

## **Populism in policy-making**

*Research proposal for “TK Inkubátor Pályázat, 2015-2017”*

### ***1. Research plan***

#### ***1.1.Short summary***

Though recent researches have discussed various political aspects of the ambiguous relationship between democracy and populism, the policy-populism nexus has been surprisingly neglected. The aim of our research is to shed some light on this research gap and we intend to explore the typical policy-making patterns of populist political actors when they are in governing position. We also have two additional research questions: how do populist actors influence the policy process when they are in opposition? And what are the mechanisms shaping the policy choices, instruments and narratives of populist actors in governing position vs. in opposition?

Our conceptualization of populism follows the umbrella term of populism; thus we understand populism in policy-making as a strictly majoritarian approach assuming a single cleavage in the society and promoting a polarizing and adversarial politics under a charismatic leadership. This encompassing approach may include populism either as a political strategy, or a political communication style or a thin-centred ideology. Supported by previous theoretical studies and empirical researches, we investigate the role of populism in policy-making through four main initial hypotheses: the audience hypothesis, the narrative representation hypothesis, the institutional hypothesis and the trust hypothesis.

The project obviously starts with a more in-depth elaboration of the concept of populism in policy making. In the empirical research, first, we define a limited number of policy fields (probably criminal justice policy, economic policy and welfare policy) and then within the fields particular policy issues and debates as cases where we can expect competing options of populist vs. non-populist policy stances. Then concerning the selected policy issues the data will be constructed through documentary analysis and interviews with key policy actors in the particular policy fields. In addition, a media database will be built related to the chosen policy discourses. Although at present stage the research has a focus on populism in Hungarian policy-making, the research has a strong potential for further comparative and international collaborative research and our research team already includes Umut Korkut, a high-reputation political scientist from Caledonian University, Glasgow.

## ***1.2. Theoretical background, research question, initial hypotheses***

In a seminal article published a decade ago Cas Mudde wrote about the emergence of a *populist Zeitgeist* in Western Europe as a consequence of populist reactions of mainstream politicians to opposition populist parties (Mudde, 2004). Recent studies, however, have found a rise of populism also in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): ‘in these countries, populism, if anything, is even more widespread’ (Kriesi, 2014:372) [than in West European countries]. Previous researches focused on the power politics aspects of populism; first and foremost the ambiguous relationship between populism and liberal democracy (see: Canovan, 1999; Mair, 2002; Abts and Rummens, 2007; Korkut, 2012; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). At the same time, the *policy aspects of populism* have been surprisingly neglected. Yet, as populist parties have come into governing positions in several European countries, a set of new puzzling questions has emerged: ***what are the typical policy-making patterns of governments dominated by populist parties? In addition, how do populist actors influence the policy process when they are in opposition? And what are the mechanisms shaping the policy choices, instruments and narratives of populist actors in governing position vs. in opposition?*** These are our initial research questions and the points of departure of our proposal that will be answered through an explorative research strategy.

### *Conceptualizing populism*

A research agenda about ‘populism in policy-making’ is obviously influenced by our conceptualization of populism. In one of the classical works of modern political science, *Political Man*, Lipset (1960), inspired by examples of post-war Latin American politics (e.g. the rise of Perón in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil), considered populism as an emerging extremist mass movement relied on the lower classes. The original ‘populism as a movement’ perspective was later developed into three competing approaches: (1) populism as a political logic or political strategy (Weyland, 2001; Jansen 2011), (2) populism as a political communication style or discourse (Knight, 1998; Canovan, 1999; Laclau, 2005; Korkut, 2012; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014) and (3) populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). As an illustration of the competing approaches: (1) Weyland defines populism as ‘a political strategy 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: 14). (2) Knight sees populism as a loose style ‘characteristically involving a proclaimed rapport with “the people”,

