



Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe

Working Paper

## **Populist Governance and Policies in Europe**

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## **Abstract**

The rise of populist governance throughout the world offers a unique opportunity to analyse how populist leaders and parties govern. This study investigates the factors shaping the policies of populist governments. First, an ideal type of populist policy making is developed, elaborating the policy content, the policy discourse and the policy making procedure of populism. Then a congruence analysis is applied to test the conformity of policy making patterns with the ideal type in seven countries where populist parties have been in government. We study the two established cases of populist governance in the EU (post-2010 Hungary and post-2015 Poland), Greece where left-wing populist Syriza and the right-wing populist Anel governed between 2015 and 2018, two countries where populist parties had minor influence in governments (Lithuania and Slovakia) and two countries from the EU neighbourhood (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey) where hybridization tendencies of populist governance can be observed. Policy making patterns are investigated in three policy areas: criminal justice policy, economic policy, and family policy. Our findings suggest that populist parties have a predominant role in shaping government policies in the policy discourse dimension. In addition, our analysis confirm that populist rulers may appear as particularly effective in policy reforms by circumventing conventional institutionalised policy mechanisms. Unmediated, top-down consultations and adversarial, polarising narratives accompanies policy changes when populist leaders govern. These features tend to undermine the institutions of liberal democracy and they inevitably foster social and political polarisation. There are two important implications of the discursive power of populism in policy making: a general need of wording policy messages in non-technocratic everyday language and a specific support of independent local journalism initiatives as highly trusted sources of policy information.

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## **1. Introduction**

The rise of populist governance throughout the world offers a novel opportunity to study the way in which populist leaders and parties rule. This task investigates the factors shaping the policies of populist governments. First an ideal type of populist policymaking is developed, elaborating the policy content, the policy discourse and the policymaking procedure of the populism. Then a congruence analysis (pattern-matching analysis) is applied in order to test the conformity of policymaking patterns with the ideal type in 7 countries where populist parties have been in government.

The policy aspects of populism and their relation to polarising policy practices have largely been neglected in populism studies. Since the seminal article of Mudde (2004) on to the emergence of a populist *Zeitgeist* in Western Europe, the scholarship of populism research has focused on political actors and discourses of populism and particular attention was devoted to the ambiguous relationship between populism and liberal democracy (Canovan, 1999; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). The lack of attention to the real-world consequences of populist governance is all the more striking in that in the past decade, populist parties have come into governing positions in several European countries and in the Americas (Hawkins and Littvay, 2019). Policy reforms that were adopted by populist governments may have tangible impact on social and political polarisation although this effect is yet to be explored. The fact that populist parties and leaders are in power thus offers a novel opportunity to study the practice of their governance and policy making. In this respect, the case of Central and Eastern Europe seems particularly relevant as ‘in these countries, populism, if anything, is even more widespread’ (Kriesi, 2014, p. 372) than in Western Europe.

Accordingly, our research has the ambition to conceptualise the specific features of populist policy making and to suggest a way in which to study this phenomenon. To this aim we theoretically address three core elements of policy making: the substantive (the content), the procedural and the discursive patterns of populist policies. This synthesis working paper is structured as follows: After presenting the analytical framework and the methodology of the research we reconstruct the implicit ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies. Then as an antithesis of the liberal ideal type we elaborate an ideal type of populist policy making. Finally, we summarize the main findings of the congruence analysis in seven cases: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Turkey. The qualitative assessment has a focus on three policy areas: criminal justice policy, economic policy and family policy. In the concluding part we discuss the implications of populist policy making on the polarisation of societies and the future of liberal democracies.

## **2. Analytical Framework and Methodology**

As our theoretical aspiration is to conceptualise the relevant features of populism in policy making, we use the Weberian ideal type framework. Recent theoretical and methodological discussions (Rosenberg, 2016) have provided new inspirations to apply the ideal type framework in empirical policy studies (Peters and Pierre, 2016). Following this agenda, we construct sociological ideal types (we refer to them henceforward simply as ideal types). In our case this means that both the substantive and the discursive components are constitutive elements of the policy making ideal types, while the context of social relationships is reflected through the procedural components.

