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Should Populists Stand Out? Assessing the Analytical Advantages of Populism for Democratic Backsliding Studies *

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Abstract

Scholars interested in democratic backsliding often highlight the presence of populism and call attention to populist cases. However, populism attracts controversy to research due to a lack of conceptual clarity. Against this backdrop, this paper questions whether populism brings more gains than disadvantages to democratic backsliding studies. To assess possible gains, I discuss two conceptual functions that could possibly offer analytical advantages to this research agenda, supporting scholars in explaining backsliding processes. First, I evaluate whether populism could address the influence of authoritarian preferences on backsliding processes. I argue that, although populism can be considered an anti-pluralist ideology that conveys political actors' authoritarian-leaning inclinations, the concept embraces only a subset of authoritarian preferences' manifestations. Therefore, this conceptual function brings a distortion to research that nullifies possible gains. Second, I investigate whether populism could distinguish a pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes. Through a case-comparison study between a populist (Hungary, 2010-2015) and a non-populist (Bulgaria, 2016-2019) episodes of democratic backsliding, I find that populism does not differentiate the strategies chief executives take to undermine democracy or the democratic dimensions under attack. Therefore, I conclude that populism does not offer analytical advantages but adds greater disadvantages to democratic backsliding studies.

1. Introduction

The preamble of the Hungarian Constitution approved in 2011 states that “the family and the nation constitute the principal framework” of the country’s coexistence. It recognizes “the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood”, praises Hungarian heritage, and offers to minority groups the position of “living in Hungary”—but not a common nationality.¹ In 2010, prime minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party came to power with mass support, campaigning against the elite and claiming to represent the true people. Observers acknowledged the power of a divisive and anti-elitist ideology. Populism came to the spotlight.

Also, since 2010, Hungary’s democracy has weakened. The country may be the first non-democratic regime to compose the European Union.² Gaining a super-majority of seats in parliament in recurring elections, Orbán concentrated power in the Executive branch, imposed control over the judiciary, and narrowed the independence of media outlets. Today, Hungary is a telling instance of democratic backsliding, a slow and open-ended mode of transition from democracy in which the chief executive converts central democratic institutions into tools for increasing her own power.

This example is emblematic of a broader trend. In the last decade, populist parties and leaders gained traction in Europe and the United States. Populism, a phenomenon previously associated with charismatic left-wing Latin American politicians, expanded to other regions and showed its right-wing form. At the same time, citizens of different countries have become less satisfied with democratic institutions and open to authoritarian alternatives. As increasingly more regimes transitioned away from democracy, political scientists started to consider the existence of a new wave of autocratization.

Are the emergence of populism and democratic setbacks related? Scholars interested in democratic backsliding constantly mention populism and call attention to populist cases. Political scientists have found that democratic backsliding is more likely when populists are in power.³ Nevertheless, these research agendas have independent goals, and their connection is hazy. More importantly for this paper, the literature on democratic backsliding does not establish how the concept of populism helps to analyse backsliding processes or what function it should perform in research. Instead, studies generally mention populism with different purposes and do not explain how it relates to authoritarian outcomes.

The practice of mentioning populism has significant disadvantages. Fundamentally, populism is a contested concept whose connection with democratic backsliding is not established. Political scientists disagree about the definition of populism, about the elements that

are subject to this classification, and even more about its relationship with democracy. Therefore, when scholars seek to analyse backsliding processes but call attention to populism, they inevitably attract controversy to their research efforts.

Does mentioning populism bring more gains than disadvantages for democratic backsliding studies? Should scholars continue to employ this concept? If yes, for what purpose? Seeking to answer these questions, this paper searches for conceptual functions of populism that bring analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies. By conceptual functions, I understand, beyond definition, the reasons for which authors mention the concept in a given research context: what they aim to identify, highlight, discuss, and analyse from that use. Here I discuss which possible conceptual functions, if any, contribute to the primary goal of explaining democratic backsliding processes and offer advantages that outweigh populism's downsides.

To increase my chances of finding these conceptual functions, I start from an approach to populism that is favourable to achieving positive results. Thus, this work adheres to the ideational approach and understands populism as a set of ideas that mobilizes the people against an evil elite.⁴ In brief, this approach can favour the search for analytical advantages because, unlike others, it suggests how populism may impact authoritarian outcomes. Arguably, starting from the comprehension that populism influences democratic backsliding is a necessary step in finding how it can contribute to explanations of these processes.

In Section 3, I discuss the first conceptual function of populism: addressing the influence of authoritarian preferences on backsliding processes. Many scholars cite populism for this purpose, which underscores a relevant element in explanations of autocratization processes: political elites' lack of commitment to democracy. In this context, I discuss whether populism can reveal authoritarian preferences and offer an analytical advantage in this sense. I conclude that, although the ideational approach lays the basis for stating that populism is an authoritarian-leaning ideology, it only embraces a subset of all authoritarian preferences' manifestations. Therefore, this conceptual function brings a distortion to research that nullifies a possible analytical advantage.

