbán are positive and 9 percent are negative, 65 percent of the posts in which he appears are positive and 17 percent are negative.

The majority of images in which the leader is depicted are medium-sized shots (77 percent), which suggests a personable but not intimate personal distance (see Meyrowitz, 1986). About 20 percent of the shots featuring Orbán were long shots, which are often used as scene-setting or 'establishing' shots without much opportunity for advancing personal connections between the leader and social media users. Only 1 percent of the shots were close-ups, suggesting Orbán's reluctance to use close-up para-proxemic cues in his posts.

Eye-level was the most common angle (90 percent) used in images of Orbán, followed by low (6 percent) and high (3.5 percent) angles. It appears that Orbán and his communications team do not tend to favor empowering people by portraying them from a low angle or diminishing them by shooting from a high angle (Meyrowitz, 1986).

b) Viktor Orbán's populist style

To answer our research questions, the data were collapsed along the major dimensions of conceptual interest and sub-themes such as people vs. elites (closeness, ordinariness, extraordinariness, elites), bad manners, and crisis communication (enemies, threats) (see Table 1). This approach enabled statistical analyses of aggregated dimensions despite low-frequency counts for many individual subcategories.

The first research question prompted us to investigate the extent to which Moffit's (2016) three dimensions of populist style are used in Viktor Orbán's bimodal Facebook communication. In general, as Figure 8 shows, the presence of each element in the post either visually or verbally suggests that Orbán's Facebook communication is mostly about 'the people' and 'the elite', while he clearly avoids bad manners and moderately focuses on potential threats.

Unpacking the details of the subthemes of the most frequently applied *Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite'* category reveals a slightly paradoxical but expected pattern. Orbán and his communications team have placed great emphasis on presenting his 'ordinariness', which was expressed in four out of five posts, while at the same time he presented elite actors in two out of three posts – somewhat in contrast to the image of 'ordinariness.' This contrast is also reinforced by the fact that extraordinariness appeared in 39 percent of posts, while closeness appeared in 27 percent. Thus, it seems that Orbán and his communications team play with a dual image on Facebook – one that is ordinary and accessible, but also extraordinary and embedded in the political elite. Moreover, this contrast is often made clear as the elements related to ordinary people –such as closeness and

ordinariness – appear together with the representation of the elites in 56 percent of all posts. Although it may seem paradoxical at first glance, similar patterns have been found with other populist leaders as well (see Mendonça and Caetano, 2020).

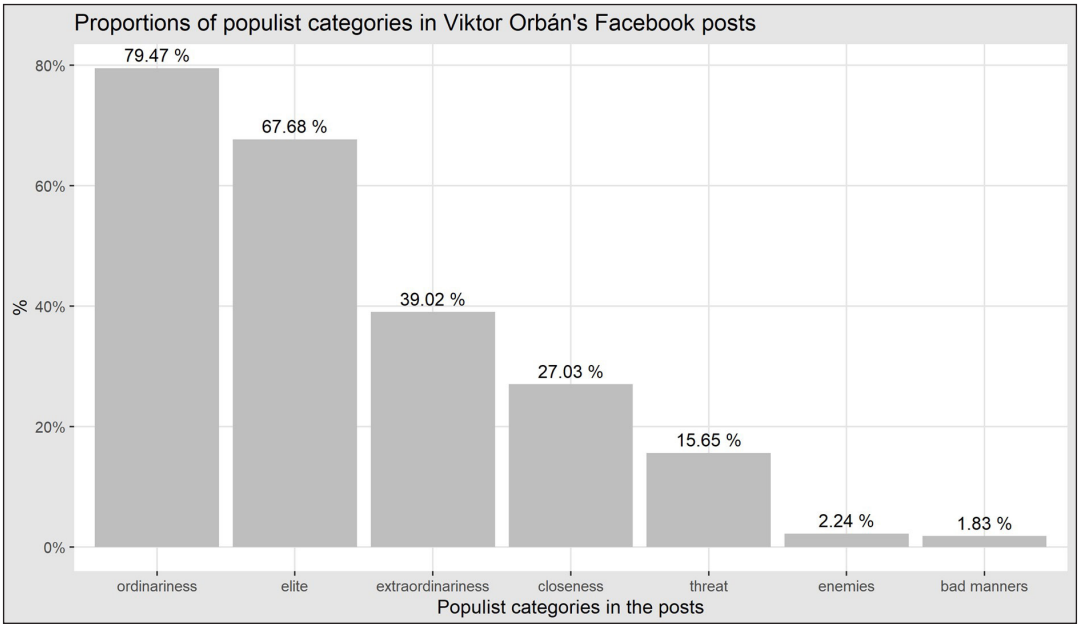

Figure 8 Proportions of populist categories in Viktor Orbán's posts

Nevertheless, this contrast is not a depiction of the conflict between ordinary people and the evil elites: 'the elite' in general is not necessarily portrayed negatively in Viktor Orbán's communication. Rather, they are more often portrayed in a positive context. Almost two-thirds of the posts featuring elites have a positive valence, and only 15 percent are clearly negative, with 8 percent having a mixed valence. Negative or neutral posts, in which both the elites and people-centric closeness or ordinariness categories are found, appeared in 14 percent of all posts. This means that the explicit contrast of 'the people' versus 'the elite' is not typical, but it is far from rare, with one in seven posts using this strong distinction. This may be due to Orbán's particular situation, since as an incumbent PM since 2010, it would be difficult to convey an undifferentiated anti-elitist stance.

All other categories are used less frequently, especially *Bad manners*, which appears in only 2 percent of all posts. *Crisis, breakdown, and threat* categories are present in 17 percent of all posts, while enemies are not frequently depicted in Orbán's image posts. In 18 percent of posts, at least two main categories are present, and only 3 percent of posts have no populist element.

As *Appeals to 'the people' versus 'the elite'* subthemes seem to be the most important part of Viktor Orbán's populist style, it is worth focusing in more detail on the variables in this general category. When looking at these subcategories specifically, it is important to keep in mind that the frequencies of some of these were extremely low. Therefore, their reliability values are mostly based on the absence of these elements rather than their presence.

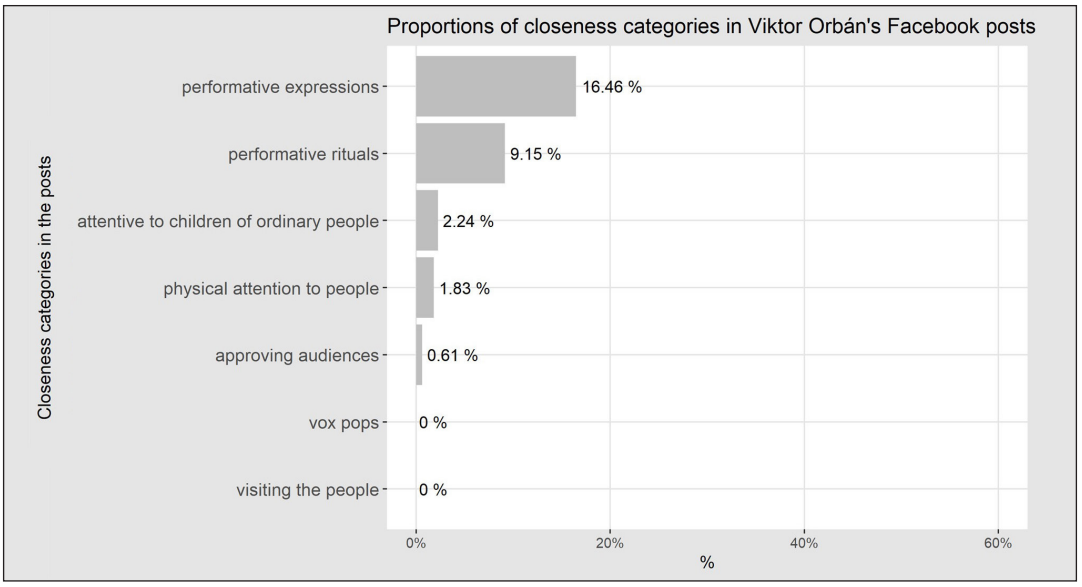

Figure 9 Detailed proportions of Closeness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Closeness categories in Orbán's posts appear primarily in performative rituals and expressions; other categories are rarely applied (Figure 9). In other words, closeness for Orbán is manifested in staged events rather than in more natural connections to ordinary people. Ordinariness appears in the forms of symbols, especially national symbols, through informal clothing and rural settings, which show that Orbán is similar in values and taste to his voters (Figure 10). Extraordinariness is shown primarily through media interest in the leader and the portrayal of his achievements (Figure 11).

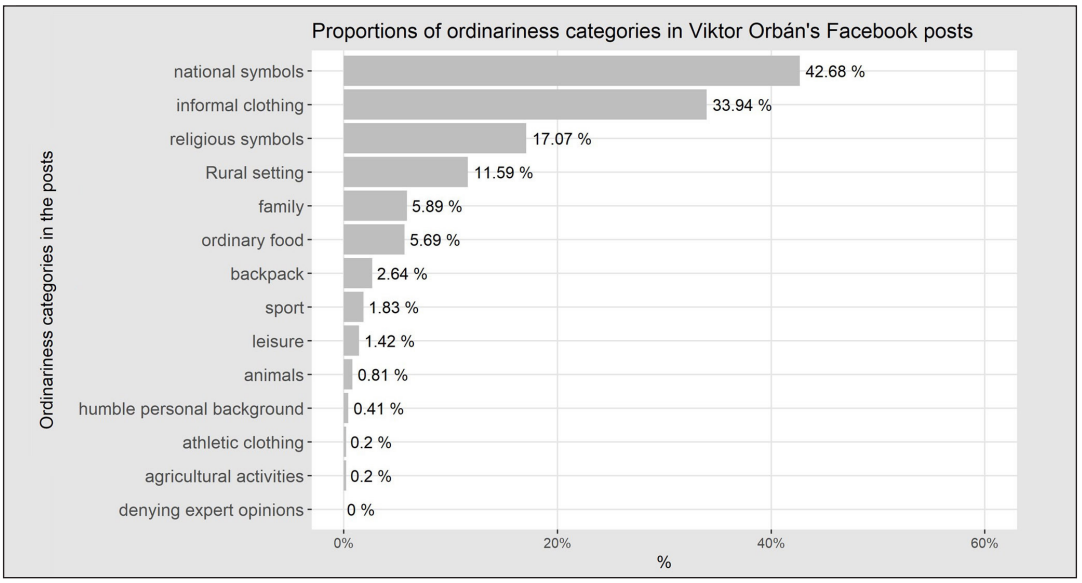

Figure 10 Detailed proportions of Ordinariness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

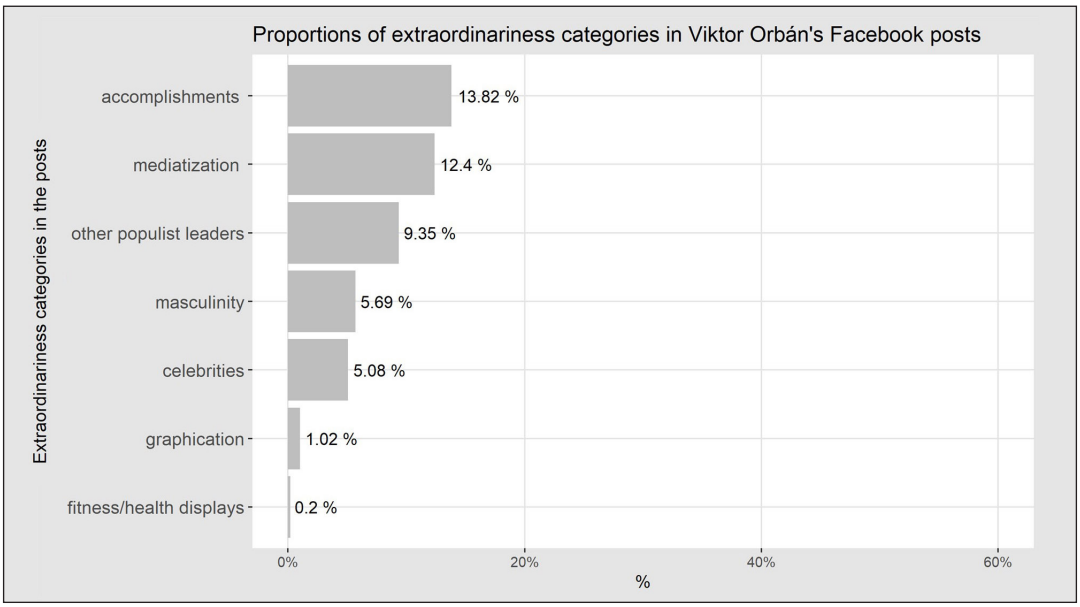

Figure 11 Detailed proportions of Extraordinariness categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Both components of the category 'the elite' are frequently used: In a significant proportion of posts (57 percent), some kind of elite actor appears, while the depiction of a wealthy environment occurs in one in three posts (Figure 12). This means that while Orbán emphasizes his similarity to ordinary voters, he also highlights his particular elite status through the surroundings in which he works.

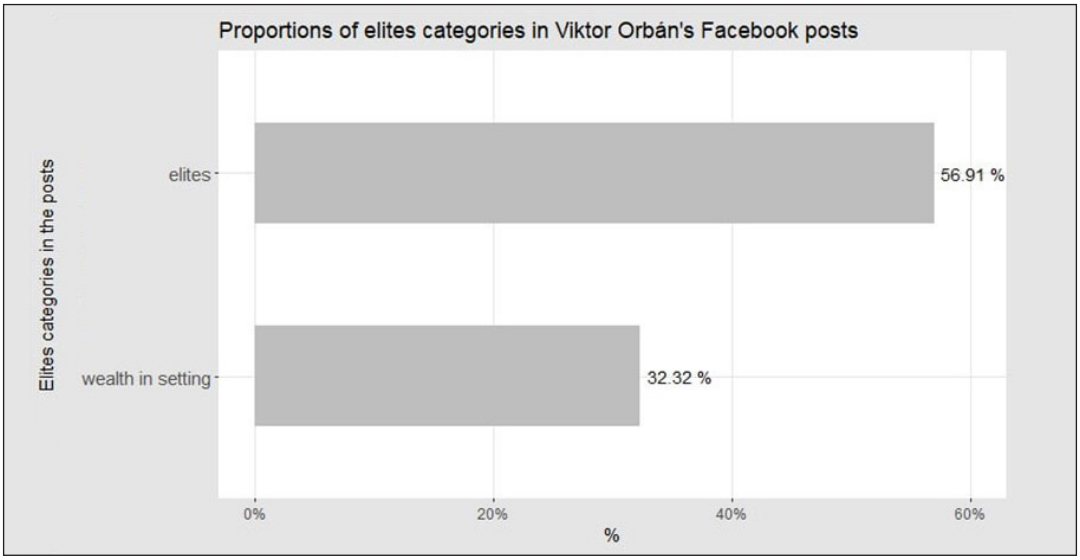

Figure 12 Detailed proportions of Elites categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

To answer the second research question, we examine our variables separately in terms of verbal and image-based communication. As Figure 13 shows, there are differences in the application of the categories based on the modalities.

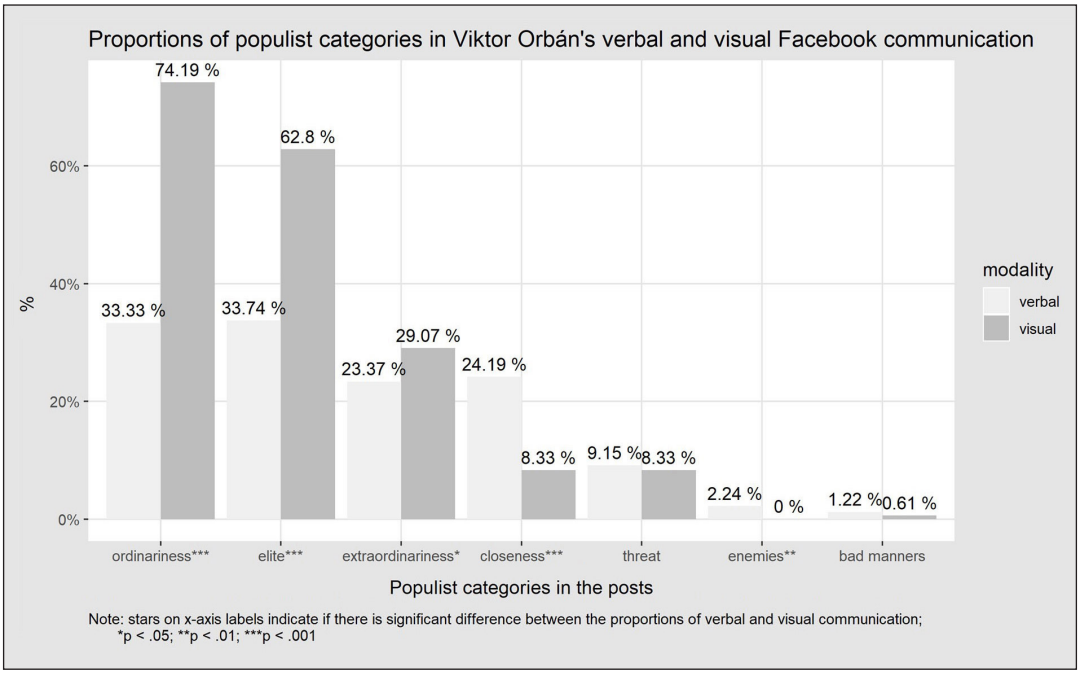

Figure 13 Proportions of visual and verbal populist categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts

Closeness is conveyed by the Prime Minister primarily verbally, while ordinariness and elites are presented much more visually in his posts. The results related to visual ordinariness can be understood if one considers that categories of ordinariness are mainly represented by symbols and clothing. Furthermore, it is important to see that elites and wealthy environments are mainly shown but not explicitly discussed in these posts. Further, smaller but still significant differences can be perceived between the more visually depicted extraordinariness and the only verbally represented enemy images, which, from this perspective, might be considered 'invisible enemies'. Bad manners and threats appear in similar proportions, verbally and visually.

Looking at the results across the three different time periods, the data show relatively small differences.

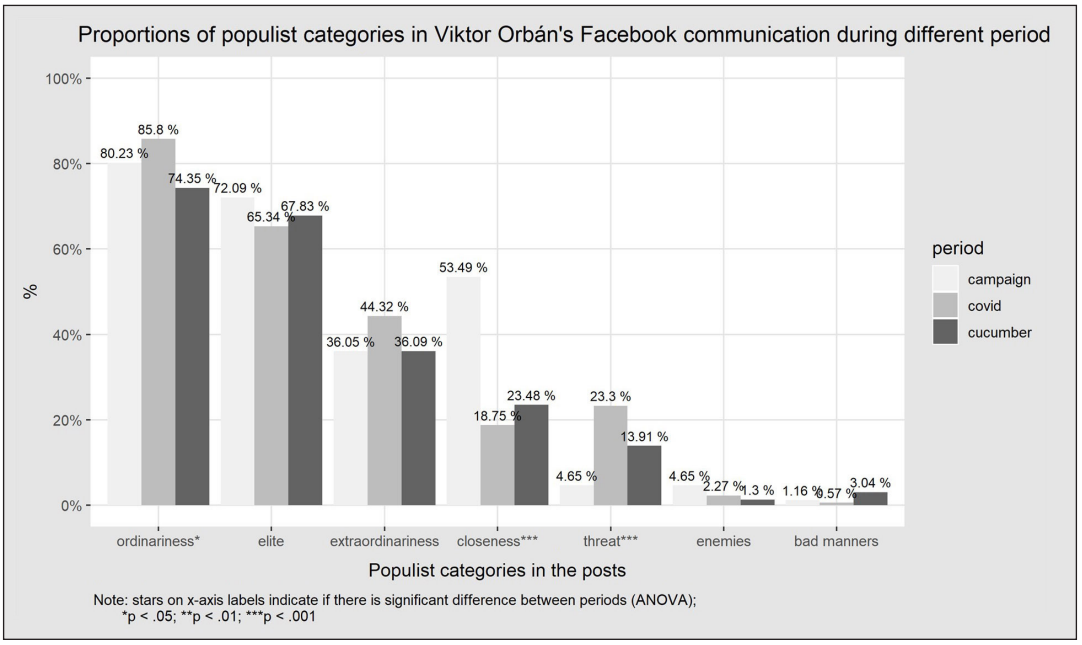

Figure 14 Proportions of populist style categories in Viktor Orbán's Facebook posts across the three different time periods

As Figure 14 shows, unsurprisingly, closeness categories are significantly more prevalent in Viktor Orbán's image-based Facebook communication during the campaign period than in other periods. When it comes to the campaigns, the leader's closeness to 'the people' appears in every second post. It is also no surprise that the threat during the COVID-19 period was much higher than in the other periods. However, it was least prevalent during campaigns, so it seems that it has been used less to mobilize voters. There are only minor differences in the application of ordinariness categories, but it is worth noting that their share during the COVID-19 period is a little but significantly higher than during the cucumber period.

6 Discussion

The study described here examined Viktor Orbán's populist style on Facebook using a coding instrument that operationalizes Moffitt's (2016) notions of populist style using a bimodal measurement system. Conclusions may be drawn about how well Moffitt's populist approach can describe the image-based social media communication of one of the leading European populist actors.

To answer the first and second research questions, the dimension of Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite' captured by far the most instances of the populist style. Crisis, breakdown, and threat categories are used to a lesser extent, while Bad Manners categories are rare. It should also be emphasized that in the Appeal to 'the people' versus 'the

elite' dimension, 'the elite' is highlighted more than 'the people.' In addition, the depiction of the elites is more positive than negative. This strong emphasis on the elites can also be observed in the situational elements, as settings signifying wealth are more visible in the posts than those in a rural environment. Compared to the frequent presence of the elites, 'the people' as actors are relatively rarely depicted in the Hungarian Prime Minister's posts. Nevertheless, the people-centric style is prominent in his self-presentation, as closeness and ordinariness play an important role in his communication. While these elements are often presented fragmentarily, it is not uncommon that the people-centric elements are directly contrasted with negative elite portrayals. Accordingly, our expectations based on verbal research were not justified, as two of the three dimensions rarely appear in Orbán's communication.

Turning to the third research question: given that the distribution of image posts within the sample is not uniform across the major events, the likelihood of inclusion in the sample is reduced for categories that occur less frequently during periods with lower content volume. Still, Orbán's bimodal social media communication seems to be fairly consistent, with minimal differences between the different periods. The depiction of the people-centric closeness increased during the campaign period, while extraordinariness increased during the COVID-19 period. However, the differences between the modalities are more pronounced: The most frequently used populist elements are more pronounced in visual communication than in verbal communication. Ordinariness and elites are mostly presented visually, and the visual depiction of extraordinariness is also more prevalent than its verbal counterpart. These results underline the need to examine visuals in populist communication. On the other hand, closeness is predominantly conveyed through verbal cues.

In general, the results show that Orbán's social media-based populist style does not really fit Moffitt's (2016) definition – his "populist toolbox" is narrower. Orbán's populism is essentially based on the 'the-people-versus-the elite' dimension, in particular, people-centric self-representation and the mostly positive depiction of elites. The latter may be an important strategy, as Orbán has to represent an anti-elite position from an elite position with more than a decade of governance. Therefore, this mixed narrative can be seen as a strategic tool that, in some ways, contradicts the general anti-elitist characteristics of populists. The Prime Minister's image as a verbal "streetfighter" may also be refuted by examining his bimodal messages.

The stability and consistency of communication across different time periods suggest that Orbán has already developed a populist style on Facebook that does not require adaptation to current events. However, our results suggest that the seemingly general populist people-centric feature is less important when the leader is not campaigning. Finally, an important finding is that the populist style can be better grasped in visual messages, which shows that populism research that focuses only on texts may provide an incomplete picture.

Considering the previous findings on visual populism, our study has provided a broader understanding of the topic by applying the populist style approach. Although the frequent depiction of the leader and the demonstration of both his ordinariness and extraordinariness are consistent with previous findings (Herkman, 2019; Mendonça & Caetano, 2020), our results indicate several differences. First, negative emotions are less frequently depicted in Orbán's Facebook communication than the use of positive valence.

Moreover, unlike what is shown in other studies (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014), neither the depiction of enemies nor threats is common in our case. Finally, the depiction of elites is anything but negative, which also emphasizes the visual and verbal differences in populist communication.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that the results of the present study can be perceived as relating to a continuum, as the populist communication style and its elements can be applied by all political actors (populists and non-populists) and to varying degrees from period to period. Moreover, as Moffitt (2022b) argues, exploring the visual aspects of populism can reveal the connections and differences between the communicative and ideological dimensions of populism. Accordingly, the visual and verbal analysis of Orbán's communication style on Facebook described in this study identifies fewer populist elements than in his speeches examined through discourse analysis (Lamour & Varga, 2020) or the study of his foreign policy rhetoric (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). The contrasts between the content of communication and discourse or policy shed light on the fact that politicians who are perceived as populists may not be so different from their non-populist counterparts, but the few striking differences, such as the more frequent use of national symbols, draw attention to the essential elements of populist communication.

Consequently, the primary significance of our study lies in the ability of the codebook we created to reveal messages that differ from those of previous research based on verbal communication. Further, from a broader perspective, due to the contagious nature of populism (Järviniemi, 2022), these communication characteristics may spread more widely in the political sphere. With our results, this study contributes to the literature on the communication strategies of populist actors (see Bucy et al., 2020; Mendonça and Caetano, 2020; Sonnevend and Kövesdi, 2023).

To make a generalizable contribution to the literature, we have also created categories that can capture not only Orbán's but the broadest spectrum of populist styles worldwide. Accordingly, most of the codebook's categories do not focus specifically on Orbán's communication, but on populist communication in general, except for some country-specific variables, such as the Hungarian Prime Minister's famous backpack and his enemies, as known from his verbal communication. This also results in the fact that some categories did not occur at all or only rarely in the Hungarian case, which does not call into question the applicability of the codebook. On the contrary, the absence of certain variables highlights the differences between the expected and actual results, for example, in the case of missing negative references to elites or Brussels. The detailed coding instrument might produce different results when applied to other leaders worldwide, and, as Moffit (2022b) argues in his latest theoretical article, not all populists can be expected to use the same images, but common aspects might emerge. The results of this study are consistent with this position.

A future research direction may therefore be the extension of the application of the coding instrument to other populist leaders. To do this, only some country-specific variables, such as some enemies and special clothing, need to be changed. For example, Viktor Orbán's famous backpack could be changed to a soccer jersey in the case of Jair Bolsonaro (Mendonça & Caetano, 2020) or a red baseball cap in the case of Donald Trump (Bleakley, 2018).

Nevertheless, the study has its limitations. The research only focused on social media, but it is possible that Orbán communicates differently via other channels (e.g., more or less crisis communication or bad manners), which would be better captured on other communication platforms. Future research could examine other channels and platforms by applying the coding instrument. Also, we ignored moving images, which Viktor Orbán frequently uses as a tool of communication on Facebook. It may be that certain populist elements, such as enemies or threats, are more predominantly discussed in edited video content.

Overall, the coding instrument presented in this study may be a useful tool in the study of populism worldwide, as it operationalizes Moffitt's (2016) theory into flexible verbal and visual frames. For the application of the instrument in other contexts, cultural differences can easily be adapted to by changing the specific enemies or clothes.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Gender perspectives on research impact: Insights from a survey of early career researchers

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Abstract

The increasing emphasis on research impact in academia necessitates a deeper understanding of how early career researchers (ECRs) perceive and engage with this concept, especially through the lens of gender. This study aims to explore the gendered dimensions of research impact among ECRs in the social sciences. We conducted a comprehensive survey across over thirty countries in Europe, as well as South Africa. The methodology involved thematic analysis of survey responses, focusing on differences in attitudes towards impact, the challenges faced, and the role of gender in shaping these perceptions. Our findings reveal that while there are no significant gender differences in the conceptualization of research impact, female ECRs experience greater vulnerability due to systemic inequities in academia. These disparities affect their career trajectories and ability to generate impact. This study highlights the need for tailored support structures to address these gender-specific challenges and calls for further empirical research to validate and expand upon these initial findings.

Keywords: impact, gender differences, motivation, ECRs.

1 Introduction

Scholarly research is generally considered to create impact when its outputs affect, change, or benefit the economy and society beyond academia (REF, 2014, p. 6). The growing emphasis on impact as a key objective in science policy stems from the desire to see research institutions provide tangible benefits in response to significant past increases in science funding (Mühonen et al., 2020, p. 34). However, impact is not easy to create and to communicate to the larger public. A number of activities, such as scientific communication (e.g. writing book chapters), contributions to the public debate, policy advice (e.g. producing policy documents), participative research, or consultancy, what Spaapen and Van Drooge (2011) call "productive interactions", are required to achieve it.

As with all dimensions of research culture, there are many differences in how researchers and other stakeholders think about impact. The discipline of the research, the career stage of the researcher, and geographical location, for example, are likely to have

a strong effect on what counts as impact and how it is created and measured. Generating impact has a geopolitical dimension as well. As de Jong and Mühonen (2020) examined, in Low Performing Countries (LPC) in the European Union (which are mostly former socialist countries), when it comes to impact generation, there is a lower impact capacity compared to High Performing Countries (HPC) (which are mostly the Western European countries), which suggests that researchers from HPCs are better equipped to score well on the impact criterion when applying for international funding than researchers from LPCs.

LPC include CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia. LPC typically involve fewer types of stakeholders, resulting in lower societal impact capacity. They notably engage citizens, the private sector, and the cultural sector less frequently compared to HPC. This is surprising considering these groups are key audiences for Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research dissemination. In contrast, HPC cases employ a broader range of interaction channels tailored to specific audiences. They use methods like popularizing books for the public and offering training courses and synthesis notes for governments and politicians (ibid). The most significant differences between LPCs and HPCs include stakeholders' negative attitudes towards SSH research in LPCs and the influence of policies and funding requirements on academics' motivation in HPCs to achieve impact. However, both LPCs and HPCs face challenges in obtaining practical support for societal impact, though support structures appear to be improving in HPCs. Constraints such as insufficient funding and time are prevalent but not considered major issues in either group of countries (de Jong & Mühonnen, 2020).

There is increasing pressure from research funders to ensure the research they fund has societal impact. As a result, impact and income have become the most highly valued commodities in the academic arena, perhaps to the detriment of the intrinsic value of one's scientific work (Grove, 2017). In other words, the scientific value of research is no longer the top priority – it is rather the value it creates for a society which funders can point to in order to justify their funding expenditures (Fecher et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2021). Such demands put significant pressure on researchers regarding the topics they pursue and how, since acquiring grant funding is often necessary for establishing and maintaining an academic career (Herschberg et al., 2018).

According to Smith et al. (2020), as funders and higher education institutions continue to debate, measure, and promote various forms of research impact outside of the academy, there is a great need for empirical research on the topic, with a particular eye to understanding how researchers understand and engage the impact discourse and how those differences may vary by discipline, gender, or career stage. To learn more, we carried out an international survey of Early Career Researchers (ECRs) who were currently doing or had completed their PhD in Social Sciences and the Humanities (SSH) in the previous eight years. This group represents the first generation of SSH scholars to be exposed to the impact-related provisions that have increasingly been made by funders or policymakers during the last decade (Mühonen et al., 2018; de Jong & Mühonen, 2018).

In coding our data and conducting our analysis we considered not only ECRs' conceptualization of impact (that is, what ECRs think impact is), but also their attitude or orientation to that impact. In this paper we draw on these data to address three questions:

– How do ECR researchers conceptualize research impact in their work?
– What is their attitude towards research impact?
– How does gender factor into differences in orientation to research impact (conceptualization and attitudes) among ECRs?

We begin by reviewing the literature on research impact and different pathways and approaches to implementing it. We then describe our survey in greater detail, followed by the findings section, where we address the research questions above. We conclude by discussing how our work can contribute to further understanding of research impact and the need for more research on gender and other demographic differences in orientation to research impact.

2 Understanding research impact

Impact is not just an endpoint or target; it is a series of processes that can be conceptualized and implemented in a number of ways (Finne et al., 2011; Morton, 2015; Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010). It does not emerge unexpectedly but is rather a consequence of various activities undertaken to achieve it, such as policy recommendations, knowledge exchange, contributions to public debates, participative research, etc. More precisely, impact implies a wide variety of spheres of society (Bayley et al., 2018). This suite of activities is also referred to as pathways (Research Councils UK, 2014). A recent analysis of 6679 impact case studies showed that 3709 unique pathways could be identified (King's College London and Digital Science, 2015).

Despite the recognition of a variety of pathways, what still remains unexplained are the processes that precede them. Two models of these processes have been described; these tend to be presented as linear and non-linear pathways to impact (Grønvad et al., 2017). According to the linear model, there is a direct pathway between research and impact. It was predominantly used in the 20th century (Lawrence, 2006) and dominated national and European research and innovation policies. This approach to impact argues that researchers disseminate their research to societal stakeholders who are then in charge of identifying the impact of that research (Phipps et al., 2016). In other words, research is passed on to society only upon its completion. Furthermore, it was believed that the knowledge transfer process could be measured and quantified, as in the Technology Readiness Levels (TRL) systems, which are used to assess the maturity of a particular technology. With this approach, there is a dividing line between academics on the one side and societal stakeholders on the other (Caplan, 1977; Cousins & Simon, 1996).

Although linear models found their application in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, they were hardly applicable in the SSH. During the 1990s, scholars acknowledged that knowledge does not flow in such linear ways (Morton, 2015) but rather that knowledge transfer consists of more complex and iterative processes. In an early non-linear model of impact, Meagher and colleagues (2008) described the many forms that research takes, as well as various ways that research can influence society from direct instrumental impact to indirect conceptual impact. These authors also state that knowledge does not always flow in the same direction, i.e. that it is not always passed by the researchers to society, but that the opposite case is also possible – nonexperts can also

transfer some knowledge to science and scientists. One such model, the Quadruple Helix model, is commonly used in the EU. It postulates that four sectors – civil society, industry, government, and academia – according to their institutional functions, contribute to creating impact (Cavallini et al., 2016).

Sometimes, discussions of creating impact take on a rather self-justifying tone (Vanholsbeeck & Lendák-Kabók, 2020), in the sense that researchers need to provide society with reasonable grounds for conducting research, i.e. to account for its purpose. In this debate, the responsibility of the researcher to account for the research's impact becomes the most prominent notion, such that all research needs to be evaluated in terms of its contribution to society (Shore, 2008). In this view, the relationship between researchers and societal stakeholders is of great importance – the closer they are, the higher the impact is assumed to be. In other words, the more involved societal actors are, the more likely it is that the research will meet their needs, be picked up, and have an impact. Thus, the driving forces of research are sustainable and efficient forms of partnership with societal actors.

As research impact has become a more important part of accounting for research, measuring it has become more important as well. However, many such attempts to create metrics for measuring impact have consequences that redound negatively to women, ethnic and racialized minorities and has geopolitical implications (Lendák-Kabók, 2017; Lendák-Kabók et al., 2024), for a myriad of institutional and systemic reasons that are often tied to fewer citations, slower career progression, and assumptions about a career model that continues to favor men (Lendák-Kabók, 2022; Lendák-Kabók et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2020; Beaudry et al., 2023). According to Davies and Thomas (2002, p. 184), in the search of new performance indicators, New Public Management produced novel forms of managerial masculinity, based on "self-sacrifice, competitiveness, aggressiveness and long hours".

As Zhang et al. (2021) note, although there is a long history of research into gender and research performance, there have been fewer studies that look closely at gender differences in what kind of research is performed and why. This gap in the research matters for science policy and practice. To give a concrete example, Davies et al. (2020) note that women management scholars are under-represented in leading impact cases of UK research in 2014. More precisely, only 25 per cent of business and management studies were led by women, whereas 54 per cent of them were solo-authored. Similarly, the same authors (Davies et al., 2017) found that only 31 per cent of the cases in the same corpus included at least one woman in the research team. Another project led by Chubb and Derrick (2020) was one of the first to uncover implicit gendered associations around impact generation. Such studies are part of a larger body of work on publication rates, promotions, funding, and other dimensions of research culture and point to stark disparities in the recognition of women and their achievements in research. As Chubb and Derrick (2020, p. 2) bluntly put it, "[M]odern science was born as an exclusively masculine activity".

The REF (Research Excellence Framework) and SIAMPI (Social Impact Assessment Methods for research and funding instruments through the study of Productive Interactions) are among the most prominent frameworks for assessing and measuring research impact. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) evaluates the impact of research conducted by British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The REF aims to: allocate block-

grant research funding to HEIs based on research quality, ensure accountability for public investment in research and demonstrate its benefits, and provide insights into the overall research health of HEIs in the UK. Besides the REF, SIAMPI, a project introduced in the Netherlands, created an innovative approach on how to shed light onto the mechanisms by which social impact occurs and to develop methods to assess social impact (SIAMPI, 2011).

Critics argue that the REF overly emphasizes research impact beyond the university system, questioning its relevance to research quality. Some suggest the REF may incentivize mediocre published research while discouraging potentially valuable long-term research.

Given the recent focus of research institutions on impact and its measurement, there has been surprisingly little discussion of how ECRs are receiving training in creating and measuring impact. For instance, Wróblewska et al. (2024) provide an initial examination of the challenges early-career researchers (ECRs) encounter as they balance their personal aspirations for achieving impact beyond academia with conflicting signals about the importance of these activities in a successful academic career. This study explores the challenges faced by ECRs regarding the concept of impact beyond academia in their careers. Thematic analysis revealed a variety of conflicting themes as ECRs navigate their inherent commitment to societal impact against a research culture that predominantly rewards narrow, traditional forms of excellence necessary for achieving research independence (ibid.). These tensions were similarly reflected in discourse analysis, where both negative and positive evaluations were intertwined. It seems clear that the career stage of researchers also potentially affects their attitudes towards creating impact and their ability and pathways to achieving it. As Laudel and Glaser (2008) note, the journey of turning an apprentice into a colleague is often long and full of obstacles. This journey is one from dependence to independence, having as the ultimate goal becoming a completely independent researcher (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011) but the daily reality of higher education for many ECRs is the need to pursue activities that result in a stable career path (Herschberg et al., 2018).