We apply the method of congruence analysis (Blatter and Haverland, 2012) also called as pattern-matching analysis (Yin, 1984) to investigate the empirical relevance of our ideal type of populist policy making. Using this method in qualitative case study analysis ensures that our selected cases are investigated through theoretically well-elaborated expectations as we directly link the empirical findings to the ideal type. We investigate the two established cases of populist governance in the European Union: post-2010 Hungary and post-2015 Poland. We have also selected Greece that was governed by two populist parties, the left-wing populist Syriza and the right-wing populist Anel between 2015 and 2018. Two countries were chosen as they represent cases of populist parties as minor coalition government partners: Slovakia because of the government position of the right-wing partly populist Slovak National Party (SNS) after the parliamentary elections of 2016, and Lithuania because of some episodes of populist parties in government. In addition, two countries are investigated from the European Union neighbourhood as well: Bosnia and Herzegovina that represent a peculiar case of populist governance in an ethnically divided context and Turkey where we can observe the hybridization tendencies of populist governance (a shift from flawed democracies towards authoritarianism) under the AKP, the longest-ruling populist party in Europe (Yabancı and Taleski, 2018). This working paper summarizes the main findings of the country cases; more detailed studies are available in the [DEMOS project cloud](#). It is important to note that methodologically the qualitative assessment of the major policy changes does not have an aspiration that we expect from classical explorative case studies; the applied logic of case selection and the empirical reconstruction of the typical policy patterns supported by area specific policy expertise of the researchers, however, fits the qualitative congruence analysis research design and the conceptual ambitions of this task.

### **3. Conceptual Departure: The Liberal Democratic Model of Policy Making**

Governance and policy making varies between countries and across time: A variety of actors and institutions participates in the delivery of governance functions and their configurations delineate different governance models (Peters and Pierre, 2016). However, we argue that beyond the variations of governance types the ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies is implicitly applied.

One tacit assumption of policy making models in liberal democracies is that a relatively coherent system of ideas shapes policy positions: Ideas play a key role in the policy content and ‘can explain crucial aspects of policy development’ (Béland, 2009, p. 704). At the same time, although majoritarian preferences have a pivotal role, they are substantively constrained by the protection of minority rights. In addition, policy content is heavily influenced by area-specific technocratic expertise (Weible, 2008) and mainstream policy paradigms that tend to create policy monopolies (Baumgartner et al., 2009). As a result, the content of policies is mostly stable and policy changes are mainly incremental.

A main procedural feature of policy making in liberal democracies is institutionalism: The policy process is constrained and channelled by formal and informal institutions, thus political leaders have a low level of discretion (Przeworski et al., 1999). The constitutional embeddedness of pluralism limits the majoritarian logic as pluralism acknowledges the role of different social and political actors throughout the policy cycle (Baumgartner et al., 2009). This implies that public discussions inform the electorate on proposed policy alternatives. In discursive terms rival policies in this policy making model are interpreted through competing discourses and policy frames by manifold stakeholders. Policy discourses with high and positive valence (Cox and Béland, 2013) are generally applied. At the same time, the role of discursive governance (Korkut et al., 2015) is limited: Although strategic metaphors are

typically used in government discourses, public policy problems are usually conceptualised with specific policy language terms. Table 1 summarises the main components of the ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies.

Table 1: Ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies

Policy content	Policy embedded into a relatively coherent system of ideas
	Central role of mainstream policy paradigms supported by area-specific policy expertise
	Majoritarian policy preferences constrained by the protection of minority rights
	Incremental policy changes dominate
Policy process	Constrained by formal and informal institutions
	Plurality of participating actors in each stage of the policy process
	Public discussion on proposed policy alternatives
Policy discourse	Limited use of discursive governance
	Competing discourses and policy frames
	Dominant policy discourses with high and mainly positive valence

We use the ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies as an anchor, a potential antithesis of the populist policy making ideal type. Populist policy making, however, is not necessarily a fully divergent, alternative model leaning towards illiberal governance (Pappas, 2014). Indeed, populist policy making might appear within liberal democracies; similar to the ‘étatiste’ model of governance that can operate either in authoritarian or in democratic political regime contexts (Peters and Pierre, 2016, pp. 91–92).

#### 4. Populist Policy Making: Constructing an Ideal Type

Populism is a particularly precarious conceptual edifice in contemporary political science (Aslanidis, 2016) and encompasses three competing understandings. One approach interprets populism as a political logic ‘through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers’ (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). Another group of scholars considers populism as a political communication style (Knight, 1998) characterised by a Manichean logic (‘elite’ vs. ‘people’) and adversarial narratives as well as the depiction of crises that imply the need for immediate government intervention. The third main perspective, the ideational approach conceptualises populism as a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of ‘the *volonté générale* of the people’ (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Accordingly, populism fundamentally opposes both elitism and pluralism (Mudde, 2004).