In Section 4, I explore another conceptual function of populism. Through a case-comparison study, I investigate whether populism could serve to identify a particular pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes. Given that democratic backsliding studies privilege institutional-centred explanations, differences between these processes at the institutional level would entail a relevant analytical advantage. In this section, I do not intend to prove or disprove the causal relationship between populism and democratic backsliding—a goal for which a comparison between two cases is not suitable. Instead, as I test whether a concept can be helpful

in distinguishing and analysing phenomena, comparing two countries is appropriate because my choice of cases will not determine the apprehension of analytical advantages. If anything, an advantage would appear in comparing any populist and non-populist case, or it would be relatively weak.

After carrying out a case selection with clearly defined criteria through the Liberal Democracy Index of V-Dem and the Global Populism Database, I compare the backsliding processes in Hungary (2010-2015), under the populist prime minister Viktor Orbán, and in Bulgaria (2016-2019), under the non-populist prime minister Boyko Borisov. I conduct a description of these processes based on Huq and Ginsburg's typology of pathways of democratic backsliding.⁵ I conclude that, in both cases, political elites resorted to similar strategies to decrease the quality of democracy and harmed equal democratic dimensions. Thus, as populism did not entail significant differences in the institutional pattern of these processes, this conceptual function is ineffective and does not result in analytical advantages.

I chose to discuss these conceptual functions, not others, because they rely on common theoretical strands in democratic backsliding studies. Namely, scholars interested in democratic backsliding commonly address political leadership and institutions as a theoretical choice. Therefore, if these conceptual functions proved advantageous, researchers could incorporate them in their research endeavours without waiving their theoretical preferences. In this way, I ensure that potential positive results could be consequential in the context of democratic backsliding studies.

The main contribution of this paper is showing that the practice of mentioning populism may generate more disadvantages than gains for democratic backsliding studies. Although I have discussed promising conceptual functions from a favourable approach to populism, these functions do not render analytical advantages that outweigh the concept's drawbacks. Therefore, this paper suggests that scholars interested in democratic backsliding should not mention populism as a common practice but evaluate case-by-case when and whether it is productive to mobilize this concept.

2. Disadvantages of Populism

Up until some decades ago, scholars of autocratization mainly analysed democratic breakdowns. At that time, most transitions to authoritarian rule were marked by authoritarian forces' explicit intervention, and one could distinguish the exact moment a country ceased to be democratic.⁶ However, from the end of the third wave of democratization, the mode through which most

democracies end has changed.⁷ Instead of plotting coups and driving tanks to the streets, wannabe authoritarians started to win elections and erode democratic institutions incrementally and without violating the law. In these processes, minor actions carried out by incumbent governments diminished the quality of democracies and led to the establishment of hybrid or authoritarian regimes.

This trend motivated a new wave of studies about what was denominated democratic backsliding, decline, decay, recession, or regression, among other options.⁸ In sum, an open-ended mode of transition from democracy in which, without the threat of overt violence, the elected chief executive remains in office and converts central democratic institutions into tools for increasing her own power. Although a great confusion exists regarding this process' denomination and measurement strategy, I establish here that a democratic backsliding process occurs when substantial decays simultaneously happen in three predicates of democracy: the rule of law⁹, liberal rights to speech and association, and competitive elections.¹⁰

New attempts to define and explain democratic backsliding are abounding. Among these efforts, a trend draws attention: the use of the concept of populism. Of 127 papers addressing democratic backsliding in journals with diverse impact factors, I found that 59% mentioned the word populism or populist at least once.¹¹ Nevertheless, populism is not a harmless concept with an undisputed association with autocratization. Rather, it usually causes confusion because of its contested nature.

Populism brings at least four disadvantages to research on democratic backsliding. First, it has multiple definitions within social science, which inevitably adds noise to any research effort. Second, political scientists disagree about its consequences for democracy. Third, populism does not have a consistent conceptual function within democratic backsliding studies. Fourth, the practice of focusing on populism can lead scholars to neglect equally relevant non-populist cases.

To begin with, populism carries massive conceptual misunderstandings within social sciences. Distinct approaches to populism define the concept disparately and conflict about which actors are populist. For instance, populism can define things as diverse as an electoral strategy (political-strategy approach)¹², a discourse that unites a popular hegemonic bloc (Essex discursive approach)¹³, and an ideology that puts the people against the elite (ideational approach)¹⁴. In this context, scholars who mention populism face confusion and are compelled to engage in long conceptual discussions, regardless of efforts to define the concept clearly.

Furthermore, political scientists disagree about the effects of populism on democracy. As expected, scholars who embrace different approaches reach contrasting conclusions. However,

even the most common approach to populism¹⁵ in political science—the ideational one—does not establish if populism is positive or negative for democracy. Instead, it holds the ambiguous view that populism is "very democratic" for promoting the people's sovereignty and simultaneously harms liberal rights.¹⁶ In this scenario, scholars who mention populism with the overall goal of analysing authoritarian outcomes must consider that, at best, its effect on the phenomenon of interest is deemed ambiguous.