a “them-and-us” mentality’ (Knight, 1998: 223), while Moffitt and Tormey (2014) define three core elements of populist style: (i) appeal to the ‘pure people’ as opposed to the ‘corrupt elite’ (‘the establishment’), (ii) a contextualization of crisis, breakdown and/or threat and (iii) a ‘tabloid’ style of communication (see also Canovan, 1999). (3) Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser define 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 and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012: 8). These conceptualizations are partly overlapping but they express different aspects of populism; nevertheless, when investigating populism in the policy process, each of them can be relevant. For our research, the umbrella term of populism suggested by Pappas (2014) could be particularly useful; thus we understand populism in policy-making as a strictly majoritarian approach assuming a single cleavage in the society and promoting a polarizing and adversarial politics under a charismatic leadership. Translating this into the language of policy studies and elaborating it as a set of initial working hypotheses for our research:

**H1 (*audience hypothesis*):** first, populist policy actors formulate their policies as *responsive actors to the preferences of the imagined (good) people* opposed to both the ‘(corrupt) establishment’ (represented first and foremost by the incumbent or the previous governing elite, depending on the power position of the particular actors) and the ‘unpopular minorities’ (see Sullivan et al., 1985).

**H2 (*narrative representation hypothesis*):** Second, populist policy actors carefully elaborate *adversarial narratives along the ‘we, the good people’ vs. ‘them’* and flexibly adapt the ‘villain’ narratives (Shanahan et al., 2011) to the potentially changing policy preferences.

**H3 (*institutional hypothesis*):** Third, populist policy-makers *tend to neglect, undermine and/or dismantle constitutional checks and balances* perceived them as obstacles of efficient policy-making (governance). This hypothesis indeed implies two sub-hypotheses, one about the role of governing political elite in the policy process and another one about the leadership and political communication style. Thus we also expect that

**H3a:** populist policy-making is exclusively *politically driven* that implies a disregard of opinions and policy initiatives of civil society actors, business sector and employee representatives as well as various sorts of expert bodies and professional associations;

*H3b*: in addition, we expect populist policy-makers to neglect impersonal institutions, policy expertise and elements of evidence-based policy-making, while *to support their policy-decisions through personalist authority, charismatic leadership and by direct communication with the people*, from time to time ignoring constraints of rule of law and regularly using unconventional policy instruments, often unpredictably.

*H4 (trust hypothesis)*: Fourth, populist policy measures *may increase public trust in political institutions*. However, this kind of trust is different from the concept of democratic efficacy-based trust (see Jamal and Nooruddin, 2010; Denmark and Niemi, 2012) and can be best characterized as a kind of dependency-based trust.

Thus we assume that populism in policy-making is manifested mainly in the *policy-making procedures* and less in the *policy content* or in the *policy outcome*. Accordingly, our approach does not predict a strong relationship between populism and any left-wing or right-wing ‘thick’ ideology, but allows an avenue for populist policy-formulation along the whole ideological spectre, depending on the framing of ‘the people’ by the particular political actors. Though in West European countries the cultural notion of people, i.e. people as a nation is typically associated with right-wing populism, while the socio-economic notion of people, i.e. people as a class is rather a characteristic of left-wing populism (Kriesi, 2014), we cannot expect an obvious ideological embeddedness of populism in Central and Eastern Europe where party ideology and policy preferences are often related in an ambiguous manner (see ‘When Left Is Right’ from Tavits and Letki, 2009). There is more probable that in the CEE region genuinely populist policy actors try to use a particular mixture of conventionally left-wing and right-wing ideological narratives. Nevertheless, *mapping the thick ideology context of populism* (interpreted the latter as a thin-centred ideology) remains a puzzle and it is one of the aims of our research. In addition, we have to underline that our conceptualization of populism does not assume any relationship between populism and the macrofinancial sustainability of particular policies. This is in sharp contrast with the typical understanding of populism in opinion articles concerning fiscal policy issues where ‘populism’ is used as a synonym of fiscal irresponsibility, i.e. macrofinancially unsustainable promises of political actors or fiscal policy decisions of the governing political elite that undermine general government balances. Thus our approach allows populist policy actors to behave in either a fiscally responsible or an irresponsible manner and in general we do not have prior expectation about the particular policy outcomes either. However, an additional finding of our

research could be the exploration of typical *empirical patterns between the various aspects of populism and policy outcome*.