The umbrella term of populism suggested by Pappas (2014) provides an appropriate theoretical framework for our research. He focuses on majoritarian political logic and polarising narratives, encompassing thus the discursive framing as well as the procedural features of populism in policy making. We enrich this perspective with Weyland’s idea (2001) on personalistic leadership and the unmediated contact between the political leaders and the electorate.

## 5. Populist Policies: A Substantive View

Although left-wing and right-wing populists have divergent visions about ‘good society,’ they also have some policy preferences in common. In foreign policy, they take a critical stance towards supranational institutions, advocate the primacy of nation states and reject liberal globalisation. In economic policy, populists tend to blame, and when in power, punish the unpopular banking elite (O’Malley and FitzGibbon, 2015) and transnational companies (Bartha, 2017). Some typically assumed populist policy positions, however, derive from intermingling populism with nationalism (De Cleen, 2017). Law-and-order punitive measures in criminal justice policy, negation of extending LGBTQ rights (Pappas, et al., 2009) or perceiving gender equality as jeopardising the idea of the traditional family (Korkut and Eslenziya, 2011; Szikra, 2019) can be deduced from right-wing nationalism of the respective political parties and not from their populism.

As populism travels across ideologies, the assumed common substantive components of populist policies are malleable and transient. While part of the European scholarship conflates the thin ideology of populism with thick right-wing nativism (Wodak, 2015), in Latin America as well as in Mediterranean Europe a left-wing, inclusionary type of populism has developed (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Empirical observations confirm that the marriage of populism with nativism and the subsequent ethnic polarisation is not necessary, but contingent. Taggart denotes ‘the empty heart of populism’ as a reflection of the lack of core values that implies its essentially ‘chameleonic’ nature (Taggart, 2004, p. 275). The Muddean thin ideology approach also admits the substantive flexibility of populism implying a wide array of populist policy measures (Mudde, 2004).

Though policy contents advocated by right-wing and left-wing populists may differ fundamentally, certain common features of populist policies can be theoretically detected. Populist leaders are particularly responsive to the majoritarian preferences of their electorate (Urbinati, 2017). Accordingly, populist policy measures tend to harm minority interests, and they are hostile towards unpopular minorities (Pappas et al., 2009). Populist majoritarianism is potentially incompatible with policy expertise: in the case of a marked gap between popular beliefs and area-specific policy evidence, the populist stance is by definition against expert positions shaped by mainstream policy paradigms. Striking examples include the anti-vaccination stance of Italian 5 Stars Movement leaders; the anti-green attitudes of Donald Trump or the economic unorthodoxy of the Greek Syriza. The reservation of populists towards mainstream policy paradigms and traditional epistemic communities often implies unconventional policy innovations and radical, paradigmatic policy reforms.

## 6. Procedural Features of Populist Policy Making

The procedural dimension of our ideal type is informed by the possible incompatibility between populism and liberal democracy and its preference to the majoritarian rule—a thesis widely shared in the scholarship (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013; Pappas, 2014). The ‘populism as political logic’ approach stresses the importance of personalistic leaders and their use of ‘direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support’ (Weyland, 2001, p. 14).

Populist governments tend to undermine the edifice of liberal democracy through eroding the rule of law, neutralising checks and balances and marginalising political opposition (Batory, 2016; Taggart and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Discriminatory legalism is a general pattern of left-wing and right-wing populists (Weyland, 2013), although especially valid for exclusionary populism (Müller, 2016). However, the inclusionary populist Syriza government was also heavily criticised for its legal procedural practices (governing by decrees, appointing loyal

judges). The inclusionary type of populism does not necessarily undermine the institutions of liberal democracy, but tends to circumvent them: For instance, the 5 Stars Movement is strongly in favour of direct democracy. That is, although to different degrees and by different means, populists have a willingness to directly communicate with the electorate.

Populist policy making means a different relation between governing politicians and other policy actors compared to the implicit policy making ideal type of liberal democracies. While usual policy process modelling frameworks such as the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) consider subsystem-specific policy experts as main contributors to the policy process, populist political leaders tend to be hostile towards technocratic expertise, downplaying the advisory role of epistemic communities in general, and the related supranational institutions in particular. The adversarial stance of populists against technocrats who created policy monopolies is inherent; indeed, populist and technocratic forms of political representations are two different alterations of party-based governments of liberal democracies (Caramani, 2017). An important consequence of sidelining veto-players and neglecting expert consultation is that the decision making process under populist rule fundamentally differs from that in liberal democracies along each of the temporal dimensions specified by Grzymala-Busse (2011). Thus, policy making under populist governance tends to have a significantly faster tempo and a shorter duration with frequent episodes of acceleration and an unpredictable timing.