One of the obstacles that ECRs encounter along their path is temporary employment; the challenges of short-term contracts, which are especially pronounced for early career researchers, may lead to insecurity about career prospects and job satisfaction (Waaijer et al., 2016). ECRs may find it difficult to think about the impact of their work on their local society or region if they are not able to be resident long enough to understand deeply the local context.

There are many other challenges for ECRs with respect to creating (or demonstrating) impact. One is the inability to expand one's research ideas due to being contracted to particular projects; thus ECRs may lack spare capacity to develop in other directions (or, perhaps, think more about the medium and long-term impact of their work). The lack of mentors as vital figures to provide support is another problem mentioned by ECRs (Capewell et al., 2016).

Following the calls of Smith et al. (2020), Chubb and Derrick (2020), and others for more critical engagement with and understanding of research impact with more empirical data on disciplinary, gender, and career stage differences, as well as more nuanced analysis of attitudes and challenges, this paper reports on a survey of social science ECRs to

learn more about how they perceive impact, their attitudes towards impact, and how gender might figure into those attitudes. Our article aims to build on what Wróblewska et al. (2024) provided in their study, additionally focusing on ECRs' narratives from a gender perspective.

3 Methodology

Within a COST project (European Cooperation in Science and Technology)[1] ENRESSH (European Network for Research Evaluation in the Social Sciences and the Humanities) Action, the Careers and Research Evaluation Systems for Societal Impact (CARES) questionnaire was developed (https://enressh.eu/cares/). It was disseminated between December 2018 and January 2019 in European universities and research centres using snowball sampling. One hundred and eleven questionnaires (in English) were filled in by ECRs active in 31 European countries and South Africa.[2] The respondents had completed their PhD up to eight years before they took the survey or were still working on their degree.

The CARES questionnaire consisted of 14 open-ended and 14 closed-ended questions. The goal was to investigate ECRs' orientation, experiences, and attitudes towards the principles of defining and delivering research impact. As a result, the CARES questionnaire did not include any ex-ante definition of impact, so there was no bias concerning the introduction of a pre-determined description in the answers provided by the respondents. The introduction made it clear though that the focus of the survey was on the impact of research on society, and not on its scientific or technological effects.

A primary analysis of the qualitative data was conducted in relation to our first and second research questions about ECR researchers' conceptualization of research impact and their attitude towards it. Initial coding (Saldana, 2013) was applied, which involved developing a list of codes after the first cycle of analysis of the open-ended questions. The different codes were then sorted and examined for overarching theme(s) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89), and then refined – first by reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts and second in relation to the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). The following five themes emerged in relation to the conceptualization of and attitudes towards impact: (1) accountability, (2) social engagement (3) motivation, (4) burden and (5) other issues.

The survey also asked questions to understand the pool of respondents: gender, discipline, field of study, country, and institutional context. Statistical analysis was conducted to record the frequency of occurrence of specific themes and thus verify their persistency. Analysis of the data found that gender had a partially significant role in the nature of the responses, hence our focus in exploring the data further (and reporting findings by gender). Finally, it is important to mention that the sampling was in no way aleatory, and the researchers did not use any inferential statistics, only descriptive ones.

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[1] The European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) is a long-running instrument for bottom-up research networking across the European Union and associated countries. COST Actions run for four years and bring together researchers around pre-defined topics.

[2] South Africa is a COST associated country; thus it was included in our research.

4 Findings

A total of 110[3] questionnaires were filled in, out of which there were 39 (35 per cent of respondents) male and 71 (65 per cent of respondents) female respondents. The summarized results are presented in Figure 1 below. After analysing the answers given with respect to the respondents' attitudes towards the societal impact of research and themes drawn from the existing literature on research impact, the following codes were developed: accountability, social engagement, motivation, burden, and other problems. We structure our findings accordingly.

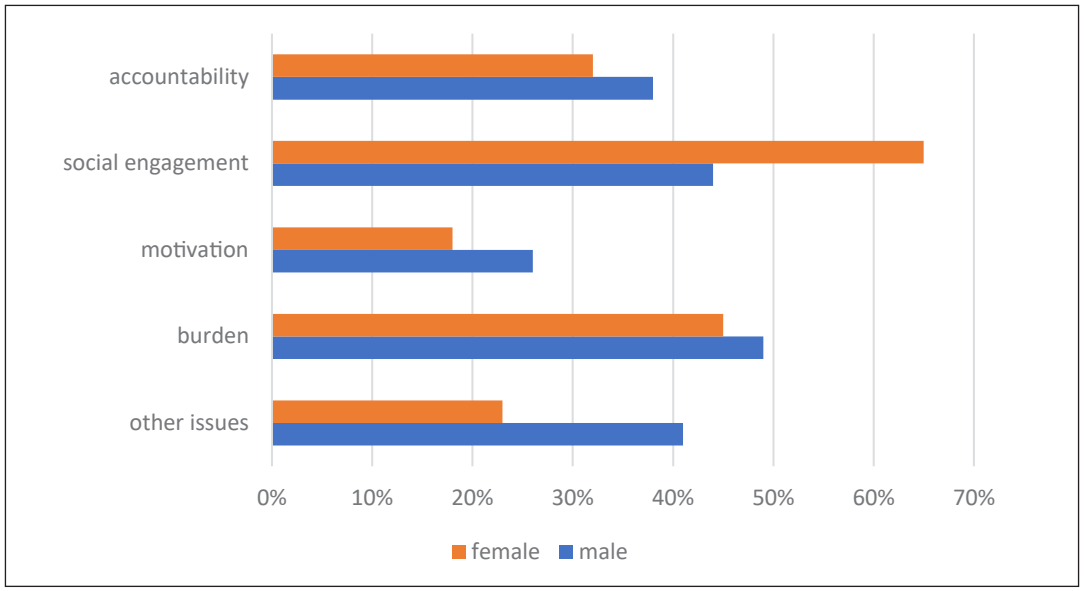

Figure 1 Coding of respondents' attitudes to societal impact by gender (%)

4.1 Accountability

Impact cannot be discussed without referring to public accountability, or the need to justify research funding that is dependent upon the expenditures of public funds. In this case, accountability "refers to various legitimization attempts to defend academic endeavours by revealing greater interaction between researchers and social agents" (Lauren, 2022, p. 217). In other words, accountability is the researcher's need and desire to justify public expenditures on their work in some way to the public that funds them. Due to pressures on universities and researchers to be accountable, various evaluation practices have been implemented to assess research and value scientific performance (Galleron et al., 2017; Bayley & Phipps, 2023).

[3] Initially, there were 111 questionnaires filled in, however one of the respondents did not specify their gender, so those answers were not included in the analysis.

Just over one-third (38 per cent, n=15) of male respondents reported that creating impact is their duty and responsibility as researchers. The most commonly occurring argument is accountability towards the larger society, i.e. the public funding received should be used to make society benefit from their research. As one respondent wrote:

> *The impact of research in society is vital for two main reasons; 1. Efficient use of financial resources to conduct research and 2. Research outcomes are valuable and practical for the improvement of people's lives. (Male, Business Administration, Cyprus)*

Almost one third of female respondents (32 per cent, n=23) responded that they felt it was acceptable to be held accountable for creating impact, as part of their duty and responsibility. Similarly to the male respondents, they were of the opinion that they should give back to the community that is funding the research, as well as to the research subjects who provided the data. A quote from one female respondent illustrates this point:

> *A lot of SSH research deals directly with research subjects and creates opportunities for impact (or should I say achieving social change) that would be immoral to miss. In SSH research there are also plenty of chances to exploit research subjects for data and impact can be a way of giving back and achieving balance. (Female, Social Studies of Science and Technology, UK)*

4.2 Social Engagement

A significant portion (65 percent, n=46) of female respondents argued that creating impact holds great importance, emphasizing that researchers should address issues relevant to society. This quote illustrates this claim:

> *We are supposed to create value for the development of a better society. Therefore, society should be interested and take advantage of our discoveries. Otherwise, it would have no sense [sic] to be creating non-valuable knowledge. (Female, Management, Basque Country)*

Almost half (44 per cent, n=17) of the male respondents mentioned social engagement, i.e. the argument that research is important as a vehicle for social change and a tool for social development. They perceived their research as a sort of power aimed at improving the world they live in. Therefore, these respondents believe that conducting research without impact would not be worthwhile, even adding in some cases that it is not science if it does not have impact. One respondent writes:

> *Research (as education) is a tool for development, and expenses in research (as expenses in education), are social investments. Research has the power to improve the society in which we live and our understanding of reality from different perspectives. (Male, Business Economics, Spain)*

4.3 Motivation and Burden

About one quarter (26 per cent, n=29) of all respondents stated that they feel intrinsically motivated to conduct research with impact, whereas almost half (49 per cent, n=54) said it is a burden for them. Accounting for impact takes extra time and effort that is not accounted for in their workload but requires additional, usually personal, time. Some male

respondents explained that given how challenging it is to quantify impact in a CV, they should have considered impact as an important part of their research production earlier on. Among additional problems, male researchers mentioned tensions such as balancing research output between quality and quantity and the pressure to be a "public academic". The following quote illustrates the perceived difficulty of maintaining a commitment to generating societal impact at the same time as balancing other responsibilities as an ECR;

> *[It] creates various tensions with teaching. Doing research and creating societal impacts is a very time-consuming task. It is impossible to conduct world-class research, create societal impact and teach in a very innovative way. There is just not enough time for this. (Male, Philosophy, Poland)*

Respondents acknowledged many of the known difficulties of measuring societal impact outcomes, and thus the negative effects of dedicating too much time to generating, when time could be better spent achieving more traditional, and measurable markers of academic esteem to bolster future career opportunities: *"I believe nevertheless that for some research the immediate benefit for society may not be directly visible and the impact may be long-term or even non-existent". (Male, Czech Republic, Contemporary History)*

18 per cent of all female respondents indicated that they were more motivated than men to create impact (n=13), compared to 26 per cent of men (n = 10), who stated that they are motivated to created impact which shows that men are slightly more strategic in this matter – as their motivation is connected to their career achivements. In the open-ended survey questions, some women explained how creating impact takes more involvement but is not part of their job descriptions. Within "Other issues" female researchers addressed included finding a balance between career achievements and impactful research, as well as the concern that impact is often not immediately evident. Women also spoke of the difficulty of addressing people who would recognise impact (i.e., a lay audience), lack of funding and energy, and difficulties identifying pathways towards impact generation, whereas men did not report these issues. Some women also brought up the problem of the lack of valorisation, wherein generating impact is not sufficiently valued, thus disincentivizing any increased time and attention on generating non-traditional research outputs such as impact. Nevertheless, they did express the desire to have their research be useful. One of the female researchers' testimonies follows:

> *It is a robust motivating factor for me, to feel that my research is "useful" and can help people or places. Especially, because I focus on poorer peripheral regions, and am very driven by the real need to understand more about the plight of these places and how we can design better policies and approaches for them. (Female, Economic Geography, Sweden)*

A specific orientation or focus on creating impact, female respondents reported, takes time and energy which should be spent on career building, i.e. scientific writing. The generation of impact adds an extra burden besides the regular research duties, which was highlighted by the male respondents as well, almost in the same percentage (49 per cent, n=19).

> *For me aspect of societal impact [sic] e.g. strong link to the practices of research policy is an inspiration also for my work. However, sometimes I feel that time used for all the side duties is away from scientific writing [sic]. (Female, Sociology, Finland)*

4.4 Other Issues

Table 1 below summarizes the themes raised by respondents with respect to "other issues" that arise for them in the context of impact. Most of these are also perceived as burdens.

Table 1 List of other issues by gender

other issues			
female respondents		***male respondents***	
additional requirements	time, work, activities, energy, travel	**additional requirements**	time, work
the lack of…	funding, resources, time	**the lack of…**	time
other tensions	career advancement, no measurable benefits, publication duties (highly ranked journals), legitimacy, valorization, difficult and time-consuming to communicate to lay audience	**other tensions**	valorization, negative impact, politics involvement, publication duties, communicating research, long-term or non-existent impact

One female scholar from Lithuania struggled with communicating her research results because of entrenched ideologies in the society in which she is living and researching:

> *Communication with media, struggle with limitations of research, that do not let to make [sic] fully grounded statements in questions of policymakers (that are usually not nuanced), and sometimes it is hard to fight with dominating ideology and common sense – people are not ready to question their assumptions. (Female, Sociology, Lithuania)*

This quote raises an important point: communicating research results and creating impact in SSH might depend on cultural boundaries and geopolitical differences, especially if the aim of the research is to deconstruct dominant narratives and ideologies.

The results show that the structural disadvantages that women face within academia and which are well documented in the literature (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Lendák-Kabók, 2020 among others) do not impair women ECRs' commitment to generating impact in the early stages of their career. Notably though, men are more cognizant of the political factors involved in generating impact, and combined with the realization that impact outcomes are neither measurable nor formally rewarded in their academic settings, are less personally motivated to pursue impact at the cost of more traditional markers of esteem.

5 Discussion

In the analysis five themes were identified in relation to the different conceptualizations and attitudes ECRs developed towards societal impact, as a product of the research they do in SSH: (1) accountability, (2) social engagement, (3) motivation, (4) burden, and (5) other issues.

We analysed the concepts introduced above and attitudes from a gender perspective. When it comes to accountability, both men and women feel accountable in the same way for creating impact, however there is a difference in the type of accountability they share. Women tend to engage more than male academics in accountability towards the academic community through academic services or towards teaching students. Whereas men think that creating impact is their accountability towards society which provides the funds for the research itself. Our results show that ECRs (both men and women) have integrated "horizontal accountability" towards society, not just "vertical accountability" towards research managers and assessors, into their worldview. The most prominent gender difference was regarding social engagement – a much higher number of women consider their research impact to be social engagement to change the world for the better, which confirms that women are more focused on academic community work and service rather than being very strategic with the enhancement of their personal academic career (Lendák-Kabók et al., 2024). When it came to motivation for creating impact, more men were motivated to conduct research with an impact than women who stated that they sometimes feel insecure about making everything "work" at the same time when it comes to all aspects of their research. Both men and women equally stated that they lack time and energy and see focusing on societal impact as a burden. Men in our survey reported disregarding the generation of impact, as it is not a measurable aspect, nor a visible one, of research power and achievements. Under "other issues" men mentioned the involvement of politics as the greatest impediment in creating impact, while women were rather complaining of the difficulty of addressing people, lack of funding and energy, organizational issues, difficulties with finding pathways towards impact generation, but also of dominant ideologies, which are discouraging them of promoting their research results, i.e. creating societal impact.

The above results suggest that the engagement of researchers in impact activities is highly contextualized and related to many other aspects of research culture (de Jong & Mühonen, 2020). So too are researchers' motivations which are sensitive to notions of what their research is worth to their institutions beyond academia. These tensions are amplified in the ECR context, where scholars are committed to solidifying research reputations and agendas within the wider research culture and the context of precarious contracts and political concerns. Weighing the options among the possible choices that ECRs of both genders make in their early career is related to balancing a personal commitment to generating research outcomes that reflect their sense of societal "duty" with the time necessary to generate traditional markers of academic esteem that will solidify their membership within academia. For ECRs the choice to engage in impact generation activities comes at a cost to gaining the markers necessary to advance in academia/research culture; our data do not allow us to infer any significant difference of attitude towards research impact between male and female researchers in this regard.

In the end, we conclude that our research adds an extra layer of consideration of how non-traditional forms of research impact are gendered at the point of research choices made by individual researchers as well as for the constructive of impact narratives for the purpose of evaluation (Davies et al., 2020; Chubb & Derrick, 2020). Notably, the career journey that ECRs face is "a continuum beginning with doctoral studies, moving through the years spent as a non-tenured academic and on to becoming an established academic" (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011, p.15). That journey is permeated with both pleasures and tensions. Students' doctoral experiences are an intertwined scheme of internal and external factors creating a cross-cutting impact on their academic development (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Some of the difficulties that emerge are the product of academic life which is (about to become) a "market failure" (Laudel & Glaser, 2008), since high expectations are imposed upon doctoral students, who, apart from their studies, personal lives and, very often, full-time jobs, need to do various other activities in order to fulfil the requirements, with the ultimate goal of earning money for their institution (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011). Consequently, while trying to successfully build their academic careers, this most vulnerable group is faced with heavy workloads, the inability to find work-life balance (Lendák-Kabók, 2020; Lendák-Kabók et al., 2024), as well as the time-consuming nature of impact generation (Wroblewska et al., 2023). From our study, we can provisionally conclude that researchers and institutions need to consider the role of research of impact in the career development of ECRs more thoughtfully and that gender differences, if they do not seem to alter very significantly neither the principal conceptualizations of research impact nor the attitudes of our respondents towards impact, could nevertheless result in an increasing vulnerability of women.

6 Conclusion

We acknowledge several limitations to our study. One, it is based on a relatively modest number of questionnaires. However, these were collected in more than thirty countries across Europe with the addition of some respondents from South Africa. Secondly, gender differences were not the initial focus of the survey but instead arose from the coding and from our interest as researchers. Follow-up work in the form of interviews (for example) would be needed to strengthen claims and probe the themes that surfaced. In addition to the need for further understanding of how gender differences are manifested in research culture and impact generation, our survey also suggests the need to explore more deeply how mentorship and training, national or institutional mandates for impact generation, and disciplinary/research methodology are involved.

This exploratory study constitutes an early attempt to consider ECRs' career building under the lens of the creation of research impact. Further empirical studies will be needed to deepen our provisory conclusions and, in particular, evaluate to what extent gendered differences in conceptualization of and attitudes towards ECRs contribute to systemic inequities and disparities in career trajectories.

On a practical level, the different kinds of pathways to impact could also form the basis for more effective training and implementation and lead to more care being taken concerning supporting women in the research enterprise. At a broader level, the results also argue for more understanding of how societal impact in SSH happens and nonlinearly,

often incrementally, and contributes to change through communication and interaction with relevant societal stakeholders (Grønvad et al., 2017). Sustained engagement between researchers and societal stakeholders is needed (Nutley et al., 2007; Greenhalgh & Wieringa, 2011; Grønvad et al., 2017; SIAMPI, 2011). Even as knowledge mobilization strategies and identification strategies are used by pivotal stakeholders (Bayley et al. 2018; Grønvad et al., 2017) and approvingly accepted by EU policy makers and used in European research and development policies and programmes (Vanholsbeeck & Lendák-Kabók, 2020), the daily lived experience of women researchers and their concerns may well be at odds with what has been "accepted" as research impact and how institutions and organizations evaluate it.

As Laudel and Glaser (2008) write, the journey of turning an apprentice into a colleague is often long and full of obstacles. This journey can be described as one where an ECR moves from intellectual dependence to independence, with the ultimate goal becoming a completely independent researcher with their own way of creating impact through their work (Healey & Davies, 2019). Therefore, understanding the everyday difficulties and responses that ECRs experience along that path may provide clearer ways to support their academic growth as researchers and scholars (Jazvac-Martek et al., 2011).

Conflicts of interest

Not applicable for this section.

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated nor analysed during the current study.

Dedication to Paul Benneworth (passed away on May 12, 2020 at the age of 46) who was the initiatior of the CARES research

Paul was the most creative person I have ever met. His ideas focused on creating meaningful research while also aiming to involve and integrate young scholars into the academic arena. He was deeply aware of the adversities faced by early-career academics and the precarity of their positions. I cannot recall exactly when the Careers and Research Evaluation Systems for Societal Impact (CARES) initiative fully developed, but I think it began as a thought during the Training School Paul organized on societal impact in February 2018 in Zagreb, as part of the COST ENRESSH network. This event targeted early career investigators (ECIs). At the time, we exchanged thoughts about how research on understanding societal impact within ECIs would be innovative. However, as I was still struggling to finish my PhD thesis, I suppressed the idea and assumed Paul did too. A few months later, at an ENRESSH meeting in Ljubljana in July 2018, Paul gathered a small group of us for a discussion where he elaborated on his CARES initiative. We agreed to develop a questionnaire to be distributed among young scholars across Europe. True to his nature as a man of action, Paul promptly drafted a version of the questionnaire and sent it to Rita Faria and me for feedback. Rita's comments led to essential improvements, while

my contributions were more modest. In November 2018, following the SSH Impact conference in Vienna, Paul convened another meeting with a few network members (a different group from the Ljubljana meeting) to form working groups and articulate the topics we would address based on the questionnaires. In Vienna, I also spoke with Marc Vanholsbeeck about the CARES initiative, and he decided to collaborate with me on this project. By the end of 2018, Paul launched the questionnaire, and several of us circulated it among our ECI colleagues, who completed it. Within the ENRESSH Action, Marc undertook a Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM) at CEU in Budapest, which I hosted in February 2019. Together, we analysed the CARES dataset and planned to write two papers: one on impact as a boundary object and another on the gender perspective of impact creation. The first idea materialized thanks to Marc, and we published a paper based on the CARES data in Word and Text. Paul was a great source of encouragement throughout the process. The second paper, intended to incorporate a gender perspective, was planned for a special issue of Research Evaluation. However, the special issue struggled to gain momentum. We discussed potential topics and papers during a meeting in Valencia in September 2019, but little progress was made. Later, Kalpana Shankar joined this endevour, to whom I am truly grateful.

The last time I saw Paul was in Paris in February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted everything. At our final ENRESSH meeting, he admitted he was exhausted and lacked the energy to lead the special issue. I was disappointed, as his enthusiasm seemed to have waned. It felt as though he had stepped away from the central idea of giving ECIs a voice, making them count through research, and supporting them to publish. Although I understood the immense pressure he was under, balancing work, travel, and family, I still expressed my dissatisfaction with his decision to withdraw from leading the CARES project. As we parted, he left me with a sentence that has haunted me ever since: "Karolina, this might be the last time I'm seeing you, so don't be nasty with me, as I might bite you back." Since I am terrible with goodbyes, I didn't say a proper goodbye to Paul in Paris. I was confident we would meet again soon. During the COVID-19 lockdown, I often looked at the photos he posted of himself with his children on Twitter. He seemed happy.

Karolina Lendák-Kabók

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Fuel poverty, uncontrollable heating expenditure, and the consequences of heat cost allocation in a large housing estate of Budapest

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Abstract

Recent initiatives in the European Union aimed at reducing energy consumption in multifamily buildings have centred on implementing heat cost allocation, which facilitates charging for heating services based on consumption. Prior experiences demonstrate that heat cost allocation efficiently decreases energy use by providing prompt feedback regarding energy usage and expense. Nonetheless, its influence on fuel poverty, energy vulnerability, and heating affordability is still inadequately comprehended. The study involved implementing personal surveys and interviews with residents of large housing estates in Budapest to investigate their experiences and coping strategies related to heating expenses, comfort, and ability to influence these aspects. It also analysed how the presence or lack of consumption-based heating service billing influences various factors, including fuel poverty. The findings indicate that heat cost allocation considerably affects energy vulnerability and fuel poverty. In buildings lacking heat cost allocation, resident agency is constrained by fixed heating expenses and the heterogeneity of the residential community, resulting in postponed purchases of essential goods and heightened energy waste. While heat cost allocation reduces consumption and improves financial flexibility, its impact on fuel poverty is ambiguous, as it does not address the broader socioeconomic and energy-efficiency determinants of energy vulnerability and fuel poverty.

Keywords: fuel poverty, heat cost allocation, large housing estate, lived experiences, coping strategies

1 Introduction

In 2020, Space heating accounted for 62.8 per cent of European household energy consumption (Eurostat, 2022). Numerous multi-family housing units in the EU use fixed heating fees based on floor area rather than actual usage, hindering consumption control and contributing to energy inefficiency. Directive 2012/27/EU addresses this issue by advocating the use of individual heat meters or heat cost allocators to accurately measure heating usage and encourage a reduction in consumption (European Parliament, Council of the European Union, Directive 2018/2002).

Twelve years after introducing the Energy Efficiency Directive, Hungary adopted its guidelines on individual metering from 1 January 2024. According to the amendment of Government Decree no. 157/2005 (VIII. 15.) on the implementation of Act XVIII of 2005 on district heating services, and Government Decree no. 676/2023. (XII. 29.) on central heating and hot water service, owners of multifamily building flats are required to install heat meter devices or heat cost allocators. If consumers opt not to install any measurement devices by 1 January 2027, despite the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of such installations, the household's heating-related expenses, determined by the floor area of the flat, will be multiplied by a factor of 2.5.

Currently, 49 per cent of district-heated large housing estate buildings with a one-pipe heating system fail to adhere to the directive due to the absence of heat cost allocation or individual heat metering (BME, 2023). Since 2000, the use of heat cost allocators has been substantially bolstered by a countrywide remodelling campaign called the "Panelprogram." No substantial subsidy scheme comparable to those implemented before 2014 has been put in place to facilitate building-level energy measures (Szabó & Bene, 2019; Ámon et al., 2024). Adherence to the legislative amendment is further obstructed by multiple factors, including the nearly 96 per cent prevalence of individual private ownership (Kovács et al., 2018), significant heterogeneity among homeowners, and the resultant difficulties in building-level decision-making and management (Janky & Kocsis, 2022).

EU policies and academic literature emphasise the positive impact of individual heat meters on energy efficiency, but the challenges regarding heat cost affordability arising from their absence receive less attention (Canale et al., 2019). Addressing this gap, Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) highlighted the issues caused by the lack of consumption-dependent heating service billing in large housing estates, noting that uncontrollable heating expenses may lead to fuel poverty.

The research seeks to investigate two principal issues: first, regarding the study by Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012), to examine the lived experiences, coping strategies, and agency of households that, in the absence of heat cost allocation, cannot mitigate excessive heating expenses, and second, how these factors are affected by the implementation of consumption-based heating service billing. The findings will reflect on the swift and expected further expansion of heat cost allocation in Hungary. The research employs a consensual approach and does not seek to provide an exact quantification of those impacted by fuel poverty; instead, it concentrates on examining the lived experiences related to the difficulties described by Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012).

In contrast to a substantial portion of the scholarly literature (Canale et al., 2019), this paper primarily examines residential buildings without extensive energy-efficiency modifications. The research does not seek to be statistically representative and lacks the generalisability of quantitative studies. Nonetheless, it indicates that such challenges with unmanageable heating costs are probably widespread in large housing estates in Eastern and Central Europe (Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz, 2012).

2 Literature review

The Hungarian Statistical Office (KSH) characterises large housing estates as collections of mid-rise and high-rise residential structures, predominantly built with prefabricated technology from the 1960s until the late 1980s (KSH, 2013). Notably, during the initial stages of housing estate construction in Hungary, edifices were constructed using brick (Kovács et al., 2018). Subsequent periods saw the utilisation of monolete concrete technology (Antypenko & Benkő, 2022), although, as indicated by the referenced definition (KSH, 2013), these constitute merely a minor portion of the total housing estate construction from the state socialist era. Considering the article's breadth, it is essential to highlight that although most large housing estates utilise district heating, a significant percentage depend on local central heating boilers (Egedy, 2003; Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz, 2012).

In Eastern and Central Europe (ECE), prefabricated panel blocks in large housing estates accommodate 34 million individuals, effectively mitigating housing shortages within the framework of state socialist political, economic, and ideological conditions until the 1980s (Szafrańska, 2015; Kocsis, 2012; Kovács & Herfert, 2012). In contrast to large housing estates in Western Europe, those in Eastern and Central Europe have sustained and stable social and real estate conditions due to their socioeconomic heterogeneity (Szafrańska, 2017; Hess et al., 2018).

A key consideration in large housing estate construction during the socialist era was to create the maximum number of buildings in the shortest duration, prioritising quantity over quality (Kocsis, 2012). Energy efficiency was not prioritised, partly due to ongoing fiscal limitations and diminished energy prices (Csizmady, 2003; Kocsis, 2012; Benkő, 2015). Insufficient insulation, substandard windows, and unmanageable heating expenses at the household level have led to considerable energy wastage since the establishment of large housing estates (Csoknyai et al., 2016).

A substantial corpus of literature worldwide examines the management and decision-making obstacles in multifamily buildings that persistently impede building-level refurbishment, particularly in Hungary. The scope of the paper precludes an in-depth examination of the specific legal frameworks governing various multifamily building types in Hungary, including condominiums and housing cooperatives, which are subject to distinct legislation. Furthermore, the impact of these legal structures on the implementation of building-level renovations necessitates additional investigation. Nonetheless, global literature identifies elements that obstruct the execution of renovations, which are similarly widespread in Hungary. This encompasses a significant percentage of homeowners and the considerable social diversity among residents (Matschoss et al., 2013; Janky & Kocsis, 2022). The majority of owners must provide consent for the implementation of improvements, whether in condominiums – where the decision is based on ownership share – or in housing cooperatives, where each flat has one vote, either cast by members (owners) or their representatives. Reaching this degree of consensus can be incredibly challenging when substantial disparities in age or income exist within the residential community, a notable trait in Hungary (Kovács et al., 2018; Janky & Kocsis, 2022).

Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) observed fuel poverty in large housing estates, primarily associating the issue with district heating services and vertically distributed

central heating systems. The cited paper attributes significant importance to the low efficiency and obsolescence of district services in the Central and Eastern European region following the regime changes as contributing to the problem. Regarding vertically allocated central heating systems, the lack of individual meters or heat cost allocators means heating expenses are determined by floor area rather than actual usage, inhibiting residents from reducing costs even as they reduce heating consumption. This leads to superfluous heating services, resulting in energy waste and elevated fixed expenses for residents. This circumstance disproportionately impacts low-income households, necessitating trade-offs between heating costs and fundamental requirements such as transport, sometimes linked to energy poverty (Simcock et al., 2021).

Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) designated this form of fuel poverty a 'post-communist type', emphasising its prevalence in large housing estates served by district heating systems, which characterise multifamily buildings in Eastern and Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the paper indicates that such difficulties may be pertinent in other settings characterised by the prevalence of energy-inefficient, district heating-serviced buildings. District heating cannot be exclusively linked to post-communist nations or solely to large housing estates. Additionally, the energy efficiency of district heating systems has become a much more nuanced topic than in previous decades (B. Némethi, personal communication, October 6, 2023). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that unregulated heating usage and costs are not limited to large housing estates or district heating (Martinopoulos et al., 2018). In light of these considerations, Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) pay limited attention to the broader political and socioeconomic factors that could inform the terminology; the designation 'post-communist' may overly simplify the issue. Significantly, between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s, two-pipe heating systems were implemented in large housing estate buildings, enabling the regulation of heating demand via radiators without individual metering or heat cost allocation. However, if these systems have not been updated since their installation, the regulators often become outdated and fail to fulfil their stated purpose of managing consumption. The phenomenon of fuel poverty identified by Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) may similarly manifest in these buildings (B. Némethi, personal communication, October 6, 2023).

Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) assert that the phenomenon of fuel poverty cannot be appropriately defined by criteria that exclusively focus on a household's capacity to maintain sufficient warmth, such as the indicator 'inability to keep home adequately warm' (Anagnostopoulos & De Groote, 2016, p. 74). Definitions that account for the relative cost of energy (e.g., 'A household is energy poor if / when that household is unable to achieve an adequate [i.e. comfortable and safe] standard of warmth, and supply of energy services at an affordable cost' – Lawlor & Visser, 2022, p. 1) permit the inclusion of households that sustain adequate warmth at a high cost. Consequently, fuel poverty arising from unpredictable heating expenses need not be categorised separately, as it aligns with the commonly referenced contributing factors of fuel poverty, including elevated costs, low incomes, and energy inefficiency (Boardman, 2010).

The framework of 'post-communist fuel poverty' is not entirely incorrect. Still, it should be used contextually to refer to the socioeconomic and political characteristics of post-communist countries that influence fuel poverty in ECE, causing various forms and manifestations of the problem across social and spatial settings (Buzar, 2007; Jiglău et al., 2021). When analysed independently, the factors presented below cannot be considered

characteristics unique to ECE countries. However, when interpreted as a group, their presence is noticeable in the region, influenced by state socialism (Jiglău et al., 2021). As a problem cluster, it significantly impacts the social and territorial manifestations of fuel poverty in the region, as documented by Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) and Jiglău et al. (2021). (Figure 1)

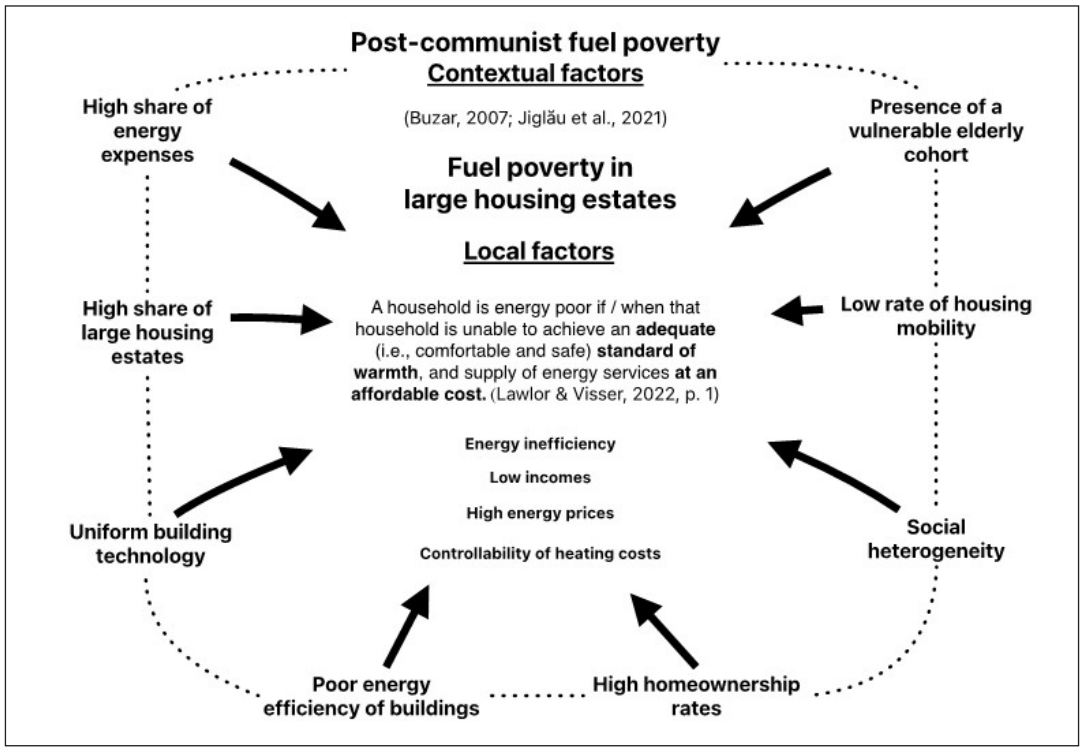

Figure 1 Post-communist fuel poverty

Source: Own editing based on Buzar (2007), Jiglău et al., 2021, and Lawlor & Visser (2022, p. 1)

- High share of energy expenses: Households in ECE face relatively high energy costs compared to those in other parts of the EU, partly due to the post-privatisation of energy services and a monolithic energy mix (Buzar, 2007; Bouzarovski et al., 2016; Bajomi et al., 2021; Deller, 2018).
- The high share of large housing estates: A substantial portion of the housing in ECE consists of large housing estates with unmodernised heating systems lacking individual controls and consumption-dependent heating service billing (Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz, 2012; Hess et al., 2018).
- Uniform building technology: Standardised construction methods in large housing estates reduced costs and expedited building to meet housing demand (Kocsis, 2012; Benkő, 2015).
- Poor energy efficiency of buildings: Most buildings have poor energy efficiency, attributable to the quantitative approach that dominated mass housing construction during the state socialist era. In parallel, the low energy cost also contributed

to the marginalisation of energy efficiency considerations, while budgetary constraints hindered building maintenance (Kocsis, 2012). After the regime change, during mass privatisation, former renters of the large housing estate flats became private homeowners. The lack of awareness regarding the upkeep of both private and shared ownership and the management issues caused by the high homeownership rate contributed to the further deterioration of the buildings and their infrastructure, causing considerable energy waste (Matschoss et al., 2013; Benkő, 2015; Janky & Kocsis, 2022; Pirrus & Leetmaa, 2023).

- High homeownership rates: Privatisation led to high homeownership rates in large housing estates, with owners often neglecting common areas of buildings because of low awareness and lack of resources, which also hindered the maintenance and development of their flats (Kovács et al., 2018; Janky & Kocsis, 2022; Pirrus & Leetmaa, 2023). Additionally, homeowners face heating costs as a separate item of expenditure (e.g., not integrated into rent); therefore, there may be a greater interest and awareness in reducing them (Fine & Touchie, 2020).
- Social heterogeneity: The social status and heterogeneity of individual large housing estates varied in the socialist era (Csizmady, 2003). However, since the regime change, the social heterogeneity of the population living in large housing estates has significantly increased, driven by the influx of younger residents (Szafrańska, 2015) and the still-observable prevalence of the 'indigenous' elderly first in-movers (Kovács et al., 2018). Social heterogeneity (alongside the high homeownership rate) complicates collective decision-making related to building refurbishment (Matschoss et al., 2013; Janky & Kocsis, 2022).
- Low housing mobility rate: Low social mobility after regime changes, high homeownership rate, and the unaffordability of new housing limit housing mobility. Relocation is complicated by high utility costs and relatively low real estate market prices compared to the other segments of the housing market (Musterd & van Kempen, 2007; Janky & Kocsis, 2022; Jackson & Evans, 2017; Durst & Huszár, 2022).
- Presence of a vulnerable elderly cohort: There is a high share of vulnerable elderly with low incomes in large housing estates who moved in as young parents in the socialist era (Kovács et al., 2018; Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz, 2012).