In addition, the literature on democratic backsliding does not establish how and for what purpose authors should mention populism. Thus, even when scholars rely on the same definition, they employ the concept with different functions. For instance, when mentioning the ideational concept of populism, Przeworski aims to discuss changes in party systems,¹⁷ Tomini intends to talk about electoral platforms,¹⁸ and Huq and Ginsburg seek to point out wannabe autocrats' strategies to win elections and govern.¹⁹ In some works, populism's function is naming historically located political phenomena, as the "pink tide" in Latin America.²⁰ In others, the concept labels the political actors who carry out democratic backsliding (*populists*) in general, as if the two phenomena did not exist separately.²¹ Lastly, Norris and Levitsky and Ziblatt cite populism to address political actors' authoritarian preferences.²²

Finally, the practice of mentioning populism encourages scholars to focus on populist cases even when they do not aim to investigate the relationship between these two distinct phenomena. Frequently, backsliding cases regarded as populist get most scholarly attention. However, the excessive attention that populism receive is troubling because nothing indicates that populist backsliding processes are more relevant than non-populist ones for explaining democratic backsliding. From this perspective, if scholars refrain from analysing non-populist backsliding processes without a good reason, they can impair their primary research goals.

Against all these inherent disadvantages, it is fundamental to search for conceptual functions that offer greater analytical advantages. For this quest, I adhere to an approach to populism with good prospects of achieving positive results: the ideational one.

3. The Ideational Approach

The ideational approach defines populism as an ideology that "considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people".²³ Mainly, this approach establishes that the content of populist ideas, shared through the discourses propagated by populist politicians and voters, is the key to analyse real-world political

developments and answer how and why populist politicians come to power.²⁴

According to the ideational approach, populism lacks programmatic content and is limited in scope, standing for a *thin-centred ideology*. In contrast to overarching ideologies that present a full spectrum of responses to political problems, populism simply elaborates on the view that the people's wishes are supreme to guide politics and must overpower the enemy elite. As a result of the limited scope of populist ideas, different politicians can combine them with different political platforms, whether left or right-wing. Ultimately, however, the ideational approach defends that populist mobilizations are explained by the effect of populist ideas on voters and political decisions.²⁵

I have chosen to search for analytical advantages from the *ideational* definition of populism for two reasons. First, most authors who mention populism in the context of democratic backsliding studies understand the concept in its ideational sense.²⁶ Arguably, this natural convergence indicates possible unstated analytical advantages. Second, the ideational approach discusses the negative impacts of populism on minority rights and independent institutions that limit the majority's power.²⁷ Thus, in suggesting that populism may affect democratic norms and institutions, this approach is more likely than others to ground conceptual functions that offer analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies.

4. Populism as an Authoritarian Preference

One of the most common conceptual functions of populism in democratic backsliding studies is addressing the role of authoritarian preferences in backsliding processes. While a few works cite populism to label leaders who erode democracy,²⁸ others explicitly establish populism as a sign that political elites are not committed to democratic norms.²⁹ For instance, in "How Democracies Die," Levitsky and Ziblatt mention populism to name politicians who, in words or action, send warning signs about their lack of commitment to democratic rules and should be prevented from coming to power. In addition, Norris employs populism to denote the authoritarian political forces that pose a behavioural threat to Western democracies today.

When authors employ populism to address authoritarian preferences, the concept underscores a feature of backsliding processes that points to an analytical advantage. This feature, uncontroversial for the literature on autocratization, is the role of authoritarian preferences in explanations of authoritarian outcomes. In particular, political scientists agree that political elites can undermine democracy unilaterally if they withdraw from democratic practices and use the State structure to destroy opponents and undermine fair elections.³⁰ Conversely,

some other functions of populism today—for example, denoting a successful electoral strategy—do not have such a direct association with relevant explanatory elements of authoritarian outcomes.

Is populism effective in addressing authoritarian preferences? An argument in this favour should demonstrate that populism is *anti-pluralist* and, as such, stands for an authoritarian-leaning ideology that shapes political actors' behaviour.

Within the ideational approach, the claim that populism is an anti-pluralist ideology is widely accepted. As the argument goes, while pluralism appreciates society's diversity as a guarantee against a tyrannic majority, populism recognizes only one cleavage in society and advocates for the exclusion of divergent political voices. As expected, these opposite views lead to opposite stances regarding political institutions. For pluralism, mutually agreed rules should limit the majority principle and ensure tolerance and the right of minority groups. For populism, the right of minority groups and pluralist institutions are obstacles to a true representation of the people's wishes.

If the claim that populism is anti-pluralist seems straightforward, the connection between anti-pluralism and *authoritarianism* deserves further elaboration. After all, it can be counterintuitive to assert that populism—an ideology that constantly refers to the sovereign of the people—is not democratic. In fact, some authors who adhere to the ideational approach defend that populism is *democratic* because it mobilizes the majority and does not oppose elections.³¹ Nevertheless, the question of whether populism tends towards authoritarianism can be resolved by clarifying the definition of democracy in use.

Authors interested in democratic backsliding embrace a definition of democracy that contemplates the current liberal democratic regimes subject to backsliding processes. Namely, this definition considers both the majoritarian and the pluralist sides of democracy. While majoritarianism shapes collective decisions in current democratic regimes, pluralism is “the best ground on which to sustain and legitimize the limited majority principle,”³² validating the existence of political parties, the separation of powers, minority rights, and the rule of law. Therefore, the preservation of pluralist principles and institutions—which guarantees fair elections—is as central to democracy as the majority principle itself.