## **7. Populist Policy Discourses**

Discourses can play a formative role in policy change (Schmidt, 2008) and they have a particular status in populist policy making. Approaches that understand populism as a communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007) or as a discourse (Aslanidis, 2016) pinpoint that populist policy making exhibits strong discursive features. Indeed, while populism is at odds with the institutionalised process of policy making, it is particularly susceptible to apply instruments of discursive governance (Korkut et al., 2015), and uses strategic metaphors extensively to ground and legitimise policy measures.

Scholarship also suggests that populist governments use a tabloid and emotional communication style with moralising adversarial narratives and crisis frames (Moffitt, 2015) reinforcing polarisation in policy positions. While the chameleonic flexibility of populist governments can imply policy choices in line with expert policy evidences, discursively populists often have a clear anti-expertise stance (Thirkell-White, 2009).

Populist government leaders tend to use Manichean language and adversarial frames in legitimising policy decisions: The menace of dangerous immigrants was frequently invoked by both Salvini and Trump in order to promote increased securitisation and law-and-order measures. Populist discourses may portray both transnationally embedded liberal groups and socially marginalised unpopular minorities as enemies of the ‘real people’ (Müller, 2016) thus forging social polarisation. Arguments against liberalism are discursively linked to attacks against liberal ‘censorship’ and reveal the potentially subversive character of populism: popular beliefs have a higher moral stance than the values promulgated by elites. Table 2 summarises the main features of the populist policy making ideal type (Bartha et al., 2020a).

Table 2: Ideal type of populist policy making

Policy content	Ideologically multifaceted and diverse
	Heterodox policy elements with frequent policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms
	Reflecting majoritarian preferences, hostility against unpopular minorities
	Radical and paradigmatic policy reforms
Policy process	Circumventing established institutions, downplaying veto-players
	Limiting participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors
	Direct communication with the electorate
Policy discourse	Extensive use of discursive governance
	Tabloid, highly emotional communication style, recurrent crisis framing
	Dominance of Manichean discourses

## 8. Applying the Ideal Type: Populist Policy Making in Seven Countries with Populist Governance

This section summarises the main findings of the seven countries investigated by the DEMOS national research teams within the DEMOS project. National research teams applied congruence analysis in three policy areas: criminal justice policy, economic policy and family policy. The detailed studies are available in the [DEMOS project cloud](#).

### 8.1 Populist Policy Making in EU Member States

#### 8.1.1 Greece

After 2010 the fiscal adjustment and internal devaluation policies deepened economic recession and its social impact, and, despite some progress, the reform programme failed to change fundamentally Greece's growth model and public administration. These economic policies triggered populist reactions in 2010-2014 which soon, in 2015, brought to power a coalition of a strong populist party of the Left, Syriza, and a smaller nationalist/populist, right-wing party (the Anel). After coming to power Syriza changed course in terms of its populist promises regarding economic policy content. It employed policy processes already used by its predecessors in power. And it continued with a populist rhetoric, hoping to prolong its term in power.

Regarding the content of policies, Syriza proved chameleonic enough in the field of economic policy. It tried to negotiate its way through a reversal of economic austerity, but soon backtracked and implemented the neoliberal policy which informed the MoUs (Memoranda of Understanding) agreed between Greece and its creditors. On criminal justice issues, Syriza proceeded with reforms of the criminal code, the prison system and anti-corruption which only to an extent served the necessary modernisation of the criminal justice system. For the most part, Greek populists opted for criminal justice measures either reflecting their radical left-wing ideology or serving their struggle against political opponents (former governing parties). As for family policy, the content of policies was not hostile to unpopular minorities. However, it also

combined a social democratic drive to expand social protection to the less protected categories of the population with a tendency to serve the particular electoral pool of Syriza.

The process of policy making under the Syriza populist government reflected, among other things, the populists' antagonism against what they called the old political system or the corrupt elites. More concretely, Greek populists did not trust institutions which they did not control (i.e., independent authorities) or stakeholders whom they could not influence (e.g. professional or labour associations in which they did not hold the majority). In other words, Greek populists tried to do away with institutional constraints in policy making. Leadership in policy making was exclusively entrusted to government ministers and their close entourage, while participation in policy making was trimmed, if not completely curtailed, unless it converged with the priorities of populists.

With regard to policy discourse, throughout its period in opposition (2010-2014) but also in government (2015-2019), Syriza adopted an aggressive Manichean rhetoric. Syriza denounced the austerity inspired policy programme imposed by the country's creditors after 2010 as the root cause of Greece's problems. Along with other, minor opposition parties, including right-wing ones, and along with its government coalition partner (Anel), Syriza pursued a fierce confrontation with its opponents on the grounds of an anti- MoU campaign, which split society along a MoU/anti-MoU dividing line and increased polarisation to unprecedented levels.