In addition to the previously discussed factors, it is crucial to emphasise other significant aspects that could potentially influence the occurrence of fuel poverty in the region, particularly in Hungary. Climate, a non-socioeconomic or political factor, remains a crucial influencing factor regarding fuel poverty: due to cold winters, heating accounts for a significant share of household energy consumption in ECE (Jiglău et al., 2021). This is partially related to the relatively high heating demand of households in Hungary. Compared to other European countries, the proportion of households heated to indoor temperatures of 22-23℃ or above 24℃ is exceptionally high (Csutora et al., 2021). Fuel poverty is substantially shaped by the 5 per cent VAT rate on district heating services and the state-subsidised energy price regulation program, known as '*rezsicsökkentés*', introduced in 2013. The program applies to electricity, piped gas, and district heating. While this initiative increased residential energy affordability, it has several adverse consequences: it diminishes

household incentives for energy conservation, hinders residential energy-efficiency refurbishments, and leads to declining energy-sector revenues. Consequently, the sector experiences delays in necessary investments, which compromise energy security (Weiner & Szép, 2021).

The concept of post-communist fuel poverty has its limitations. Critics argue that terms such as 'post-communism' and 'post-socialism' negatively frame ECE by focusing on its past (Lánczi, 2007). Also, these terms may not effectively describe whole regions due to their diverse post-communist developments (Armingeon & Careja, 2008). Additionally, over 30 years since the regime changes, the referred-to terms may be obsolete as communist legacies lose relevance. Thus, new theories are being created to describe specific features or differences within and beyond the former Soviet sphere (Müller, 2019). It is essential to note that not all factors are common across all post-socialist countries; for example, Bulgaria has advanced in installing heat cost allocators (MUNEE, n.d.), and the volume and impact of energy price regulations vary across countries (Jiglău et al., 2021).

As with definitions, analytical approaches to fuel poverty often overlook situations in which households face high fixed costs without unhealthily low indoor temperatures, thereby imposing financial burdens (Thomson et al., 2017). Using WHO guidelines, the temperature-based approach is limited by geographical and social factors and is less suitable for assessing fuel poverty caused by fixed tariffs (Thomson et al., 2017). The expenditure-based approach, which defines fuel poverty by the heating expenditure exceeding a threshold percentage of income (utilising Low Income/High Cost, also 2M and M/2 indicators), may identify potential overconsumption but faces limitations in Hungary due to government-regulated energy prices, data biases, and the large share of undeclared incomes (Weiner & Szép, 2021; Fenyvesi & Pintér, 2020).

The consensual approach relies on qualitative methods and self-assessment to identify fuel-poor households based on perceptions, living conditions, and vulnerability. It offers more profound insights into household experiences and challenges than expenditure-based methods (Csizmady et al., 2021). The approach helps detect fuel poverty patterns obscured by limitations in statistical data or by factors outside conventional frameworks (David & Koďousková, 2023). Nevertheless, a frequently cited limitation of the approach is its resource intensity and households' tendency to self-exclude from several problems due to the dominance of self-reports and subjective indicators.

The consensual approach is widely utilised to address lived experiences and coping strategies related to fuel poverty. The former refers to daily challenges, perceptions, and encounters that fuel-poor households face on a daily basis (Willand & Horne, 2018; Ambrose et al., 2021). The theory of coping focuses on daily practices, routines, and habits that the fuel poor implement to tackle challenges and adapt to ensure the best possible quality of life (Anderson et al., 2012; Brunner et al., 2012; Chard & Walker, 2016). With this approach, energy vulnerability may also be captured, a concept that enables researchers to move beyond the binary of fuel poverty and non-fuel poverty (Csizmady et al., 2021) to explore the broader, somewhat hidden aspects of housing deprivation and fuel poverty. Energy vulnerability focuses on specific internal or external factors, harms, and the potential exposure and sensitivity of households to changing circumstances, which could lead to fuel poverty or might be missing from mainstream fuel poverty interpretations

(Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). The mitigation of the triggering factors and symptoms of fuel poverty and energy vulnerability is strongly connected to the agency of respondents, which can be defined as 'the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001, p. 110, cited by Frank [2006]).

3 Research method

One of the main pillars of the research is a personally conducted questionnaire survey utilising both closed-ended and open-ended questions. One hundred and nineteen households from six buildings participated in the survey, with household members serving as the respondents.

To facilitate the identification of individual buildings and the association of specific information with them during the study, the buildings were assigned codes ranging from B1 to B6.

The questionnaire used in the research was partially based on the EU-SILC survey and on questionnaires from European countries on housing and fuel poverty (Thomson et al., 2017). It focused on several key issues across distinct sections: the household's demographic composition, the flat's physical characteristics, the occupants' heating habits, and their lived experiences and coping strategies regarding thermal comfort and affordability. Systematic sampling was not conducted. During the data collection process, all flats with doorbells were approached. If there was no response, a second attempt was made at the next available opportunity on another day and time.

Practical considerations primarily guided the choice to employ a personal questionnaire survey rather than interviews. The residents of the studied housing estate were reserved, distrustful, and unwilling to devote more than minimal time to participation due to other obligations. As a result, conducting one-hour interviews was not feasible. Instead, residents demonstrated greater openness to completing a 15-minute questionnaire, which could be administered conveniently and efficiently in the corridors and doorsteps. Consequently, a substantial proportion of the survey questions were open-ended, which enabled the collection of in-depth qualitative data suitable for examining lived experiences. One of the key advantages of this approach was the ability to reach a relatively large number of residents in a short time: approximately one-third of the 340-360 households in the housing estate were surveyed. Meanwhile, there was an opportunity to collect detailed responses to open-ended questions and conduct personal observations. Applying this practice allowed for the integration of some of the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This claim is supported by the fact that responses to some closed-ended questions yielded meaningful results at both the housing estate and building levels. These results are clearly framed by the short comments and additional information from respondents, as well as the feedback associated with the open-ended questions, which provide detailed insight into the quantitative data on lived experiences.

Questionnaire survey results were complemented by semi-structured and spontaneous interviews conducted with residents, janitors living in the buildings as residents, and condominium managers. Interviews, along with some sections of the questionnaire, focused on lived experiences, coping strategies, conflicts, and power relations within the

residential community. Various actors were surveyed during the research, each offering different perspectives. Residents provided valuable information on all aspects as consumers of heating services and housing community members. As daily observers of residential concerns, condominium managers also offered insights into power relations and conflicts as community representatives. Janitors living in the buildings contributed as residents and caretakers of resident complaints, offering more profound insights into building-level issues.

Complementing the data from questionnaires and interviews, exact heating expenditure data could be obtained from condominium managers. Insights were also gathered about the latest renovations, utility metering, and accounting details.

The research adopted the consensual approach to fuel poverty research. Households' difficulty paying heating costs was estimated not based on the share of actual income or expenditure but based on the respondent's self-reporting to avoid the challenges and drawbacks associated with determining exact thresholds. A similar approach was taken regarding respondents' thermal comfort: the precise temperature of flats was not analysed in the survey, as it would not be an accurate indicator of thermal comfort, which is influenced by several other factors. Consequently, the questionnaire asked whether the respondent felt the internal temperature of their home was adequate. The deployment of objective measures and thresholds is somewhat limited to avoid excluding households that fall slightly outside these thresholds as fuel poor.

3.1 Limitations of the research method

Systematic sampling was not used during the implementation of the in-person questionnaire surveys. Despite the relatively high response rate within the housing estate, the conditions for representativeness were not met at either the building or the housing estate level; thus, the generalisability of the findings is low.

Regarding the questionnaire survey results, the article primarily relies on responses to the open-ended questions, with few exceptions. This approach stems from the inherent limitations of the survey employed in the research. While the questionnaire survey reached nearly one-third of households living in the large housing estate, a considerable proportion of responses were strongly influenced by factors that varied at the building level (e.g., social cohesion in the residential community, the size of common areas, and heating costs). As a result, for some closed-ended responses, it was not easy to extract precise housing estate-level findings, limiting the advantages of the quantitative approach that would otherwise have been expected from the questionnaire survey.

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the depth and detail of responses to the open-ended questions varied significantly. While some respondents were talkative and added informative comments and clarifications even to closed-ended questions, others merely answered the questions and remained brief even in response to open-ended questions.

Regarding the consensual approach to fuel poverty, further research limitations should be noted, which reflect those already mentioned in the previous section. One of the most crucial limitations stems from the fact that the research fundamentally relies on

individual, self-reported, subjective thermal comfort and affordability assessments. This significantly complicates the evaluation of heating affordability and the comparison of households based on objective criteria. As previously noted, self-reports can exclude households from the problem of fuel poverty, or, on the contrary, respondents may exaggerate the severity of their situation. Some elements of the frequently used expenditure-based approach were also utilised, as data offered insights into residents' heating costs provided by condominium managers and residents. However, information about residents' income levels could only be derived through indirect descriptions and personal observation.

4 Study area

The research took place in one of the lowest-status large housing estates of Budapest, located in the centre of the 17th district (Balás et al., 2021), one of the outer districts of the city predominantly characterised by detached houses. The lower status of the area is partially due to its remote location from central Budapest and its densely built, noisy environment, congested with traffic. Monotonous, ten-storey-tall housing estate buildings from the 1970s stand out against the district's suburban character, whose architectural quality and reputation are below average for Budapest.

The six residential buildings involved in the study are located next to each other; their main physical aspects (e.g., number of storeys and flats in the buildings, heating source) are identical, and their overall social status is assumed to be rather similar. In line with the general patterns, the great majority of the residents who participated in the study were private homeowners, thus having a direct influence on refurbishments and building-level decision-making.

Legally, each building functions as an independent condominium. The apartments are individually owned; however, the common areas of the buildings (such as stairwells, corridors, and lifts) are collectively owned. The principal decision-making entity of the communities is the general assembly, consisting of all building owners. Voting rights are commensurate with each owner's property stake, reflecting the size of their flat.

With some exceptions, the general assembly makes its decisions by majority vote, calculated according to the ownership shares of the owners present at the meeting. This includes decisions related to refurbishments as well. The administration of the community is managed by a common representative, who fulfils the functions of a condominium manager, whose role is executive based on the decisions of the general assembly. A sizeable portion of a condominium manager's practical work involves financial and other administrative tasks, communication with residents, organising maintenance work, and, in some cases, fiscal management related to refurbishment projects.

The owners share the monthly expenses of the typical costs based on their ownership proportions. Common costs usually include management fees, cleaning, maintenance of common areas, and other expenses. If a substantial renovation or urgent repair incurs expenditures that surpass the coverage provided by common costs, the additional funds that are required are allocated according to ownership shares.

The buildings employ central gas-heating boilers within a vertically arranged heating system, which is atypical for large housing estates generally supplied by district heating.

This type of heating system provides the community with enhanced autonomy, as the residential collective regulates the boilers' seasonal operation and temperature settings. Nonetheless, the community's obligation to maintain and operate is significantly heightened.

All buildings in the study have been thermally insulated, and most of their windows have been individually replaced by residents. As these measures were implemented years before the study across all buildings, their expenses have already been settled by the condominiums and are hence not included in the common costs. Moreover, the study was unable to investigate the impact of these factors on thermal comfort and the affordability of heating expenses in the buildings.

Two buildings have heat cost allocators and modern individual heat controllers installed on radiators. Unlike individual heat meters, heat cost allocators measure the temperature difference between heat emitters and room air to calculate each unit's share of building-level heating costs. Regardless of the presence of heat cost allocators, households face fixed, flat-rate monthly heating costs determined annually based on the previous year's consumption. Residents pay one-twelfth of the total heating costs of the prior year each month. At year-end, actual consumption is reconciled with estimated costs paid throughout the year. Residents receive compensation if consumption has been lower than estimated, or pay the excess if it is higher.

Building-level heating costs are allocated based on flat sizes in buildings without heat cost allocators. In contrast, buildings with heat cost allocators calculate costs and compensations individually based on household-level consumption.

All the buildings included in the study were equipped with two-pipe heating systems, which allowed for the installation of heating controls on radiators. At the time of the construction, this enabled household-level control over heating consumption. New heating controls were also fitted on all radiators in buildings where heat cost allocators have been installed. In buildings where heat cost allocation has not yet been implemented, some residents have independently replaced their radiators, typically equipping them with new heating controls as well. However, these residents still cannot regulate their heating costs and can only improve their comfort by controlling heating levels. The original heating controls are typically outdated and nonfunctional in households where heat cost allocation has not been introduced, nor have the old radiators been replaced individually.

The end-of-year reconciliation scheme fails to provide immediate feedback on consumption and costs, thereby partially undermining the purpose of cost-sharing. Although the gas service provider offers the option of monthly meter readings and payments, condominiums have opted for flat-rate payments with annual reconciliation. This decision is primarily attributed to the predictability of heating costs: under a flat-rate system, monthly heating expenses are fixed and can be planned for the entire year. Furthermore, the distribution of annual heating costs over twelve months reduces households' financial burden during the winter months of the heating season. From the consumer perspective, despite the scheme's advantages in maintaining predictability, excessive consumption can lead to substantial bills at year-end. Different characteristics of the buildings analysed are presented in Table 1. Further elaboration of the diverse aspects of heating cost variation will be provided in subsequent sections.

Table 1 Characteristics of the buildings analysed regarding heating systems and costs

Building	Heating service billing	Control of heating	Date of last gas boiler replacement	Flat size (m^2)	Common costs/ month (EUR)*	Heating costs/ month (EUR)**	Building level heating costs/ year (EUR)
B1	Consumption-dependent	Available	2020	45	43.24	~20.96	18 519.2
				59	53.54	~27.38	
				63	56.58	~25.97	
B2	Based on floor space, with individual compensation at the end of the year		2010	45	23.88	29.05	26 838.1
				59	23.88	37.86	
				63	31.72	40.48	
B3	Based on floor space	Limited	2020	45	31.23	25.43	23 603.9
				59	37.50	33.41	
				63	36.69	35.72	
B4			2021	45	33.63	32.78	30 464.6
				59	44.32	43.07	
				63	47.32	46.18	
B5			2013	45	32.25	32.92	30 225.6
				59	41.62	42.72	
				63	44.03	45.24	
B6			2012	45	32.20	24.71	22 828.6
				59	42.13	32.20	
				63	48.30	34.43	

Source: Results from data acquired from condominium managers

Note: *Including maintenance and cleaning of common spaces, loan repayment for renovations, and additional target payment obligations.; ** For "B1", the amounts shown are averages based on anonymous data provided by the condominium managers.; *** In these buildings, although manual controls are typically available on the radiators, they are outdated, obsolete, and failing to perform their function due to the lack of renovation.

5 Results

5.1 Lived experiences and coping strategies in buildings where heat cost allocation is not available

In all buildings included in the research, most respondents consider their home temperature to be approximately adequate during the winter months. A tiny proportion of respondents find their home a little colder than necessary. However, more than a quarter of all respondents feel that their flat is slightly or much warmer than they would like (Figure 2).

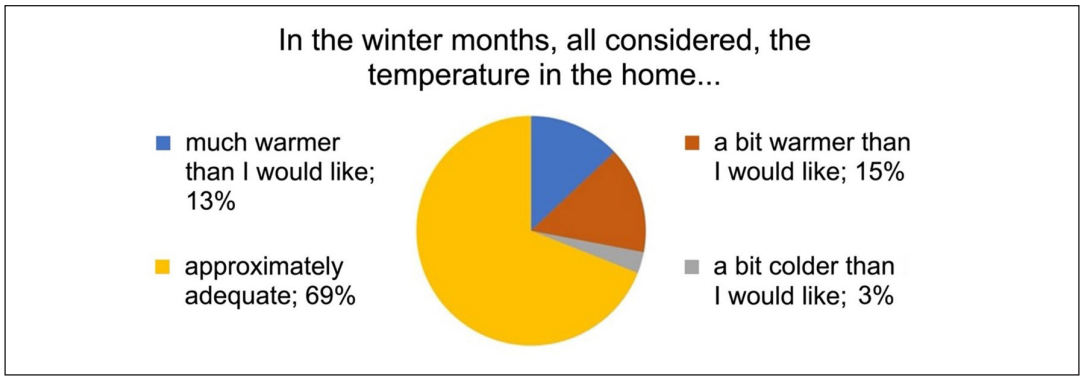

Figure 2 Thermal comfort of surveyed households

Source: Results from a personal questionnaire conducted by the author

Most of these residents live in buildings where heat cost allocation is unavailable. In such buildings, there was rarely criticism of the heating system not providing enough warmth (Table 2). On the contrary, the heating system was criticised for the unnecessarily high temperatures and overheating.

Unless the radiators and heating systems have undergone renovation, it is improbable that the initially equipped heating controls from the 1970s remain functional. One resident expressed their reluctance to use the controls: *'I'd rather not touch it anymore; I'm afraid it will break apart'.*

Central heating boilers are usually set to an elevated indoor temperature of around 27℃ by *'common agreement'*, predominantly forced by older residents with higher heating demands. As a result of their inability to regulate heating at the household level, many residents are left with only inconvenient and wasteful methods of achieving thermal comfort: *'The elderly lady next door is freezing at 26 degrees, and I sit in my flat all day in underpants with the windows wide open'.* Ventilation for reducing the internal temperature of the flat was sometimes used by residents, but many of them are aware that *'it should not be like this'*; '*it is not good that everyone is heating the street'.* This issue has prompted cunning coping strategies among the most dissatisfied residents, as one of them humorously remarked, *'The other day, we joked with the janitor that we should turn down the central heating boiler without the older residents getting to know [...]. Just 1-2 degrees; maybe they wouldn't notice.*

Table 2 The relationship between the availability of heat cost allocation and modern heating controls and thermal comfort of households surveyed

		In the winter months, all considered, the temperature in the home...				
		a bit cold	**a bit warm**	**absolutely warm**	**adequate**	**Total**
Building	HCA* and modern heating controllers are available	3	2	1	45	51
	HCA and modern heating controllers are not available	1	16	14	37	68
	Total	4	18	15	82	119

Source: Results from a personal questionnaire conducted by the author

Note: *Heat cost allocation

The residents' agency to reduce heating costs at the household level in these buildings is severely constrained. Even if the heating controls were operational and an individual reduced their heating to economise, the resulting cost savings would be distributed across more than 60 households due to the absence of a heat cost allocation system. *'I hardly ever turn off the heating; I pay the same anyway'. 'Why should I turn it down when others always heat?'* Cost reductions could theoretically be achieved through collective action, such as more economical use of the central heating boiler and its regular replacement with a newer and more efficient one. However, heating system renovations are significantly hindered by the varying heating needs of the occupants, their diverse financial situations, and the complicated and slow decision-making in the residential community. Slight dissatisfaction and distrust with the condominium manager can also be observed, as some residents feel that the amount spent on building maintenance is insufficient compared to the common costs they pay.

For older households of lower socioeconomic status, an increase in expenditure of 15 EUR per month for a renovation is a significant burden, whereas higher-status households possess both the need and the financial means to undertake renovations. A resident noted, *'I've been [trying to] convince people to install solar panels for five years at housing meetings, without any progress'.* Difficult building-level decision-making and the unavailability of consumption-dependent heating service billing represent significant barriers to individual initiatives aimed at reducing energy consumption. Residents may desire to contemplate energy efficiency practices at a household level. Yet, they often find themselves questioning the feasibility of such endeavours due to their current circumstances: *'Of course, I would like to consider [using] energy efficiency practices in my home, but what should I do with them? The heating costs won't change anyway. In multifamily buildings, it doesn't make sense to think about such issues'.*

5.2 Recent experiences and consequences of the installation of heat cost allocators

Buildings B1 and B2 are equipped with heat cost allocators and modern heat controllers that provide consumption-based heating service invoicing among the surveyed buildings. In B1, the implementation occurred in 2019, coinciding with the substitution of central heating boilers for more efficient ones. Residents can regulate the temperature in these structures by adjusting controls to maintain satisfactory thermal comfort (Table 2).

In contrast to other residential buildings, where the floor area of each flat determines heating costs, building B1 exhibits significant variability in heating expenses even among flats of identical size.

Table 3 Minimum and maximum heating costs by flat size in the residential building marked with B1

floor space (m^2)	Heating expenses (HUF)		
	min	max	median in buildings without heat cost allocation
45	1 550	24 720	11 495
59	2 090	18 330	15 238
63	2 290	24 150	15 990

Source: Results from a personal questionnaire conducted by the author

Notably, the highest heating cost in building B1 surpasses the maximum heating cost of buildings without heat cost allocators by 27 per cent (Table 1 and Table 3), indicating that the ability to control individually and the installation of heat cost allocators can result in increased consumption and higher expenses. With a few exceptions, it is notable that only buildings B1 and B2 contain residents who assume they may be able to reduce their heating costs significantly if needed.

The financial benefits of modernisation are undeniable at the building level, and they are most striking when looking at the heating costs of building B1. In this case, it is possible to compare heating costs before renovation in 2019 with new heating costs in 2022 based on the data provided by the heat cost allocators. It is essential to point out that after the renovation, the building-level heating costs were 50 per cent lower than before the renovation.

Evidence shows significant variability in household heating expenditure, indicating that retrofitting heating systems and implementing heat cost allocators do not benefit all households financially. In building B1, five out of sixty-four households experienced increased heating costs after the installation of heat cost allocators. Conversely, most households saw their heating expenses decrease by more than half compared to the previous amounts, with some achieving savings of nearly 90 per cent. However, such savings are nuanced if monthly renovation repayments are added to the heating costs. Approximately one-fifth of households faced higher costs, with 70-80 per cent increases due to renovation-related payments. Nevertheless, a quarter achieved reductions exceeding 50 per cent (Figure 3).

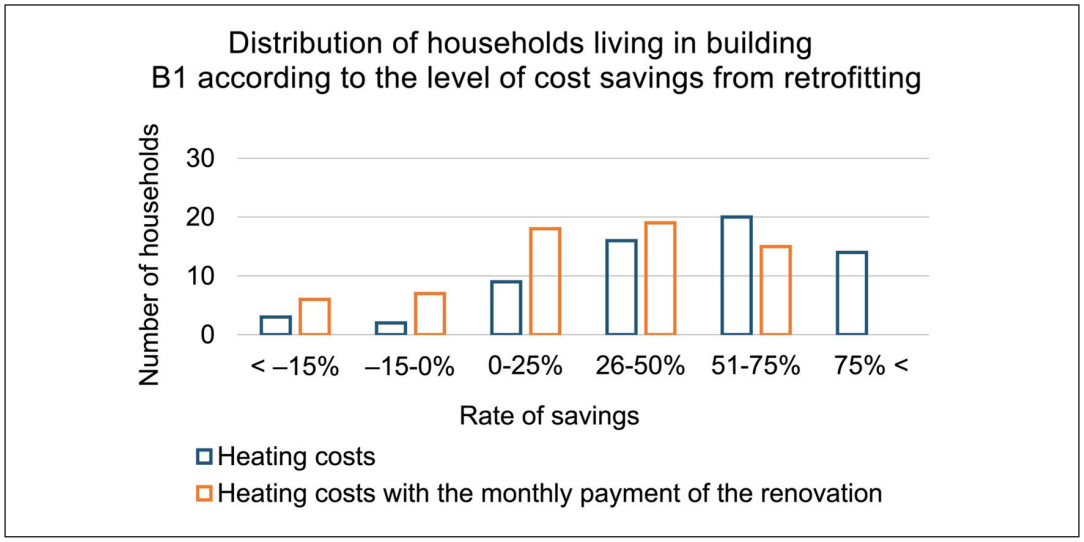

Figure 3 Distribution of people living in building B1 according to the level of cost savings from retrofitting

Source: Data provided by the condominium manager

The installation of modern gas boilers and heat cost allocators has contributed to reducing heating costs at the building level and across most households. The former provided greater efficiency, while the latter enabled residents to adjust their heating levels according to their comfort preferences or financial considerations. Those living in buildings B1 and B2 are the most motivated to save since they can realise rather direct benefits through reducing heating due to the availability of heat cost allocators. However, households living in these buildings also ventilate due to the high indoor temperatures. Nevertheless, according to the janitor of building B1, who has lived in the house since the renovation, there are fewer windows open all the time, and '*the residents are slowly learning to save money by turning off the heating*'. Although the main reason for turning down thermostatic valves (heating controls) was typically limited to achieving comfort in most buildings, saving money was repeatedly mentioned as a motivating factor in Building B1, solely.

Installing heat cost allocators and thermostatic valves eliminates 'artificially' high and low heating costs for some households. After retrofitting, residents start paying prices that reflect their actual consumption, resulting in a range of outcomes, with some households experiencing significant benefits and others experiencing rising costs. Household preferences and the location of the flat within the building both influence expenses. Flats on the corners and edges are typically considered colder, thus exhibiting higher heat demands. Residents who are comfortable in cooler homes and whose neighbours maintain significantly higher heating levels generally have been able to reduce their heating costs by 70-80 per cent. In the process of heat cost allocation, individual households pay their heating costs in proportion to their share of total heat consumption in the building. As a result, the heating consumption of households relative to one another mutually influences each other's heating costs.

Changes in the heating habits of a household's immediate neighbours may lead to an increase in heating costs. Before the installation of heat cost allocators, neighbours had no incentive or ability to influence their heating consumption, and households benefited from heating usage through the shared walls. However, installing heat cost allocators has encouraged neighbours to reduce their heating use, causing households to receive significantly less heat from adjacent flats. High heating costs may thus now be due to the need to compensate for 'cooler walls' through increased consumption, even if only to maintain the same thermal comfort. Consequently, unlike in the past, other residents no longer 'share' the financial burden of maintaining their neighbours' comfort. This scenario exposes older homes, typically characterised by poorer incomes and increased heating requirements, to heightened risk compared to younger households.

The uneven distribution of heating costs arises because nearly 100 per cent are based on heat cost allocator data. In contrast, based on legislation, buildings with district heating must maintain at least 30 per cent of heating costs as fixed, even with heat cost allocators, to ensure an equitable distribution of costs for heating common areas (e.g., staircases) and to reduce cost disparities. Building B1, which uses a privately owned central gas boiler, does not implement this practice because it is not compulsory. The radically altered and divergent heating costs often precipitate conflicts among residents. As the condominium manager of the building noted, *'I used to reassure people that as long as there is no (household-level) metering* (heat cost allocation)*, those who live in a well-located flat will pay much more than is realistic based on the location of the flat. I keep saying (to the resident): Well, you will certainly be paying more in the next thirty years than you have, but you should realise that you haven't been paying what you should have in the last thirty years. It has been paid by those who have paid more than they should have because of the lack of consumption-dependent billing'.*

Residents' reluctance to adopt heat cost allocators that enable individual metering is not solely due to this issue. The unfavourable outcomes of the renovation persist even after completion. Post-renovation, residents have had to adjust their heating settings more frequently, resulting in heightened temperature fluctuations in the heating pipes of the buildings and continuous clicking and crackling noises heard throughout most flats. As stated by the janitor residing in the building: '*We are slowly getting used to it*'.

Despite the refurbishment resulting in a 50 per cent reduction in heating costs and consumption at the building level, this enhancement has led to increased tension among residents and mechanical difficulties. The condominium manager of the buildings deems the installation of heat cost allocators generally advantageous and concurs with their positive impacts. Nevertheless, the manager underscored that heat expense allocation cannot establish a wholly equitable scenario for each household. The manager commented: '*So, that's why I talked them down, the other two buildings…, it would be very nice to have heat cost allocators, but let us not go into that, because they already regretted it* (in building B1)'. This serves as a pertinent example of the influence condominium managers can exert in executing building-level renovations.

5.3 Patterns of fuel poverty and energy vulnerability

Over a third of respondents (44 out of 119 households) reported difficulty in regularly paying their heating bills, 50 per cent of these comprising single pensioners. Among these 44 households, 39 indicated that their indoor temperatures were adequate, slightly warm, or excessively warm. Twenty-five of these households reside in buildings without heat cost allocators, limiting their ability to reduce heating costs. Fourteen live in buildings with consumption-dependent billing, but due to flat-rate billing, savings can be realised at the end of the year.

Fuel poverty can manifest itself in several ways in the large housing estates we analysed. In buildings where heat cost allocation is not available, the phenomenon is associated with significant energy waste. Many of those respondents who live in these buildings are burdened by heating costs, yet they are compelled to keep their windows open and ventilate constantly during winter due to unnecessarily high indoor temperatures.

Meanwhile, many of these households must postpone the purchase of certain goods and services because a disproportionate amount of their income is being allocated to unnecessary heating expenses: As an elderly lady commented, '*Yes, there are occasions when I can't afford a haircut* (…) *I'd rather put on another sweater and turn the heating down if I could'*. To put it into perspective, an elderly, disabled woman who participated in the survey receives a monthly pension of 180 euros, of which she allocates 40 euros to heating and 50 euros to common costs.

Single pensioners face the most significant challenges, with many expressing uncertainty about their future financial stability. Those in better health are currently working to support themselves, but they expressed their concerns about their finances in the event that their health no longer allows them to work. Pensioners living with an elderly spouse typically manage to meet their needs, but they face the potential risk of a sudden income reduction following the death of their spouse. From this viewpoint, elders who reside with an employed adult relative or receive financial support from their family are less vulnerable.

Fixed heating costs, despite being burdensome, ensure a safe indoor temperature, which is crucial for elderly residents. The importance of this leads many to advocate for the early activation and higher temperature setting of the central gas boiler to increase heating and prioritise utility bill payments. '*Every month, the utility bill comes first'*. Only seven respondents out of 119 reported that they were overdue with payments relatively frequently.

Heat cost allocators reduce energy consumption and heating costs by allowing household-level expenditure control and greater financial freedom in allocating expenses. However, the installation of heat cost allocators eliminates a predictable and reliable warm heating service that is available at a set cost. Due to the flat-rate billing system, households only discover at year-end whether they have consumed more than the predetermined flat rate established at the beginning of the year, further exacerbating uncertainty: '*Well, we are heating for now, then we will see the compensation bill at the end of the year*'.

Households occupying flats with higher heat demands and less favourable locations within a building are the most vulnerable. While residents in better-situated flats can reduce their heating consumption, those in less advantageous units have fewer options.

They may resort to reducing their heating, potentially resulting in unhealthily low indoor temperatures. The installation of heat cost allocators may thus push households with the lowest socioeconomic status towards energy vulnerability and fuel poverty, manifesting in low indoor temperatures, high heating costs, and severe unpredictability in heating expenses due to the year-end reconciliation. The monthly repayments for the installation of heat cost allocators may exacerbate the issue.

6 Discussion and conclusions

Employing a consensual approach, the paper sheds light on the real-life problems that arise because heating service bills are not based on usage, as discussed by Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012). The paper contributes to the development of the concept of Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) not just empirically, but also theoretically. Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) identified a manifestation of fuel poverty characterized by households that, while not experiencing unhealthily low indoor temperatures, must bear significant financial burdens due to uncontrollable heating costs. The phenomenon was referred to as a 'post-communist type' of fuel poverty, with the study primarily associating it with large housing estates served by energy inefficient district heating systems where a substantial share of the ECE population resides (Szafrańska, 2015).

Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) argue that following the regime changes around 1989, a lack of investment in district heating systems led to their energy inefficiency and obsolescence in the ECE region. However, the discourse on district heating regarding energy efficiency has recently become much more nuanced (B. Némethi, personal communication, October 6, 2023), and the marginalisation of broader contextual factors that could support the validity of the 'post-communist' label does not provide sufficient justification for its widespread use.

It is crucial to highlight that neither large housing estates nor district heating systems are exclusive to ECE. Additionally, individually uncontrollable, vertically allocated central heating systems were widely installed in multifamily buildings during the twentieth century in other regions worldwide, including North America and Western Europe. Applying the term 'post-communist' may be redundant, as the fuel poverty definition of Lawlor & Visser (2022) already encompasses this specific issue of fuel poverty – the manifestation of inadequate thermal comfort accompanied by burdensome heating costs. Consequently, fuel poverty stemming from uncontrollable heating expenses should not be classified as a distinct 'post-communist' type, as suggested by Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012). In this paper, this phenomenon is referred to as fuel poverty.

Extending the observations of Herrero and Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) and drawing upon the perspectives of Buzar (2007) and Jiglău et al. (2021), we have identified certain factors that significantly influence the manifestation of fuel poverty in multifamily buildings within ECE countries, emphasizing the role of the state socialist legacy in their persistence. This paper argues for the possible use of the term 'post-communist fuel poverty' contextually, highlighting the interplay of post-communist socioeconomic aspects that influence the manifestation, severity, and volume of the problem, which can be manifest in

any form that causes various symptoms in any social group or space (Buzar, 2007; Jiglău et al., 2021). Within the framework of this research, the issue is primarily relevant to East-Central Europe, but similar studies in the region and Western Europe, as well as in other regions, are crucial to extending knowledge on fuel poverty related to the absence and implementation of consumption-dependent heating system billing.

ECE fuel poverty research typically places significant emphasis on rural areas, highlighting the disadvantageous interplay among large, energy-inefficient buildings, low incomes, and the unaffordability of solid fuels (Jiglău et al., 2021). This paper shifts the focus to urban areas, specifically multifamily buildings, in the Hungarian socioeconomic context. Additionally, the research contributes to the European discourse on heat cost allocation. While much of the related literature primarily addresses the impact of heat cost allocators on energy savings (Canale et al., 2019), this paper places greater emphasis on fuel poverty within the scientific discourse on heat cost allocation, highlighting how the presence or absence of cost allocation influences heating affordability.

Based on the lived experiences of residents living in large housing estate buildings, the availability and lack of consumption-dependent heating service billing persist as significant contributors to fuel poverty and energy vulnerability. Our study confirms that in large housing estate buildings, a lack of heat cost allocation leads to significant energy waste, which is associated with fuel poverty, especially in lower-income households.

Residents in these buildings face uncontrollable heating bills due to excessive energy consumption, forcing lower-status households to sacrifice essential goods and services. The absence of consumption-based billing limits residents' ability to reduce heating costs, thus undermining their energy-saving efforts. Social heterogeneity impedes decision-making about building-level refurbishments and agreements concerning central heating boiler operations, nullifying residents' agency. Indeed, receiving adequate levels of warmth is a markedly different phenomenon from the frequently cited lived experiences of fuel poverty, where unhealthily low indoor temperatures persist as one of the main issues (Middlemiss & Gillard, 2015). Nevertheless, fixed heating costs limit residents' ability to allocate their expenditure efficiently, a phenomenon discussed in studies that highlight the disproportionately high heating costs faced by the fuel poor (Brunner et al., 2012). Uncontrollable heating costs also constrain coping strategies: while fuel-poor households that are experiencing cold home temperatures develop practices to minimally increase thermal comfort (Chard & Walker, 2016), households suffering from uncontrollable heating costs often resort to reducing their consumption of other goods and services, including transportation (Simcock et al., 2021).

Analysing the lived experiences of residents living in buildings lacking heat cost allocation, the paper confirms and extends the observations of Herrero & Ürge-Vorsatz (2012) and Janky & Kocsis (2022) on the situation of being 'trapped in heat' and highlights that the phenomenon is not linked exclusively to district heating, as the paper describes the analysis of buildings served by central gas boilers.

The paper confirms the beneficial energy-efficiency consequences of installing heat cost allocators (Canale et al., 2019), along with providing evidence for emerging disputes among residents over diversified heating costs. Heat cost allocation provides the ability for residents to reduce the heating costs of their household directly, offering increased financial freedom and significantly easing the 'trapped in heat' situation. However, households

residing in flats with an unfavourable location within a building (Canale et al., 2019) often face higher heating costs, a situation further exacerbated by monthly repayments for installing heat cost allocators and heating-related renovations. While the lack of consumption-dependent heating service billing protects elderly households with high heat demand from potentially unhealthy low indoor temperatures, the installation of heat cost allocators introduces uncertainty regarding heating costs and leaves elderly households vulnerable to relatively low indoor temperatures (Boardman, 2010). Platten et al. (2020) have already noted that the installation of heat cost allocators could potentially push vulnerable households towards fuel poverty.

Although we recognize that the widespread implementation of heat cost allocators is a critical measure for reducing emissions from residential building stock, their effectiveness in alleviating fuel poverty remains ambiguous. Broader socioeconomic and energy efficiency factors, such as energy vulnerability (Csizmady et al., 2021), influence this uncertainty, which heat cost allocation alone may not address. The severity of the analysed issue may be significantly influenced by the thermal insulation capabilities of the buildings (B. Némethi, personal communication, October 6, 2023), which could not be addressed in this study due to the specific characteristics of the study area. Given the high share of large housing estate buildings in the ECE building stock and the anticipated increase in heat cost allocators in Hungary in the coming years, these factors could be particularly significant. The paper also highlights the significant role of condominium managers in the residential acceptance of heat cost allocation, suggesting further research on institutional and interest-related barriers to building-level refurbishment.

Given that the research focus on fuel poverty in the ECE has thus far primarily been directed towards rural areas (Jiglău et al., 2021), further studies must provide detailed insight into the nature, characteristics, and severity of fuel poverty in large housing estates.

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The beginning of Fordian economic organization in East German and Hungarian rural societies before 1945, with special regard to de-peasantization

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Abstract

This comparative historical study examines the early stages of "de-peasantization" in East German and Hungarian rural societies prior to World War II. The analysis focuses on two regions that can subsequently be classified as transitional zones within the "Green Ring," a belt encompassing the agricultural periphery of the continent. The question is to what extent the gradual disappearance of the peasantry was related to the two key economic paradigms of the 20th century: first, Fordism, and later the "Green Revolution"? As a theoretical framework, this study applies Reinhart Koselleck's model, which examines a specific historical moment in the context of both past and future. Accordingly, with regard to the peasantry of the 1930s, it is necessary to examine the degree to which the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" were in alignment at the time. To what extent did their synthesis anticipate subsequent trends? Furthermore, how did the German and Hungarian trajectories differ in terms of technocratic solutions in the 1930s?

Keywords: Fordism, Taylorism, "Green Revolution," "de-peasantizatin", "Green Ring"

1 Distinction of Terms

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Question

The analysis focuses on "de-peasantization" as a long-term social process, the consequences of which were most strongly felt by former socialist countries at the time of their EU accession. While the disappearance of the peasantry in the West was a continuous trend, in the East it occurred within a few decades after 1945, in conjunction with collectivization. At the beginning of the 20th century, the decline of the peasant population was still an "organic" tendency, resulting from factors such as overpopulation and undivided inheritance. After World War I, however, this trend was accelerated by specific mechanisms.