Under this prevailing definition of democracy, if populism is anti-pluralistic, it is necessarily authoritarian-leaning, regardless of its manifested majoritarian side. Authors who adhere to the ideational approach seem to embrace this definition when they affirm that populism “indirectly questions the procedural minimum that lies at the heart of our current definitions of democracy” and “can legitimize authoritarianism.”³³ From this perspective,

populism prompts political actors to impair a constitutive side of democracy. Therefore, the claim that the concept conveys their authoritarian preferences holds up.

Can one conclude, then, that populism renders an analytical advantage in this regard? A fundamental point to consider in the search for this answer is that populism is not the only concept capable of fulfilling this function. To give one example among many, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán mention and measure political actors' "absence of a normative preference for democracy" to investigate their influence on autocratization processes.³⁴ In this sense, mentioning populism is not strictly necessary to reach the analytical advantage discussed here. Against this backdrop, the main question becomes whether scholars should employ populism to this end, given the possibility of addressing authoritarian preferences in more usual and direct ways.

As much as populism performs this conceptual function, I argue that it brings a distortion to research that nullifies any possible gains. Since populism is only a subset of all manifestations of authoritarian preferences, it limits the analysis of backsliding processes to a subpart of them. However, this focus does not seem calculated, as authors who mention populism to address authoritarian preferences—as Levitsky and Ziblatt, and Norris—do not particularly investigate the causal power of populist ideas over backsliding processes. On the contrary, a thorough review of these works shows that they are fundamentally concerned with leaders who want to undermine democracy, regardless of additional attributes of these preferences.

If, as a rule, democratic backsliding studies do not delve into the effects of populist ideas on backsliding processes and are not primarily concerned with this subset of cases, then populism brings a distortion, not an analytical advantage, by addressing authoritarian preferences. Thus, instead of mentioning populism as a common practice, scholars who want to underscore this explanatory element of backsliding processes would likely benefit from choosing broader concepts that convey what they mean more precisely. In this way, they can bypass the controversy and distortion associated with populism and avoid a concept that does not offer analytical advantages to democratic backsliding in this regard.

5. Populism as an Institutional Pattern

Populism does not render an analytical advantage by addressing authoritarian preferences. Can it identify a distinctive pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes? For the ideational approach, what distinguishes populist and non-populist leaders is the ideas behind their

speeches, actions, and political success. Thus, when populists and non-populists erode democratic regimes, an expected distinction between these processes is the discourse that encompasses and justifies the measures that lead to democratic backsliding. However, this difference at the ideational level does not necessarily appear at the institutional level. On the contrary, the distinctive effects of populism on the pattern of democratic backsliding remain to be proven.

On the one hand, populism may induce the weakening of specific democratic dimensions or the use of particular strategies to this end. If it proves true, populism would effectively perform the function of distinguishing democratic backsliding processes, which would render an analytical advantage and enable further investigations of this distinction. On the other hand, the presence of populism could have no consequence at the institutional level of these processes. To test these possibilities, I carried out a case selection with clearly defined criteria and compared a populist and a non-populist case of democratic backsliding.

5.1 Case Selection

The quantification of democratic backsliding episodes can be tricky. One way to overcome this challenge is using the loss of democratic quality measured by reliable indexes as proxy.³⁵ For this goal, I used the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) of V-Dem and replicated the approach of Lührmann and Lindberg.³⁶ The LDI is an adequate index to measure backsliding processes because it evaluates the level of electoral competition in a given country, as well as the protection of individual and minority rights and the limits placed on governments. Since I was interested in the loss of democratic quality in relatively stable liberal democracies, I only considered the countries that scored above 0.5 in the LDI for at least 16 years before the episode's beginning.

To identify which heads of government in charge of declining countries were or were not populists, I used the Global Populism Database (GPD), which gathers scores for the level of populism in speeches of chief executives.³⁷ I chose to use the GPD because it seeks to operationalize the ideational definition of populism and is consistent with this work's comprehension of the concept. Although the GPD's codebook does not offer a score from which the speeches and terms are considered populists, 0.75 is the accepted threshold in the literature.³⁸ As populism is a contested concept, the distinction between populist and non-populist cases presented below can raise controversies. Nevertheless, I do not aim to critically evaluate political science's standard approaches to measure either populism or democratic backsliding. Instead, I will follow the best practices in the literature—as scholars would do in reality—to investigate the benefits of a conceptual function.

Through the GPD, I identified the periods within each democratic backsliding episode that had only populist incumbents or non-populist incumbents. When a backsliding country had two non-populist governments in a row, all years of these tenures were considered part of the same non-populist period. Following this criterion, I ensured that I compared periods that had or did not have populist incumbents from beginning to end. Table 1 shows the periods of populism and non-populism within each democratic backsliding episode subject to comparison according to the case selection's specifications.

Table 1. Populist and non-populist periods within democratic backsliding episodes.