### **8.1.2 Hungary**

Ruling since 2010, the government of Hungary under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been the first clear populist administration of an EU member state that has, at the same time, moved away from liberal democracy. The governing party Fidesz has already spent a decade in power that allowed its policies to crystallise. These features make the Hungarian case especially suitable for illustrating the ideal type of populist policy making.

Both discursive and procedural features of Hungarian criminal justice policy have been fully congruent with the ideal type. The dominance of Manichean discourses and tabloid, highly emotional communication patterns with recurrent crisis framing was detected especially in the discourses revolving around hate crime legislation. In the policy process, a striking populist feature of Hungarian criminal justice policy has been the abandonment of the scientific-dogmatic foundations during the legislation process. Findings are less unanimous in the policy content dimension, although the excessive majoritarianism built upon hostility against unpopular minorities was pervasive.

A similar pattern can be detected in post-2010 Hungarian economic policy. Discursive patterns are fully congruent with the theoretical expectations; in economic policy reasoning a specific feature of Manichean framing is the recurrent enmification of international actors (the International Monetary Fund and a conflation of global financial market actors, George Soros and EU institutions). Procedural features of economic policy making have also been rather congruent with the ideal type. A striking feature of the selective consultation policy of the Hungarian government is reflected in the use of Strategic Partnership Agreement policy that segments the corporate landscape to 'good' (productive) versus 'bad' (speculative) companies. The economic policy content, however, frequently differs from the discursive patterns: an enlightening example of this apparent inconsistency is applying neoliberal macroeconomic stabilisation measures together with harsh discursive rejection of austerity policies. This pattern, however, is a genuine practice of discursive governance, a core component of populist policy making,

Discursive enmification was also prevalent in post-2010 Hungarian family policy that linked the discourse of demographic crisis to the rehabilitation of traditional family policy ideals. In this context pro-natalist and childcare incentives coupled with a disallowance of certain entitlements from non-traditional families (e.g. adoption of children by LGBTQ couples). In family policy, there has been a general ideational consistency between policy content and policy discourses. This policy making was embedded in the procedural context of parliamentary supermajority of the governing Fidesz that combined cardinal legislation with individual member's bills. These techniques circumvented veto-players and limited involvement of external policy experts, opposition parties or civil society actors in policy debates.

### **8.1.3 Lithuania**

Throughout the independence period so far, Lithuania has had three governments that included populist parties. The first populist party to get into the government was the Labour Party after the Seimas elections in 2004. The second populist party to become part of the governing coalition was the National Resurrection Party. It entered the Government after the Seimas elections of 2008. In both cases populist parties experienced major internal shake-downs and split into two separate factions, which undermined their ability to become more relevant for policy making and governance. To date the period of 2012-2016 was the most successful for populist parties, as two of them – the Labour Party and the Party Order and Justice – became part of the governing coalition after the parliamentary elections.

In general, policy making and governance in the area of criminal justice may be described as populist content, process and discourse free. This may be explained by the fact that criminal justice area of policy was never high on the Lithuanian policy agenda. In terms of policy content in the area of economic policy two of the parties analysed (the Labour Party and the Party Order and Justice) may be described as ideologically multifaceted and diverse, while the National Resurrection Party stayed rather consistent ideologically and supported liberal agenda. Most important issues related to the economic policy area during the studied periods were (and some still are) increasing the minimal monthly wage, amending (decreasing) personal income taxation and approval of the new Labour Code (liberalisation of work relations). While in the area of economic policy heterodox policy elements, policy innovations challenging mainstream policy paradigms and radical and paradigmatic policy reforms were never on the agenda of populist parties, the stance that the parties took or policy initiatives that they advocated were resonant of the majoritarian preferences in most cases (and arguably contradictory at the same time, as for example, increasing minimal monthly wage and liberalising the Labour Code).

In terms of policy process in the area of economic policy, none of the analysed parties has shown consistent signs of populist policy making and governance. Only direct communication with the electorate was among the attractive options for the populist parties. However, this option was not used extensively. Policy discourse in the area of economic policy was also rather moderate in terms of populism. One might find traces of tabloid, emotional communication style in the rhetoric of the populist parties. However, it was not radical. Sometimes Manichean discourses were evoked, especially, with regard to justification of policy measures taken on the grounds of being conducive to higher well-being of the poor or 'common (average) people'.