In particular, I refer to Fordism as the technocratic paradigm that emerged from globalization, meaning the organization of production and consumption on a mass scale. In its broader sense, Fordism – named after iconic figures – comprised two complementary processes: Taylorism, as the means of mass production, and Keynesianism, which sought to create a framework for mass consumption. The latter trend appeared briefly after the 1929–1933 economic crisis but became significant in Western societies only after 1945 (Cséfalvay, 1999, p. 14).

Regarding the origins of Taylorism and the organization of mass production, it is worth recalling Peter Drucker's observation that, even in the most developed countries, 19th-century industrialization was financed by agriculture, which also meant draining the uneducated rural labor force. This workforce had to be integrated into the framework of industrial plants. This goal was served by "Scientific Management," associated with Frederick Taylor, which undoubtedly resulted in an increase in skills and productivity in the long run. As subsequent generations in the United States became more skilled, workers required less supervision, and the previous rigid operating structures could be relaxed. The internationalization of markets also brought benefits: according to Drucker, international trade grew faster than foreign capital investments from the early 20th century onwards, enabling greater reliance on domestic capital. The latter sought out new investment opportunities, targeting domestic markets more effectively. (Even in the United States, foreign capital typically flowed into infrastructure during the 19th century.) The "industrialization" of agriculture, which started in the United States before 1913, was also part of this broader framework. By the 1960s, agriculture itself had become an "industry" with the highest scientific input per unit, leading not only to higher productivity but also to greater concentration and a reduction in the agricultural labor force (Drucker, 1971, pp. 139–145).

If Taylorism in the United States and Western Europe represented a relatively short transitional period, in Eastern Europe it was a long-lasting process due to the peculiarities of the communist dictatorship that followed 1945. This raises some questions for the latter countries: to what extent did Fordism influence de-peasantization, and to what degree was it shaped by pre-1945 developments as opposed to the communist dictatorship itself?

At the time of EU accession, the legitimate question was how compatible these rural societies were with the structures of the older EU Member States. In Western countries, there were also fears that the Agrarianist "Third Way" ideologies of the interwar period might be revived. But these concerns proved unfounded, since the shift to a market economy in these countries also favored larger sizes over family farms. The break with the peasant past was even more complete in those Eastern countries where the traditions of "peasant democracies" and large peasant parties were completely missing during the interwar period. This was particularly true of the former GDR and Hungary, where, unlike their neighbors, agricultural societies were dominated by large estates before 1945. In fact, in Germany, the divide between the city and the countryside was much sharper than in Eastern Europe or in the southern countries. So in the following, focusing on eastern Germany and Hungary, I argue that in both countries – albeit in different ways – the process of de-peasantization began earlier than in their eastern neighbors.

1.2 Interpretation Frameworks, Contexts, and Basic Concepts

Examining de-peasantization within the context of Fordism and the Green Revolution is essential. First, we need to define what we mean by de-peasantization. Imre Kovách distinguishes three levels of de-peasantization—the gradual elimination of historical peasantry: *1. structural*: the disappearance of peasantry as a class and its representative bodies; *2. social*: the changing role of farming for farmers and their families; and, *3. cultural*: the broader societal consequences of these processes, including the re-creation of national identity (Kovách, 2012, p. 197).

From a social-historical perspective, however, Fordism in the West was the first important step in the transition from pre-industrial society to modernity. Taylorism, originally developed in the United States in the 1880s, was a method of work organization designed for industrial companies. Since the United States has always been an immigrant country, efficient production required integrating unskilled immigrants of diverse nationalities into the national labour market. In fact, this was the reason behind the emergence of Frederick Taylor's approach, which aimed to achieve this goal by simplifying and standardizing workflows linked to performance-based wages.

The entry of capital into the agricultural sector was hindered by the sector's inherent unpredictability – particularly due to weather – and the diversity of tasks, with seasonal peaks across various activities. As a result, in agriculture, Taylorist methods came into use only to a limited extent. Performance was more difficult to evaluate, partly because agricultural work often involved group tasks, such as harvesting, which Taylorism generally sought to avoid (Seedorf, 1925, pp.73–83). Taylorist methods were mainly applied in large plants with specialized profiles. Expectations for smallholder farmers were transmitted indirectly through markets, buyers, cooperatives, and sector-wide umbrella organizations.

Although Taylorism, with its "Scientific Management" methods, time-and-motion studies, was initially aimed mainly at increasing performance and standardizing specific production factors, it required a continuous increase in technical expertise. (Skills testing, common in industry at the time, further reinforced this trend.) Those who could not keep up became redundant in agriculture, left the countryside, or started another occupation. After 1945, the Eastern Bloc institutionalized these principles, reorganizing the entire economy along Taylorist lines. In factories, for example, workers did not perform intellectual work. Russian Bolsheviks eagerly adopted the concept of Taylorist work methods in the 1920s and later extended it to occupied countries, focusing on employee control and decision centralization (Schlett, 2014, pp. 216–218).

However, even if Fordism evoked bad memories in the Eastern bloc, the later Western view of it was more positive. In the United States, agriculture, however, had already begun to give way to the Green Revolution before World War I. On the organizational side, there was a shift away from strict worker control and the separation of physical from mental labor, toward greater decentralization. On the economic side, overproduction led to cost reductions, which shifted the emphasis to new sources of energy production and related technologies. The winds of change were also felt in Hungary. As László Zelovich wrote in 1932, if the 19th century was marked by the industrial revolution, then the first

decades of the 20th century would bring the revolution in agricultural production (Zelovich, 1932, p. 16). Hungary's receptiveness to these innovations is underscored by the fact that, after 1945, Hungary was the only country in the Eastern Bloc where the Green Revolution gained the most ground, while elsewhere in the bloc agriculture was industrialized along Fordist lines only in the 1960s (Schlett, 2014, pp. 210–211).

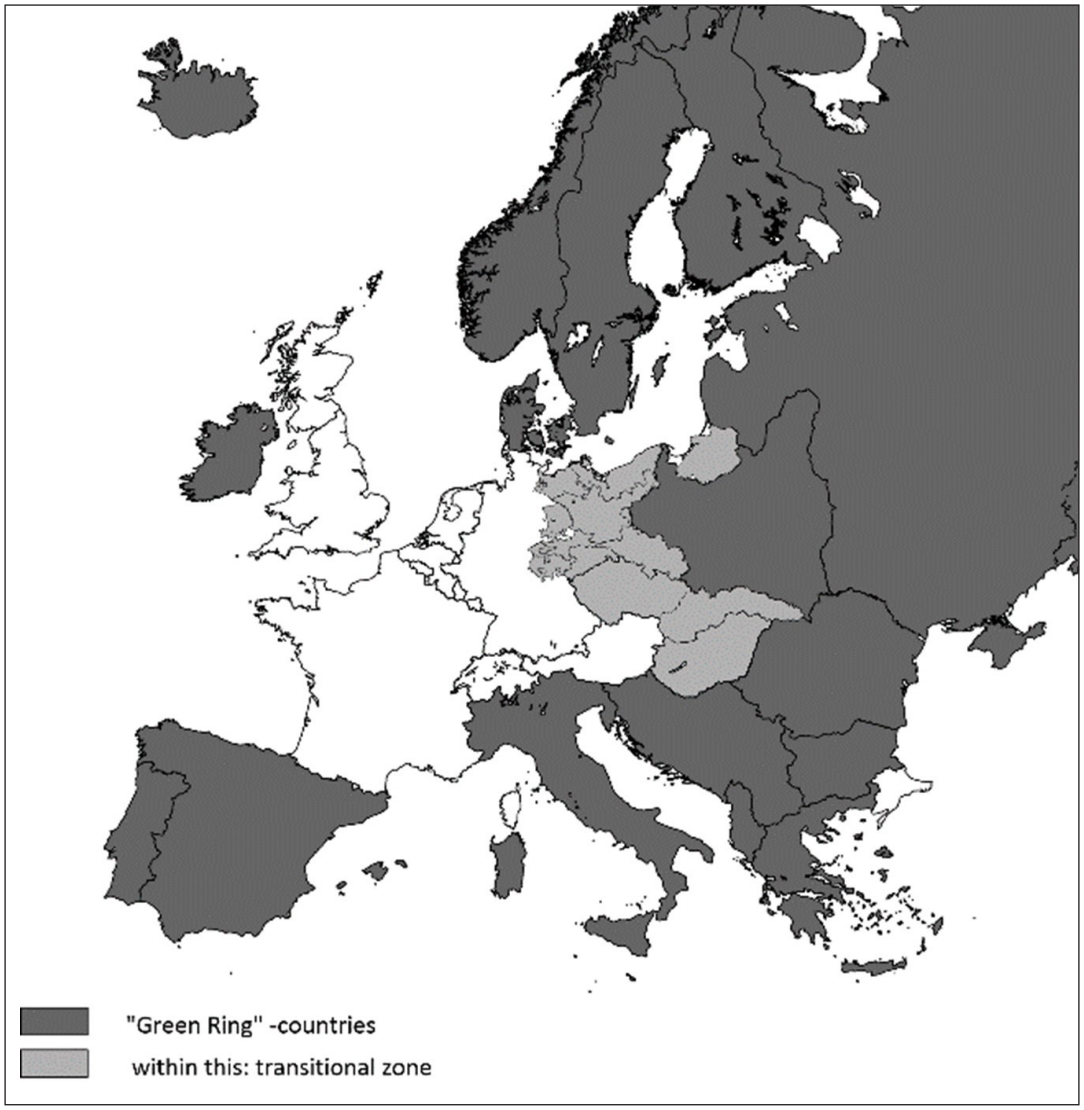
However, the Green Revolution had a significant impact on de-peasantization; the share of the agricultural population in the Western center countries was smaller from the beginning than in the periphery. In the United States, ten out of every twenty members of the labour workforce were employed in agriculture. By 1945, almost one-third still worked on farms. By the end of the 1960s, however, fewer than one-tenth of the workforce worked as farmers (Drucker, 1971, pp. 25–26). This trend implied from the beginning that part-time farming was becoming increasingly common (Zelovich, 1932, pp. 24–25).

1.3 Geographical Demarcation and Demography: Beginnings of De-peasantization in Central Europe

When analyzing de-peasantization, demographic differences cannot be overlooked. According to Gustav Cassel, in Western Europe, the population expanded in the 19th century, while the share of people living from agriculture decreased. This trend continued into the 20th century, even as overall population growth began to decline. In contrast, in Eastern Europe, continuous population growth was induced by the expansion of the rural population. East Germany and Hungary occupied an intermediate position. In the first half of the 20th century, both countries experienced slowing population growth, while the proportion of people living from agriculture stagnated (Cassel, 1927, pp. 500–508).

In the decades after 1945, however, the agricultural population declined sharply across Europe, most notably in the continent's periphery, which had previously resisted industrialization. This area—referred to as the "Green Ring" by Leo Granberg and Imre Kovách—was characterized by strong rural traditions and extended across the former Iron Curtain, including Southern, Northern, and Eastern Europe (Granberg et al., 2001, p. xiii). Within the Green Ring, regional differences were the subject of significant sociological debate, particularly in Hungary around the time of EU accession (Kovách, 2012, pp. 192–193).

Obviously, our main focus is on the former socialist countries, including the East German and Hungarian processes. Although different agricultural history typologies usually negotiate Hungary with the neighboring countries, Folke Dovring, a Swedish agricultural economist of the 1950s, pointed out that Hungary's prewar agrarian society closely resembled that of East Germany. He emphasized that on this side of the Iron Curtain, the share of wage workers in the agricultural workforce had been the highest in East Germany and Hungary. According to him, the proportions in the two countries were closer to the Spanish and even English and Portuguese indicators than to other countries in the region (Dovring, 1956, p. 132). This pattern is further confirmed by various census data.



Map 1 The "Green Ring"

Source: https://www.censusmosaic.demog.berkeley.edu/data/mosaic-data-files based on author's construction

If we examine the origins of Fordism in the interwar years, it was obvious that Germany, an industrial country, would adopt industrial methods. The drive for increased performance ("surplus-production") also played a role in the odiousness of the lost war, where, in the new conditions, it was necessary to secure the country's food supply, while the new democratic system demanded shorter working hours in agriculture (Lüders, 1926, p. 5). Together, these factors made it inevitably necessary to increase productivity at the plant level. In the case of Hungary, which primarily remained an agricultural country, the large-scale territorial loss shifted attention to the construction of industrial capacities.

This expansion could only be covered by agricultural exports, where increasing revenues also presupposed surplus production, i.e., greater performance.

After World War I, Germany had to overcome its strong traditions of particularism in order to move toward standardization, since tools and practices varied significantly by region. This task of unification was taken on by Wilhelm Seedorf and the Pommritzi Institute in Saxony. In Hungary, by contrast, the main problem was the differentiated property structure, which resulted in wide disparities in both production quality and yields across the different types of farms. The economic crisis highlighted the problems in this area. For producers – particularly in the grain sector – it became essential to enter the market with goods of consistent quality. This required the standardization of seeds and technologies.

Table 1 Structure of Agricultural Society before 1945 in Each Country

Countries	**Percentage of agricultural population in total population**	**Of which:**				**Area ratio of holdings over 50 hectares, percentage**
		independent farmers, tenants	**clerks, employees**	**farm servants, farm hands**	**agricultural laborers, day laborers**	
East Germany* (1933)	25.5	54.2**	0.9	7.3	37.6	56.6
Hungary (1930)	51.8	51.9	0,3	11.9	31,9	46.6
Czechoslovakia (1930)	34.6	69.9	2,2	0.0	27.4	43.3
Poland (1931)	60.6	83.6	4,3	2.1	7,8	25.8
Romania (1930)***	83.5	80.0	..	1.7	4.0	32.2
Yugoslavia (1931)	76.3	78.4	0,3	20.1	1.1	9.6
Bulgaria (1934)	85.0	84.6	0,1	0.0	15.3	1.6

Source: census volumes of the respective countries.

* *Brandenburg, East Prussia, Pomerania, Upper Silesia, Lower Silesia, Grenzmark, Saxon Province, Saxony, Thuringia, Mecklenburg, Anhalt.*

** *Full-time farmers.*

*** *The data on Romania is not complete. The number of clerks and employees is unknown.*

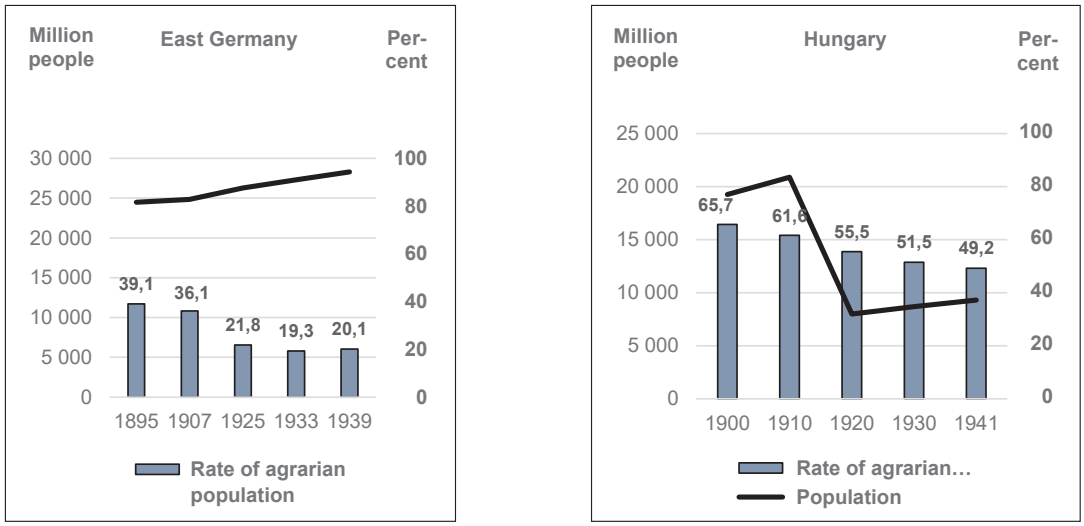


Figure 1 Share of agricultural population in Central Europe before 1945

Source: Mitchell, B. R., 2003, pp. 150–151.

Note: Within the boundaries of that time.

Of course, the Green Revolution that began at that time also had a profound impact on both areas. However, in the case of Central Europe, this cannot be separated from the context of authoritarian and even fascist regimes. Contemporary social history, with a broader perspective, maintains that in the 1930s the agricultural modernization efforts of these regimes—although in a specific way—were nevertheless part of the Green Revolution. In this regard, the pioneer was undoubtedly fascist Italy, which was forced to take this path very early because of the lack of capital and raw materials, although, in many respects, it followed American models.

After 1945, it became necessary to abandon the ideological legacies of the previous era, e.g., the peasant myth (Fernández-Prieto et al., 2001, pp. 28–29).

If we seek to compare East German and Hungarian peasant societies from this perspective, a complex methodological framework is required. The most important element of this is Tomka's concept of "asymmetric comparison" (1), which compares a "test region" with a "control region." In this study, East Germany serves as the former and Hungary as the latter. This framework is complemented by the adaptation of Koselleck's "historical time" (2) and a self-developed model that reflects the most important criteria (3).

2 The Peasant Policy of the Two Countries before 1945

2.1 East Germany as a "Test Region"

2.1.1 The Age of the "Space of Experience"

Regarding the established "industrial state" at the end of the 19th century, the main recurring concern was *Landflucht*, the depopulation of the countryside, primarily affecting the eastern provinces. After Germany's defeat in World War I, the discourse shifted to the other extreme, with many advocating a return to the "agrarian state" to ensure self-sufficiency. The new democratic system also considered it necessary to increase and continue the settlement policies initiated in the Prussian era due to the "Polish threat." However, the economic crisis of 1929 profoundly reshaped rural demographic processes. According to Cassel, prior to the crisis, industrial economic activity was essentially accompanied by migration away from agriculture, while during industrial slowdowns, many emigrated back to the countryside. Rural employment also increased during the agricultural boom, whereas agricultural crises, however, generated rural unemployment, and migration to the city also increased. The Great Depression disrupted these cyclical patterns.

On the other hand, these changes cannot be separated from the social mobilization that took place in the Weimar Republic after the First World War, when social aspects also came to the fore in rural areas. While this opened new perspectives for those of the rising strata, it also marked an overture to de-peasantization. This was confirmed by the 1933 census data, according to which 1.2 million people were working part-time in the eastern provinces, in addition to 3.2 million full-time farmers. Nevertheless, at this time, East Germany was still considered a lagging region within the country. Furthermore, during the economic crisis, some experts even suggested that the real solution to eliminating Western competition in industry was to shift the center of the world economy from the West to the East (Eastern Europe and Asia) (Rogmann, 1930, p. 129).

The breakdown of patriarchal relationships and the weakening of the natural wage system paved the way for the rise of Fordism in Eastern German culture. Junker groups invested in industry, especially heavy industry, and may have played an important role in disseminating industrial methods in agriculture, while there was considerable enthusiasm for the American way of organizing work. A pioneering role in the adoption of German agricultural practices was played by Wilhelm Seedorf's Pommritz Institute. With regard to the Green Revolution, the strong traditions of chemicalization and the fertilizer industry must also be highlighted. Although the eastern provinces were rich in water energy, there was no interest in exploiting it.

Mechanization – another integral part of the Green Revolution – gained prominence as a result of American examples during the economic crisis. It should also be remembered that in agricultural-importing countries such as Germany, far fewer people worked in agriculture than in agricultural-exporting countries. Large estate landowners strongly supported mechanization because they were interested in reducing wages. This effort was also strongly supported by the extension of unemployment benefits to agricultural workers in 1927 (Wunderlich, 1964, pp. 54–55). By contrast, in peasant-dominated regions such as southern Germany, there was great mistrust of American- and Soviet-style mechaniza-

tion, as many feared it would lead to kolkhozization. Münzinger's 1930s experiment at Hohenheim essentially aimed to adapt machinery to peasant conditions (Haushofer, 1958, pp. 83–84).

Table 2 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in East Germany in the 1920s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/ measures**
Demographic characteristics	population starting to decline, rural emigration	"Landflucht," part-time farming, entry of women into employment, cult of youth,
Technocracy	Taylorism, standardization, accounting, American patterns	"experimental circles," machinery circles, voluntary work service, Institute of Work Sciences of Pommritz
Science and technology background	motorization, electrification, chemical industry, traditions of fertilization, mechanization, animal nutrition	agricultural academies, university research institutes, The Hohenheim Experiment
Welfare indicators	Bismarckian social security system, urbanization, social mobilization, and suburbs	establishment of a Ministry of Labour
Signs of agrarian state	the influence of Laur, weakening of large estates, enhancing inner colonization in the east	anti-urban attitude, after the war defeat, "back to the agrarian state"

Source: Author's construction.

2.1.2 The Age of the "Horizon of Expectation"

Under the leadership of the Reich Peasant Leader (*Reichsbauernführer*) and Minister of Food and Agriculture Richard Walther Darré, the aspiration for an "agrarian state" in Germany peaked during the era of the Third Reich, spanning 1933 to 1936. This weird detour of crisis management combined both visionary and rational aspects. The former category included, for example, the attempt to create a "new nobility." American economists viewed the Darré notion as a flawed economic model and an unusual sociological experiment (Holt, 1936, pp. 178–183). Later historians have differed in their opinions. German authors tend to interpret the process of "re-agrarization" in terms of a national political perspective, while Italian scholars argue that Darré's Reich Food Estate (*Reichsnährstand, RNS*) was only a faint imitation of the similar organization there, and the Italians achieved agrarian modernization more successfully than the Germans (Corni, 2001).

Although many of Darré's proposals date back to the Weimar Republic, there were also reasonable economic components in his approach. One example was the idea of the so-called "large-area economy," which extended the existing national autarchy to wider

regions. In agriculture, this was linked to "partial autarchy" (*Teilautarchie*), which was clearly aimed at supporting German farmers. In principle, the latter was able to produce high-value-added products on the basis of raw materials imported from southeastern European states. At the same time, there is no doubt that the Nazis, for ideological reasons, strongly fought against the introduction of industrial methods into agriculture and the employment of women. There are many elements mentioned in "The Ten Commandments of the Production Battle" written by Darré, but machinery is not among them (Lovin, 1974).

Some contemporary German historians argue that the peasant policy of the Third Reich was not at all contradictory to agricultural modernization. This duplicity is clearly reflected in the activities of the Darré–Backe duo, where the romantic visionary and the cold technocrat managed to work together. The two Nazi ministers of Food and Agriculture represented different sides of the same ideology. For the peasantry, the twelve years of the Third Reich brought only some respite from the pressures of modernization. Peasant farmers remained the spoiled favourites of the system and were protected from foreign competition (Gerhard, 2014).

Table 3 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in East Germany in the 1930s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/ measures**
Demographic characteristics	decrease in urban fertility	support for families with several children, restricting foreign work
Technocracy	corporativism, state intervention, "Neuer Plan," "System of Stable Prices"	Reich Food Estate," "market regulation," "production battles," "large-area economy"
Science, technology	economic geography research on rural spaces, tractorization, nutrition	system of "central places," "Spatial Research"
Welfare indicators	Schacht's inflation financing, imitation of Keynesianism, overcoming unemployment	"Strength Through Joy," construction of highways, increased role of sea fishing in supply
Signs of agrarian state	providing self-sufficiency in food, slowdown of settlements	"peasantry as a vital source of the race," "new nobility," "blood and soil," Hereditary Farmstead

Source: Author's construction

2.1.3 The Age of the "Revelations"

In this specific case, the main problem with Darré's strategy was its inability to guarantee food self-sufficiency.

This could only be achieved by beginning the production of weapons, which they did at a time when industry was at its weakest. The German economy officially embarked on this path with the Four-Year Plan, launched in 1936 and led by Göring. Yet even Schacht's "New Plan" (*Neuer Plan*), two years earlier, pointed in this direction. The "production battles" (*Erzeugungsschlacht*) initiated at that time could openly serve the purposes of armament production. However, this kind of recovery further intensified the exodus from the countryside. Between 1933 and 1939 alone, 400,000 people left – mainly agricultural workers, *Landarbeiter* – while production potential reached its final limits (Huegel, 2003, pp. 448–449).

Long-term solutions could only be found in the rapid technological advancement of agriculture. This process was successful until the outbreak of war, between 1936 and 1939, when farms expanded their machinery fleets, and the efficiency of individual machines improved. However, after 1939, this boom ended, as raw materials for agricultural technology were redirected to military purposes (Niemann, 2000, pp. 112–115). At the beginning of the war, to introduce tractorization, a campaign was launched to enforce farm consolidation. This led to the demise of many dwarf and small peasant farms (Wunderlich, 1961, pp. 185–189). Alongside mechanization, women were also mobilized for work. By autumn 1943, the proportion of women employed in the German military industry was 34.0 percent, compared to 25.4 percent in the United States and 33.1 percent in Great Britain (Tooze, 2006, p. 515). Soon afterwards, in the official terminology, the term "peasantry" (*Bauerntum*) was replaced by "rural population" (*Landvolk*), to include all rural inhabitants regardless of occupation (Gutberger, 1999).

An important political shift came in 1942, when Darré was replaced at the head of the ministry by his deputy Herbert Backe, who was already clearly trying to assert technocratic priorities. He had previously contributed to the Four-Year Plan as Göring's trustee. Backe was satisfied with the ministerial position; he did not claim the role of "Reich Peasant Leader." Expectations of corporatism were also dissolved. In turn, the new minister proved to be a ruthless enforcer of Nazi policy in occupied Europe, particularly in the eastern territories. Backe sought to exploit these regions – considered part of the *Lebensraum* – to the utmost for German war efforts (Tooze, 2006, pp. 477–478).

In contrast to politicians and ideologists, experts had denied the possibility of returning to an agrarian state as early as 1933, when the Nazis came to power. The demographer Friedrich Burgdörfer, for example, was asked at this time by the Friedrich List Society *(Friedrich-List-Gesellschaft*), which propagated autarky, to investigate the possibility of this. Using statistical methods, he analyzed to what extent the population trends supported the reality of the concept. Burgdörfer concluded that although the "window of opportunity" in this sense remained open as long as rural fertility exceeded urban, in the long run, decline was inevitable in any case (Burgdörfer, 1933, p. 154).

Since much also depended on the extent of emigration to the big cities, it was argued that – given the poor quality of land in many areas and the expected decline in food consumption – instead of settlement (inner colonization), rural people should be retained in place by decentralizing industry (Burgdörfer, 1933, p. 154).

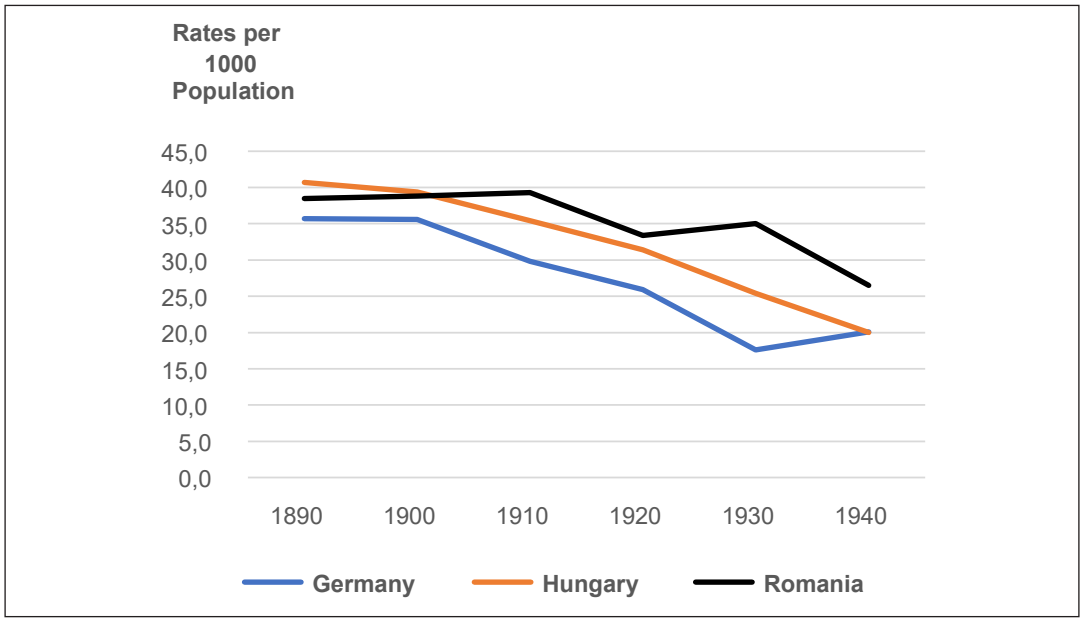


Figure 2 Number of Births in the First Decades of the 20th Century in Central Europe

Source: Mitchell, B. R., 2003, pp. 98–100, pp. 105–107.

Note: Within the boundaries of that time.

Table 4 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in East Germany in the 1940s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/ measures**
Demographic characteristics	increasing rural migration, re-employment of foreign workers	less talk about "German work," women's employment
Technocracy	top economic ministry, state intervention, centralization, Four-Year Plan, rationing	"cannons instead of butter," compulsory labor service, consolidation in farm holdings
Science, technology	statistics, demography, sociology, economics of rural industrial resettlement	a less ideological approach, innovation in planning methods, market districts for each product
Welfare indicators	decentralization of industry, banknote press	"Ersatz" solves problems with food supply
Signs of agrarian state	family trees, runic writing, coats of arms	in phraseology, a "rural people" instead of "peasantry"

Source: Author's construction

2.1.4 Conclusions on the Pre-1945 Era

Pre-World War I history makes it clear that the "industrial state" emerged too rapidly, which provoked certain objections. By that time, the actual peasantry, due to the phenomenon of serf liberation, already represented a narrower social stratum. Nevertheless, peasantry and agriculture continued to play a significant role in Eastern national politics and ideology. The fact that strong agrarian fundamentalism was an integral part of this ideology became especially apparent during the grain crisis. At that time, it was argued that grain production was an important attribute of the peasantry, and that its destruction would endanger the entire economy. Additionally, ancestral inheritance was proposed as a means of maintaining the peasantry as a social class.

Regardless of migration, it is undeniable that a process of social mobility began in the interwar period. In response, conservative parties agitated rural voters by claiming that the peasant farmers also belonged to the middle class. In reality, however, the peasantry and the great estate had already become economically divided and even in competition with one another. This was made clear as the scandals surrounding "Eastern Aid" were revealed during the economic crisis, while the ultimate beneficiary – the laughing third party – was the Nazi Party. The main question of the dispute between the large estate and the peasantry lay in the question of which group would benefit more from state subventions.

In East German agriculture, Fordism primarily paved the way for the emergence of a broad class of agricultural laborers due to the expansion of intensive crops, such as sugar beet. Naturally, the peasantry, too – if it did not want to fall behind its rival, the large estates, in terms of performance – had to adapt. However, rising productivity gradually reduced the need for labor in agriculture. This exodus disproportionately shifted the burden of farming onto women.

3.1 Hungary as a "Control Region"

3.1.1 The Age of "Space of Experience"

Hungary had to embark on the path of industrial development after 1920, but this led to several contradictions. First, although the new country was increasingly converging with the West in its population relations after World War I, it retained its agricultural character. The agricultural area was small compared to the size of the peasant population, and even this limited land was mostly used for extensive production. In addition, exports of minimally processed agricultural products were promoted (Lipták, 1935, p. 21).

With regard to the large estates, there is no doubt that after 1920 their sense of social responsibility increased, and it became increasingly common for them to take farming into their own hands. Although Taylorist methods were identified prior to World War I, Kálmán Méhely's contributions were confined only to the industrial sector (Méhely, 1913). Industrial patterns were less strictly followed in the rationalization of agriculture, as evidenced by the fact that a significant part of the large estates still maintained the natural

wage system. Moreover, theory and practice were more separated than in Germany. As a result, the inspiration for Fordism came primarily from administrative professionals dealing with the situation of agricultural workers, such as András Heller, the sheriff of Székesfehérvár district. While Heller's book focused mainly on wage issues, it also discusses the question of Scientific Management (Heller, 1939).

It did not take long for poor economic conditions to arise. A major turning point in this was the economic crisis of 1929, which manifested itself as a sales crisis in the mainly agrarian exporting countries (Szuhay, 1962, pp. 31–43). Hungarian wheat could not compete with American and Canadian supplies either in quantity or quality. Later, during Germany's so-called "large-area economy," Hungary was expected to achieve "surplus production" even though its crop yields were below German indicators based on more intensive production.

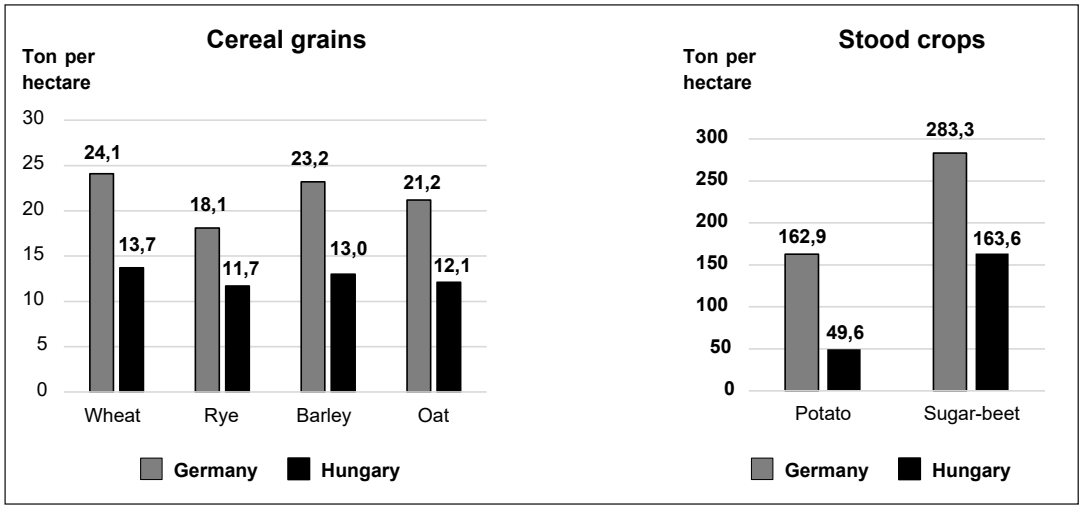


Figure 3 The issue of "surplus production" in Hungary based on the German and Hungarian yields of 1935

Source: Mitchell, B. R., 2003, p. 221, p. 226, p. 279, p. 284.

The only available solution was to unify and increase yields. This required uniform quality, ensured by using the same seeds everywhere in grain production. This, in turn, focused on plant breeding, an area in which Hungarian researchers were in the lead. At the same time, however, there was widespread skepticism about mechanization. Even Mátyás Matolcsy, one of the era's most dominant agricultural economists, believed that under Hungarian conditions – in contrast to the United States and Canada – redundant agricultural workers would not find work in other sectors.

Table 5 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in Hungary in the 1920s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/measures**
Demographic characteristics	population beginning to decline, but not typical of city flow	family model with one child, homestead question, cult of youth, generational antagonisms
Technocracy	consolidating parcels, beginning of accounting, Italian patterns, fewer industrial solutions	centralization in umbrella organizations, tenant cooperatives entails refusal of mechanization
Science, technology	motorization, electrification, agronomic, mill industry, animal husbandry traditions	agricultural academies, research departments of interest, protecting organizations (OMGE)
Welfare indicators	Klebelsberg school network, farm schools, nurse network, housing policy	establishment of a Ministry of Welfare, social aspects come to the fore
Signs of agrarian state	industrial development as a "necessary evil," limited land reform, order of "vitéz"	division of large estates in an organic way, separation of activities by type of plant

Source: Author's construction

3.1.2 The Age of the "Horizon of Expectation"

According to Zsuzsanna Varga, the most prominent Hungarian politicians in the 1930s were both idealistic and realistic (Varga, 2014, p. 130). During Gyula Gömbös's far-right administration (1932–1936) as prime minister, the notion of an idealized, traditional "agrarian state" was discussed, but it remained at the level of political slogans. Soon it became evident that this intention was illusory, much like the radical land reforms. In his 1932 "National Work Plan," Gömbös elevated his peculiar interpretation of "agrarian thought" into a political doctrine that essentially meant the dominance of agriculture. According to this concept, a form of economic dictatorship was to coincide with gradual land reform, aimed at cultivating "Christian economic individuals" as the socio-political foundation of his agenda (Vonyó, 2011, pp. 5–9). Following Darré's model, Gömbös also sought to create a kind of entailed smallholding, but Hungary lacked the tradition of undivisive inheritance.

The propagation of "agricultural industries" fit well into these ideological frameworks, and appeared in other parties' programs. This concept was realistic to the extent that the economic conditions of the country were best suited to the development of the sectors processing agricultural products. There was widespread recognition that previous industrialization efforts had been unsuccessful, and instead, the agricultural price scissors had widened. Moreover, there were fears this would exacerbate rural impoverishment (Matolcsy, 1934, pp. 45–46).

On the opposite side, the "Garden-Hungary" concept envisioned by folk writers fits into this mainstream perspective. According to this Third Way concept, the main profile of the economy – in a small-ownership structure – would be grape, fruit, and vegetable production, supported by improved infrastructure and irrigation. These proposals should be viewed in the context of the German "large-area economy" that was emerging at that time, which required some adaptation. It is also necessary to take into account that the central role of grain production was presumed to decline. Some experts even suggested that under the given circumstances, Hungary could mirror Denmark's position in relation to England with its food deliveries (Adorján, 1941, pp. 38–39).