Populists					
Country	Episode^a	Δ LDI^b	Head of government^c	Period by term^d	GPI^e
Hungary	2010-2015	-0.28	Viktor Orbán	2010-2015	0.87
Poland	2015-2019	-0.32	Beata Szydło	2015-2016	0.86
USA	2015-2019	-0.14	Donald Trump	2017-2019	0.78
Venezuela	1998-2005	-0.43	Hugo Chávez	1999-2005	1.92
Non-populists					
Country	Episode	Δ LDI	Head of government	Period by term	GPI
Brazil	2014-2019	-0.28	Dilma Rousseff	2014-2015	0.17
			Michel Temer	2016-2018	0.00
			Jair Bolsonaro	2019	0.50
Bulgaria	2016-2019	-0.14	Boyko Borisov	2016-2019	0.14
Czech Republic	2013-2019	-0.15	Petr Necas	2013	0.12
			Bohuslav Sobotka	2014-2016	0.00
India	2014-2019	-0.20	Narendra Modi	2014-2019	0.55

^a Total length of the democratic backsliding episode. ^b Total variation of the Liberal Democracy Index from the year prior to the episode to the ending year of the episode (or 2019, latest year available in the database). ^c Heads of government in power during the episode (only those who compose consecutive periods of populism or non-populism). ^d Populist or non-populist period within the democratic backsliding episode, separated by the term of office of each head of government. ^e Index of populism according to the Global Populism Database.

In the last step of the case selection, the guiding principle was similarities among countries' historical experiences and diffusion of authoritarian institutions, which can be derived from the region. From the populist periods, Hungary was selected for having non-populist regional equivalents and for having a longer backsliding period than Poland.³⁹ From the non-populist cases, I chose Bulgaria to analyse in-depth. Considering the magnitude of the loss of democratic quality (Δ LDI) for the elapsed time, the Bulgarian democratic backsliding is more comparable to Hungary than the Czech one.

5.2 Case Analysis

Hungary has received much scholarly attention in the last years due to the depth of its democratic backsliding process and its ubiquitous classification as a populist case. In 2010, when Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party gained power, they made a two-thirds majority in parliament. As a result, they could pass laws and change the Constitution alone, which allowed them to capture the state at an alarming rate. Additionally, several textbooks and papers consider Viktor Orbán a populist reference.⁴⁰ Thus, as the Hungarian case presents many measures that diminish the quality of democracy and has a consensual populist framework, it becomes an ideal type of populist democratic backsliding case.

No other country in Central-eastern Europe has recently experienced a backsliding process as intense as the Hungarian one. Nevertheless, the loss of democratic quality that Bulgaria has endured since 2016 is not negligible. Additionally, Bulgaria is not widely recognized as an instance of populism. For the ideational approach's literature and main database, prime minister Boyko Borisov (GERB) does not share a discourse with enough populist ideas to classify as a populist leader. In this context, Bulgaria stands for a non-populist case of democratic backsliding. As such, it provides an appropriate comparison with Hungary to answer whether populism entails a particular pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes.

This section describes the efforts in Hungary and Bulgaria that qualified both countries as instances of democratic backsliding, underscoring the similarities and differences between them. For this purpose, I guided my comparison by Huq and Ginsburg's "five pathways", which typify the strategies heads of government take to erode democracy. They are: (i) using constitutional amendments to marginalize political opposition and concentrate power; (ii) eliminating institutional checks by controlling independent oversight institutions; (iii) politicizing the executive power by appointing loyalist officials to bureaucratic positions; (iv) contracting the public sphere by chasing the media and civil society; and (v) eliminating political competition through legislative changes and intimidation.⁴¹

Hungary

When Orbán was nominated prime minister in 2010, he immediately used his supermajority in parliament to shape state institutions for his own interests. One of his first targets was the Constitutional Court.⁴² Already in 2011, Fidesz amended the Constitution to appoint judges without the agreement of other political parties. It also restricted the Constitutional Court's jurisdiction, disallowing it to rule over fiscal issues—even when they violated fundamental rights.

Not yet satisfied, the parliament increased the number of seats in the Court from 11 to 15. As a result, the ruling party's representatives could nominate and elect seven loyal judges in less than two years. Promptly, the oversight power of the Constitutional Court was impaired.

Media freedom was another early target of the government. In 2010, the parliament updated media regulations and created a five-member independent commission to function as a regulatory authority. The prime minister was granted the right to appoint its head, while the Fidesz-controlled parliament elected all other members. Vested with great powers, the Council can allocate radio frequency distributions following broad criteria, impose fines when media outlets do not produce a "balanced" news coverage, and nominate all public media executive directors. At one go, this arrangement weakened the media freedom in the country.⁴³

Independent private media outlets also face restrictions and struggle to stay open and profitable. First, private firms that wish to keep good relations with the government do not advertise with them.⁴⁴ Second, the government uses taxpayer money—including EU funds—to advertise with pro-government outlets and punishes critical ones through tax audits.⁴⁵ Due to this financial distress, loyalist investors can buy conglomerates that were once critical of the government and shift their editorial line.⁴⁶

Additionally, the freedom of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has shrunk. The most intense blow against these organizations happened later in the Hungarian backsliding process. In 2017, the parliament approved the legal requirement that all NGOs receiving donations from abroad publicize their funding sources and exhibit the label "foreign-funded" in their materials.⁴⁷ Failure to comply can lead to fines, penalization of employees, and the dissolution of organizations—a legal way for the government to punish critical voices.