The area of family policy was more prone to become populated with populist elements, at least by the Party Order and Justice. In terms of policy content, the most hotly debated issues in this policy area were related to the law on the protection of minors from the negative effect of public information and a constitutional amendment linking definitions of family and marriage as well as the artificial insemination law. While the Labour Party and the National Resurrection Party mostly avoided the initiative (as well as participating in the discourses) on these issues (though

supporting the majoritarian preferences in most cases), the Party Order and Justice was an ardent advocate of majoritarian preferences (family and traditional values) and dismissed all the initiatives of the LGBT community. This party also was discontent with participation of civil society groups in the policy process and tried to diminish the role of veto-players (for example, the President). The discourse related to the family policy of this populist party was full of Manichean content, dismissing the ‘liberal agenda of elites’ and destructive ‘values of the West’.

#### **8.1.4 Poland**

After the double (presidential and then parliamentary) electoral victory of 2015 by the United Right coalition consisting of the dominant Law and Justice party (PiS) and its minor partners: Poland Together (after November 2017 Agreement Party) and Solidaristic Poland designed and implemented macroeconomic, family and criminal justice policy. One of the striking features of PiS’s political position is its immunity to internal (opposition) and external (EU institutions) critique concerned particularly with the breaches of the rule of law and attacks on the independence of judiciary. One of the explanations of its sustained electoral support is the ability to deliver on the promises related to social spending, particularly on 500 Plus programme which is widely recognized in society and which was recently extended to every child. In combination with the cultural conservatism and the ability to create a sense that the government started to care about less well-off people it allowed PiS to improve in 2019 on its good score in the 2015 elections. This analysis allowed to highlight these aspects of three public policies which contributed to a large extent to these successes. It was not only the populist content expressed in the ideological unorthodoxy and the ability to construct and reflect majoritarian opinions but also the populist policy making based on a relaxed approach to best standards of policy and law-making procedures (i.e. a willingness to employ fast track procedures, poor expertise, short public consultations, poor quality of the Regulatory Impact Assessments, occasional breaches of European Law).

Most importantly, PiS used extensively the discursive governance measures to define the reality, offer the moral evaluation and legitimize proposed policy solutions. What all the policies shared was the populist communication strategies based on people-centrism, anti-elitism, occasional othering, constructions of crisis and context-related strategies like economic nationalism, penal populism or essentialisation of traditional family. It is worth emphasising two important factors not captured by the analytical framework: the significance of timing and the role of staged events, including media events, party conventions and other devices used to emulate the sense of direct communication with the electorate.

#### **8.1.5 Slovakia**

The Slovakian case study explored that the policy making impact of the investigated Slovak National Party (SNS) was fairly limited as a minor partner in coalition government. Three specific factors limited the role of SNS: the Manifesto of the Government, the thin portfolio of ministries controlled by the party and the transformation of SNS from a classical nationalist party to a rather moderate, conservative, patriotic/nativist party under Andrej Danko. In this context, SNS typically presented policy proposals aimed at increasing income or benefits for the broader electorate, and as a result, implying a deterioration of public financial positions. SNS has not initiated radical and paradigmatic policy reforms and has not challenged mainstream policy paradigms with policy innovations, with one exception, a special sectoral tax on food retail chains. Still, SNS illustrates the multifaceted character of populist parties as

it endorses left-wing economic policies but exhibits conservative social values (cf. Norris, 2020).

There is no evidence that SNS deliberately attempted to limit participation of technocratic policy experts, opposition parties and civil society actors in the policy process, although it initiated some policy measures without consulting with coalition partners, government agencies or broader stakeholders. At the same time, SNS was active to present its populist policy suggestions in public debates. These policy initiatives typically did not pass in the Parliament (such as abolishing e-vignettes, or a ban on Sunday shopping), or did not materialise for other reasons (e.g. the costly idea to launch national air carrier, or a plan to establish a Ministry for Tourism Industry).

SNS could not capitalise on the typical discursive instruments of populist parties in policy making: policy communication of the party tends to lack tabloid and highly emotional communication patterns. These policy communication patterns were rather sporadic and temporary, although clearly adopted not only by SNS but also by Smer-SD in both economic and family policy areas during the election campaign of the 2019–2020 autumn and winter period. The blurred discursive approach of SNS explored the lack of authenticity of the party in issue ownership and likely contributed to the party's losing parliamentary representation in 2020.

