

# Beyond Populism

Tribalism in Poland and Hungary

REPORT SUMMARY



**POLITICAL CAPITAL**  
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

## WHY THIS STUDY?

In this study, we wanted to examine<sup>1</sup> how populist politicians in power can do the magic trick: mobilizing their electorate with anti-elite messages while being the political elite themselves? How can they keep their voter bases happy and who is resonating with their way of governance? And what can be the broader, long-term impact of their policies?

## WHY POLAND AND HUNGARY?

- Populists on government: Despite the “populist Zeitgeist” countries, where authoritarian populists are in government, are still rather the exception than the rule. Hungary and Poland are the early birds of this era. Populists in these Central Eastern European countries were elected before it was cool: eight years ago in Hungary<sup>2</sup> and three years ago in Poland. Based on the experiences of past years, the assumption that populism can only be successful in opposition – and not in government – certainly has to be overcome. “Populist establishments” can be highly successful in delivering results at the policy level, and in transforming and even building institutions<sup>3</sup>.
- Hungarian and Polish populism have a lot in common: **the sense of victimhood, feeling of limited sovereignty, a peripheral position within the European Union and a negative perception of superpowers in the West and in the East** – especially in Poland. These sentiments are widely exploited by populists in both countries.
- In both countries, which are mostly ethnically homogeneous, politicians are exploiting “**platonic xenophobia**” – anti-immigration sentiment without immigrants.
- **High political polarisation and low interpersonal and institutional trust** - these are important social factors that help authoritarian populism in both countries.

## WHAT DO THE SURVEY RESULTS TELL US ABOUT POPULISM – AND TRIBALISM?

**In our research, we focused on “populist attitudes,” and not voting on populist parties – although we also measured party preferences.**

- Our survey results in Poland and Hungary indicate that **socio-demographic indicators predict receptivity to populism very poorly. Party preference trumps all other factors.** In our opinion, it reveals a more general tendency. Contrary to common wisdom, right-wing populism is much more about the circus than about the bread. Inequality and socio-economic deprivation, while definitely creating fertile grounds for the rise of authoritarian populism, fail to explain its political success: today’s main

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1 The project consisted of two parts: extensive analysis and targeted outreach. The comprehensive research incorporated desktop research, a representative survey and qualitative interviews with the aim of identifying socio-demographic factors and other possible contexts and correlations concerning the support of populism. Simultaneously, the activity-focused component involved the work of grassroots community partners, we worked with 15 organisations altogether. This was done in order to gain a better understanding of underlying issues that in certain areas make local populations more susceptible to anti-systemic messaging and to formulate a constructive approach to facilitate building dialogue.

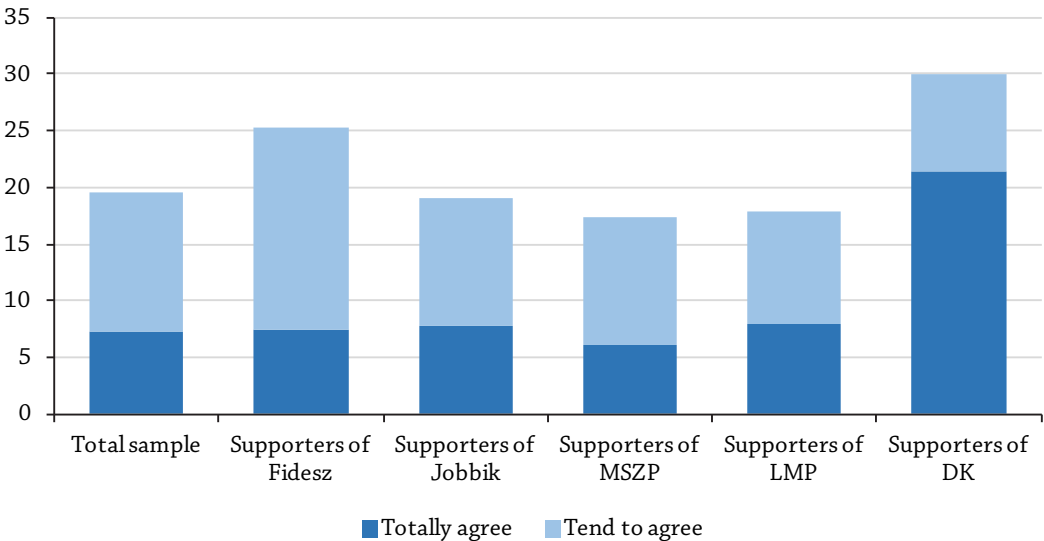
2 Disregarding the first term of Viktor Orbán.

3 Zsolt, Enyedi: *Understanding the rise of populist establishments*. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/07/04/understanding-the-rise-of-the-populist-establishment/>

right-wing populist trend is not economic populism, it rather targets identity-based fears and nationalist sentiments. Right-wing populism mobilizes, unites and divides using the concept of the nation and not that of the class.

- **There is an obvious difference between populism in government and populism in opposition: they see the elite elsewhere.** While populists in opposition are concerned with the national elite (and mainly the government), populists in government rather channel social discontent towards international elites (and their domestic allies). If the anti-elitist opposition party becomes the elite itself, the voter base seems to easily adapt to this new situation. Pro-government voters in Poland and Hungary see the national parliament as trustworthy, but do not regard the European Parliament the same way<sup>4</sup>. For opposition voters, it is the other way around. According to our research, negative sentiments towards the domestic elite are stronger among supporters of opposition parties than among supporters of governing parties.
- Populism in these countries is all over the spectrum: not only the supporters of populist parties are open to populist narratives. We have found left-wing and liberal parties with similarly strong black and white views on politics to the electorate of the two governing parties.