The Hungarian electoral system also went through transformations. Modifications were arguably crafted to increase Fidesz's vote share. For example, a new electoral law approved in 2011 eliminated the second round in parliamentary elections, a measure that benefits the relatively biggest party; allowed out-of-country voting in a moment in which Fidesz's members had reasons to believe that ethnic Hungarians with no permanent residence in the country would overwhelmingly vote for them; and redrew constituency boundaries, which raises suspicions of gerrymandering.⁴⁸

In addition to the attacks on freedom of speech and association and competitive elections, the ruling government also weakened the rule of law in Hungary. First, with the approval of the new Constitution in 2011, the mandatory retirement age of judges and prosecutors was lowered. Thus, the government could install allies in these senior positions. Second, the new Constitution created a new body to administrate the courts called National

Judicial Office (NJO), and Fidesz placed loyalists in its presidency. As a result, Fidesz's allies control the selection of the inferior courts' presidents and the appointment, promotion, demotion, or relocation of any judge in the country.

The Prosecution Service, also reformulated by the new Constitution, works through the same logic. The Prosecutor General is not subject to any check. She manages the career of all prosecutors and can relocate, dismiss, promote, and discipline them alone. At any time, she can terminate investigations or decide not to take a case to court.⁴⁹ The Executive branch chooses the Prosecutor General, and the parliament approves the nomination by a two-thirds majority vote. Again, Fidesz has placed an ally in this position. As a result, investigations involving people close to the government hardly progress.⁵⁰

The prevalence of corruption in Hungary is another consequence of eliminating control institutions. According to Transparency International, the country's perception of anti-corruption performance has been decreasing sharply since 2012.⁵¹ Because the national government centralized power and politicized the judiciary, powerful politicians can advantage oligarchies and benefit from their economic success without worrying about investigations.

In Hungary, the government repeatedly used some tools to grab power and defuse the opposition. In several situations, it terminated mandates prematurely, fulfilled bureaucratic vacancies with loyalists, and created new government agencies that work with partiality to benefit the incumbent administration. Other examples follow the same pattern. In 2012, a new judicial body replaced the Supreme Court, and its president was prematurely dismissed.⁵² The state audit office, responsible for investigating public funds misuse, has been revoking opposition parties' state funds and imposing fines upon them disproportionately.⁵³ Besides, many agencies and commissions were packed with Fidesz-appointees, as the National Bank, the Budget Council, and the Ombudsman Office.⁵⁴

Bulgaria

The worsening of democratic indexes in Bulgaria was first noticed in 2016. Except for the period between January and May 2017, when Ognyan Gerdzhikov served as an interim Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov (GERB) has been in power throughout the Bulgarian democratic backsliding. Since 2009, his party won an election after another. However, unlike Fidesz in Hungary, GERB was never able to annul the legislature or the Constitution Court's constraining functions. In Bulgaria, more than changing the rules to remain in power, Borisov and his party seized opportunities already available in the legislation and political landscape to capture the state and diminish their chance of electoral loss.

The politicization of the judiciary and the Prosecution Service is one of the most similar aspects of the Hungarian and Bulgarian democratic backsliding. As well as the NJO in Hungary, in Bulgaria, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) manages the career of all judges and prosecutors. The parliament elects most of its members, and judges and prosecutors elect the minority. The consequence of this institutional arrangement is clear: the governing majority can choose the officials that will make highly significant decisions. Namely, the SJC elects the presidents of the two Supreme Courts and the Prosecutor General. It also determines judges and prosecutor's appointments, promotions, demotions, and relocations.⁵⁵

Indeed, as GERB solidified in power, it created a climate of fear among judges. For example, in 2015, the parliament approved an amendment to the Constitution that strengthened the powers of the Inspectorate, a structure suited for investigating judges and prosecutors. As members of the Inspectorate are elected by the parliament and act under the SJC's request, the structure became a tool to threaten deviating judiciary members.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Bulgarian Judges Association asserts that judges who refuse to benefit government members in critical trials are exposed to arbitrary tax audits.⁵⁷

Prosecutors face comparable problems internally. The Prosecution Service is headed by the Prosecutor General (PG), elected by the SJC. The PG can decide to begin criminal investigations against any person or company or refuse to do so even if there are reasons to proceed.⁵⁸ She also has a decisive influence on the career of prosecutors and can annul or amend their individual acts.⁵⁹ Seemingly, the government can elect loyal PGs. For instance, the former PG Sotir Tzatzarov was accused of pressuring a private media outlet to stop criticizing the government⁶⁰, and the current PG Ivan Geshev publicly criticizes the opposition.⁶¹

Regarding corruption, Bulgaria is continuously at the bottom of indexes among the EU member states. As in Hungary, political connections can determine the success of businesses in the country. On the one hand, members of the ruling party know that the Prosecutor Service will not investigate them and feel free to demand bribes and favours.⁶² On the other hand, powerful economic elites are interested in manipulating public tenders and establishing cartels.⁶³

This condition puts Bulgaria under constant pressure from the European Union to increase the fight against corruption. For this reason, in 2018, the Bulgarian parliament created a new anti-corruption commission responsible for investigating senior public officers. However, instead of meeting EU requirements, the commission was designed to expand the government's grip on power. First, the parliament elects all its members by a simple majority. Second, it can open investigations and gather private information voluntarily. Third, it can confiscate properties

without prior conviction, only on behalf of a “reasonable assumption” about the unlawful acquisition of assets.⁶⁴