## **8.2 Populist Policy Making in the EU Neighbourhood**

### **8.2.1 *Bosnia and Herzegovina***

Populist politicians have been widely using discursive governance instruments and found a way to abuse susceptibility of citizens and their sentiments in most of the investigated policy issues: economic growth and well-being, employment opportunities, sentencing of the most dangerous criminals, organised crime and corruption, fertility or the role of the traditional family in Bosnian society. Making unrealistic pre-election promises, manipulating data about economic statistics, introducing the most severe sentences in the penal law system and selective anti-corruption measures affecting only political opponents have been part of the populist policy toolkit.

In the field of economic policy, we notice non-transparent governmental communication regarding major economic issues. While citizens are well-informed about specific sectorial trends (that they usually are not able to understand), they are not properly informed about some core indicators of employment, attracting foreign investments or providing tax exemptions/benefits to foreign investors in the country. A striking example is a shift of employment law towards a strongly pro-employer oriented regulation without any public debate or any attempt of a reasonable policy explanation.

In criminal justice policy an overwhelming drive of penal populism can be detected, although most of the politicians' promises made in the field of criminal law remain unfulfilled. The most debated issue in criminal justice policy has been life imprisonment in the Criminal Code of Republic of Srpska in 2020 obviously derived from the populist policy agenda.

Populist elements of family policy have been crystallised around fertility; the decline of birth rate has been considered as one of the most serious challenges faced by Bosnian society. The identified challenge has been mainly contextualised in a traditional pronatalist frame, while multiple goals concerning work-life balance, combating child poverty, support of child development and welfare at the earliest age have been secondary. This clearly indicates that

area-specific policy expertise plays only a secondary role compared to the populist family policy agenda.

### **8.2.2 Turkey**

The Turkish national case study indicated that policy making features of AKP are strongly congruent with the populist policy making ideal type. It demonstrated that in terms of policy content, policy process and policy discourse, the AKP displays characteristics associated with the theoretical expectations. While these tendencies are strongest in macroeconomic policy making and weakest in family policy, the AKP does not shy away from using these strategies when it deems it necessary. Analysis also shows that the AKP is consistently congruent with the ideal populist type in policy process and policy discourse in terms of three major policy areas investigated in this working paper.

These limited observations hint that Turkish populist are less interested in policy content and more interested in policy processes and the discourse they use. This fact reveals populists' relative lack of concern for institutions and legalities, demonstrated in their willingness to disregard these formalities once they are in power. They use policy processes and discourse to affect and change policy. Accordingly, any attempt to block the advance of populism should focus on these areas rather than policy content.

## **9. Conclusions**

Populist parties have increasingly gained power in Europe and beyond offering a novel opportunity to study the way they govern. The main aim of this article was to conceptualise policy making features of populist governments. As a point of theoretical departure, we reconstructed the implicit ideal type of policy making in liberal democracies where a plurality of actors participates in the policy process that is constrained by formal and informal institutions and competing policy discourses shape policy alternatives. This policy making ideal type generally applies in liberal democracies independently from the functionalist model of governance in a broader sense.

Then, reviewing the populism scholarship, we constructed an ideal type of populist policy making. The content of populist policies is partly shaped by the underlying core ideologies; still, policy heterodoxy, strong willingness to adopt paradigmatic reforms and an excessive responsiveness to majoritarian preferences are probably distinguishing features of any type of populist policies. Discursively, populist political leaders tend to use crisis frames and discursive governance instruments such as strategic metaphors in a Manichean language to legitimise policy decisions. Direct communication with the electorate and circumvention of existing institutions is a general pattern of populist policy making, but more inclusionary variants of populist governance tend to respect the established democratic procedures more.

We investigated policy making patterns in three policy areas and seven countries to assess the congruence of populist governance with the ideal type. Our qualitative assessment suggests a high degree of conformity between the ideal type of populist policy making and the selected cases, especially in the policy discourse dimension. In addition, our analysis confirmed that populist rulers may appear as particularly effective in policy reforms by circumventing conventional institutionalised policy mechanisms. When populist leaders govern unmediated, top-down consultations and adversarial, polarising narratives accompanies criminal justice policy, economic policy and family policy reforms; features that are rarely present in policy making in liberal democracies.

Understanding populist policy making has important theoretical and practical policy implications. First and foremost, it helps us explain how and why populists survive in power even in the longer run. Reasons for success of populist governance might include the ideological flexibility that closely follows majoritarian preferences of the electorate. Our findings also confirm the ambiguous relationship between populist governance and liberal democracy. While majoritarian preferences may legitimise populist policy reforms, abrupt and radical policy changes downplay institutional and policy expertise control mechanisms and are routinely supported by adversarial narratives. On the one hand, these features tend to undermine the institutions of liberal democracy; on the other hand, they inevitably foster social and political polarisation. This is particularly harmful for unpopular minorities, including the poor, the Roma, migrants and LGBTQ communities, who can easily become the scapegoats and the losers of policy changes. Given the procedural features of populism, social groups with weak lobbying power might easily become excluded from decision making and their voices remain unheard. This process leads to the decline of participatory democracy and decreases the quality of policy making.