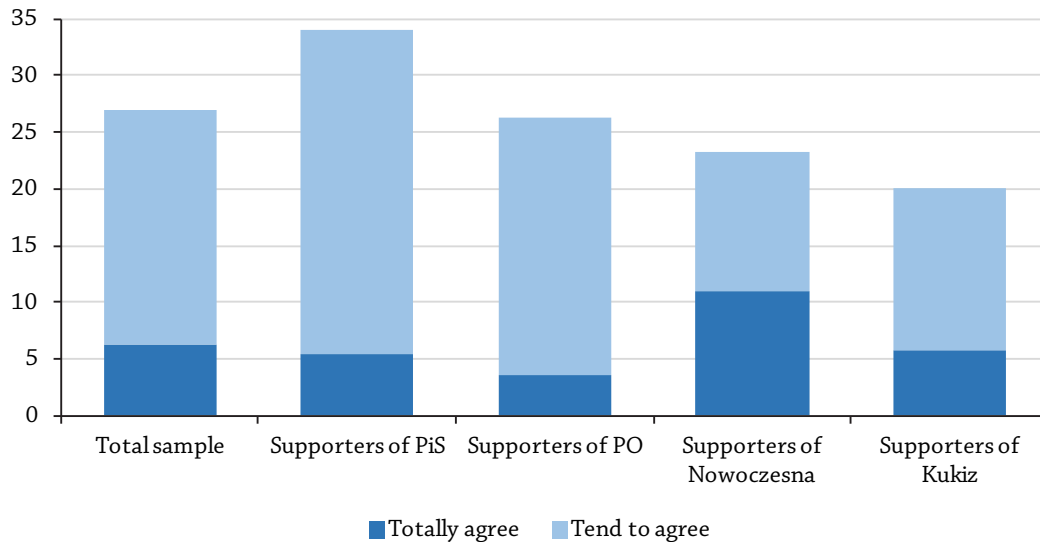
**Figure 1.** Manichean way of thinking among the supporters of Hungarian political parties (% level of agreement with the statement: „You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics”. Fidesz: governmental party (populist right, EPP), Jobbik: opposition party, far-right (NA), MSZP: opposition, center-left (S&D), LMP: opposition, green (Greens), DK: opposition, center left (S&D), the party of ex-PM Ferenc Gyurcsány)



- Interestingly, **people-centrism (a reference to the will of the people as the final source of legitimacy) is weak among the supporters of parties claiming to be the sole representative of “the people”**— among voters of PiS and Fidesz.

<sup>4</sup> According to European Social Survey data.

**Figure 2.** Manichean way of thinking among the supporters of Polish political parties (%), level of agreement with the statement: „You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics”. PiS: governmental party, populist right (ECR), PO: opposition party, center-right (EPP). Nowoczesna: opposition party, liberal (ALDE). Kukiz 15: opposition, far-right)



- **A significant portion of these societies support a strong leader instead of elected politicians.** This ratio is higher in Poland (35%) than in Hungary (26%), though.
- While we started to study populist attitudes, we found something more dangerous and malevolent: the combination of Manichean, black and white narratives that divide the world between good and evil and authoritarianism that puts trust in a strong leader, which makes a dangerous combination. We labelled **it tribalism: rallying around the leader of the tribe and rejecting the other tribe**. We found that tribalists are more likely to support political violence as a tool and are also more likely to reject political pluralism. Tribalism is beyond populism: tribalists do not share democratic attitudes, they are authoritarian, politically intolerant and, to a certain extent, elitist. **The proportion of tribalists is 10% in Hungary and 15% in Poland.** Tribalists are overrepresented on the governmental side, especially in Hungary: 59 % of tribalists would vote for Fidesz.
- **Authoritarian populism leads to increasing tribalism in these societies.** This phenomenon can be especially dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe, where democratic institutions are young, fragile and democratic norms are weaker – therefore, “populist establishments”<sup>5</sup> can transform and re-write the whole socio-political setting. Poland and Hungary are the best illustrations. In these countries, leaders of the tribes want to benefit from fuelling tribal views instead of reducing them, as they have a lot to gain from increasing polarisation.

<sup>5</sup> Zsolt, Enyedi: *Understanding the rise of populist establishments*. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/07/04/understanding-the-rise-of-the-populist-establishment/>

## IS THERE A WAY TO ADDRESS THESE ATTITUDES CONSTRUCTIVELY?

Together with our community organizing partners from Poland and Hungary, we organized 14 discussions in small and middle-sized towns. Our aim was to talk about controversial issues and understand how to address populism on the local level. The methods that can potentially mitigate authoritarian populism and tribalism are the following:

- **More debates.** Debate culture is traditionally weak in both Hungary and Poland, and it has been weakened further in recent years. This provides a fertile ground for tribalism and polarisation.
- **Stepping out of bubbles.** Good debates can be organized only if the participants are willing to step out of their comfort zone and get out of their bubbles. Debates outside the capital are especially important. The events we organized were very important for these groups as well to get recognized by their local authorities and gain more visibility among the inhabitants.
- **Bridging the ‘populist gap’.** The most successful events are the ones where the speaker-audience divide can be diminished, creating an environment where status differences does not determine the discussion.
- **Going offline.** As Timothy Snyder puts it<sup>6</sup>: “*Within the two-dimensional internet world, new collectivities have arisen, invisible by the light of day—tribes with distinct worldviews, beholden to manipulations.*”. To counter this tendency, there is a need for more debates in the offline space. More discussions outside the online platforms are necessary for reducing the echo chamber effect: the driver of tribalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Snyder, Timothy. *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. Tim Duggan Books, 2017.