Table 6 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in Hungary in the 1930s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/measures**
Demographic characteristics	proportion of industrial employees is slightly increasing	employment of women, intellectual overproduction
Technocracy	concentration and statist tendencies due to the crisis, German and Italian patterns, market research, advertising	"surplus-production," establishment of the Ministry of Industry
Science, technology	hydrocarbon research, plant breeding, aluminium production, discovery of vitamins, beginnings of tractorization	university research institutes, village research
Welfare indicators	infrastructure development, tax incentives, combating unemployment	"evolution of quality," realization of the need to increase internal consumption
Signs of agrarian state	"agricultural industries," refounding of the Smallholder Party	"land reform" as part of political programs, irrigation of the Great Plain, "Garden-Hungary," settlement by Gömbös, entailed smallholding

Source: Author's construction

3.1.3 The Age of the "Revelations"

During Béla Imrédy's premiership, the Hungarian economy embarked on a path of rearming with the Győr program, initiated in 1938. Regardless of political considerations, this marked a turning point, as Hungary transitioned from an agro-industrial to an industrial-agrarian country (Csikós-Nagy, 1996, p. 71). This shift also involved a move toward increased planning and state interference in economic processes, resulting in a gradual shift from "agricultural industries" to heavy industries, such as the chemical industry and vehicle manufacturing. For these purposes, a separate Ministry of Industry was created as early as August 1935, which also implied the decentralization of industry.

On the other hand, armaments brought agricultural and industrial interests closer together in Hungary. Within agriculture, both large estates and peasants were forced

to cooperate more and more economically. (Although the paths of the two had already separated politically as a result of the crisis, which was reflected in the reformation of the Smallholder Party.) Hungarian agriculture, increasingly oriented toward the German market, now encouraged cooperation within specific product lines rather than complementary production among individual holdings. The structures used for this were referred to as "one-handers." These economic groupings were established to position specific products in specific markets. It was about firms operating in a cooperative form, but with state support. Coordination was mainly carried out by large estates. These were cooperatives in name, but in reality state-supported companies which had little to do with the Roshdale Principles. It also appeared that cooperative development was increasingly moving towards vertical integration (Szuhay, 1962, pp. 248–252).

In Hungary, preparations for war also drew greater attention to the Taylorist Scientific Management methods. This was all the more necessary since, during the war, the Hungarian government consciously sought to maintain continuous production. Throughout the war, military production had to be adapted to the situation, as the rural population consisted of small peasants who were mostly difficult to mobilize. At the same time, there was a shortage of labor in agriculture. In the long run, this immobility gave rural industrialization an opportunity, while war management temporarily made it necessary to coordinate agricultural work.

The establishment of a delivery system that supplied both the army and the civilian population, along with price interventions and production guidelines, was an indication of a new era. The future of peasant farming was certainly questioned by the territorial revisions after 1938: while the agricultural population increased within the new borders, the amount of distributable agricultural land did not. In addition, in the regained territories, the quality of land was generally worse than in the motherland (Domonkos, 2017, p. 5).

Table 7 Peasantry and the Beginnings of Fordism in Hungary in the 1940s

	Trends	**Public discourse/institutions/ measures**
Demographic characteristics	fertility of large estates is higher than that of peasant villages	realization that population processes are not conducive to small peasant farming
Technocracy	top economic ministry state intervention,compulsory war delivery	increased role of planning, "one-handers"
Science, technology	innovations in heavy industry, chemical industry, agricultural economics, statistics	"circles of production," standard of living calculation, consumer basket, representative household statistics
Welfare indicators	decentralization of the industry, family house-benefit (ONCSA)	focus on community consumption
Signs of agrarian state	developing heavy industry, later German plans for the agrarianization of the country	Imrédy's draft small-scale lease law, re-evaluation of large plants

Source: Author's construction

3.1.4 Conclusions about the Pre-1945 Era

There was no doubt that industrial development could only be achieved at the expense of those living from agriculture. Even if the rural population had some reservations about industrialization, it was not anti-urban: in many cities, a significant part of the population was still engaged in agriculture. A healthy peasant policy undoubtedly had a basis, since small peasant farms remained widespread after serf liberation and had proven their viability during the grain crisis. It was therefore no coincidence that the counter-revolutionary system established in 1920 saw the peasantry as the most reliable element. Large-scale educational programs were launched to promote its advancement. Although the center of the discourse on land question seemed to focus on ownership change, the main question was, in fact, where to draw the line between large-scale and small-scale production.

However, in Hungary, agricultural rationalization followed industrial patterns less closely than in Germany. Backwardness was evident in the fact that the focus was more on the concentration of production, i.e., on the use of extensive methods rather than intensive methods, and on actual increases in productivity. On the other hand, since cereal production there relied less on the labor of agricultural workers than in Germany, modernization had to be extended primarily to peasant farms. In this process, large estates played a major mediating role. The crisis in Hungary, regardless of ideology, encouraged an even more pragmatic approach, given the scarcity of resources. (However, the problem was that the peasants there were less willing to cooperate with each other than in Germany due to the fragmented nature of rural society.)

4 Summary and Outlook

After reviewing the pre-1945 period, we can turn to later developments. In terms of peasant policies, the economic crisis demonstrated the need for a less ideological approach to economic organization and for more consideration of economic rationality. The idea of an "agrarian state," whatever this might have meant, was not supported by the population processes in any country. In the end, de-peasantization began instead, influenced by two major paradigms of the 20th century: Fordism and the Green Revolution. The Fordist methods used in agriculture before 1945 were characterized primarily by the pursuit of performance improvement and standardization. The fact that both countries had a reasonably diverse group of agricultural laborers before 1945 considerably aided the rise of Fordist tendencies. Fordism in Germany, at the time, involved high hopes for its social impact. The perceived social benefits of the new paradigm were described as follows: 1. the elimination of waste; 2. turning uneducated workers into a skilled workforce; 3. indirectly reducing the cost of living; 4. bridging the gap between graduates and workers in education; and, 5. forcing capital and labor to cooperate (Seedorf, 1925, pp. 30–31).

After the Second World War, both the eastern half of divided Germany and Hungary found themselves on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. As in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, collectivization began after 1948. From the organizational point of view, this process was inseparable from the institutionalization of previously scattered scientific

methods. However, by separating the physical and intellectual work in plants and shifting toward a sectoral structure, collectivization only increased migration out of agriculture. At the same time, while communist dictatorships regarded Fordism, which fit well with the planned economic system, as a means of catching up, little attention was paid to the peculiarities of agriculture (Schlett, 2014, p. 218).

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The world of work in Hungarian television: The portrayal of occupations in Hungarian fiction series

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Abstract

The main role of the media is to be an information source – such as a window on the world – which forms people's knowledge, values and attitudes. Several studies have shown that the impact of television during socialisation is unquestionable, and it continues to shape people's perceptions later on too. If the portrayal of the labour force on television is distorted, it can not only distort in the audience's image of the world but also alter their perceptions of their own lives and make them dissatisfied with their own social status. A great amount of foreign research has been conducted on this topic, but no such research has yet been done in Hungary. The current study examines how Hungarian fiction series portray the world of work by quantitative content analysis of all series of which the premiere was broadcast between 2015 and 2019 in the prime-time slot and gave sufficient opportunity for discovering portrayals of occupational roles. The results show that the world presented on television is more masculine and glamorous, with certain occupations significantly overrepresented, while some other occupations are neglected compared to the real world. The portrayal of characters also shows a distorted picture of society in the television world.

Keywords: media portrayal; world of work; cultivation theory; quantitative content analysis

1 Introduction

Television serves as a primary socializing force, the impact of which continues throughout an individual's life (Greenberg, 1982; Signorielli, 1993; Wright et al., 1995; Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Hoffner et al., 2008; Gehrau, Brüggemann, Handrup, 2016). Viewers gain knowledge from television about unfamiliar concepts and construct a broader social reality than what they can access directly. Consequently, through the representation of working characters and their occupations, media has an inevitable role in shaping public conceptions of the professional world.

Work plays a central role in human life, particularly in Western cultures where an active life, framed by paid employment, is the standard. It affects life in many ways, from

transforming the environment to shaping personal identity (Watson, 2008). An individual's occupation often determines their social standing. For instance, when meeting for the first time, people frequently ask, "What do you do?" to help situate each other in a social context. Participation in certain occupations is culturally bound and socially valued (Phelan & Kinsella, 2009; Unruh, 2004), and occupational titles function as social categories, thus forming a part of one's social identity.

Due to their significant social, cultural and psychological functions, television series are a major media genre, often serving as modern-day tales for adults. This format allows audiences to develop strong bonds with and also identify with the characters. When this engagement becomes sufficiently strong, viewers may begin to perceive these narratives not just as entertainment, but as stories that reflect their own lives (NMHH, 2016).

In 2010, a total of 216 series premiered in the US, while in 2019, the number of produced series was 532.[1] Starting from 1997 (the year the two commercial TV stations, RTL Klub and TV2, entered the market) until the end of 2019, 41 Hungarian series were produced.[2] After 2010, there was a notable increase in the production of locally made series. According to data from Nielsen Audience Measurement, fiction series have become the most popular genre, yielding high ratings for broadcasting channels. In fact, the audience share for series reached the highest level among all programme types, standing at 20.4 percent RSH[3] for the total population aged four and above in the first quarter of 2019 across Total TV. (Figure 8 in Appx.)

In 2015, eight new series premiered in Hungary. Over the five-year period from 2015 to 2019, a total of 24 Hungarian prime-time fiction series were introduced. The main themes of these series are broadly international and generally lack distinct Hungarian characteristics. The focus on a specific profession, workplace, or the nature of work itself is not a uniquely Hungarian trend. For instance, there are series centred on teachers and school life (*A tanár/The Teacher*) or set in a private hospital (*Jóban rosszban* [*In Good Times and Bad*]). Similar thematic choices are common in foreign series as well. When television portrays a distorted labour force, it risks misleading viewers, creating false beliefs, and fostering dissatisfaction with their own social standing.

Numerous international studies have demonstrated the media's impact on the occupational aspirations of children and adolescents (e.g. Atkin, 1991; Vande Berg & Steckfuss, 1992; Signorielli, 1993, 2004, 2009; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli &Kahlenberg, 2001; Jacobs et al., 2015; Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018). This body of research has focused on the depiction of occupations in television programmes and their influence on viewers' perceptions of the world of work. The findings consistently show that television provides a biased account of occupations, underrepresenting traditional professions while promoting distorted and false ideas about the characteristics of various jobs.

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/444870/scripted-primetime-tv-series-number-usa/ [Accessed 07 09 2021]

[2] Data are from own collection (from 1998 onwards, the first full year after the launch of the two major commercial channels (RTL and TV2). The database includes all fiction series produced in Hungary between 1998 and 2019.

[3] RSH stands for "Rating Share," which is a measure used in television ratings to indicate the percentage of television viewers watching a particular programme compared to the total number of viewers watching television at that time. It helps to assess the popularity of a programme relative to its competitors.

Consequently, the aim of this research is to explore how entertainment television shows – particularly locally produced, scripted series – portray the world of work, in a realistic, idealised, or distorted way. The objective of this research is to provide a general overview of how work is represented in Hungarian scripted prime-time series. To achieve this, we will examine the demographic distribution of characters on television and their work-related characteristics, comparing these findings with actual social conditions.

Therefore, the research questions are the following:

- What are the demographic characteristics of Hungarian Fiction series and how do they compare to the actual Hungarian population?
- How do the characters' employment statuses and the portrayed professions compare to the real-world labour force?

As this research follows the methodology of previous studies, its outcomes are comparable with the results of earlier analyses. A large body of content analysis on the portrayal of work has been conducted in the U.S. (e.g. Atkin, 1991; Signorielli, 2009; Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018), whereas far less research exists in Europe (e.g. Emons et al., 2010; Jacobs et al., 2015). Although the results have not shown remarkable differences in how television portrays the world of work, this highlights the problem that such research is largely missing in other regions and cultures.

In Hungary, media research has covered all medium types, with numerous studies on the portrayal of phenomena like violence or minorities. For this study, television-related projects are the most relevant. Previous research has focused on specific series genres, narrative analyses of shows like Szomszédok or Barátok közt (e.g. Hermann, 2010; Kupi, 2011), historical analyses (e.g. Gayer, 2000), or the depiction of specific issues like abusive relationships or Roma characters (e.g. Bernáth & Messing 2001; Császár & Gregor, 2016).

The current research connects to these previous studies and complements them. However, no content analysis of this kind on the portrayal of the world of work has been conducted in Hungary, making this study a necessary supplement to the field. Without mapping the media's messages on occupational issues, it is impossible to ascertain the social context generated by television content.

2 Background

The evolution of media effects theory has occurred in tandem with the development of the media environment itself (McQuail, 2010). The theoretical framework of this research is underpinned by two seminal paradigms: George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory and Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Both are among the most influential and frequently cited theories in communication studies (Morgan, Shanahan, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015), serving as the conceptual basis for extensive research into media messages and their influence (e.g. Signorielli, 2004, 2009, 2017; Hoffner et al., 2008; Esch, 2011; Gehrau et al., 2016). These theories converge on a central premise: that mass communication constructs a symbolic environment whose influence is pervasive, even in the absence of direct exposure, as effects can be transmitted through socially mediated channels. However, they diverge in

their analytical focus. Cultivation Theory examines media's long-term, cumulative effects through a sociological lens, whereas Social Cognitive Theory explores the psychological mechanisms of learning and cognition.

Cultivation theory has faced significant criticism regarding its applicability in the modern, fragmented media environment. A primary critique is that the proliferation of platforms has segmented the audience, weakening the uniform influence that television once had. However, Morgan and Shanahan (2010) argued that these developments often lead to more intense and focused media consumption, which actually reinforces the theory's relevance.

Given that the number of U.S.-produced series more than doubled between 2010 and 2019, and considering the global popularity of series, we are clearly in a new era of storytelling. Even people who cancel cable subscriptions still access popular media content through streaming services or downloads. Therefore, it can be argued that the platform is secondary to the narrative itself, as these stories circulate widely within and across societies. This widespread circulation of stories reinforces the continued relevance of Cultivation Theory.

While other media theories, such as Representation Theory or Cultural Studies, could provide relevant grounding for this research, a quantitative method was chosen to address feasibility issues associated with a large-scale, long-term examination. Given the number of foreign studies on this topic, ensuring comparability was a key consideration, allowing the results to be interpreted in a broader context. This approach also makes it possible to see if recurring themes and stereotypes are observable across different countries. Since the vast majority of this previous research is based on Cultivation Theory, continuing with this framework is a reasonable choice.

The original aim of Cultivation Theory was to develop a method for examining the "central cultural dynamics of the age of television" (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 22). Gerbner developed the "Cultural Indicators" research project to study television as the key source of shared images and messages in society. According to the theory, the stable and repetitive messages on television have a strong influencing power, as nearly everyone is affected either directly or indirectly.

As the main focus of the current research is on the portrayal of the world of work in television, the primary approach is based on the guidelines of the 'Cultural Indicators' project, which provides empirical support for exploring the world of television. The research methodology aligns with Gerbner's 'Cultural Indicators' project framework and associated protocols. Spanning a period of five years, the current study employs a systematic quantitative content analysis for its message system assessment. Since earlier studies also employed the same framework, using this method was not only suitable for the subject but also ensures the results are comparable.

Several studies have explored the portrayal of the world of work in television programmes. One area of this research has focused on how television content portrays the world of work demographically (e.g. Atkin, 1991; Vande Berg & Steckfuss, 1992; Signorielli, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2017; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Elasmar et al., 1999; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli &Kahlenberg, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004, 2005; Emons et al., 2010; Esch, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015; Behm-Morawitz et al. 2018).

Most of these studies examined television's demographic characteristics in terms of gender distribution, age, marital status, and ethnicity. The findings frequently highlighted gender disparity (Vande Berg, Streckfuss, 1992; Signorielli, 1993; Greenberg, Collette, 1997; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Elasmar et al., 1999; Glascock, 2011; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004; Emons et al., 2010; Esch, 2011; Jacobs et al, 2015) and a low representation of teenagers and the elder generation on screen (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli, 2004; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005; Smith et al., 2012). With regard to ethnicity, a similar disproportional representation, which differs significantly from the distribution of the real population, has been reported (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001; Signorielli 2004, 2009). The consistent findings across these studies highlight that the world portrayed on television is predominantly male dominated, sidelining older generations, families, and ethnic minorities, thus marginalizing certain groups and reinforcing stereotypes that perpetuate social inequalities.

Prior research has consistently found that the representation of everyday work roles on television is infrequent (Atkin, 1991; Vande Berg & Steckfuss, 1992; Signorielli, 1993, 2004, 2009, 2017; Greenberg and Collette, 1997; Elasmar et al., 1999; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004, 2005; Emons et al., 2010; Esch, 2011; Jacobs et al., 2015; Behm-Morawitz et al., 2018). Beyond simply analysing the proportion of occupational roles, researchers have extended the analysis to examine the relationship between work and other demographic characteristics. Regarding gender differences, male characters are more often portrayed with higher status and in leading organizational positions, while their female counterparts are more likely to have stereotypical jobs or an unknown occupational status (Atkin, 1991; Signorielli, 1993, 2004, 2009; Greenberg & Collette, 1997; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Elasmar et al., 1999; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004, 2005; Emons et al., 2010; Esch, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Jacobs et al., 2015). Furthermore, older men were more likely to work outside the home than women (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Glascock, 2001; Signorielli, 2004, Lauzen & Dozier, 2005). This pattern strengthens a sense of male superiority by portraying men in more prominent work roles with higher status, more success and power, thereby projecting the idea that the world of work is a privileged territory for men, where women are merely on the periphery.

Although – as it was mentioned earlier – significantly more research was conducted in the U.S. than in Europe in this field, the results showed that there are no remarkable differences: television portrays the world of work in an imbalanced, stereotyped way, in which men's situation is more favourable, compared to women in terms of occupational position, status, prestige and power. All these representational characteristics derive from the evolution of television series production.

When television became widespread and started to emerge as a mass medium, soap operas, which were some of the most popular and successful programmes on radio, were broadcast on the screen as well. Since serials have strong audience-attracting power, soap operas had become a primary tool for building up a loyal viewerbase. (Hagedorn, 1995) In the 1970s U.S. TV networks changed their prime-time programme offer in order to engage a wider audience: they started to broadcast more male-compatible versions of already well-known soap operas. The new series incorporated elements from crime genre, male characters and the upper-class were more dominant (e.g. *Dallas*, *Dynasty*). (Antalócy, 2001)

As years passed by, more and more new networks and cable channels were launched and the competition on the television content market had become stronger. In the early period of series, the main aim was to develop the commercial exploitation and stimulate the consumption of advertised products. Recently, the major goal of the broadcasters is to increase the media consumption – as higher ratings mean higher advertising revenue. In line with it, the soap opera format evolved to new levels and new genres were developed. (Bondebjerg, 2012) Although the format significantly changed, the popularity of series genre further increased. It seems that the characteristics of early serial production which guaranteed the high ratings and enormous popularity were retained, such as the dominance and more advantageous portrayal of male characters.

4 Method

To answer the research questions, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on Hungarian fiction series that premiered during a five-year period. The scope of this research is a systematic quantitative content analysis of all Hungarian scripted fiction series that premiered between 2015 and 2019 during prime-time broadcasting hours (19:00–23:00).

The period and time band selection were based on two solid considerations. Regarding the period, 2015 was the year of the rejuvenation of Hungarian series production: RTL Klub, one of the two market leader commercial television channels launched two locally produced Hungarian weekly fiction series and HBO launched its biggest Hungarian hit, the 1st season of *Aranyélet*. A five-year-long period is long enough to have a comprehensive amount of content for the analysis.

As for the prime-time selection, according to the KSH Time Use research and Nielsen Audience Measurement Data, the audience is the most concentrated in the evening hours. Some titles were excluded from the analysis due to genre issues or giving limited opportunity for discovering portrayals of occupations. Most of the produced series in Hungary are adaptations, but since the focus of the present research is an analysis on the patterns which the Hungarian audiences were exposed to in domestically produced fiction series, this aspect is not part of the analysis.

From a total of 24 series broadcast in the chosen period and time band, 19 were analysed (five were excluded for the reasons mentioned above). These were categorised as either daily or weekly series. The total broadcast time of the included daily series exceeded 1600 hours, which required a sampling strategy. To avoid overrepresenting the long-running soap operas, a disproportionate sampling method was used. The total sample size is 300 hours, allocated as follows: 100 hours for each of the two main soap operas, and a final 100-hour sample selected from the remaining telenovelas and series, drawn proportionally based on their total airing time.

Table 1 Sample of daily series

Daily series				
All titles			**Sample**	
Title	**No. of episodes**	**Total time**	**No. of episodes**	**Total time**
Barátok közt	2460	548:40:00	224	100:01:00
Jóban rosszban	1240	787:04:56	159	100:02:59
Terápia	35	15:40:17	11	4:55:47
Oltári csajok	101	73:55:15	33	24:19:20
200 első randi	118	87:58:44	39	29:12:01
Drága örökösök	142	106:43:59	46	34:54:13
MintaApák	30	23:52:46	10	7:57:36
Total		**1643:55:57**		**301:22:56**

As for the weekly series, except the excluded five titles, all of them were coded. The total broadcast hours of the weekly series pool were 200.5 hours.

Table 2 Sample of weekly series

Weekly series		
Title	**No. of episodes**	**Total time**
A mi kis falunk	38	27:17:10
A tanár	18	13:21:45
Alvilág	8	6:23:21
Aranyélet	24	22:13:08
Bogaras szülők	10	4:39:11
Csak színház és más semmi	26	22:32:53
Ízig vérig	10	7:25:58
Jófiúk	14	10:34:29
Korhatáros szerelem	23	16:50:02
Munkaügyek	60	25:53:39
Tóth János	104	45:09:10
Válótársak	30	22:46:04
Total		**225:06:50**

The codebook covers all socio-demographic characteristics of the relevant characters, who are the unit of the analysis: only those with speaking roles (more than three lines) and judged to be 15 years old or older. The following character traits were coded:

- Gender – the socially constructed aspect was recorded, due to the fact that the biological sex is undetectable in most cases
- Chronological (the character's precise or estimated age; social age) and social age (an estimation of the stage at which the character operates in his/her interactions with others)
- Marital status
- Having children and the number of children
- Socio-Economic Status: the evaluations were based on only the visible possessions (e.g. housing conditions, clothing, jewellery, etc.)
- Economic activity
- Occupation: recorded as a short description and was categorised in a later phase
- Own Business (yes or no)
- Hierarchical position / Status of employment
- Ethnic minority: Romani or not

Since the character traits are not constant, from time to time, some changes occurred in their marital state, status of employment, etc. These changes should have been tracked; to avoid chaos, the following recoding system was invented. Each time a new character appeared, who matched the requirements, their attributes were coded. Those changes which altered the traits of a character resulted in a subvariant character.[4] This coding system guarantees that all relevant character traits were tracked. Based on the number of the subvariants, a character weight was calculated (Wch=1/Ncharacter subvariant) and applied.

For testing the reliability of the coding schemes and process, 10 per cent of the whole sample was coded by two independent coders. Since the current research involved three coders and different level variables, KALPHA was applied for checking the Intercoder Reliability Indices (ICR). Regarding Krippendorff (2004) suggestions, KALPHA is always acceptable above 0.9, over 0.8 guarantees suitable reliability, and the results between 0.667 and 0.8 could support explanatory studies. In most cases (74 per cent of the variables), the result of the ICR test reached the acceptable level ($\alpha \geq 0.667$) or higher. In some cases, the results failed to reach the tolerable level, due to the low number of episodes coded by the sub-coders that provided limited opportunities for fair judgements.

[4] E.g. the character ID of the main character in the series Tóth János/János Tóth was TJ001 – this character was unemployed. As he started to work as an entrepreneur, the ID of the subvariant changed to TJ001_02. As soon as he started a new job, a new ID was generated and used; or if he just simply became unemployed again, the original ID was recorded again.

Table 3 Summary of the KALPHA results

		Type of data	KALPHA	LL95%CI	UL95%CI
Characters	Gender:	nominal	1.0	0.9	1.0
	Chronological Age:	ordinal	0.9	0.9	0.9
	Social Age:	ordinal	0.8	0.8	0.8
	Martial State:	nominal	0.7	0.6	0.7
	Having Children:	ordinal	0.9	0.9	1.0
	No of Children:	ratio	0.9	0.9	1.0
	Socio-Economic Status:	ordinal	*0.6**	0.5	0.7
	Economic Activity:	nominal	0.8	0.8	0.9
	Occupation:	nominal	0.8	0.8	0.8
	Own Business (yes or no):	nominal	0.8	0.8	0.9
	Hierarchical Position:	ordinal	*0.5**	0.5	0.6
	Ethnic minority:	nominal	0.8	0.7	0.9

* KALPHA is below the tolerable agreement level

A supplementary database gathers all the reference or so-called 'real-world' data. The official datasets of the Central Statistics Office were used for the comparative analysis, in order to measure the socio-demographical and occupational distributions on television against those of the Hungarian labour force and overall societal characteristics. The most up-to-date and relevant available[5] data were applied (from STADAT, the average of the 2015-2019 period).[6]

5 Results

In the following, all results are systematically presented altogether in different sections. First, it starts with a character overview, which presents all socio-demographic characteristics of the characters, then the next phase introduces all occupational characteristics, including the work-related main aspects of the world of work on television.

[5] Official data about ethnic minorities and number of children were provided by Microcensus 2016, all other socio-demographic data were available in the Summary Tables (STADAT)

[6] One methodological problem in relation to 'real-world' data should be noted: in the KSH data on Stratification by the character of work done, currently retired persons are included by their last occupation, thus increasing the size of the two-manual and agricultural groups. This classification cannot be reproduced in the present study due to different analytical purposes.

5.1 Character Overview

Altogether 1995 characters were recorded, who matched the criteria apart from the subvariants.

With respect to the gender distribution, on television the male characters significantly outnumber females by about 1.55 to 1 (Figure 1), while in the real world the ratio is reversed in favour of women.

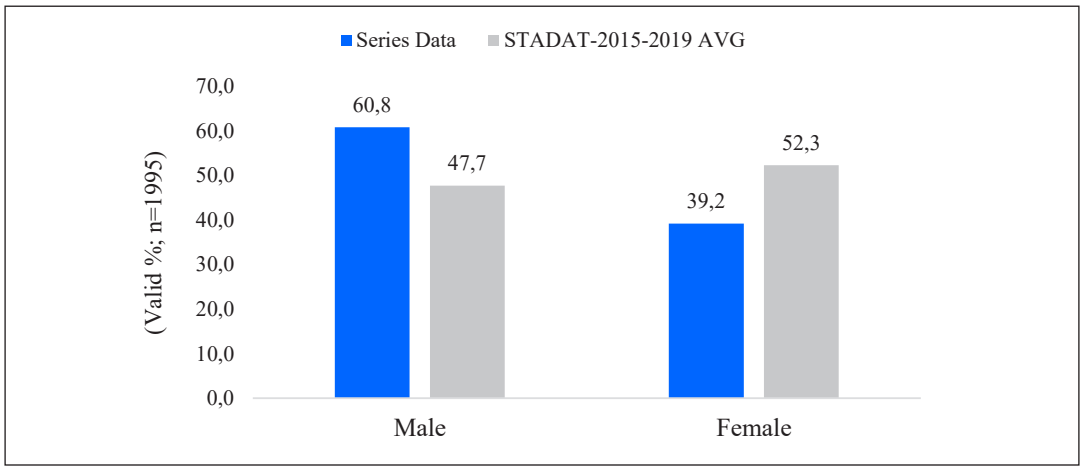

Figure 1 Gender distribution in television series vs. 'real-world'

Goodness of Fit Test: χ^2 = 137.919, df=1, Sig. < .001 (Table 4 in Appx.)

Source of 'real-world' data: KSH Summary tables; 22.1.1.3. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0003.html [Accessed 19 05 2021]

Prior research reported the same imbalanced gender representation (Vande Berg, Streckfuss, 1992; Signorielli, 1993; Greenberg, Collette, 1997; Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Elasmar et al., 1999; Glascock, 2011; Lauzen & Dozier, 2004; Emons et al., 2010; Esch, 2011; Jacobs et al, 2015), which reinforces the concept that the overrepresentation of male characters in Hungarian TV series is not a recent or unique phenomenon, but rather a consistent pattern, which may strengthen existing social inequalities and preconceptions by stereotyping viewers' perceptions and attitudes towards gender roles and identities.

Regarding the age distribution (Figure 2), two variables were used during the coding phase in order to make the most accurate estimation of the characters' age (chronological and social age). Both variables show the same results; young adults (aged 20-34) and characters in their midlife (35-49 years old) are overrepresented in television, while adolescents and elderly people are very rarely shown on screen. The chronological age classification shows that characters in their 30s and 40s overdominate the other four age groups. These results are completely in line with previous research findings, which highlighted that teenagers and the elderly generation are neglected on screen and the difference between the television representation and the population is significantly distorted. (Signorielli & Bacue, 1999; Signorielli, 2004; Lauzen & Dozier, 2005; Smith et al., 2012)

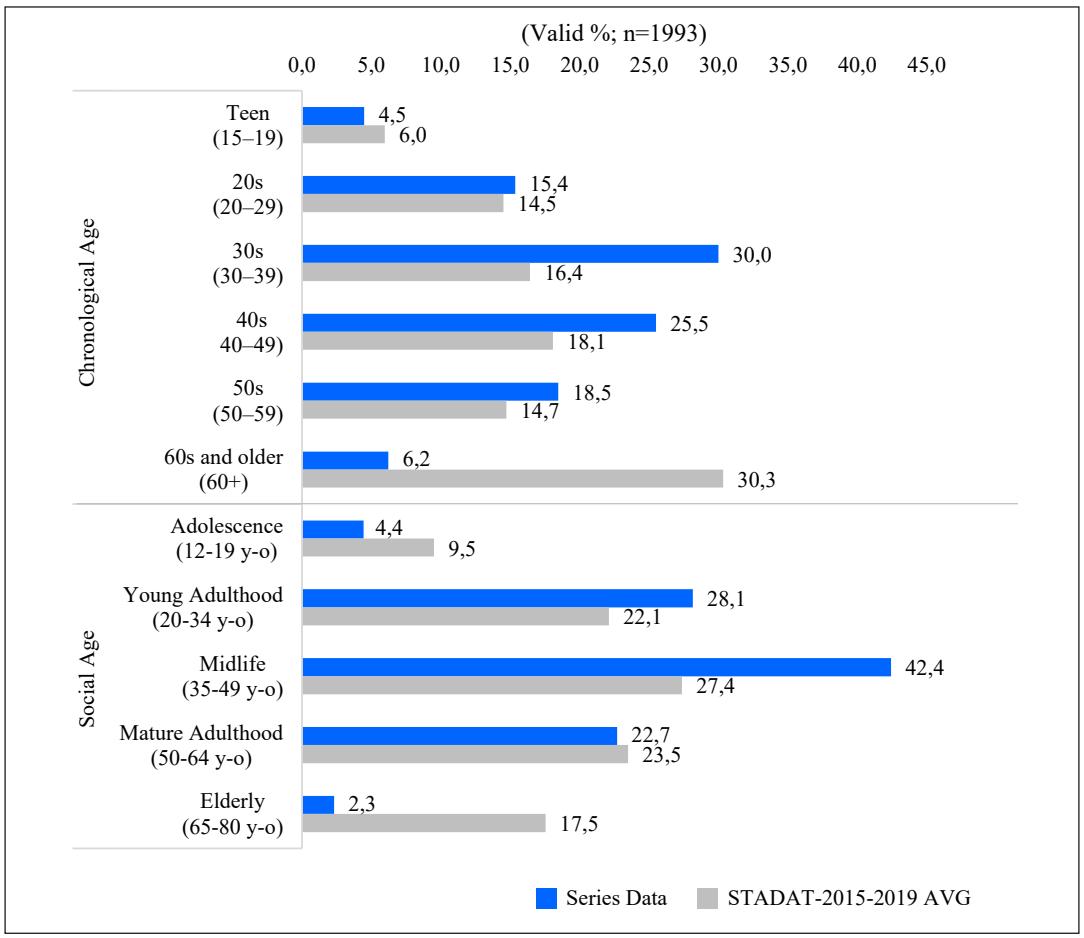

Figure 2 Age distribution in television series vs. 'real-world'

Goodness of Fit Test – Chronological Age: χ^2 = 694.08, df=5, Sig. < .001 (Table 5 in Appx.)

Goodness of Fit Test – Social Age: χ^2 = 514.623, df=4, Sig. < .001 (Table 6 in Appx.)

Source of 'real-world' data: KSH Summary tables; 22.1.1.3. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0003.html [Accessed 19 05 2021]

As for the age distribution by gender (Figure 3), younger females are more likely to be portrayed, while middle-aged males make up a larger segment of the characters on the television screen. Males aged 30-50 are overrepresented; meanwhile, their counterparts over 60 are significantly underrepresented compared to the real-world age distribution. Females in their twenties are overrepresented, also in their 30s and 40s, while women in their 60s or older are dramatically underrepresented. This distorted representation of different age groups in favour of younger generations is particularly counterproductive in an ageing society, as it hinders intergenerational understanding and facilitates ageism, perpetuating stereotypes that marginalise older people in media narratives.

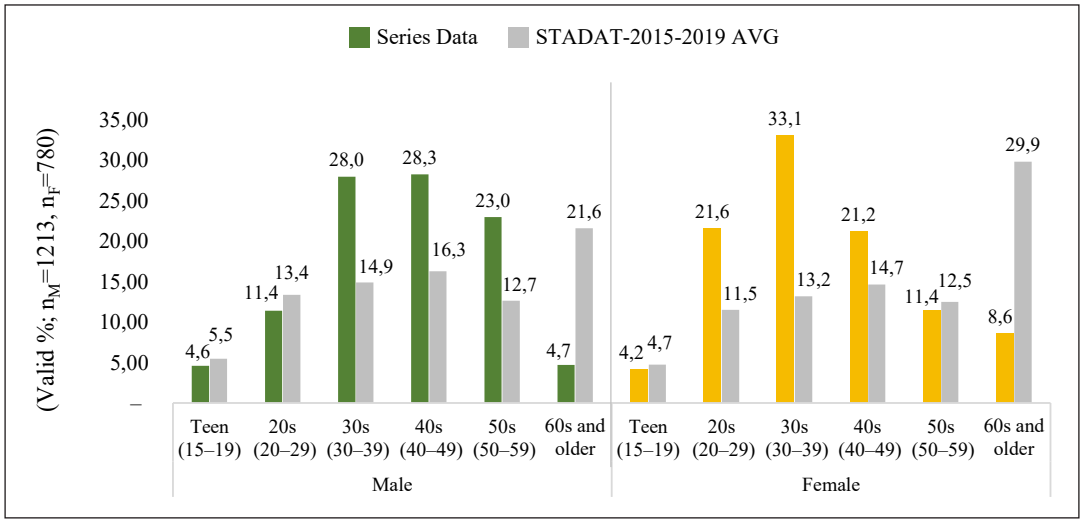

Figure 3 Age distribution by gender in television series vs. 'real-world'

Chronological age by gender: χ^2 =92.15, df=5, Sig. < .001

Source of 'real-world' data: KSH Summary tables; table 22.1.1.3. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0003.html [Accessed 19 05 2021]

According to the results, legal marriage is significantly underrepresented on televison, and the same applies for divorcees and widows (Table 7 and 8 in Appx.). The official demographic statistic covers only the 'single' state at the legal category; however, during the coding, romantic and civil partnerships were also recorded. Legally, singles are highly overrepresented in television series (61.5 per cent (total percent: 20.7) vs. 34.9 per cent in the 'real-world'). The rate of 'real' single persons is the highest (34.3 per cent; total percentage: 11.5), and a quarter (26.6 per cent; total percentage: 9) of the characters are in a relationship (the number of civil partnerships is marginal). Among the male and female characters, there is no significant difference regarding their marital state. Similarly to the findings of Glascock (2001), males' marital status was significantly less likely to be known (70.9 per cent indeterminate) than their female counterparts' (59.3 per cent indeterminate). (This distinction is so meaningful that if the indeterminate category is included in the analysis, the difference between male and female characters is significant (Table 9 in Appx.)). The high proportion of single characters is also associated with the fact that the most frequent changes in the lives of the characters are related to their marital status. This phenomenon can be attributed to the central role of love in the narrative structure, while for already married characters, there are fewer potential complications in the storyline, as they have already established a stable relationship.

Determining if a character has a child or not was difficult in many cases (67.6 per cent) as well. Regarding the obvious cases, the majority had no child (57 per cent; total percentage: 18.5), meaning that parents are underrepresented in fiction series (population rate: 62.5 per cent; see Tables 10 and 11 in Appx.). Among females and males, there is no remarkable difference in having a child or not.

In the cases of those who have children (43 per cent; total percentage: 14), the average number of children is 1.45. Families with one child are more likely to be presented on the television screen (67.5 per cent; total percentage: 57.6 vs. population rate: 54.5 per cent), while families with more children are slightly underrepresented compared to the population average (Tables 12 and 13 in Appx.).

It proved challenging to define the characters' socio-economic status, with 80.4 per cent of the cases remaining indeterminate. However, the clear cases show that television's world overrepresents the upper- and upper middle class compared to the social reality[7]. Figure 4 illustrates that the representation of the middle class in the series is close to the real world, while the lower classes are underrepresented. As it was discussed earlier, such over-representation of the higher social classes has historical roots, as in the early days of series production, television content producers tried to attract a larger audience with stories about the glamorous lives of the wealthy characters. Nevertheless, such representations of social classes on television screens can negatively shape viewers' perceptions and attitudes towards class dynamics and social inequality. Over-emphasising the lifestyles of the higher classes strengthens class divisions, marginalises the lower classes, and creates barriers to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of different social classes.