These findings have broader policy implications. It seems clear that policy content may, of course, oscillate, depending on the party or coalition of parties elected into power. However, given the framework of European Union treaties and the value system of the Union, the content of policies cannot flagrantly violate the rule of law. This is particularly important for criminal justice policy, a policy field in which populist governments are tempted to sidestep institutions or use the justice system as a tool in electoral competition.

In the same vein, following the expected requirements of the functioning of democracy in Europe, the policy process needs to be as open and inclusive as possible. Policy formulation may not take place in isolated circles of governing party appointees and ministerial officials, as this practice hinders transparency and accountability. Governing by fiat should be curbed in non-crisis time periods. It is not only undemocratic, but it also leads to less efficient policy making. Social partners and networks of experts could contribute to drafting more cost-efficient policy measures and more efficiently implemented measures, as consensus would possibly be reached at preparatory stages of the policy cycle.

Another aspect pertains to policy discourse. That may range from consensual to conflictual, as expected from players in an open-to-all democratic game. However, political parties and other political institutions, such as the mass media, need to remember their socialising function. They do not only inform citizens but also educate them. The diffusion of polarising, polemical and acutely confrontational speech exacerbates the negative political effects which external circumstances (e.g., a grave economic crisis) usually bring to bear upon democratic life. It is thus recommended that collective actors (parties, interest groups, mass media) socialise their members, target groups and audiences in the logic of open debate and convergence over policy issues rather than in the logic of an all-out war.

Non-populist 'mainstream' democratic politicians should formulate their policy messages in a more citizen-oriented manner (in rather everyday language and less technocratic, area-specific expert wording). It does not mean adopting the populist strategies and creating the conducive conditions to populist agenda but rather taking social fears and anxieties into account seriously. It is also necessary to resign from technocratic legitimisation of policy making and artificial celebrity politics which can be easily portrayed as out of touch with the people.

More efforts are needed to support professional media outlets. There is a need of strengthening publicly and easily available fact-checking initiatives and platforms in major policy areas at national and European levels. Such platforms would not only detect the misinformation

practices at the political level, but would also name and shame the exclusionary and inaccurate populist language. That would lower the cost for citizens to find independent information.

Along the same lines, there is a special need to invest in supporting independent local journalism initiatives as highly trusted sources of policy information. This is particularly important in those societies where populist governance is coupled with increasing democratic shortcomings and/or a fragility of independent media.

## **Appendix: Populist Policy Making and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic implied multiple challenges in the life of citizens and other socio-economic actors. The populism-COVID-19 nexus was investigated by various DEMOS research teams (see for instance studies related to DEMOS D6.2.). Although it was not part of our original research plan, here we present some illustrative findings of using our populist policy making ideal type in understanding COVID-19 epidemiological crisis management. These findings are based on the study of Bartha, Kopasz and Takács (Bartha et al. 2020b), an investigation carried out in the frame of the DEMOS project.

From a policy perspective, tackling pandemic challenges can be interpreted as a specific form of crisis management. Based on the ideal type of populist policy making the research team set the following expectations concerning tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in populist democracies versus liberal democracies. (1) Populist governments and leaders are more familiar in crisis management communication, thus they can manage crisis communication more effectively. (2) Populist governments are more likely willing to adopt strict and unconventional measures that are challenging basic democratic rights of citizens. (3) Populist governments are less likely to cooperate with broader societal actors in crystallizing crisis management policies.

Then the applied epidemiological and the related broader societal measures were scrutinised in six EU member states: Hungary and Poland represented the populist governance, Austria, Netherlands and Portugal represented liberal democracies, while the Czech Republic was a case of liberal democracy with a recent shift towards populist political leadership. Although it is a risky adventure to provide an assessment about COVID-19 policy success in particular countries, the preliminary findings of the research team is that (a) warlike, emotional mobilisation messages of populist governments proved to be efficient in the short run, but (b) more consensual policy making pattern of liberal democracies –counting more with informed and responsible behaviour of citizens – appear to provide better policy results in the long run. Accordingly, the contrasting policy making ideal types of populist versus liberal democracies appear to be a useful framework in studying COVID-19 pandemic policies.

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