Since its creation, the anti-corruption commission has been accused of lacking independence and impartiality.⁶⁵ Indeed, one of its first actions was accusing the owner of critical media outlets Ivo Prokoviev of crimes from 20 years earlier that the justice had already acquitted. As Prokoviev’s media companies constantly criticize the government, independent publishers and journalists interpreted the anti-corruption commission’s initiative as intimidation.⁶⁶

GERB did not need to change laws or created new regulatory authorities to shrink the public sphere in Bulgaria. Rather, the ruling elite took advantage of existing conditions. First, due to financial distress, many companies sell ad space to ministries or local governments, which allows politicians to choose the outlets that will receive public money—including EU structural funds for communication—based on their willingness to become less critical of the government.⁶⁷ Second, government loyalists buy private media companies and change their editorial line.⁶⁸ Third, the Bulgarian media regulatory body—whose part of the members are elected by the parliament—appointed supporters to the national television and radio administrations, which acquired pro-government bias.⁶⁹

Civil society organizations are also under siege. In 2020, the parliament discussed a draft bill requiring official registration from foreign-funded NGOs and allowing state agencies to audit them and their managers. From the moment the draft was introduced, the organized civil society and international bodies protested its restrictive consequences for the freedom of organization.⁷⁰ As a consequence, the parliament withdraw from approving the bill—at least momentarily.

Concerning the electoral dimension of democracy, Borisov’s party engaged in electoral reforms that arguably aimed to increase its vote share. In 2016, alleging to combat vote-buying, the parliament limited the number of out-of-country polling stations to 35 per country. The most striking consequence of this act was decreasing in 101 the number of polling stations available for Bulgarians living in Turkey.⁷¹ In Turkey, members of the Bulgarian diaspora massively support the ethnic-Turkish dominated party MRF—which was not in the majority coalition. Because of that, this electoral reform was interpreted as collusion on the part of majority and minority parties to weaken the MRF.

5.3 Discussion

Bulgaria and Hungary developed comparable flaws in many of democracy’s fundamental dimensions, and the government in both places relied on the same pathways to decrease the quality of democracy. In Bulgaria, the ruling party amended the Constitution to strengthen state

agencies that would favour its members (the Inspectorate). Although Hungary can be considered a unique case of over-constitutionalisation, Bulgaria's government also drew on this strategy to increase its power. The elimination of institutional checks was more visible in Hungary since Fidesz could pack the Constitutional Court. However, GERB did the same with other judicial bodies and filled oversight institutions with loyalists as well.

Both countries engaged in the politicization of the Executive branch and the deterioration of bureaucratic autonomy. For instance, the patronage system that decides which companies will win public bids and advantages follows the same pattern in Hungary and Bulgaria. Besides, in both cases, state agencies benefit the incumbent administrations and chase the opposition. Two similar examples are the media regulatory bodies and the tax authorities. In Hungary, the supermajority in parliament allowed Fidesz to reform whole structures or create state agencies. In Bulgaria, the government did create the anti-corruption commission, although founding new organizations was a rarer strategy.

The governments of Hungary and Bulgaria have built a media environment favourable to them through similar steps. The capture of public broadcasters, the concentration of media ownership, and the arbitrary allocation of advertisements allowed these governments to flout independent media. Both countries targeted the freedom of NGOs through restrictive laws, although only Hungary was successful in approving them. Finally, GERB and Fidesz tried to decrease electoral competition through legislative measures. Overall, considering that the Bulgarian government had less power to move forward with authoritarian measures, I conclude that the democratic backsliding processes in both countries proceeded in similar ways, impaired comparable democratic dimensions, and relied on the same strategies and tools.

What differences did populism make in these processes? Considering that Hungary is a consensual instance of populism for the literature and that Bulgaria is a backsliding case headed by a prime minister whose speeches were empirically evaluated as non-populist, one would expect to notice variations prompted by populism precisely in this comparison. Nevertheless, populism did not depict any particularity in the backsliding process at the institutional level. Orbán's ideology did not lead him to turn to specific strategies or prioritize the weakening of particular democratic dimensions.

For populism to distinguish backsliding cases effectively and render an advantage in this sense, the distinction that it identifies needs to be consistent and stable among diverse cases. However, the Hungary-Bulgaria comparison has shown that populism does not perform this function in all and every case. Rather, this Section concluded that scholars should not expect populism to consistently differentiate the measures taken by chief executives to erode democratic

institutions. For this reason, democratic backsliding studies will not find an analytical advantage in this conceptual function and should not employ the concept for that purpose.

The existing difference at the discursive level between a populist and a non-populist leader may have consequences for other dimensions of backsliding processes that I have not considered here. Nevertheless, the finding that populism does not predict a pattern of institutional change is relevant for democratic backsliding studies. Given the attention populism has received in this research agenda, it would be reasonable to assume that there would be a clear difference between populist and non-populist cases, one that appears in the very institutions whose changes define democratic backsliding. However, as this section has shown, populism does not distinguish the steps leaders take to erode democracy. If populism entails some difference in backsliding processes, it will be less pronounced one that does not affect their pattern.