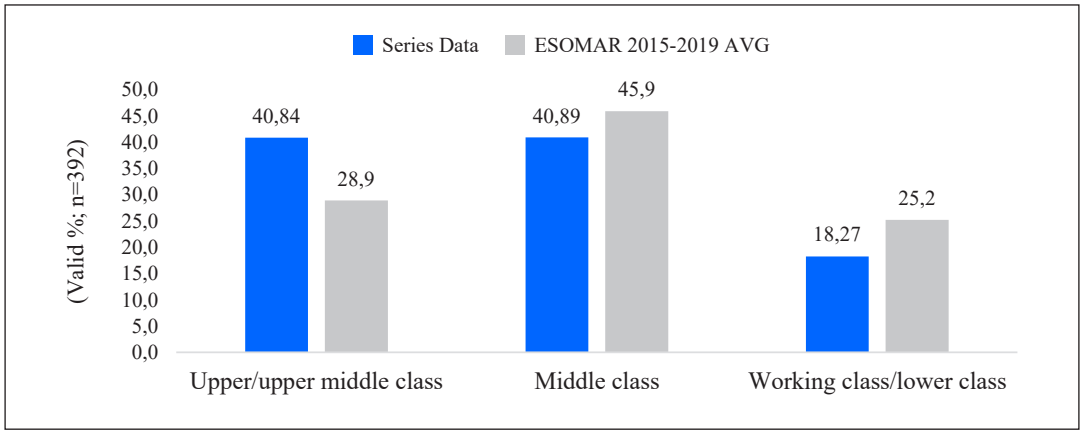

Figure 4 Socio-economic status in television series vs. 'real-world'

Goodness of Fit Test – Chronological Age: $\chi^2 = 29.135$, df=2, Sig. < .001 (Table 14 in Appx.)

Source of 'real world' data: Nielsen, Establishment Survey, 2015 & 2019 avg.

[Obtained directly from the Audience Measurement Company; Accessed 08 06 2021]

[7] The 'real-world' data is based on the ESOMAR classification. The data is obtained from Nielsen's (Television Audience Measurement company) Establishment Survey (2015 and 2019).

The representation of the ethnic minorities is also inequitable (Table 15 and 16 in Appx.): 1.3 per cent of the characters were Romani, while their ratio in the population is 3.2 per cent. The same disproportionate portrayal of ethnicity was reported in prior research (e.g. Signorielli and Kahlenberg, 2001; Signorielli, 2004, 2009). The underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in the media content not only reflects existing social inequalities but also serves to reinforce them, along with the stereotypes that further marginalise minorities.

5.2 Occupational characteristics

The employment rate is highly overrepresented on television: the vast majority (89.5 per cent total percentage: 64.5) of the characters had a job, while in reality 60.4 per cent of the Hungarian population is employed (Figure 5). Inactive people are dramatically underrepresented in television series, which is also strongly associated with the representation of age groups: students and pensioners are underrepresented on screen. It should be highlighted that Hungarian television series show small proportions of effectively unemployed characters – if so, it is more likely to be temporary – and rather depict homemakers or other dependents. The neglect of unemployment and the rapid finding of work may foster the false idea that it is easy to get a job, thereby stigmatising the inactive who do not conform to societal norms of productivity.

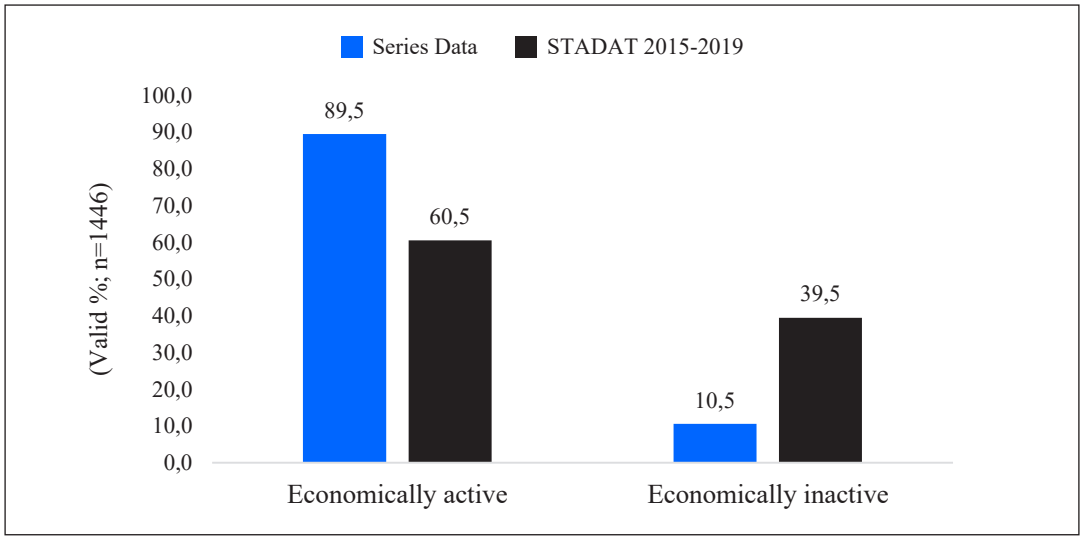

Figure 5 Economic activity in television series vs. 'real-world'

Goodness of Fit Test: χ^2 = 505.681, df=1, Sig. < .001 (Table 18in Appx.)

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Summary tables; 20.1.1.5. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0002.html [Accessed 19 05 2021]

Regarding the gender differences, for women, it was more likely to be unclear whether they are economically active or not (33.7 per cent is indeterminate, while for men, the proportion of the unclear cases was 23.5 per cent). Jacobs et al. (2015) found the same connection between gender and unknown occupational status. Focusing on the relevant occurrences (Table 17 in Appx.), in television series more men are portrayed as economically active than in the population (66.4 per cent vs. 53 per cent), but for women a reverse trend was found (33.3 per cent in television world vs. 47 per cent in reality), which further strengthens the stereotype of men on television screens. Contrary to the findings of Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001), in Hungarian television series, there is no connection between marital state and economic activity, meaning married women are equally likely to work as their male counterparts, thus avoiding the stereotype that a wife cannot have a career outside the home.

The ratio of business owners in series is twice as much (20.3 per cent; total percentage: 9) as in society (10.2 per cent; Table 19 and 20 in Appx.); consequently, employed workers are slightly underrepresented on television (79.7 per cent; total percentage: 35.5 vs. 89.4 per cent). Television tends to portray both men and women with a greater entrepreneurial spirit.

Determining the hierarchical position of a character seemed to be challenging in half of the cases (52.5 per cent) and was indeterminate. Regarding the unclear cases, twice as many men's employment status was undeterminable as women's (62.2 per cent vs. 37.8 per cent). As for the obvious instances, most of the characters were employees, one-fifth of them were in managerial positions, while very few unemployed or pensioners were visible.[8]

As Figure 6 shows, there are some obvious differences between men and women regarding their hierarchical positions. Males are significantly more likely to fill leading positions or be self-employed. On the other hand, pensioners on television are mainly female characters. This biased depiction of the working characters reinforces broader gender inequalities in the world of work on television screens, which implies a quite unfavourable position for women, as their recognition in positions of power and authority is limited. The 'other inactive' status encompasses housewives and students, resulting in a balanced distribution of genders in this category, which suggests a more equitable representation of gender roles in this sense.

Altogether 323 different occupations were depicted in the Hungarian prime time series. As Glascock (2001) and Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) noted, men were shown in a more diverse number of occupations than women, the same was found in the recent analysis: while male characters were cast in 268 different jobs, their female counterparts were portrayed in 163.

[8] The hierarchical position of the characters or their status of employment was recorded as well, but unfortunately there is no population data which is convenient for comparative purposes.
The stratification model (Stratification by the Character of Work Done – based on the HCSO-08/FEOR-08 classification) covers hierarchical aspects as well, and that also provides an opportunity for comparing the population and the television data, these are presented in detail later in this chapter.

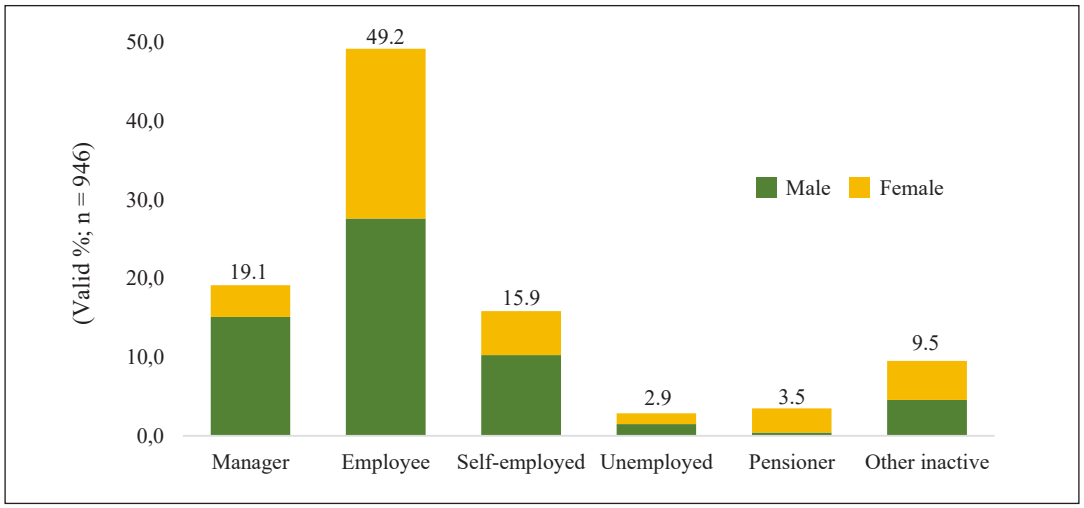

Figure 6 Hierarchical positions by gender in television series

Hierarchical position by gender: χ^2 =67.3, df=5, Sig. < .001

In general, the top 10 most prevalent occupations that were held by almost a third of the characters are the following: police officers, doctors, nurses, waiters/waitresses, salesclerks, lawyers, teachers, receptionists, managing directors, and actors/actresses. Previous studies reported very similar tendencies. Police officers, doctors and lawyers were the most represented occupations according to Signorielli (1993, 2004), Greenberg and Collette (1997), Elasmar et al. (1999), Glascock (2001), Lauzen and Dozier (2004) and Esch (2011). Although Signorielli (1993) reported that teachers, secretarial and sales workers are underrepresented, the current analysis has found that teachers, salesclerks, and receptionists are also among the most frequently portrayed jobs. Consequently, in respect of the branches of economic activities, a greater percentage of occupations belong to public administration and defence, human healthcare, and accommodation and food services. Also, a great percentage were in arts and entertainment-related occupations.

Between male and female characters, there are some remarkable differences in this aspect as well (Figure 7). The highest percentage of men were police officers and other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers. Greenberg, Collette (1997) and Glascock (2001) came to the same conclusions. In Hungarian fiction series, males are also likely to be portrayed as managing directors. The other most common occupations among men were typically non-intellectual jobs, such as courier, waiter, bartender, security guard, and repairman. It is rather an interesting fact that the list of the top ten most frequent occupations for men includes priests (1.6 per cent; valid percentage 1.1).

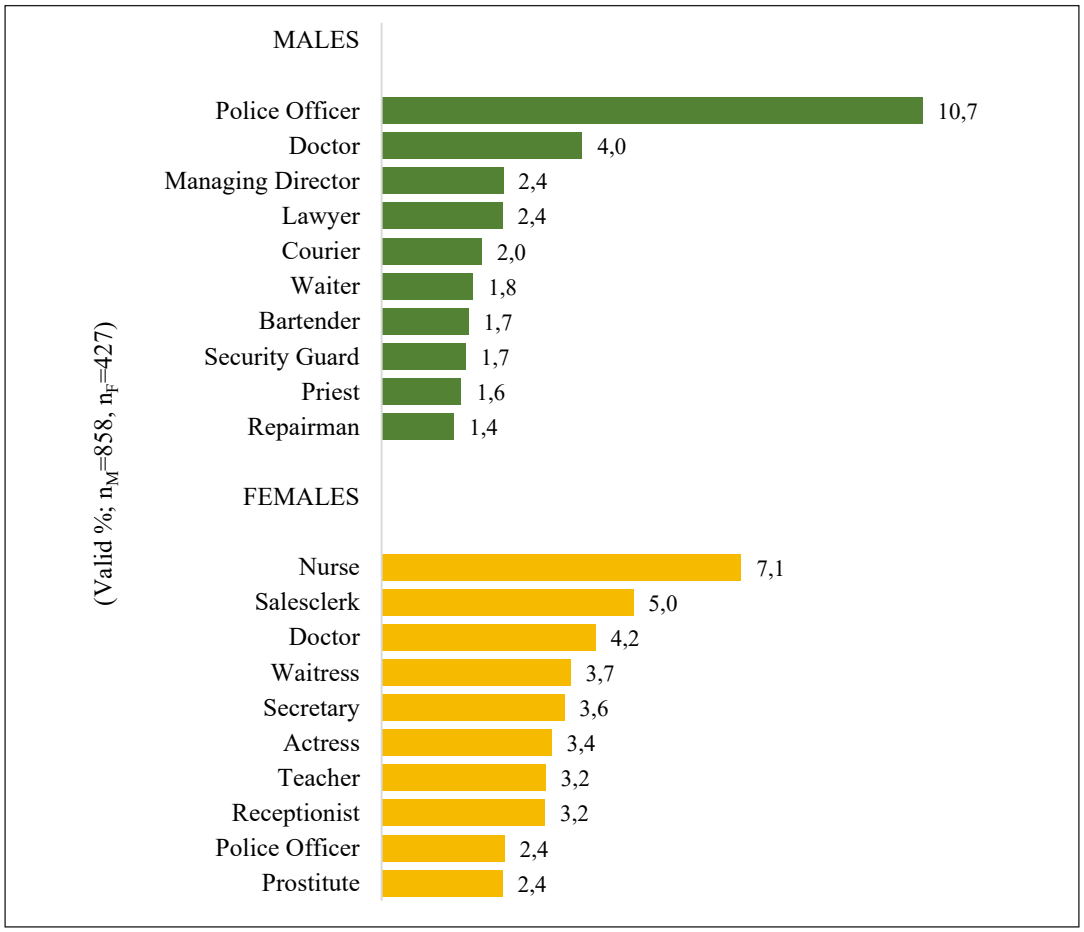

Figure 7 Most frequent occupations in television series by gender

Women are proportionately more likely to be seen in pink-collar occupations, which highlights even more the stereotypical gender portrayal. Six out of the ten most frequent professions belong to that category, such as nurse, salesclerk, waitress, teacher, receptionist, and secretary. Similar to men, a doctor is a common occupation for females as well, and women are also often depicted as police officers. Glascock (2001) also found that females on television screens are rather likely to be seen as police officers, nurses, secretaries, and waitresses. Elasmar et al. (1999) and Lauzen and Dozier (2004) reported that a high proportion of women are employed in the entertainment business. The present study found similar results, as an actress is the sixth most common profession among female characters.

6 Summary and conclusions

Television is a significant mass medium with a dual function: it can be watched for leisure time activities and also for obtaining information about news, politics, and the world in general. Among the numerous types of television programmes, television series are the most important ones and their popularity continues to grow.

As the results of the research demonstrate, the portrayal of male and female characters is not balanced, and the depiction of age groups is also inadequate; thus, the potential bias or stereotypes are strengthened towards gender roles and ageism. The same neglect is true for legally married couples, divorcees and widows who are apparently sacrificed for a better storyline. Families with more kids are also underrepresented, just as members of the lower social class. Minorites, more precisely the Romani ethnicity, are also inequitably represented compared to the population average, which also perpetuates stereotypes and marginalisation, and reinforces societal prejudices.

The occupational characteristics in television series are also distorted in most ways. The employment rate is overrepresented, suggesting that active working life is the standard, which can maintain social preconceptions about productivity and performance, ignoring the contribution and experience of inactive individuals. The majority of men were active, while their female counterparts were overrepresented among those who are economically inactive, and their economic activity status is unclear in more cases. The actual occupation was indeterminate more often for females; moreover, men tend to be portrayed in more diverse kinds of occupations than women. All these findings further deepen the differences and stereotypes between men and women, portraying males in a more favourable light.

At certain points, there are many similarities with the findings of prior studies concerning the inadequate portrayal of various groups, including, but not limited to, genders, older generations and certain occupations. Furthermore, it can be stated that, overall, the workforce in Hungarian television series is more masculine and glamorous, consistent with prior foreign studies.

These similarities can be interpreted as a confirmation of the mainstreaming pattern of television. Through these systematic repetitions and patterns, despite the wide range of possible options (e.g. different formats, genres, broadcasting platforms), the audience is still subjected to relatively restricted choices. One potential explanation is that it is an unrecognised and unconscious heritage or habit, i.e. building on the success of previous series, the next ones adopt the established patterns.

This exploratory research is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it addresses a gap in the Hungarian research landscape. Secondly, its findings contribute to international scientific knowledge: the results demonstrate that biased media representation is a universal phenomenon, with similar distortions occurring in different parts of the world. Thus it further reinforces the thesis of cultivation theory that the media functions as a melting pot by homogenising the divergences and converging the different views (Gerber et al., 1986), which spans not only different media platforms but also national boundaries. Furthermore, as the characteristics of depiction appear to adhere to the 'original' recipe of a successful television series, which entails an over-glamourised world with male

dominance. It can be stated that these phenomena not only extend across spatial and geographical boundaries but also over decades of series production, thereby preserving the imbalanced and biased portrayal of different societal members and groups.

The current study has limitations. Due to the sampling in the case of the long-running daily series, some character traits remained unclear. This issue can also be addressed by choosing a smaller period as the unit of analysis or larger contiguous units. Given that the current research spanned five years, this was indeed feasible. The methodology-related issue pertains to the reliability test. Although in most cases the IC-indices reached the accepted level, most of the discrepancy was a result of the low number of episodes on which the cross-coders worked. This issue can be handled by raising the number of cross-coders or delegating more episodes from fewer series to them.

Regarding future research directions, this analysis can be extended by new seasons of ongoing series, or by the newest Hungarian productions. Since 2019, fifteen brand new series have premiered, of which ten are originals. Involving these in the already existing database, new research questions can be answered that focus on the differences between the original series and adaptations. On the other hand, on a narrowed sample, certain series can be analysed in a more detailed manner, applying qualitative methods, other dimensions of the portrayal could be explored, such as how characters are presented in certain positions (e.g. appearance, personality traits, etc.), and also involving even more productional elements which further nuance the depictions of characters and occupations.

Hungarian research production is in its heyday and further blooming. The current research has proven that there is a wealth of available content to conduct an extensive and comprehensive analysis on any topic.

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Appendix

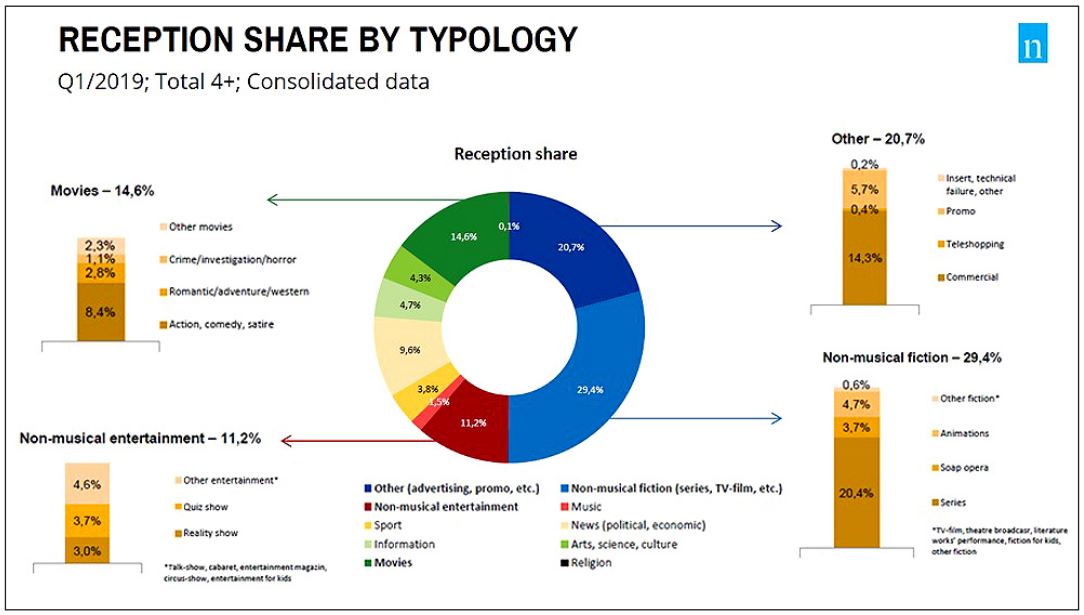

Figure 8 Reception share by programme typology in Hungary (Q1 2019)

Source: Nielsen, TV Market Snapshot 2019 Q1

Table 4 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Gender in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Male	1214	952
Female	781	1043
n = 1995		
χ^2 = 137.919, df=1, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

The Goodness of Fit Test was calculated by the online calculator of Statistic Kingdom webpage: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 5 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Chronological age in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Teen (15–19)	89	119
20s (20–29)	306	289
30s (30–39)	598	327
40s (40–49)	508	360
50s (50–59)	368	294
60s and older	124	604
n = 1993		
χ^2 = 694.08, df=5, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 6 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) - Social age in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Adolescence (12-19)	88	189
Young Adulthood (20-34)	561	441
Midlife (35-49)	845	545
Mature Adulthood (50-64)	452	468
Elderly (65-80)	47	350
n = 1993		
χ^2 = 514.623, df=4, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 7 Marital state in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA			POPULATION DATA
	Freq.	**%**	**Valid %**	**STADAT 2015-2019 avg. (%)**
Single	230	11.5	**34.3**	**34.9***
In relationship	183	9.2	**27.2**	
Married	183	9.2	**27.2**	**42.1**
Divorced	53	2.7	**7.9**	**12.1**
Widow	23	1.2	**3.4**	**10.9**
Indeterminate	1323	66.3	–	–
Total	1995	100.0	100.0	100.0

* Legally single (unmarried)

Source of 'real-world' data: KSH Summary tables; table 22.1.1.5. - 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/nep/hu/nep0005.html [Accessed 19 05 2021]

Table 8 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) - Marital state in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Legally single	413	234
Married	183	283
Divorced	53	82
Widow	23	73
n = 672		
χ^2 = 216.766, d.f.=df=3, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 9 Marital state by gender incl. Indeterminate

	Marital state (Valid %)					
n=1995	**Single**	**In relationship**	**Married**	**Divorced**	**Widow**	**Indeterminate**
Male	6.57	4.56	4.86	1.30	0.40	43.06
Female	4.96	4.61	4.26	1.35	0.80	23.26
χ^2 = 39.580, df=6, Sig. < .001						

Table 10 Parenthood in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA			POPULATION DATA
	Freq.	**%**	**Valid %**	**Microcenzus 2016 (%)**
Have children	279	14.0	**43.0**	**62.5**
Does not have children	369	18.5	**57.0**	**37.5**
Indeterminate	1348	67.6	–	–
Total	1995	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Microcensus, 2016; table 1.6.1.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/mikrocenzus2016/kotet_6_haztartasok_es_csaladok_adatai [Accessed 19 05 2021]

Table 11 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Parenthood in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Yes	279	405
No	368	242
n = 647		
χ^2 = 216.766, df=1, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 12 Number of children (of those who has children) in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA			POPULATION DATA
	Freq.	**%**	**Valid %**	**STADAT 2015-2019 avg. (%)**
1	133	57.6	**67.5**	**54.5**
2	46	19.8	**23.2**	**33.2**
3+	19	8.0	**9.3**	**12.3**
Indeterminate	34	14.6	–	–
Total	231	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Microcensus, 2016; table 1.6.3.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/mikrocenzus2016/kotet_6_haztartasok_es_csaladok_adatai [Accessed 19 05 2021]

Table 13 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Number of children (of those who have children) in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
1	133	108
2	46	66
3+	19	24
n = 198		
χ^2 = 12.889, df=2, Sig. < .005		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 14 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) - Socio-economic status in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Upper/upper middle class	160	113
Middle class	160	180
Working class/lower class	72	99
n = 198		
χ^2 = 29.135, df=2, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 15 Ethnic minorities (Romani) in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA			POPULATION DATA
	Freq.	**%**	**Valid %**	**STADAT 2015-2019 avg. (%)**
Romani ethnicity	27	1.3	**1.3**	**3.2**
Not Romani ethnicity	1963	98.4	**98.7**	**96.8**
Indeterminate	5	0.3	–	–
Total	1995	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Microcensus, 2016; table 1.1.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/mikrocenzus2016/kotet_12_nemzetisegi_adatok; table 2.1 [Accessed 21 05 2021]

Table 16 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Ethnic minorities (Romani) in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Romani ethnicity	27	63
Not Romani ethnicity	1963	1927
n = 1990		
χ^2 = 21.244, df=1, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 16 Economic activity in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA		POPULATION DATA	
	Valid %		**STADAT 2015-2019 AVG (%)**	
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Economically active	66.4	33.6	53	47
Economically inactive	45.1	54.9	41.4	58.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Economic activity & Gender: χ^2 =26.87, df=1, Sig. < .001

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Summary tables; table 20.1.1.5. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0002.html [Accessed 23 05 2021]

Table 18 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Economic activity in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Economically active	1293	875
Economically inactive	153	571
n = 1446		
χ^2 = 505.681, df=1, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

Table 19 Entrepreneurship in television series vs. 'real-world'

	SERIES DATA			**POPULATION DATA**
	Freq.	**%**	**Valid %**	**STADAT 2015-2019 avg. (%)**
Entrepreneur	180	9.0	**20.3**	**10.2**
Employee	708	35.5	**79.7**	**89.4**
Indeterminate	5	0.3	–	–
Total	1107	55.5	100.0	100.0

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Summary tables; table 20.1.1.11. - 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0011.html [Accessed 22 05 2021]

Table 20 Goodness of Fit Test (χ^2) – Entrepreneurship in television series vs. 'real-world'

	Observed freq.	**Expected freq.**
Entrepreneur	180	90
Employee	708	798
n = 888		
χ^2 = 100.15, df=1, Sig. < .001		

Calculated by: https://www.statskingdom.com/310GoodnessChi.html

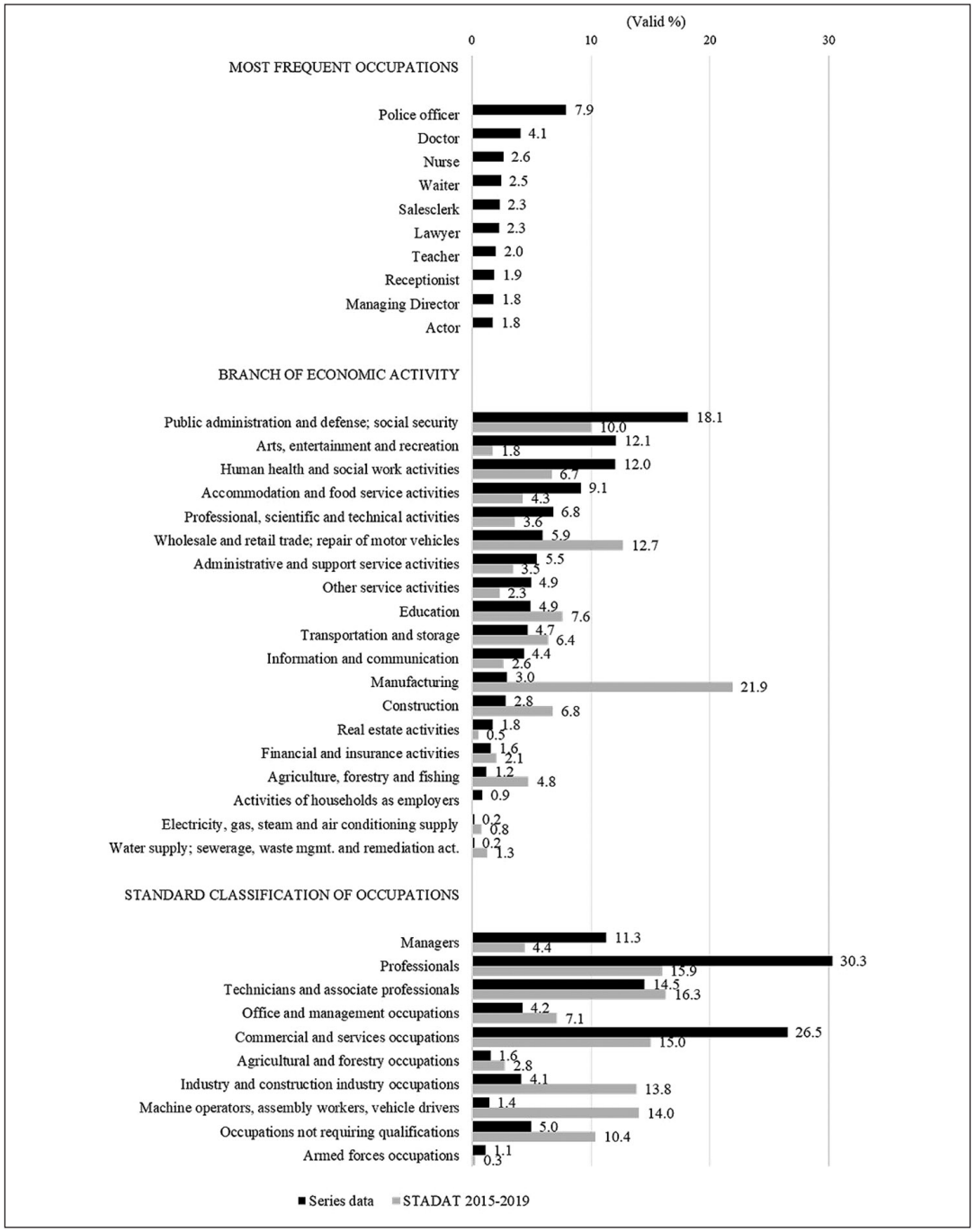

Figure 9 Most frequent occupations, branches of economic activity, and Hungarian standard classification of occupations in television series vs. 'real-world'

Source of 'real world' data: KSH Summary tables; table 20.1.1.10., 20.1.1.9. – 2015-2019 avg.

Available at: https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0010.html; https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/mun/hu/mun0009.html [Accessed 12 05 2021]

Iván Szelényi,* Attila Melegh**
& Péter Mihályi***

The world in 2025 from a Weberian-Polányian perspective: An interview with Iván Szelényi[1]

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Introduction by Iván Szelényi[2]

In July 2014, in Tusnádfürdő, Transylvania, outside the country's borders, Viktor Orbán clearly stated in a public lecture that caused noticeable international ripples that he wanted to build an *illiberal system* in Hungary.[3] Orbán then utilized several other platforms to reiterate and expand on this idea. His starting point was a critique of liberalism. Liberalism, Orbán says, focuses only on the rights of individuals and does not represent the interests and rights of the nation, the community. According to him, one of the main tasks of nation-building is the creation of national institutions, including a new national bourgeoisie. The government of the nation must defend national sovereignty against globalism, mass migration that threatens national culture and ethnicity, and the actions of international capital and the global market that violate national sovereignty. The Christian national culture also needs to be defended against the values represented by international liberalism and the LGBTQ movement – for example, because of their acceptance of non-heterosexual behaviour.

Since 2014, in several papers written in collaboration with Péter Mihályi, we have attempted to describe the mechanisms of illiberal regimes, particularly the Hungarian illiberalism implemented by Orbán, as clearly as possible. This is the subject of two of our books in English, *Rent-seekers, Profits, Wages and Inequality*[4] and *Varieties of Post-communist Capitalism,*[5] which were also published in Russian, and six joint publications in Hungarian in *Mozgó Világ*.[6] In these writings, we have already raised some unanswered questions

[1] The interview was first published in Hungarian in Mozgó Világ: Szelényi Iván – Melegh Attila – Mihályi Péter: A hatalom természete az illiberális rendszerekben. *Mozgó Világ*, 2025, 5: 3–23.
[2] Written by Iván Szelényi and Péter Mihályi in May 2025.
[3] Speech by Viktor Orbán at the XXV Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, 26 July 2014. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/a-munkaalapu-allam-korszaka-kovetkezik
[4] *Rent-Seekers, Profits, Wages and Inequality – The Top 20%*. Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019.
[5] *Varieties of Post-communist Capitalism: A Comparative Analysis of Russia, Eastern Europe and China*, Brill, 2020.
[6] "Köztársaságunk alapállapota – a kezdetektől fogva", 2024. 2–3., "Van-e értelmisége a Fidesznek?", 2023. 7–8., "Fajok? Etnicitás, rasszizmus", 2022. 10., "Harminc év után (A szocializmusból a kapitalizmusba való átmenet ellentmondásai)", 2021. 7–8., "Amerika már visszafordult, Magyarország még nem", 2021. 2, "A morális pánik természete. Bevándorlók, járványok, gazdasági, társadalmi és politikai válságot a 21. században", 2020.6.

about the illiberalism of Orbán. If the 'national interest' cannot be identified by liberal intellectuals, who can identify it? Are there illiberal FIDESZ intellectuals? Is the liberal intelligentsia part of the nation at all, or are they an anti-FIDESZ intelligentsia? If the government, which perceives the national interest, interferes in the functioning of the market, does it not create incomes and rents that are higher than would occur under free market competition? Does it not then mean that rent-seeking has become common practice? If, in the interests of protecting Christian national culture, a ban is imposed on the expression of certain opinions; if foreign support for press which is independent of the state media and receives little or no state funding is banned and penalised; and if the government also threatens individuals who have multiple nationalities who speak out against the interests of the nation with the possible suspension of their citizenship, is not freedom of speech being infringed?

Over the past four decades, our thinking has been inspired by the theories of Max Weber (1864–1920) and Karl Polányi (1886–1964). Weber regarded any system in which subordinated individuals obey without force as legitimate. In our joint papers, we took this as a starting point and extended the analysis to post-communist countries, distinguishing six types of actually existing systems of rule in relation to the Weberian (ideal-typical) model of the capitalist system. On the one hand, there are *liberal*, *conservative*, and *illiberal* versions, while there are also *autocracies*, *dictatorships*, and *despotic political systems*.[7]

Polányi's concept of a redistributive economic system is our other starting point. Following this, we analyse the roots of the rent-seeking that is found all over the world and argue that, at the macroeconomic level, there are three main sources of income: *wages, profits*, and *rents*. Contrary to Karl Marx (1818–1883), under conditions of free competition, we consider profit to be legitimate income that serves the interests of both capitalists and workers. Rent is different; it is a reward that, in many cases, is based on a natural monopoly (e.g., the benefits of owning agricultural land, mines, building sites, and economies of scale).[8] But in many cases, the source of rent is that the clients of the executive become owners of high-value capital assets and/or additional incomes, not because of their productivity but because of their loyalty.

Looking back from the present, it is striking that in some Soviet-style socialist regimes (especially in Hungary), from the second half of the 1960s onwards, intellectuals with transcontextual knowledge claimed some kind of centrally allocated benefits (e.g., an apartment, priority health care) in exchange for their loyalty to the party-state and for actually doing responsible managerial work.[9]

We find it remarkable that the biggest political debate in the world today is related to the trade policy of President Donald Trump in the United States, which represents a radical break with the traditions of previous decades. Tariffs are also a form of rent, *based on*

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[7] See e.g. Szelényi Iván – Mihályi Péter: The six competing types of domination in the early 21st century – towards a new Weberian taxonomy, *International Political Anthropology, 2021, 14*(2), 175–183; Mihályi Péter – Szelényi Iván.: Karl Polányi: a theorist of mixed economies", *Theory and Society, 2021, 50,* 443–461.

[8] Szelényi Iván – Mihályi Péter: R*ent-Seekers, Profits, Wages and Inequality – The Top 20%*. Palgrave Pivot Series, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019.

[9] Konrád György – Szelényi Iván: *Az értelmiség útja az osztályhatalomhoz. Esszé.* Published by the European Protestant Hungarian Free University (Bern) in Paris in 1976.

the state's monopoly on lawmaking. (Of course, it is a far-reaching question whether these tariffs ultimately generate rent for foreign or domestic companies or the Treasury.)

These three forms of income have been present in all complex societies and remain so. Under free-market capitalism, wages and profits are dominant, whereas in pre-capitalist and modern illiberal systems, rents are dominant. Therefore, pre-capitalist societies are not class-based societies. It would therefore be a mistake to consider illiberal capitalism as equivalent to state capitalism. In the former, the role of the state is not more, but different. The members of the dominant political order provide rent to their own clients (for example, through public procurement or privatisation). But by limiting competition, there is no strong economic constraint forcing clients to invest such rent efficiently; rather, this money is used to pay for the ostentatious capture of clients. This is true, but it is also true to say that those who benefit from the rent do not steal it; they receive it.

* * * * *

The interview[10]

Péter Mihályi:

Would you agree with me that the most significant output of Iván's oeuvre is the 'intellectual book', i.e., the 212-page sociological study he wrote together with György Konrád in 1973-74?[11]

Iván Szelényi:

It's for sure that this book of mine is the one that received the most attention in Hungary, and even in Germany and America at that time. It got less attention elsewhere. In Hungary, too, it only received attention for a while, because today nobody actually talks about this book in Hungary, and it has no significant influence on intellectual life. I have been self-critical about it and have even written a critique based on this self-criticism.

It is also true that the book, which in structure and style is in fact an essay, a kind of fiction, could be misunderstood. Exactly what we thought at the time would be difficult to provide clear evidence for. I can only speak of what I think about it today. One could interpret the book as if we were saying that the intelligentsia was becoming the ruling class in late state socialism. I don't think we ever wrote that, nor did we ever think it. Our idea was that a fraction of the intelligentsia had class ambitions. And this was connected with the fact that János Kádár made a triple concession in 1963 to make up for some of the atrocities he had committed between 1957 and 1963, of which the execution of Imre Nagy was the most serious, even for Kádár.

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[10] The conversation took place on 15 March 2025 in Iván Szelényi's Budapest apartment, almost simultaneously with Viktor Orbán's "bugging" speech. Attila Melegh is a Hungarian sociologist and the president of the Demographic Committee of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Attila Melegh was awarded the Polányi Károly Prize of the Hungarian Sociological Association for the best publication in 2023 – the same honour that Péter Mihályi and Iván Szelényi received in 2020 for their joint book. Peter Mihályi is a macro-economist, Professor Emeritus at Corvinus University of Budapest. The tape recording and transcript were made by Ádám Kerényi (Phd).