### ***1.3. Data and methods***

Though on the long run our research has the ambition of developing into an international comparative and collaborative research, at this stage we can present our methodology limited only to the Hungarian case (indeed, this means the investigation through multiple cases as cases are identified at policy fields). Nevertheless, similar methodology can be expected in other national cases. The project obviously starts with a more in-depth elaboration of the concept of populism in policy making that can be applied in other contexts as well.

In this research we intend to use a mixed method approach. First, in the context of process tracing (Bennett and Elman, 2006) we define a limited number of (two-three) policy fields and then within the fields those particular policy issues and debates as cases where we can expect competing options of populist vs. non-populist policy stances. Based on previous researches of our research team the potential policy fields can be (i) criminal justice policy (cf. penal populism); (ii) economic policy (cf. positive and negative sectoral policy incentives); (iii) welfare policy (cf. workfare vs. welfare-oriented policy stances). Within these fields the selection of the particular policy issues and debates will be already part of the research process; our choice will be defined on the descriptive statistics gained from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) covering Hungary (and managed by the Institute for Political Science, Center for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences).

The second step of the empirical research is the database building. Though in the selected policy issues a part of the data will be ‘constructed’ (i.e. revealed) through the careful documentary analysis of team members, in order to ensure the validity of our data we also plan to prepare a small number (altogether approx. 15) interviews with key policy actors in the chosen policy fields. Thanks to the documentary analysis and the interviews we will have a robust picture not only about the policy decisions but also the relevant actors and the major discursive positions as well as the possible frames of the chosen policy debates. As a final step of the database building, a media database will be constructed related to the particular discourses.

The discursive analysis will be prepared by standard methods of content and frame analysis, with the help of the MAXQDA software available in the Center for Social Sciences,

Hungarian Academy of Sciences. While the content analysis will be more technical in nature, the frames will be defined by previous research findings on the investigated policy issues.

#### **1.4. Planned publications**

Team members plan to publish 2-4 international journal articles about populism in policy-making in general, and/or populism in economic policy, criminal justice policy and welfare policy in particular, probably in some of the following journals: *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*; *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*; *Central European Journal of Public Policy*; *East European Society and Politics and Culture* (IF: 0.225); *Governance* (IF: 1,614); *Journal of European Social Policy* (IF: 1.71); *New Political Economy* (IF: 1.656).

In addition, we also plan to publish the Hungarian version of each of the articles published in English in the most influential Hungarian double-blind peer-review journals of the related fields (e.g. *Politikatudományi Szemle*, *SOCIO.HU*).

#### **1.5. Timeline**

1. Sept. 2015 – 28 Febr. 2016: Theoretical and conceptual elaboration, case selection, data collection (documentary analysis, interviews and media database building)

1 March 2016 – 30 Sept. 2016: First draft of research papers, internal discussions

1 June 2016 – 31 Jan. 2017: Revised versions of research papers, international workshop and conference presentations

1 Jan. 2017 – 31 Aug. 2017: International workshop and conference presentations and publications in international journals

Note: the second and third as well as the third and fourth steps of the research are partly processed parallelly.

## **2. Participants**

Bartha Attila (MTA TK PTI) FTE: 0.2 (team coordinator)

Boda Zsolt (MTA TK PTI) FTE: 0.1

Győry Csaba (MTA TK JTI) FTE: 0.1

Szikra Dorottya (MTA TK SZI) FTE: 0.1

***International member of the research team***

Korkut, Umut (Glasgow School for Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University)

***3. Research antecedents – earlier papers published by the team members related to the topic, including relevant international comparative studies***

Bartha, A. and A. Tóth (2013) A magyar nyugdíjrendszer változásai politikatudományi perspektívából. *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 22 (4): 161–183.