6. Conclusion

Scholars interested in democratic backsliding who opt to mention populism face many disadvantages related to its definitions and relationship with democracy. Simultaneously, populism does not render an indisputable analytical advantage that supports them in their primary research goals. Rather, this paper concluded that populism does not offer analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies by addressing authoritarian preferences or distinguishing a particular pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes. In these circumstances, scholars should rethink when and whether it is productive to mention populism. In many cases, the concept may generate more disadvantages than gains for their research goals.

Notes

1. Constitute Project, "Hungary 2011 (rev. 2016)."
2. V-Dem Institute, "Autocratization Surges – Resistance Grows."
3. Kyle and Mounk, "The Populist Harm to Democracy"; Huber and Schimpf, "On the Distinct Effects."
4. Hawkins et al., *The Ideational Approach*.
5. Huq and Ginsburg, "How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy."
6. Erdmann, "Decline of Democracy," 26-28.
7. Tomini, *When democracies collapse*, 47.

8. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding”; Anderson et al., “Electoral Competition And Democratic Decline”; Gerschewski, Johannes. “Erosion or decay?”; Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization”; Diamond, “Democratic Regression.”
9. Defined by Huq and Ginsburg as “the stability, predictability, and integrity of law and legal institutions [...], functionally necessary to allow democratic engagement without fear or coercion.”
10. Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 83.
11. I used the research platform EBSCO host and the database Academic Search Premier. I searched for the term “democratic backsliding” and variations (e.g., democratic recession) in titles or abstracts of all papers published between 2010 and 2021 available in the database. I then checked how many mentioned the words populism, populist, or populists.
12. Weyland, “Clarifying a contested concept.”
13. Laclau, *On populist reason*.
14. See note 4.
15. Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 12.
16. Hawkins, *Venezuela’s Chavismo*, 36; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 95.
17. Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, 87.
18. Tomini, *When democracies collapse*, 128-130.
19. Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 137.
20. Mechkova and Lührmann, “How much democratic backsliding?”
21. Havlík, “Technocratic Populism”; Diamond, “Democratic Regression,” 30.
22. Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, 22; Norris, “Is Western Democracy Backsliding?”
23. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543.
24. Not to be confused with the Essex School of discourse analysis.
25. See note 4.
26. E.g., Gerschewski, “Erosion or decay?”; Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary*; Cianetti and Hanley, “The End.”
27. Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*; Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”; and Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*.
28. See note 21.
29. See note 22.
30. Tomini, *When democracies collapse*, 17.
31. Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*.
32. Sartori, “Understanding Pluralism,” 63.
33. Hawkins, *Venezuela’s Chavismo*, 37; Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 18.
34. Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán, “Lessons from Latin America”, 127.
35. Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 120.
36. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization.”
37. Hawkins et al., “Global Populism Database.”
38. Hawkins et al., *The Ideational Approach*, 283.

39. By the measurement criteria, Hungary experienced two episodes of democratic backsliding from 2010 to 2019. The first one, which I will study here, started in 2010 and ended in 2015. The approach establishes that an episode comes to an end if there is an increase of at least 0.02 in the LDI from one year to the next, which happened in Hungary from 2015 to 2016. However, between 2017 and 2019, the decreases in the LDI in Hungary reveal another episode of democratic backsliding. The division between the two episodes results from the approach I used. In general, the literature considers that the Hungarian democracy has been suffering decays in quality continuously since 2010. Nevertheless, I chose to follow the approach and study in-depth only the first phase of the democratic backsliding episode while occasionally referring to the entire period and pointing out events that happened after 2015.
40. E. g., Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*; Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*.
41. See note 5 above.
42. Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele, “Hungary’s Illiberal Turn,” 139.
43. Bajomi-Lázár, “The Party Colonisation of the Media,” 83; Polyák, “Media in Hungary,” 285; Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press 2011.”
44. Kornai, “Hungary’s U-Turn,” 40.
45. European Federation of Journalists, “New Report: Hungary Dismantles Media Freedom.”
46. Polyák, “Media in Hungary,” 290-291.
47. Helsinki Commission Report, “Restrictions on Civil Society.”
48. László and Krek, “Election Reform in Hungary,” 2-5.
49. Transparency International Hungary, “Judiciary.”
50. Kornai, “Hungary’s U-Turn,” 35.
51. Transparency International, “CPI 2020.”
52. Pap, *Democratic Decline in Hungary*, 20.
53. Kovács, “The Hungarian State Audit Office.”
54. Huq and Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” 130.
55. Slavov, “Constitutional Moment or Failure,” 55-57.
56. European Commission, “2020 Rule of Law Report.”
57. Ceeli Institute, “Judiciary in Peril.”
58. Ganev, “Explaining Eastern Europe,” 98.
59. Slavov, “Constitutional Moment or Failure,” 57-58.
60. Cheresheva, “Protesters Call for Bulgaria’s Chief Prosecutor.”
61. Perry, “Bulgarians Protest.”
62. See note 58 above.
63. Bagashka, *Bulgaria’s*, 99.
64. National Assembly of Bulgaria, “Counter-Corruption.”
65. See note 56 above.
66. Campbell, “Is a European government.”
67. Ibid.
68. Ganev, “Explaining Eastern Europe,” 96.

69. Dziadul, “Emil Koshlukov”; RadioFreeEurope, “Bulgarian National Radio.”

70. See note 56 above.

71. Council of Europe, “Observation of the early.”

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