[11] Konrád György – Szelényi Iván: *Az értelmiség útja az osztályhatalomhoz. Esszé*. Published by the European Protestant Hungarian Free University (Bern) in Paris in 1976.

The very first concession was made to the peasantry, largely under the influence of Ferenc Erdei, who hoped for the emergence of a Hungarian peasant bourgeoisie. While he was relentless in the creation of producer cooperatives, he innovatively organised them, and the peasantry benefited relatively significantly. In fact, members of this strata were forced into the cooperatives, their horses were taken away, their machines were taken away, but they were left with about one acre of land on which they could farm as they pleased. The cooperatives had no say in what they would plant or how they could sell their produce. In fact, the cooperatives even had a role in buying up the products and taking them to market. In this way, the peasantry began to earn a considerable income. It was very good for the whole country. Overnight, the markets were filled with foodstuffs that had been unavailable until then, and that were not even seen in the surrounding countries. There was fruit, meat, etc. Everything you could imagine was produced. At first, the peasants only had one acre; then they were allowed to rent another acre, but some people farmed 4-5 acres. It was very intensive work, but from intensive work you could get a considerable income. So that was the first compromise. As a result of that, Kádár realised that what worked was to let people work on their own land, in a kind of tiny private enterprise. It's good for them because then they're still working on the farm, and it's good for the country because agricultural production increases. They had to work a lot, but never in their history had Hungarian peasants lived as well as they did under the post-1963 Kádár regime.

Kádár then realised that the market elements could apply to industry. Such were the enterprise working groups. If someone worked their eight hours, they could stay on afterwards at the state enterprise to work with the company's machines, but privately, for a market income. So-called 'gebin' enterprises also developed. These were formally subcontracted to the state enterprises, but were managed by the 'gebines', who earned market incomes.

After 1962, Kádár also made a compromise for the intelligentsia. I myself experienced this directly. Over the next 25 years, freedom of publication increased. Some journals published quite critical things – for example, *Valóság*. Sociology was allowed to exist, which, up to then, was considered a bourgeois pseudo-science, but suddenly, the Institute of Sociology was founded. They allowed intellectuals to go abroad on study trips. Even to America. I went there in 1964 on a Ford scholarship for one year.

It had a huge impact on my later career, and the one year I spent partly at Columbia and partly at Berkeley was crucial. The intellectuals felt that their freedom had increased considerably, and they began to publish critical texts. I also wrote numerous studies with György Konrád (1933–2019), which were very critical; however, we wrote them very carefully in our early work. I even did a bit of Marxism in my very first paper. It was published in *Demográfia* in 1962 under the title "The Study of Leisure in Bourgeois Sociology".[12] Putting the adjective 'bourgeois' in front of sociology was itself a gesture toward the official Marxist line. It was also an article sympathetic to Marx in content, because I said that the problem in modern societies is that man's life is not fulfilled by work. Marx somehow thought that man's personality is fulfilled when he does what he wants to do in relation to

[12] *Demográfia*, 1962. 1.

work. If he has only his free time, it is not enough. The worker must be able to express himself at work. Looking back now, this was a pointless direction, but the point is that we were allowed to publish. With Konrad, we wrote some very tough, critical articles – for example, on the question of housing distribution.[13] Back then, I was invited to Marxist-Leninist evening classes. I remember that down in the countryside, perhaps in Szombathely, I told them what we found wrong with the housing situation. That workers were disadvantaged in the distribution of housing. This was true in the 1960s. That changed in the 1970s and 1980s. When they started building mass factory housing, workers started to get housing. But in the early housing estates, essentially only people close to the Party or the government, and mostly well-educated professionals, got housing to reward them for their work. Their salaries were low, and to compensate for this, they had access to new, though not very good quality, housing. So this was a lecture in which we said that it is interesting that a society that calls itself a proletarian dictatorship does not favour the proletarians, but rather the intellectuals with better skills and expertise. The audience murmured, and we – my co-author Konrad and I – said that we were not happy about it, but those were the facts. Let there be sociology because these are facts that do not correspond to ideologies! This was a very important development for intellectuals.

Konrád and I started writing more and more impertinent articles in the early '70s, and we began to suspect that sooner or later this would lead to trouble. The first one was published in 1971, entitled "Social Conflicts of Delayed Urban Development".[14] Interestingly, the editors of *Valóság* knew then that this was going to be embarrassing, because here we were already starting to write about the planners' club – the fact that planners were conspiring to do things like help create the national urban development plan. So, then they attacked me. The editors of *Valóság* also knew there was a problem, so they asked Iván T. Berend, who was a member of the editorial board, to write an article in the same issue saying that cities had not developed sufficiently under state socialism. Our article said urban development was delayed. Our article was not stupid either. But it is also true that the insufficient development of cities was not so much the result of an anti-urban policy as of an anti-infrastructure policy. But that was unacceptable, and then there was a Party journal that did a special issue on this article, in which several of my good friends attacked us.

So, all I can say about the Konrád-Szelényi book is that there was really no question of the intellectuals becoming the ruling class, but there is no doubt that the Kádár regime made gestures towards intellectuals after 1963. Quite a few intellectuals felt that they could live under such conditions and that, after all, pretty much anything could be written. Even things like the article on delayed urban development. The 'intellectual book', on the other hand, was beyond the limits of publishability. But within those limits, almost anything could be written if written with enough composure. That is why we had the strange situation that when in 1988-1989 we were told that everything could now be published freely, we expected that now they would pull out of the drawers the social science masterpieces that people had written years earlier, and we would even be able to read a

[13] See e.g. Konrád György – Szelényi Iván: A lakáselosztás szociológiai kérdései, *Valóság*, 1969. 9.
[14] *Valóság*, 1971. 12.

series of books like *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*. But there were no such books! People who could write knew how to write a little more carefully. So what they wrote was published, with very few exceptions. And then the possibility of foreign publication or samizdat was still open. In the 1980s, people could distance themselves from Marxism. You couldn't be openly anti-Marxist, but you didn't have to refer to Marxism.

So, I think the basic idea of the 'intellectual book' is that the gestures made by the Kádár regime after '63 were attractive to the intelligentsia. Because of that, people were inclined to be interested in positions where they could even make decisions that would influence the politics of the country. Even if they did not make the decisions there, the party-state leaders would listen to the intellectuals, and what they said would not be without effect. They would be listened to. In retrospect, I think that was *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*. That's why it had the word 'road' in it – the idea that the intelligentsia had not yet become a ruling class, but it contemplated a socialism in which the intelligentsia, especially the technocratic intelligentsia, would even have class power.

In a way, it was a *third-way* idea. I no longer believe in the third way, but when we wrote this book, I still believed in the possibility of a third way. I don't know exactly what Konrád thought about it. I think his thinking changed after he stayed. My thinking changed a bit when I left. We just went in opposite directions. I became more left-wing, and Gyuri became more distant, and even towards the end of his life, he became more anti-left-wing. Péter Mihályi was also influenced by third-way ideas, as documented in a study he published in Germany in 1983.[15]

In the first self-critique, I said that we were even wrong to think that Kádár's gesture to the intelligentsia meant that the intelligentsia would actually have an influence on any decisions. The Kádár bureaucracy attempted to counter this policy as early as 1973, seeking to reassert the power of the bureaucracy. Many intellectuals became frustrated by this; many of them, incidentally, including prominent members of the liberal intelligentsia, had flirted with the idea that changes had to be made within the party. János Kis, for example, imagined that change had to be made within the party and within Marxism. The Bence-Kis-Márkus book[16] was actually written in this spirit. It was perceived that a different kind of Marxism must be cultivated; Marx must be read in his original form, not Soviet Marxism. And I imagined the desirable future in a third way, from which I only distanced myself much later, but even in 1989-90 I was, in a sense, a believer in the third way. My thinking was quite different from Péter Mihályi's in 1989 and the early 1990s: whereas he was explicitly in favour of capitalism at that time, I thought that a third way version could be developed here, in which a form of capitalism with a human face would emerge, which I imagined as a third way.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I have a few questions that relate to what Iván Szelényi said. But first, let me state that *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* has had a huge impact on all of us. I cannot think of anyone who did not wake up from reading that book feeling that they had something very

[15] "Das ungarische Modell", *Osteuropa Wirtschaft*, 1983. 2.

[16] Bence György, Kis János and Márkus György [1972, 1992]: *Hogyan lehetséges kritikai gazdaságtan?* Budapest, T-Twins Kiadó.

important in their hands. I still think so to this day, and I note that I even still recommend this book in my university courses. One of the great innovations in this book was the use of Karl Polányi's name, the application of Polányi's theory to the conditions of socialism.

Where did Polányi idea come from? How did you meet him? The other question is about what you just said – that from the early 1960s, the Kádár regime moved towards a more mixed economic format, so towards pluralism on institutional principles, which Polányi would have approved as a suitable dierction. To what extent do you see this as a critique of the way you described socialism as a kind of monolithic redistributive system? The next question, which we'll come back to later, was whether there was another big attempt by the intelligentsia at regime change. Because I think that was when the intelligentsia also gained control over property, thus truly became some kind of a class.

Iván Szelényi:

I didn't even know Polányi's name. At the Karl Marx University of Economics, the name Polányi was not even mentioned. When I was at Columbia University in 1964, my mentor at that time at Columbia, Terence K. Hopkins (1928–1997), once told me that Polányi had taught there. He told me who this Karl Polányi was and what he did. That was the first time I had heard about the concept of a redistributive economy, which really got me. Interestingly, this mentor of mine was a very close colleague of Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019). But Wallerstein was somehow not receptive to Polányi's concept of redistribution. He did not recognise that, in fact, the concept of the World System, which is very important in Wallerstein, was already being used by Polányi. In other words, Wallerstein does not refer much to Polányi in his books,[17] which has always bothered me.

Attila Melegh:

But Wallerstein did use Polányi in a couple of places! We wrote this ourselves in our joint article.[18]

Iván Szelényi:

Yes, yes. I would continue the story. I started using the concept of redistribution after I came home from America in 1965. Many people didn't understand why I was writing about a redistributive economy and not using the term 'planned economy'. Well, I replied, it is because there is no planned economy under socialism. In the Netherlands, there is a planned economy. We don't have a planned economy; we do what the bureaucracy decides. So, it is not planning.[19] When I was in exile and went to Australia, my first study

[17] Wallerstein's most important work, the four-volume *The Modern World System,* was published between 1974 and 2011

[18] Melegh, Attila – Szelényi Iván: Polányi Revisited. Introduction, *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*. 2016. June.

[19] Addendum by Péter Mihályi: Around the same time, the Marxist philosopher György Lukács (1885–1971) came to almost the same conclusion. "The later planned economy was also developed without a theoretical Marxist foundation, as an attempt to (…) accomplish certain practical tasks at any cost (preparing and defending the Soviet Union against Hitler's threatened war of aggression, etc.) Even if we acknowledge the historical necessity of the tasks thus set, we must nevertheless conclude that these initiatives have given rise to bureaucratic voluntarism and subjectivism, dogmatic practicalism, which has repeatedly turned various daily contents into dogmas." (Lukács György (1976): A társadalmi lét ontológiájáról, II. volume, 319 p. Budapest: Magvető Kiadó.)

was on the inequalities of redistributive state socialism. Interestingly, like Hungarians, my English-speaking readers did not understand what I was saying. They imagined that redistribution is what the welfare state does. So how could I say that a redistributive economy creates inequality? A redistributive economy actually reduces inequality. So, for 10 years or so, my study was not referred to until, at one point, an American friend and colleague of Chinese origin, Victor Nee, referred to my paper on the redistributive economy when he started applying the concept of the redistributive economy to the Chinese economy in his own articles. [20]

Péter Mihályi:

How do you see it today? Did the 'intellectual book' apply only to the Kádár regime or to socialist regimes in general? The second question follows from the first. There were and are many kinds of socialisms. But clearly, there were and are countries that have not been characterised by their friendly treatment of intellectuals. I am thinking here of China in particular, but also Cambodia, Kazakhstan, and North Korea. In other words, systems that cannot be denied their socialist character, but which do not operate in any way like the Kádár system.

Attila Melegh:

The book is about socialism – obviously. The idea that socialism is a monolithic system is wrong. Institutionally, it was not a monolithic system. If there are *Varieties of Capitalism*,[21] then there are and were *Varieties of Socialism*. So, this should be taken back, and I think the dynamics of the phenomenon have been misjudged. Apart from the few systems mentioned above, this claim of socialism's monolithic nature became less and less true or ineffective. Therefore, as with any economy that aims to satisfy needs at a high level, in the absence of certain institutional conditions (no capital market or no land market), other social institutions must automatically emerge to satisfy needs at a high level. Following Polányi, I think what Chris Hann[22] describes well is that socialist regimes have moved towards institutional pluralism, and there would have been even more diversity if this kind of mixed economy had persisted. But it did not. There are many reasons why this happened, but it is probably not worth going into them now. I think that politics had a huge role to play in this. To that extent, I would also criticise the book on intellectuals, because I think it paints a rather overly monolithic picture of socialism. Because there was a great deal of redistribution, but also a great deal of reciprocity. There were also different kinds of markets, for example, the housing market, and they were also very different institutionally. So I think this monolithic vision of socialism that social and political discourse today wants to maintain was not justified.

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[20] Nee, Victor: A theory of market transition: From redistribution to markets in state socialism", *American Sociological Review*, 1989, 54.

[21] Peter A. Hall – David Soskice (eds.) (2001): *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*, Oxford University Press.

[22] https://merce.hu/2019/09/24/a-piaci-szocializmus-magyar-modellje-sikeresebb-lett-volna-hosszu-tavon-is/

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Was this image of intellectuals that your book gave us valid for North Korea or Albania?

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

Let me refer to István Bibó (1911-1979). After he was released from prison under an amnesty in 1963, I worked with him in the library of the Central Statistical Office. We talked a lot at that time. He once said to me, '*The biggest lie of this system is that it says it is a dictatorship of the proletariat, while it is a dictatorship of the intelligentsia*'. I didn't understand much of what he was talking about. But there is a truth in what István Bibó said that is true of all socialism in general. Now, what is true in North Korea or Albania, I don't know exactly, but it is true in general, just not for the intelligentsia as a whole. The point is that it was not a proletarian dictatorship, and it was not proletarian revolutions that shaped the destiny of these regimes. In Russia, there was no proletarian revolution in 1917, but a radical intellectual coup. It was after this that the Communist Party came into being, and it was in response to this situation that Lenin invented the idea of the Communist vanguard. But it is true that this party also included some excellent intellectuals, such as Lenin himself. This is very important. This radical intelligentsia also claimed power decades earlier than the technocratic intelligentsia. The communist elite tried to justify its claim to power as proletarian power. Looking back today, it is very important – and perhaps we did not emphasise it enough at the time – that what we were trying to say was not about the radical intelligentsia's claim to power, but about the technocratic intelligentsia's claim to have a prerogative on making economic and social decisions.

However, I have reservations about the *Varieties of Socialism* metaphor. The mass murderer Pol Pot (1925-1998) studied for five years at a university in Paris. Although he was not particularly successful there (by his own admission, Karl Marx's text was a bit difficult for him), he preferred to read Stalin (1878-1953) and Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976) while he was a member of the French Communist Party. So he was just an intellectual after all. Now, let us think of Hungary from this point of view. Mátyás Rákosi was also an intellectual, and a radical intellectual at that, and he started out as a liberal intellectual and went from liberalism to radical communism, because liberalism did not provide a sufficient answer to what he was criticising, which was capitalism. Lenin was radicalised by it. The truth is that, in fact, all the so-called proletarian revolutions can be seen as coups by radical left intellectuals who then tried to justify themselves as proletarian dictators. This is also true of the post-Rákosi period after '45. But Rákosi did not cease to be an intellectual.

I have just praised the Kádárist Hungary to the skies and explained what social innovations it involved. But even so, it is true that all communist parties have had and still have common features. None of them was a proletarian dictatorship, and all of them oppressed the vast majority of citizens in similar ways, if not to the same extent. They abolished private property and allowed only a minimal market.

ATTILA MELEGH:

Péter Mihályi is raising an important point. I think North Korea, Albania and partly Nicolae Ceaușescu's (1918–1989) Romania were monolithic experiments. Polányi would define them as monolithic utopias that cannot really work, which is why these regimes become so oppressive. I see this as one version of the socialist experiment and limited in time.

Intellectuals have no choice but to adapt to the monolithic experiment, because if they don't adapt, they will, at best, be marginalised or something will happen to them. I am absolutely certain that no monolithic experiment can work. Now, let's turn it back around: the market utopia doesn't work either, because it has to be pluralised to remain institutionally viable. Besides, I would point out that the October Revolution, at least, would have failed without the mass support of the Soviets, and therefore, we cannot talk of a mere intellectual dictatorship. And the post-war socialisms in Eastern Europe did not only develop internally.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

We have discussed how this story is not a Hungarian one. The next question is: How significant is the kind of Marxist historical materialist tradition that existed in Eastern Europe and Russia, which started from the assumption that this form of socialism as it was created in the Soviet world, was not the best of all possible worlds? This existing world (in the GDR it was called *real existierender Sozialismus*) must therefore be constantly reformed. I first heard from János Kornai (1928–2021) that leading Soviet economists had discovered in the early 1920s that the Soviet economy was a shortage economy, but that nothing happened to them, although they said so and wrote it down. From then on, the ideology of reform, of constantly reforming the system, was constantly present, which allowed for critical thinking. In other monolithic cases, such as the Iranian revolution or the Arab world, the fundamental ideology does not allow for the idea of reform. Those worlds are entrenched in the framework of tradition, and anyone who wants to look outside it has to leave. However, intellectuals can play a role if, in principle, they are and can be pro-reform. I was shocked to hear Béla Csikós Nagy (1915–2005) saying at one of these reform meetings in the 1970s that '*the comrades are aware that what we are doing is an anti-state conspiracy*'. Because it was. The state-party (but you could say the 'party-state') was trying to figure out how to change the economic and legal framework of the existing system.

ATTILA MELEGH:

It is really important that socialism involved continuous experimentation. It starts as a monolithic utopia. The monolithic utopia develops operational problems quite quickly, but at this moment it starts to innovate on an institutional level, on institutional principles, in which intellectuals have a role and influence, but I would not overestimate this, because in addition to the intellectuals, there were also more impulses from practice, either from intellectuals or for instance from people working in the cooperatives. I would rather say that an alliance was formed along the lines of reform, which at some points faltered and at some points remained workable. I would disagree with Péter Mihályi, because I see Iran as a much more complex thing, very much a modern state in many ways, taking on all sorts of traditional things, but in its functioning, it is much more flexible than it might at first appear. I think the same thing about Syria, where, under Bashar al-Assad's regime, there was a lot of experimentation about how to make it work really well. So the Arab world is not as monolithic as it often seems. The big problem is that the economic sociology and economic history that would refine this picture, and that is so badly needed, is being sidelined. Political schemes are often false and misleading. I am also glad we are having this discussion, because it is an absolute sin that what is happening here is that economic

history and economic sociology are disappearing, and especially their institutional analysis, as the study of institutional development and institutional change is no longer needed. In the 1980s, this country was rich in such analyses. We have now lost that due to market nihilism.

Iván Szelényi:

I would like to add that there was and is a tendency in the history of socialism for this original, radical left to come to power. This is what happened in Russia in 1917 and in Hungary in 1919. Béla Kun (1886–1938) was also an absolute intellectual, and there were a lot of intellectuals alongside him. There was almost no intellectual who was not in favour of the Communist Party, as they called it then: "the Commune", in the spring of 1919. It is clear that intellectuals who were historically recognised as philosophically excellent but who were nonetheless mad, such as Lenin, later lost their power and were replaced by intellectuals who were still intellectuals, just not particularly good intellectuals. They were more interested in the acquisition and exercise of power than in theory.[23] That was Stalin. But you can't say that Stalin was not an intellectual. He was an intellectual; he even made some contributions, for example, to the nationality question, so he even thought about intellectual issues. In any case, after a few years, he was no longer interested in that, but in the exercise of power. And this happened continuously, everywhere. This process is still going on today. A lot of universities are squeezing out excellent intellectuals and replacing them with people who cannot be said not to be intellectuals, but who are not really intellectuals; they are critical thinkers only insofar as their criticisms fit into the reform movements promoted by the ruling party.

Péter Mihályi:

The play *The Genius*[24] by Tadeusz Słobodzianek, translated by György Spiró, about Stalin, is currently being performed at the Katona József Theatre in Budapest. The main character in the play is not Stalin, but Konstantin Stanislavskiy (1863–1938), a great theatre director who fought for creative freedom for artists against Stalin. In the play, Stalin speaks to him as a debating partner about what *Pravda* had written 10 years earlier concerning one of his theatre productions. Because they both remember it. Stalin also knows what was in that review, and who wrote the article, who gave it its title, what was taken from it, etc. So, Stalin behaves in an amazingly intellectual way. Imagine how many politicians today could recall off the top of their head a *New York Times*, *Pravda* or *Népszabadság* article from 10 years ago. It is a very interesting thing, but at the same time, going back to the past, I would not think of Kim Il-sung (1912–1994) or Enver Hoxha (1908–1985) as intellectuals. But it is also possible that we do not know enough about them.[25]

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[23] According to Bolshevik legend, Lenin often quoted his favourite author, Goethe, who, in Faust, put these words into Mephistopheles' mouth: "All theory, dear friend, is grey, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green"

[24] https://katonajozsefszinhaz.hu/eloadasok/bemutatok/43576-a-zseni

[25] All we know about Pol Pot in this regard is that he went to a French-language school from the age of 6 and spent a few years at university in Belgium, so he must have spoken and read a lot of French. Enver Hoxha also spent several years at university in Paris. Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969) studied at a French-language grammar school, lived in London for two years, etc.

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

Stalin is indeed very interesting, because we know that he went to all the major shows. He went to the musical performances and the theatrical performances, and he gave his opinion on them. Yes, but he was the one who banned the works that he didn't think were right. But he had an intellectual judgment about the plays performed there. This is relevant to the Kádár era as well. Although Kádár himself was not really an intellectual, there were real intellectuals in the government in his place, such as György Aczél, who understood absolutely what was at stake, because he had read everything. I have often said that I wish I could access Aczél's library and look at the book recommendations that dedicated his novels to Comrade Aczél, and with what texts. '*Dear dear Comrade Aczél, or Dear Gyurika, with respect and many thanks for the publication of my book*'. When I started having political problems in the early 1970s, Ágnes Losonczi (1928-2024) persuaded me to go to see Comrade Aczél, because if he saw that I was a human being, he would behave differently with me. Well, I didn't feel like talking to Aczél, but for once I thought that Ágnes Losonczi might be right. I called the Party headquarters, asked for the telephone number of his secretary and said I wanted to speak to Comrade Aczél. They asked who I was, and I said I was Iván Szelényi. The secretary handed the phone to Aczél, who said, 'Comrade Szelényi, what do you want?', to which I replied, 'I would be happy to speak to you'. This was at 10 a.m. Aczél said that 4 o'clock the same afternoon would be fine with him. I said OK, I went at 4 o'clock and he gave me a full lecture. He spoke as if he had read everything I had said. He had an opinion on everything. He said, look, we agree on this, we disagree on that. It was a conversation between absolute intellectuals that I had with Aczél, and there was not enough time for one of his colleagues to tell him that Szelényi had written this and that, so Aczél had read what I had written earlier.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

I would like to recall a moment when Viktor Orbán listened to Iván Szelényi. Let's talk about that!

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

Indeed, when I came home in 2014, I received a call from Orbán's secretariat shortly afterwards asking if they could bring a letter to me. I said yes. An official came and handed me the letter, which was a very polite letter: 'Dear Professor! I am glad to hear that you have moved back to Hungary. I would like to talk to you sometime, would you be willing to come to my place for a coffee?'. I told him that I would, of course, respectfully come to see the Prime Minister of Hungary for a coffee. Nothing happened for a long time after that, and the official called me once or twice more, saying that he was sorry, but there was a war going on in Ukraine, and the Prime Minister was busy with other things. Then one day he called me and said he was free that day, could I come in, he wanted to talk to me, and they would send a car for me. I said, 'OK, come and get me', and the official came with the car. The driver asked how long he should wait. I said I was planning to stay for 15 minutes, and the official said 'let the driver wait and we'll see how long the programme takes'. He arrived and called me into his room. We were alone. We talked for two and a half hours. He did most of the talking; I just listened. A day or two later, he went to Transylvania and gave a lecture on illiberalism.

In fact, in retrospect, the main purpose of the discussion was to hear what an intellectual thought about his concept of illiberalism. Orbán gave his critique of liberalism. In response, I said to him, 'Prime Minister, you are right that there are social interests as a whole that sometimes the state has to uphold by imposing on individuals. For example, people must wear their seatbelts in their car, and if they do not wear them, they can be fined by the police. Then it is in vain for the individual to say, 'Please, I want to be free, and I will decide when to put it on'. This is not reasonable, because if it is not on, there is a much greater chance of a serious accident, the cost of which society has to pay. So that's why we can make it compulsory to buckle up. But who can decide what is in society's interest if individuals don't know what is in their interest? Does the government know, or is it the prime minister who knows? If he knows, how does he know? Has he received a letter?' He said, 'no, but we just have a better idea of what society wants, because we serve the whole of society here'. He said something like that, but it wasn't really an answer to the question of who he meant by 'we'. I don't know that Orbán would have dared to say that he knew better, because that would have been the truth, and in fact, that is what he is doing, how he acts, because he 'knows'. Orbán does not need a circle of intellectuals to tell him what is in the interest of society. It is enough for Viktor Orbán to know.

Péter Mihályi:

Looking back from here, is there any relevance to this whole intellectualism idea if it culminates in the Prime Minister being the only one who knows what the public interest is? Is the expertise of the intelligentsia, be it agriculture, foreign policy, inflation, or whatever, still relevant?

Iván Szelényi:

Orbán, when I visited him, asked me if the professor didn't think he should write a new book on intellectuals. I said no, because I think the concept is outdated. It was specifically about the Hungarian situation in the early 1970s. However, there was a similar attempt in Czechoslovakia to make it the technocratic intelligentsia, not the bureaucracy, that made the decisions there. This failed. Orbán said in response that he did not think it had failed, which is why it would be worth writing about the role of the intelligentsia in determining what is in society's interest.

Attila Melegh:

The difference between the two eras is that under socialism, things were not based on the market system. That's why the redistributor was important in Iván's book, and why there were a lot of other roles that professionals could take on. Now, under market conditions, it is not the job of universities to prepare for such roles, and the principle is always stressed that they should serve the needs of the market as much as possible. I would go back to the fact that a large proportion of intellectuals have now become rather rent seekers. So this infers the embodiment of a kind of inequality in the market-society relationship, and, in light of this, this involves a kind of hunt for rent. I think that the kind of universal telos that Iván Szelényi and György Konrád wrote about back then has been lost, because the market has no need of it. The market order seems to be such that it is, in fact, insurmountable, whereas in socialism, on the other hand, there was always a need to transcend, or

some kind of universal telos. Under market conditions, what do intellectuals do, what are intellectuals interested in, and to what extent do they want to be listened to? I don't think that market players call in intellectuals as a group to give them any kind of advice, because market players tend to see this area as their competence.

Péter Mihályi:

I'm wondering, and I really don't have an answer to this in my head either, how to interpret the fact that, in principle, rent existed in an economic sense even under socialism, but then, following the principle of redistribution, nobody benefited from this rent. The centre collected all the rent through state ownership, so intellectuals as individuals did not share in it. No one benefited because there was no private property. However, after the change of regime, private property gained ground, and from then on, various people, who could be considered intellectuals to various degrees, got access to rent and went on rent-seeking. If the hunt for rent is huge, say much bigger than in Hungary, such as with the Saudi Crown Prince pocketing billions of dollars in rents partly on behalf of the state and partly on behalf of himself and his family, is the situation different? But in the Hungarian context, Lőrinc Mészáros is also a rent-seeker. I cannot say for sure what I think about this, but somewhere I can see that rent-seeking was not possible under traditional socialism because the redistributive system did not allow it.

Attila Melegh:

Private ownership of capital was obviously not present, and ownership remained part of a closed relationship. The cooperative was also a *closed system of relationships*,[26] while it also earned its income through the market. In terms of the quality of land, there was also the differential rent, on the one hand, and the rent from any kind of knowledge monopoly, on the other, but property was not subject to market exchange. I think the punchline was that not everything was trickled down by the state, and in fact, property was not shared in the corporate, economic labour community, and so the role of social rent was less, since there was no land market and no profit-based capital.

Péter Mihályi:

But a much smaller cake was distributed.

Attila Melegh:

Now I was not thinking about the size of the rent, but I was simply trying to think in terms of economic sociology – whether there was a rent under socialism. I think it is important, and I use it in my teaching because we are always trying to understand the nature of the interconnection between society and the market. What does society do to the market, and what does the market do to society? What kind of order does the combination of this form have? What trends can we discover in this? Rent is a key element of this interaction as an inequality factor. That is why I consider this to be a very important question.

[26] The concept of open and closed relationships in sociology was introduced by Max Weber.

But now I will ask why Péter Mihályi and Iván Szelényi thought it important to write about the problem of rent in 2017-18?

Iván Szelényi:

In the book about rent, we write that there are three forms of income: wages, profits from capital, and rent. Rent is the form of income that arises in some way from the limitation of the functioning of the market. So one receives a rent if one receives an income in which market competition is somehow not effective. A particular form of this, let's say in Viktor Orbán's view, is when the state intervenes in the functioning of the market and does not let market competition decide who wins an EU or a larger state subsidy. We know the techniques of this: they pretend that there is an open competition, then the competition takes place, and then they say that now we have to see who is capable of doing it and who should be selected. A new competition is announced, and in the new competition, now only those who are clients close to the government, that is to say, those who belong to the estate, will be involved. Because the notion of *client* is very good here, the people who participate in the rent-seeking represent some kind of an estate. This is my statement: that there are wages, profit, which come from capital, and there is rent, which comes from the restriction of competition. In its pure form, this is actually only true of market capitalist societies. Today's Hungary is a capitalist society, a particular society in which the state, and Viktor Orbán in particular, has an extremely important role to play in limiting competition and in providing its own clients with high incomes. And so today, one of the two richest people in Hungary is a schoolmate of Viktor Orbán, and the other is Viktor Orbán's son-in-law, who is a dollar billionaire. We also know for a fact that they are rent-seekers because they have acquired great fortunes through competition restricted by the state. Another question is, how long will they even remain clients? So, after a while, they have so much wealth that they would actually win in a normal market competition, because it is not only state intervention that can limit competition, but also the excessive concentration of capital. If there is monopolistic accumulation of capital, then small capitalists cannot really compete against monopolies. One of the main features of the Orbán system is that here the state restricts free market competition.

As a criticism, I would say that there is no such thing as a free market; in a sense, the concept of a free market is an ideal type. This is also true with the concept of democracy, which is also an ideal type – a pure democracy, such as that described by János Kornai in his book on this subject, which is very much based on economics, not political science, and which is a very ideal type of pure democracy. What Kornai calls democracy does not exist anywhere in this form. Nor is it quite a free market. The freedom of the free market in Hungary today is limited not primarily by the accumulation of capital, but by the interference of the state and, literally, Viktor Orbán in the market, which situation limits and allocates rent income. Those who refuse to remain clients and rebel, like Lajos Simicska, may find themselves in trouble. Because then, on the one hand, members of the regime will take away the rents that they have received until then; they will not be allowed to take part in competitions, they will be excluded from competitions for various reasons, and the regime will even somehow find a way to take away a fairly substantial part of the income that they have accumulated up to now. As long as Simicska had kept his mouth

shut, he would have had enough left over to make a good living. So he had accumulated enough rent to support himself and his family for the rest of their lives, which is why he will not rebel against the Orbán regime.

Péter Mihályi:

One of the important points of our book is that if we consider the concept of rent important for explaining the situation, then we necessarily say that it is not theft. This is a rather controversial idea today, even in 2025, because both the Hungarian public, social researchers, and investigative journalists are deeply convinced that theft is happening everywhere, and where theft is happening, there will be prosecutions, property will be taken away, and these people will be brought to justice. That will be the second, the 'real' regime change. But we believe that the redistribution of social wealth is basically occurring through access to rent, so that those who receive the surplus income do not steal it; they receive it. And that makes a huge difference legally, politically and emotionally. We think that the Hungarian stories that readers know fall basically into this category. There is very little theft. To promise or hope for a second regime change is irresponsible.

Iván Szelényi:

With Péter Mihályi, I once wrote that they didn't steal it, they received it.[27] The point is that in the Orbán system, people receive rent from the system itself.

Péter Mihályi:

It is very important that it comes directly from the system. In a market economy in the traditional sense, you also receive your rent from outside, from external forces. The Saudi rich do not get their money from the Saudi government, but from foreign buyers. Of course, they can sell at high prices because the oil market is limited, but it is basically through exports that they can get their rent. Even in the situation in China, I think, the politically favoured Chinese state-owned enterprises or private companies basically get their profits from abroad, and so they are in a different position from those who get rich on the state teat.

Iván Szelényi:

The situation in China is very complex. I tried to follow it for a while, but then I gave up because there are too many Chinese billionaires and they are changing too fast. All of a sudden, they become billionaires out of nowhere; at other times, the money of billionaires disappears. Exactly how this happens can be terribly difficult to find out. I don't know enough Chinese to read what is written there that is important. What is clear is that there is a large internal market in China, and in this internal market, there are people who make profits and get rich by making profits and not by getting rich.

[27] Mihályi Péter – Szelényi Iván: "Lopták vagy kapták?", *Élet és Irodalom*, 2021. July. 2.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I have a few more questions about the book. I think in many ways it's very useful that you're expanding the concept of rent, you're talking about all the extra income that people get from closed relationships. To understand rent, you have to understand this closed relationship itself first of all. Weren't you afraid that the concept had become too general and that you would lose something of it, so that everything could become rent? Everyone is in some kind of closed relationship when there is no market independent of society. That is the old Polányian argument; there is no functioning market without being somehow embedded into social relations. The other issue is that in the chapter on globalisation, you write about how rent has become prevalent in the midst of attempts to have a global market. Now, almost everyone is talking not about globalisation but about deglobalisation, 'blocisation', and securitisation. Do you think that means the importance of the rent is becoming even greater? Or what will happen now? How do you see this new situation that has arisen since the writing of the book?

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

Obviously, for my part, I don't mind if we are generalising rent. I think that I would be in agreement with Polányi here, because Polányi would also regard as rent, for example, the benefits received by those who earn income without working. So, in a given case, it could also be a charitable action to give rent to those who do not have to work for it, either because they do not want to work or because they cannot work. Because we all live in closed societies at one level, there has to be some level of income for all, including some form of support for children and elderly parents. I would still regard the income provided in this way as rent, which is, of course, a socially positive rent.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Here, it would be worth referring to Weber, because this is where the distinction between open and closed relations comes from. Some of these closed relations are completely natural, legitimate and moral, such as support for the unemployed, but we can also include here the functioning of the whole trade union movement, where the weakest trade union worker will receive the same wage as the best trade union worker. This is because the union is fighting for them collectively. Similarly, closed arrangements, such as say, a hundred years of practice in the pharmaceutical industry or copyright, also come under this heading. Someone acquires a right, and it protects them against competition for a certain period of time, and that is fine. So by definition, we do not see rent as something morally wrong. We write separately in the book about the fact that many kinds of rent are perfectly fine.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I think it is worth clarifying the relationship of rent to the concept of social capital when the extra resources from community membership are also included. Or inequality in itself – when the Congolese miner's kid crawls into these holes called mines at the age of 14, everyone from the Congolese ministry to the military gangs, to Western companies, to Nokia, takes rent off their backs. Should we not perhaps go back to the classic problem of inequality, or specifically to the concept of social capital? The problem of rent is an important thought experiment; it just needs to be placed in relation to the other concepts.

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

Inequality is not a crime in itself. Societies are necessarily unequal. The profit from capital competing in the market is in no way negative. We do not have a concept like Marx's exploitation. Having capital and investing it under competitive market conditions and making a profit from it is inevitable and necessary. We need capital, and we need to invest it to create jobs. In addition, the capitalist still has a wage, since the capitalist is usually involved in the management of his business as a manager. He is paid a wage, if you like. The phenomenon of wages is emerging as a new concept in modern societies. The concept of wages also appears in capitalism. On a feudal estate, it is not wage labourers who work, but serfs. Serfs do not receive a wage; they receive a right. After 1963, János Kádár gave the peasants land; they were given the right to work on a small area and live off the income from it, and in return, they had to work on the land of the cooperative. It's a huge change when it becomes a capitalist big business, because the capitalist big business starts using wage labourers. The emergence of the wage worker is a very important step in the development of capitalism. I can already see that a capitalist enterprise is beginning here, that they are not using serfs, but are starting to use wage laborers. In economic history, that's exactly what we do: we look at people who are already wage workers, people who work for wages. Clearly, the serf is not a wage worker.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

By the way, these social forms can survive very much longer. A personal experience: I was in Kosovo when the economic situation was very bad, the shops were empty, nobody could buy anything, and it was striking that in shoe shops and other small shops, you would see two or three employees walking around doing nothing. I asked the locals, if there are no customers, why are there two or three employees? The answer was that they were relatives employed to bring in some money to the family. These people, who were apparently hired workers, salesmen, were actually there because the owner was hiring a nephew. In Hungary, it has not been common for a very long time to employ people for family reasons.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I would also add that capitalism started not only with wage labour, but to a large extent with forced labour. Forced labour in agriculture and in some other sectors was of enormous importance for a long time. Then there were the transitional variants – indentured labour, which was semi-free, rooted in colonial systems. So even in these cases, market and wage labour prevailed only within certain limits, and very large amounts of another type of social relations were involved.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

You're right about that, and Piketty writes about it in great detail in his latest book,[28] that there is not just inequality among capitalists vs. workers, but slaves vs. slave owners, conquerors vs. natives.