Bartha, A. (2013) Explaining Success and Failure in Welfare Policy Changes in Europe: Governance, Trust and Legitimacy. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 6 (4): 287–302.

Boda, Zs. (2014) Populist Discourses in Policy-making. Paper presented at the International Political Science Association World Congress on ‘Challenges of Contemporary Governance’. Montréal, 19-24 July, 2014

Boda, Zs. and U. Korkut (2015) Populist Policy-making and the Formation of Public Trust. Paper presented at the *Political Studies Association Conference*, Sheffield, March 30 – April 2 2015.

Boda Zs., G. Szabó, A. Bartha, G. Medve-Bálint and Zs. Vidra (2014) Politikától vezérelve: A büntető populizmus diskurzusai a magyar politikában és a médiában. *Politikatudományi Szemle*, 23 (3): 69–94.

Boda, Zs., G. Szabó, A. Bartha, G. Medve-Bálint and Zs. Vidra (2015) Politically driven. Mapping political and media discourses of penal populism – the Hungarian case. *East European Politics and Societies*. Paper online first, 4 December, 2014.

Korkut, U. (2006) Entrenched Elitism in Trade Unions in Poland and Romania: an Explanation for the Lack of Union Strength and Success? *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 27 (1): 67–104.

Korkut, U. (2012) *Liberalization Challenges in Hungary. Elitism, Progressivism, Populism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Korkut, U., R. H. Cox, G. Bucken-Knapp and K. Mahendran (2015) (eds.) *Discursive*

*Governance in Politics, Policy and the Public Sphere*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Szikra D. (2014) Democracy and Welfare in Hard Times: The Social Policy of the Orbán Government in Hungary between 2010 and 2014. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 24 (5): 486–500.

Szikra D., Aczél Zs. and D. Szelewa (2014) The Changing Language of Social Policy in Hungary and Poland. In Petersen, K. and Daniel Béland (eds.) *Analysing Social Policy Concepts and Language: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives*. Bristol: The Policy Press, 35–57.

#### ***4. International environment of the research, planned future sources and extension of international relations***

This research plan already counts with the participation of Prof. Umut Korkut, a high-reputation political scientist from Caledonian University, Glasgow as a member of the core research team who already published several comparative studies about East European policy issues. In his capacity as the convenor for the Political Studies Association (PSA) Comparative European Politics Special Group, Dr. Korkut will host a panel with the project team members at PSA 2017 conference. Through Dr. Korkut's involvement, the team members will use PSA facilities in order to resonate the policy impact of this project.

We also have further plans to get access to additional financial sources and extend our cooperation with other international partners. More specifically:

- a) ***OTKA*** application submission in the topic (February 2016)
- b) Extending cooperation with Czech, Polish and Slovak partners in order to strengthen the comparative dimensions of the research and
- c) in this partnership getting access to additional financial sources through the ***Visegrad Fund*** (planned submission: March, 2016)

In addition, we will follow the ***H2020 research calls*** for collaborative projects as the topic of the research may correspond to European research priorities. In this case we will aim at either joining a consortium or initiating one in order to submit a proposal.

## 5. Planned budget (in thousands HUF)

|  | Year 1*     | Year 2**    |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Media database building costs  | 450         |             |
| Other costs of database building (miscellaneous documents and costs of interviews)   | 200         |             |
| Organization and participation at international workshops / conferences  | 175         | 825         |
| Travel and accommodation, Umut Korkut (external researcher employed by Glasgow School for Business and Society, Caledonian University, Glasgow)                                  | 300         | 300         |
| Contribution to gross-gross wages (including all taxes and social security charges paid by the employer and the employee), 4 researchers in TK employment (“keresetkiegészítés”) | 2000        | 2000        |
| <b>Overall budget / year</b>   | <b>3125</b> | <b>3125</b> |

\* 1 Sept. 2015- 31 Aug. 2016; \*\* 1 Sept. 2016- 31 Aug. 2017

## 6. References

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