[28] Thomas Piketty (2024): *Az egyenlőség rövid története*. Budapest: Corvina Kiadó.

ATTILA MELEGH:

And servants, and the examples could go on…

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Undoubtedly, this has not been much addressed in theory. The theory hasn't really looked much at slaves. This is a relatively new discovery or emphasis on an old thing, because it happened two hundred years ago. And I have one other comment about how long inequalities can persist. It's in our book that the problem with inequality is that it's often not accepted by society as legitimate. If you don't accept inequalities but think that the rich are just stealing and cheating, then that undermines social stability. I think that is a perfectly logical assumption.

From this point of view, the recent US presidential election was a huge surprise. Before the election, the public debate was about how the elites were running the country, whether the electorate would revolt against them, and whether there would be some sort of democratic alternative when there was a change of government. That is not what has happened; with Donald Trump, the oligarchs have come to power. Social inequalities will most certainly be much greater than they were before. The dissatisfaction with inequality that has been echoed in political debates has not determined the course of events, but something else. It is constantly written about in American newspapers, and it is quite obvious that there have never been so many rich people in government as there are now.

ATTILA MELEGH:

Capital has partly taken over the government. It is usually the other way round – the state serves as a source of capital but maintains a certain autonomy for itself. But the state has to maintain its autonomy.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Yes, but we expected the opposite.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I'm not very surprised. It was obvious that some references to inequality or the problem of rent would be used for something quite different. It is a classic thing in politics.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Our logic was that inequalities due to wealth and income levels would force a fairer distribution, but that's not what happened.

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

The concept of *autocracy* is also useful. The Orbán system is actually an autocratic system, where there is a central power that can make decisions about all important issues, and quickly. There is an anti-elitist ideology in this, because this is the new autocracy, this central power that can make decisions against the elite. That is what we are seeing with Trump, for example, in the wrestling with universities; he is actually taking anti-elitist steps. Here, Trump's main opponents are the world's most prestigious modern universities, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale, which he harasses and tries to get their leaders fired,

and attempts to transform them into an administrative system similar to that of the Orbán regime's universities. So, autocracy has its attractions, as opposed to democracy, which is a chaotic system. Autocracy can act quickly and efficiently. That's what Trump does so quickly – he can change in a day important previous decisions, such as whether to send arms to Ukraine. He does not need to rely on experts or advisers because he is an autocratic, authoritarian leader. In many ways, he is like Viktor Orbán.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I wouldn't exactly call it an autocracy, but I would use the term the literature uses: a competing authoritarian system. It is not a complete autocracy, but it operates within certain limits. It is said that many democracies were created during the early years of globalization and later many democracies have begun to deteriorate, which involves a series of steps. Hungary is also a failed democracy. I don't think it's any different in America either, where there is no sudden big turnaround, but where they are also building frameworks step by step. More and more, I see that the previous management of the market order has failed; something has gone wrong there. In today's era of deglobalisation, the difficulty of managing the economy is like a magnet; it starts to suck in certain people who were not so important before. Trump is precisely representative of the quasi-entrepreneurial political attitude of *'let's get it right! [...] The only problem here is that it's a mess, there are too many civil servants, they need to be fired so they don't burden us'*. If necessary, protective tariffs should be introduced, or if they are necessary, they should be abolished. This is partly true of the Orbán regime, too, in that they represent an entrepreneurial attitude in the political sphere, and the two have just come together, both in the economy and in politics.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Again, you say deglobalisation.

ATTILA MELEGH:

Based on data. In terms of the share of foreign capital investment, for example, we are going back to the level of the 1980s. Many people have said that there are cycles, and now I see that we are at the end of a cycle, and we have a very different economic situation than, say, in 2004.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Could this be an illusion? Similar to what Iván Szelényi talked about in relation to his own third-way views? So, there is a situation where some people, like Iván Szelényi, outline that now a new system is coming, the third way.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I don't see this as a third way. I think the concept of the third way is basically a transition between capitalism and socialism. Nobody is moving out of capitalism here. Trump would be the last person to move out of capitalism; it's more about being a new manager. I would say the previous management was an attempt to build a single market under US hegemony. It actually failed because China was growing too fast. Instead, a process of blocisation has started, and instead of a single market, the emerging blocs want to make the transport routes safe for themselves again. They say, *'I cannot depend on Taiwan; it is better to have*

something in Malaysia, because politically, I can still control it'. In fact, the Russian reaction has been the same: to control these relations, which creates a situation of conflict, and these conflicts are now going through the roof. A significant part of world trade occurs within supply chains, and some German analysts say that America is trying to turn away from China and Russia by channelling 25% of world trade. This is going forward as a self-exciting process, and I think it is not good for globalisation. So the data that shows that. It is scary that the flow data indicates that foreign direct investment (FDI) has fallen to 1-2% of GDP. It is down from 6%, which was a much more significant figure. We have seen these cycles before.

Iván Szelényi:

I have one more question that we haven't talked about, and that is the relationship between the Orbán government and intellectuals.

Péter Mihályi:

We have already written about this several times in *Mozgó Világ*.

Iván Szelényi:

It's an interesting question. If we understand intellectuals as critical, free-thinking, then it's as if Fidesz doesn't have many intellectuals. However, the support of the MCC[29] and the attempt to take over domestic and foreign universities are noteworthy. Fidesz is trying to create an intelligentsia for itself. It therefore gives various perks to intellectuals, which are very hard to refuse. Some people cannot even resist this. There are excellent intellectuals who, one way or another, Fidesz can use as if they were its own intellectuals. In this respect, the most shocking case is that of Imre Kertész (1929–2016), who left the care of his works to Maria Schmidt. It was allegedly his wife who did this for Imre Kertész as he aged. Imre Kertész was critical of the Orbán regime for a long time, but he became weak and contributed to it. Imre Kertész was made into a Fidesz intellectual. Károly Makk (1925-2017) is also very interesting from this point of view. I have personal experience of this. Károly Makk was offered a position as the country's national film director, which would have meant a large income, a million forints a month for the rest of his life, just because he was the 'country's artist' – a position he would receive from the Hungarian Academy of Arts, not from the Széchenyi Academy of Arts. Károly Makk's last wife was a rich Canadian woman who was very reluctant for Károly Makk to accept this and to show that he was taking this money from the Hungarian Academy of Arts. So his wife then said, 'I will pay you one million forints a month – just refuse, don't accept it!' But Károly Makk could not resist the temptation and accepted. If you look at all the awards that are associated with very high incomes, the greatest artist in the nation, the greatest movie director in the nation. The Hungarian Academy of Arts is obviously a government-subsidised institution, unlike the Széchenyi Academy of Arts, which doesn't get a penny from the government.

[29] The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) was founded in 1996 as a talent management institution. The assets of the foundation that runs MCC were negligible before 2020, when it suddenly received a portfolio of shares worth hundreds of billions of forints and more than 100 billion forints in cash from the government.

The members of the Hungarian Academy of Arts now receive a similar amount to the members of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, just 400,000 forints a month, which is not a very large sum of money. It is interesting why it is so important for the regime to have a circle of intellectuals who seem to be the intellectuals of Fidesz, at least to legitimise Fidesz.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

I agree.

ATTILA MELEGH:

If the question is whether Fidesz has an intelligentsia, the answer is that it does. And this intelligentsia also receives a stipend, the press also promotes them, they also have a role to play, so there are many things. I would like to add that, compared to the 1970s, I think that the attitude of this intelligentsia to research and to real intellectual work – and I can look at this from any political side, not just from the perspective of Fidesz – is in very great decline. Compared to what Iván Szelényi did in the 1970s, intellectual life has almost disappeared. I do not see any intellectual training at universities, and as much as we would like to, we are not producing a supply of intellectuals. On the one hand, the very social science courses that would be important from this point of view are disappearing. The student population has changed a great deal, and the researchers coming out of it are in a very precarious situation. Now all kinds of institutional changes have taken place around them, which have made the situation even worse. They have been degraded to an extremely low level, both financially and in all sorts of other ways. The impact of this on the development of society is, in my opinion, deadly – in terms of the need to consider alternatives, to consider what alternatives this country, this region, not to say the world as a whole, has. That is what we should be doing, not political infighting.

PÉTER MIHÁLYI:

Agreeing with what you say, I think there is a process here, and when we wrote about this a few years ago, the situation was different. There were quite a lot of arguments then that claimed that Orbán is an authoritarian personality who doesn't need intellectuals. Since then, the situation has changed. I don't know whether it's a matter of principle or practicality, but there are enormous resources being mobilised by Fidesz to create their own intelligentsia in 2025, which includes the MCC and many other initiatives. So the situation is a bit fluid. My deep conviction, which we have also written about before, is that this new Fidesz intelligentsia is made up of bag-carrying, careerist young people who are only in the hierarchy for 2-3 years to boost their own CVs. They do not want to become teleological intellectuals with a lasting commitment, but simply want to occupy a socially better position, financially, institutionally, perhaps PhD-wise. In fact, they don't give a damn about the papers in those bags they carry for the bosses. They don't think they should read them or care. They serve the Orbán regime. A symbolic manifestation of this, which Klub Rádió regularly discusses, is that the authors of articles in *Magyar Nemzet* do not sign them. The nastiest articles are not signed, just closed with 'from our reporter'. Of course, people write them – of course. The kind of intellectual perspective that *'if it's about my thoughts, I want to sign it*' has been completely eliminated. I'm not sure I'm right, but that's how I see it.

ATTILA MELEGH:

I think that this political power involves a bit of an entrepreneurial mood, and I think that the intellectuals who are entering it are part of a more pragmatic, entrepreneurial strata.

One other factor we haven't talked about that has significantly changed the role and position of intellectuals is the press. On the one hand, the press as a function came about because of the parallelism along political blocs, so that journalism that tried to speak across blocs was no longer there. Let us remember that Karl Polányi was a journalist for a while at an economic newspaper, where he had to do deep and complex analytical work. Let us look at what the situation looks like today, and we will see something quite amazing. The press has become hostile and takes great pleasure in how it can misinterpret the various sentences of intellectuals as best it can and channel them into certain campaigns. This is a very serious change, and I do not know what the answer to this might be. The way I see it now is that there are so many positive answers such as mini-newspapers that are being created to serve intellectuals, like *Qubit*, which is trying to maintain some intellectual autonomy and operate accordingly. This is a key issue for critical intellectuals.

IVÁN SZELÉNYI:

It is interesting how important it is for the Orbán regime to win over Hungarian Nobel Prize winners. Ferenc Krausz is a special example, an outstanding natural scientist. After he received the Nobel Prize, he received a tremendous amount of support from the Hungarian government, which practically nobody else did. Ferenc Krausz does not take any political role, but in any case, he does not say a single bad word about the Fidesz system; he does not say anything critical about the conditions in Hungary. Katalin Karikó is a bit of a similar case. As far as the press is concerned, it's interesting to note that Fidesz tabled a bill a few days ago, which has become a matter of controversy within Fidesz. This bill would allow Hungarian citizenship to be suspended, and if someone is a dual citizen, they could even be expelled from the country if they do not represent the interests of the nation sufficiently. The 'interest of the nation' is, in Fidesz's parlance, the interest of the government. We always read that when someone attacks the government, they are attacking their own nation. We know that when Fidesz came into opposition in 2002, it said that the nation cannot be in opposition, because by nation, of course, they mean the Fidesz government. What I have said here could actually lead to my Hungarian citizenship being suspended, because I have American citizenship, and I could even be deported to America, because I have made enough critical remarks about the Fidesz government here to be treated as an enemy. I don't think so, I don't think it's realistic, I'm not important enough for the weapon of expulsion to be used against me. Moreover, there was immediate criticism of this proposal from within Fidesz. According to Máté Kocsis, this needs to be reconsidered because it is not clear whether this bill can be legally enforced at all. The aim is obviously to intimidate those with dual citizenship. The current proposal is to suspend the Hungarian citizenship of certain people and send them abroad to live according to another citizenship. The emphasis is clearly on restricting freedom of speech so that people dare not speak as I have just spoken.

BOOK REVIEW

Promoting freedom in a modern society

Lars J.K. Moen (2024), The Republican Dilemma: Promoting Freedom in a Modern Society. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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The civic republican revival in political theory emerged about thirty years ago as a critique of so-called mainstream liberalism. There were, initially, two main strands among the revivalists. The first strand consisted of those like Michael Sandel, who accused liberals of proposing a self-destructive ideal. Sandel insists that maintaining free government demands that people be virtuous – and especially that they participate in politics. Should the state employ the sort of neutral policies espoused by liberals – rather than actively cultivate civic virtue –, its societal foundations will likely be undermined. The second, more recent strand in contemporary republican thought is the one influenced most heavily by the work of Philip Pettit, who argues (or used to argue) that liberal theory is inadequate for conceptualizing the wrongs associated with dominating power relations. To address this deficiency, they propose a distinct ideal of freedom: freedom from domination.

There was some discussion twenty years ago about whether or not republicans deliver on their promise of providing a feasible and attractive alternative to so-called mainstream liberalism. Republicans insist that freedom from domination is distinct from the ideal standardly associated with liberalism, namely, negative freedom (or freedom as non-interference); hence, the policy implications will be different in each case. From the liberal perspective, a person is free to the extent they are not interfered with. By contrast, the republican view is that interference as such does not restrict freedom – neither self-imposed restrictions, nor government interference that is on the people's terms. Instead, a person is free to the extent that they are not dominated. Domination is a serious inequality of power – be it based on physical strength, technological advantage, financial clout, political authority, social connections, communal standing, informational access, ideological position, or cultural legitimation (Moen, 2024, p. 44).

But there were those who were skeptical. It has been argued by critics that civic republicans may be either in opposition to liberals or pursue an appealing ideal – but they cannot do both. This is the republican dilemma. Some critics dispute that freedom from domination is conceptually distinct from freedom as non-interference (more on this below). Others concede that there is a distinction but argue that it comes at the price of republicans neglecting the wrongs associated with interference. Yet others believe that the

path to establishing an interesting philosophical difference between neo-republicanism and contemporary liberalism is through neo-republicans adopting the traditional convictions regarding the importance of civic virtue that they received so much heat for from early modern liberals. The price of that is an unattractive and unfeasible ideal; classical republicanism, with its insistence on the value of popular participation and a convergence of social norms, is not fit for the modern world. On the other hand, should neo-republicans be too mindful of the liberal challenge – as Pettit is, according to critics –, there will be no philosophically interesting difference between republican and liberal theory. The first will collapse into another version of the second, albeit covered in archaic rhetoric.

Curiously, that sort of discussion about the civic republican revival – the one that situates it in its discursive setting, measuring it by the intentions of its proponents – has been, for many years, eclipsed by another, more technical sort of discussion. That is the discussion of the policy implications of the key republican ideal proposed by Pettit, namely, freedom from domination. There is now a huge body of literature that explores the policy implications of republican theory, with topics ranging from economic policy, the welfare state, the market, socialism, education, immigration, the legitimacy of state border controls, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, secessionism, ecology, and feminism, just to name a few examples. All of these discussions share, at any rate implicitly, the conviction that the republican contribution to policy is distinct (from liberalism, socialism, and the others) due to the fact that it is based on a distinct ideal – freedom from domination.

But the validity of that assumption is, in fact, far from obvious; therefore, the entire discourse on the allegedly distinct practical contribution republican theory has to offer rests on somewhat shaky grounds. Lars Moen's book *The Republican Dilemma: Promoting Freedom in a Modern Society* is a much-needed contribution to the discussion of republicanism insofar as it revisits the controversy regarding both the plausibility of republicanism as a critique of liberalism and the distinctiveness of freedom as non-domination. Moen accepts the viewpoint of Pettit's aforementioned critics: he believes that only that type of neo-republicanism is appealing and feasible in the modern world that can be collapsed into a version of egalitarian liberalism. But unlike other critics of republicanism, he does not believe that the non-liberal version is useless: in fact, he believes it is an appealing ideal, just not one that ought to be implemented, all things considered (a confusing statement at first sight – more on this below).

Moen develops a useful heuristic for comparing freedom from domination with pure negative freedom, the key dimensions of which are robustness and scope. The scope of freedom refers to the degree to which individuals are protected from interference. Negative freedom theory has maximal scope in the sense that it identifies any interference as a source of unfreedom; by contrast, non-domination theory has reduced scope in that it identifies only a subset of interferences as a relevant restriction. Republicans believe that controlled, or self-imposed, interference is consistent with freedom. Moen sides with those in the debate who believe this aspect of the non-domination ideal makes it, in a sense, moralized. That means, according to Moen, that neo-republicans like Pettit distinguish between various interferences on moral grounds: they believe that only unjustified interference makes a person unfree; justified interference does not.

Pettit insists that republican freedom is not moralized, arguing that interference is justified to the extent that it is effectively controlled by the person or group interfered

with. Therefore, interference should track any interest people actually hold, rather than some abstract moral principle – or perhaps a preference people *should* hold. Moen counters that argument by pointing out that Pettit introduces a restriction on the acceptable interests that people can avow – that is to say, the interests that should be taken into account at all. Despite Pettit's insistence to the contrary, the restriction seems to be based precisely on the sort of reasonableness political liberals like Rawls would endorse. Just like Rawls, Pettit believes that people must be willing to live on equal terms with others and respect one another's freedom; nobody should think they are special and above the law. Any individual preference that is contrary to that will be irrelevant for policy-making.

Robustness, the next dimension of freedom explored by Moen, concerns the extent of protection against interference that is required. The negative theory of freedom has minimal robustness, since it stipulates that a person will be free to do something as long as nobody else interferes with them. By contrast, republican freedom has greater robustness since it demands that nobody be able even potentially to interfere with others in an arbitrary, uncontrolled manner. Moen is of the view that republicans overestimate the practical implications of the difference. He suspects this may be because republicans believe that negative freedom theory is only concerned with actual interference. However, this is wrong. Pure negative freedom is equally sensitive to the wrongs of *subjunctive* prevention: if a person decides not to leave the room *because* someone else will stop them if they try, then they are subjunctively prevented from undertaking a course of action. Robust protection against subjunctive prevention and overall negative freedom requires very similar protection to non-domination; to that extent, at least, republican and liberal theories will produce similar directions for promoting freedom (Moen, 2024, p. 50).

Nevertheless, Moen does not deny that there is a difference between the robustness of negative and republican theories of freedom – nor that this has practical relevance. Scope and robustness are inversely related: more robust protection of specific freedoms demands more extensive government interference, which evidently reduces scope (government interference must be justified). Republican freedom will require protection beyond what is compatible with the promotion of negative freedom if its robustness is increased drastically, coupled with an inevitable reduction of scope. Moen firmly believes that Pettit's version of so-called moderate republicanism does not deliver on this promise. Pettit believes that government interference does not restrict individual freedom if it tracks people's common interests. The scope of freedom is therefore specified based on a definition of common interests. As we have seen, Pettit defines common interests much the same way as political liberals like Rawls do – so not much in the way of transcending liberalism there.

Moen believes that the way to go for republicans who insist on transcending liberalism is to drastically increase the robustness of their ideal of freedom – and correspondingly reduce its scope. Achieving this end will involve adopting classical republican views about the necessity of active democratic control and civic virtue, making people participate in politics "whether they want to or not" (page 8). These views would have people commit to a narrow behavioral pattern and are potentially perfectionist, which is the reason why early modern liberals rejected them so fiercely. This version of the theory is rather unpopular among neo-republicans as well. In fact, the only reason active democratic control

is ever brought up in contemporary discussions is to be discarded out of hand on account of it being a completely unrealistic ideal. Much the same applies to state perfectionism, which is rejected by the overwhelming majority of neo-republicans.

Moen considers this to be a good thing overall, arguing that "strong" republicanism is an unappealing ideal for modern pluralistic societies. People want to make up their minds about what they think a good life is, and they should not be compelled to follow any republican conception. The "extensive vigilance necessary for the robust protection against uncontrolled power that strong republicanism requires will to most people involve a too costly sacrifice of personal pursuits" (Moen, 2024, p. 122). Nevertheless, Moen insists that "strong" republicanism captures an important truth that ought to be salvaged. People who actively participate in politics are better protected against the abuse of political power and have greater control over the government. The preferences of those who are active will likely have a greater influence on policy than the preferences of anybody else. It is very difficult to track the common avowable interests of people who do not leave clues as to what their interests are. Perhaps this also means that politically active citizens have more control over their lives – and are hence freer – than those who have the opportunity to participate but refuse to take it.

There is not necessarily a contradiction in arguing that an ideal is valuable, but, all things considered, it should not be a basis for policy. Moen subscribes to the "radical pluralist" idea, influenced by Cohen, according to which "we define justice, or any other value, without considering how it should inform our thinking about how social institutions should operate under actual conditions. Values are fundamentally insensitive to facts" (Moen, 2024, p. 137). If thus defined, freedom becomes just one value among many, providing a *pro tanto* reason for action. According to Moen, the advantage of the pluralist approach is that it "clarifies what we promote and what we forgo when we make the tradeoffs and the all-things-considered decisions we must make to run our society" (Moen, 2024, p. 137).

Facts then serve to determine how to prioritize among values. As a matter of fact, modern society is pluralistic, and the people who engage in politics intensively comprise a distinct minority. In our society, respect for pluralism and personal autonomy must ultimately take precedence over the demands of active control; therefore, people should not be coerced into virtuous behavior. Strong republicanism could potentially be a basis for all-things-considered judgments, but only in a society radically different from ours (namely, in a society where the majority of the population wants to engage in politics all the time). According to Moen, republicans should "think of strong republicanism as the ultimate ideal, while accepting that it might be unwise to try to implement it under current circumstances." Implementing it here and now "would come at an unacceptable cost in terms of other values" (Moen, 2024, p. 136). "While it cannot provide all-things-considered directives, strong republican freedom can give republicans grounds for evaluating society and for criticizing citizens for their failure to live up to this ultimate republican ideal" (Moen, 2024, p. 136).

Moen is a bit reluctant to make it clear, but he seems to be arguing that, in fact, the correct interpretation of democratic control is active democratic control. This is suggested by the fact that he calls strong republicanism the "ultimate ideal" and that he characterizes Pettit's conception of virtual control as "freedom constrained by concerns for individual

respect" (Moen, 2024, p. 143). The latter is perhaps an unfair characterization. Pettit understands freedom to be a threshold concept. He is a sufficientarian insofar as he believes that a person is free if they are in control of the essential spheres as defined by constitutional rights. It is a controversial subject what the essential spheres are and what their definition should be based on. But surely, there is always going to be an outer limit to the list of specific freedoms. Moen's interpretation of republican freedom seems to suggest otherwise, advancing the claim that, in principle, more control is always better: as we have seen, he believes that people who participate in politics are, after all, freer than anybody else.

I believe that a crucial aspect of Moen's ultimate rejection of the idea that a concern for active democratic control should be figured prominently in all-things-considered judgements is the manner in which he concretizes virtual and active democratic control, respectively. According to Moen, virtual control means that most people can "go about their lives, so long as they remain in standby mode", ready to be virtuous if "the red light" goes on. By contrast, active control means that people "cannot just be ready to contest any abuse of political power they become aware of; they must actively be on the lookout for it" (Moen, 2024, p. 118; p. 123). As Moen puts it, the idea of active control takes the famous statement "the price of liberty is eternal vigilance" quite literally (Moen, 2024, p. 119).

By all means, this sort of characterization of active control is not unique to Moen's argument; it is fairly common among the critics of the most participatory versions of republicanism. I say it is a key point of the argument because, in my view, it is *only because* he presents active democratic control as engagement in politics 24/7 that Moen can reasonably argue that it is incompatible with the life of modern pluralistic societies. This presentation of active control contains perhaps a bit more than the unavoidable degree of arbitrariness. Active control must mean something more demanding than virtual control; that much is clear. But it is far from clear that it must literally mean eternal vigilance.

For instance, the majority of people vote and protest at some point in their lives; most people devote a couple of minutes to reading the news and discussing politics with their friends and family; a huge number of people comment on political news online. These are all forms of political participation that are compatible with a great variety of lifestyles, hence they need not violate the respect for pluralism. It is unclear to me why these forms of participation, provided that they are fairly regular in a person's life, do not amount to active democratic control. Defining what active democratic control means in practice is difficult, so we should be careful about rejecting the idea out of hand on the grounds that it is unrealistic and overdemanding.

At any rate, Moen concludes that rejecting the idea that a concern for active democratic control should determine all-things-considered judgements has the advantage of dispensing with perfectionism, thereby making "liberal republicanism" compatible with modern life. Virtual democratic control means that the good of freedom is attainable to many people, not just those who are virtuous. This dispenses with individual-level perfectionism: regular political participation, provided it *does not* take much time, is compatible with a great many different lifestyles. However, interpreting democratic control as virtual control does not dispense with social perfectionism, nor perhaps with state perfectionism. Even if it is conceded that not everybody must be virtuous to be free, enough people must follow the republican conception of the good life for the republic to be stable. This is because maintaining a free government is a matter of collective action. And because the

stakes are so high (i.e., because widespread virtue is a necessary prerequisite of a functioning republic), it seems likely that republican principles will lend support to policies that are devised with the intent of cultivating civic virtue. These policies, as it has convincingly been argued by Lovett and Whitfield, are incompatible with the principle of neutrality, which is the basis of non-perfectionist policy.

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BOOK REVIEW

Emirhafizovic, M., Heiman, T., Medgyesi, M., Pinheiro Mota, C., Tomanovic, S. & Vella, S. (Eds.) (2022). Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing

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Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages explores the challenges and opportunities young people face in forming families across ten European countries and Israel. Supported by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), the book aims to inform new and improved family policies by analysing both structural and individual factors affecting family formation, particularly in ageing societies. This topic is especially pressing as Europe's demographic landscape has undergone significant changes in recent decades characterised by declining fertility rates, delayed family formation, and changing social norms.

The propensity to have children has been on the decline in developed countries, prompting governments to implement different public policy measures to counteract this trend. These family policy instruments can broadly be categorised into financial incentives and non-monetary means (such as support for reconciling work and family life and fostering societal shifts in attitudes toward parenthood) (Kristó, 2014). However, these interventions have had varying degrees of success, as demonstrated in this volume. Despite a widespread desire to have children, many young Europeans struggle with balancing career aspirations, housing constraints, and family responsibilities. In fact, a study by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2005) found that roughly one-third of European families would like to have more children but are hindered by financial, temporal, and social constraints. A need to rethink generally employed family policies – such as tax breaks and subsidies – arose in recent years to turn the tide of a looming demographic catastrophe.

In this regard, this book emphasises the urgency of rethinking existing family policies and creating new ones that respond to the unique circumstances of contemporary youth by addressing structural problems they face in respective countries. The book adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examining family formation, incorporating perspectives from sociology, demography, and social policy. It delves into both objective factors, such as income levels, access to housing, and employment conditions, and subjective dimensions, including individual aspirations, societal values, and cultural norms. By presenting an in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of eleven countries, the authors

aim to shed light on the structural and cultural barriers young people face while also highlighting the diversity of their experiences across regions. In doing so, they provide valuable insights not only for scholars but also for policymakers seeking to address these pressing issues.

The book is organised into eleven country-specific chapters exploring family formation across diverse social, economic, and institutional contexts: Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and Serbia. Each chapter follows a unified structure, outlining national demographic trends, policy frameworks, socio-economic conditions, and country-specific challenges. Recurring themes include youth unemployment, housing insecurity, precarious employment, and the gap between family ideals and the structural realities that shape young people's decisions about marriage and parenthood.

The first chapter, by Mirza Emirhafizović and Andrea Puhalić, focuses on Bosnia and Herzegovina, where structural obstacles – such as "high levels of corruption, high unemployment rates, and the general lack of elaborated and secure mechanisms for the protection of human rights" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 2) – combine with post-war demographic disruptions and widespread distrust in institutions to undermine family formation. Despite being a "family-centric society" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 3), BiH has "one of the lowest total fertility rates in Europe (1.26 in 2018)" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 9). The authors argue that financial incentives alone are insufficient, and policies must address insecurity, institutional distrust, and broader lifestyle factors.

In the Czech Republic, Vera Kuchařová examines how liberal attitudes – such as the acceptance of non-traditional family forms – are counterbalanced by housing unaffordability and poverty risk. While the country enjoys "favourable economic conditions" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 32), these have not translated into higher fertility, pointing to a disconnect between values and behaviour. Policy efforts aim to "create an environment in which families can freely pursue their decisions and beliefs with regard to family values" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 34), though practical constraints often prevail.

Germany, as analysed by Dirk Hofäcker, represents a paradox: a strong welfare state with persistent low fertility. Hofäcker attributes this to destabilised family norms, increasing cohabitation and divorce, and prolonged labour market entry for youth. Germany's legacy as a "strong male breadwinner" state (p. 48) has evolved through reforms supporting dual-earner models, yet "young people in Germany are particularly affected by insecure atypical employment up until their late-20s" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 50), delaying life-course transitions.

In Hungary, Márton Medgyesi critiques the government's pro-natalist turn, arguing that while family benefits have expanded, they disproportionately favour those in stable employment, and "benefits available to all children, including the poor, have not been increased" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 63). Fertility and marriage rates initially rose, but have since declined, as structural issues – intergenerational inequality, housing insecurity, and emigration – continue to shape young people's opportunities.

Tali Heiman, Dorit Olenik-Shemesh, and Merav Regev-Nevo examine Israel, where high fertility (3.11) and marriage rates (95%) persist across "all cultural and religious subgroups" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 67), despite economic hardship. Deep-rooted religious and cultural norms, alongside historical traumas and geopolitical tensions, foster a collective

orientation towards family. Yet rising housing costs and poverty affect young adults' ability to form families, and the notion of an "all-Israeli family" is rejected in favour of recognising social heterogeneity, with children being "a major driving force behind the demographical changes" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 79).

Rosy Musumeci's chapter on Italy highlights the disjuncture between strong family values and delayed family formation. Italy has among the world's lowest fertility rates (1.32 in 2017), with young people "prolong[ing] the stay in the family of origin and by that also the process of their own family formation" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 97). Structural barriers – youth unemployment, precarious contracts, and housing costs – contribute to delayed marriage and rising childlessness. While family remains central in cultural narratives ("familialistic" orientation, p. 94), the state's fragmented policies have not adapted to modern constraints.

The chapters on Latvia and Lithuania, by Līva Griņeviča, Dina Bite, and Edita Štuopytė, depict post-Soviet societies facing demographic crises driven by emigration, declining fertility, and rising individualism. In Latvia, family remains "a crucial factor of people's well-being" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 109), but competitive market pressures lead many to delay or forgo family formation. In Lithuania, modernisation has brought increased cohabitation and voluntary childlessness, but persistent poverty and "unfavorable" socio-economic conditions (Emirhafizovic, 2022, pp. 134–135) further limit young adults' ability to start families.

Sue Vella and Joanne Cassar explore Malta's shift from a traditional Catholic society to a more secular and diverse one. Social policy has long aligned with Church doctrine – evident in Malta's late legalisation of divorce – but changing norms have made premarital relationships common. Despite economic growth, young people face mounting housing costs, high wedding expenses, and mental health challenges, all of which "further complicate their ability to start families" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 151).

Portugal, discussed by Catarina Pinheiro Mota, Helena Carvalho, and Paula Mena Matos, mirrors patterns seen in Southern Europe. Young adults often delay independence due to precarious jobs and expensive housing, with many remaining in the parental home. As the authors note, "the absence of economic opportunities has created a delay in the separation-individuation process" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 171). Gendered burdens are particularly evident, with young women disproportionately affected by work-family conflicts.

Finally, Smiljka Tomanović and Dragan Stanojević examine Serbia, where traditional family ideals persist amid institutional fragility and youth emigration. Young people often postpone family formation due to job insecurity, widespread corruption, and inadequate welfare support. As in other Southern European contexts, many continue to live with their parents until they can afford to form independent households. While familialism remains strong (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 183), it is increasingly at odds with harsh economic realities.

While I believe that the book offers a comprehensive exploration of the barriers young people face when starting a family, the chapters' findings would benefit from a contextualisation within the existing body of research, drawing on key studies that align with or diverge from the perspectives offered in the volume.

The book's exploration of declining fertility rates aligns closely with van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe's work (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 15.) on the Second Demographic Transition,

which is referenced in several chapters. Introduced by van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe in the 1980s, the authors argue "that new developments from the 1970s onward can be expected to bring about sustained subreplacement fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, a disconnection between marriage and procreation, and no stationary population" (Lesthaeghe, 2014, p. 18112). These cultural shifts, particularly the move toward self-fulfilment over traditional family roles, are evident in several countries covered in the volume, including the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, and Italy where cohabitation, delayed marriage, and voluntary childlessness are increasingly common. However, the book also highlights cases where cultural factors challenge the SDT framework, such as Israel and Malta. These chapters reveal how strong religious and familial norms can sustain higher fertility rates despite economic challenges.

The book's focus on young people aligns with life-course approaches to fertility, such as those discussed by Huinink and Kohli (2014), cited in the introduction of the volume. These scholars emphasise the importance of understanding fertility decisions within the broader context of youth transitions, including education, employment, and partnership formation. The chapters on Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, and Serbia, for instance, demonstrate how delayed transitions to adulthood – mostly caused by prolonged education, unstable labour markets, and inadequate housing – contribute to the postponement of marriage and parenthood.

The theme of precarity, central to several chapters as seen in earlier parts of this review, echoes Guy Standing's (2014) work on the "precariat." Standing describes a growing class of individuals who face insecure employment, limited social protections, and uncertain futures, a "new class – the precariat" (Standing, 2014, p. 10.). This concept is particularly relevant to the book's analyses of countries like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where young people struggle with low institutional trust, limited job opportunities, and the need to rely on extended family networks for support. According to Standing, "one defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called 'flexible' labor contracts; temporary jobs; labor as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labor brokers or employment agencies" (Standing, 2014, p. 10.). We could see in several chapters (Germany, Italy, Portugal) how atypical employment forms cause economic insecurity in young people, thus delaying their choices in starting a family. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the volume contributes to the literature on precarity by demonstrating how these conditions affect not only economic well-being but also the ability to form families, reinforcing the cyclical nature of disadvantage.

Moreover, the volume contributes to the policy-oriented literature on family-friendly measures. It parallels Anne H. Gauthier's (2007) work on family policy and fertility, providing case-specific insights into how public policies and institutional frameworks can mitigate or exacerbate socio-economic challenges. For instance, the discussion of continental European (Germany, Czech Republic) egalitarian policies contrasts sharply with the fragmented welfare systems in Southern Europe, offering valuable lessons for cross-national learning. However, it is very important to note that even Gauthier herself states that "while a small positive effect of policies on fertility is found in numerous studies, no statistically significant effect is found in others. Moreover, some studies suggest that the effect of policies tends to be on the timing of births rather than on completed fertility" (Gauither, 2007, p. 323.). This finding can be seen explicitly in the case of Israel and Malta,

where it is demonstrated how deeply ingrained cultural and religious values can counteract some of the economic challenges and lack of policies that typically suppress fertility rates.

Furthermore, the volume's comparative approach highlights the diversity of institutional frameworks across Europe and their varying effectiveness in supporting young families. The findings align with research on welfare state typologies, such as those proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990), which categorise welfare regimes based on their levels of decommodification and stratification. For instance, the chapters on Germany and the Czech Republic suggest that more comprehensive welfare systems are better equipped to mitigate the effects of economic precarity on family formation. However, the book also reveals the limitations of these frameworks, as seen in the case of Germany, where strong family policies coexist with persistently low fertility rates (p. xvii.). These findings are explicitly mentioned in the book's introductory paragraphs.

Family formation among youth in Europe: Coping with socio-economic disadvantages is a significant contribution to the academic study of demographic change, family dynamics, and different family policy measures in Europe. Through its interdisciplinary and comparative approach, the book sheds light on the complex interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and policy-related factors that shape family formation across eleven countries while highlighting often overlooked structural aspects that hinder young people's opportunities when starting a family. Therefore, the key contribution of the book is policy relevance. Each chapter concludes with actionable insights, offering valuable recommendations for improving the respective countries' family policies as it provides both granular national analyses and overarching trend investigations, making it an invaluable resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

However, the book is not without its limitations. While there is a summary of certain "contradictories/peculiarities that stood out" (p. xviii.) in the introductory segment of the book, there is an absence of a unified synthesis or concluding chapter at the end, limiting the book's ability to draw broader, cross-national insights. Readers are left to piece together commonalities and divergences on their own, which reduces the book's comparative potential. Also, while chapters touch upon gender roles and their influence on family formation, the treatment of these issues often feels secondary. A more robust analysis of how gender inequalities intersect with economic and cultural barriers would have enriched the book's perspectives, especially given the central role gender plays in family dynamics and policy effectiveness. Furthermore, some chapters rely heavily on qualitative narratives without robust quantitative data to back their claims. While this aligns with the book's interdisciplinary approach, it might limit its appeal to readers seeking empirical rigour. Personally, I would have loved to see specific generational analyses as well in the volume that examines how Gen Z's life choices and attitudes towards family formation differ from those of earlier generations. For instance, Gen Z's pronounced concern for global issues, such as climate change, often influences their decisions about parenthood and long-term commitments, framing these choices within a context of sustainability and environmental awareness. Given the increasing importance of sustainability in young people's life choices, this omission represents a missed opportunity to address a critical emerging factor. Lastly, although it is mentioned explicitly that "potential contributors from other European countries have been contacted, however, unfortunately, their reports

have not been submitted" (Emirhafizovic, 2022, p. 18.), the book suffers from the absence of certain European contexts, such as Scandinavia, where family policies have been particularly effective. Including such cases could have enriched the comparative analysis and highlighted best practices.

Despite these limitations, the book is a timely and essential contribution to understanding family formation in Europe. For scholars and policymakers alike, this volume serves as a call to action: to address the structural barriers facing youth and to reimagine policies that support family formation in an era of uncertainty. By situating its findings within broader academic and policy debates, the book not only sheds light on current challenges but also charts a path forward for research and intervention in this critical area.

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