The 'Populist Explosion' in the West and its Effect on the NMS

The Polish and Hungarian Blind Alley of Populism Compared

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Abstract

The key messages of this paper can be summarized in three statements: First, the new wave of populism, as neopopulism, has been shaped in the current age of information society first of all in the terms of 'cultural' globalization as identity politics. Second, since the outbreak of global crisis in the late 2000s there has been an 'alienation' between the Core and the Periphery in the EU with very marked features in the 'East', in New Member States as widespread disappointment of populations with the results of EU membership. Third, Poland and Hungary have been pioneering in this process of divergence from the EU mainstream and in the emergence of the anti-EU populist elites, so they represent the classical case of Eupopulism in the Eastern periphery in the EU. Thus, this paper focuses on the specificity of neopopulism in NMS within the EU first of all by analysing the emergence of authoritarian populism in Poland and Hungary.

Keywords: global populist eruption; Eupopulism; hard and soft populism; deconsolidation

1. Introduction: The world system crisis and new global wave of populism

In the mid-2010s a new, global wave of populism began. The effects of the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump have been treated in international political science as a 'populist explosion'. Populism research was already very rich in literature, but after this 'explosion' it has come to the fore so assertively and dominantly that almost all global problems have been discussed in the context of this 'populist moment'. Arguing against the inflated concept or conceptual stretching, this paper tries to make a marked distinction between the former and recent wave of populisms, and it refuses to put all problems in this New Age of Uncertainty under the general umbrella of populism. The first part of the paper

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discusses the actual and virtual impact of this new populist turn on the EU in general, and on the New Member States (NMS) in particular. The second part the paper turns to the special versions of Polish and Hungarian populisms, which are relevant for the new wave of populism in NMS and beyond.[1]

At the global level, the marked feature of the new globalism is that it represents the disenchantment of the 'post-working class' and 'precariate' in developed states as losers in the world system. This the first time in the world history that the developed states – mainly the Anglo-Saxon countries – which were winners in previous periods of globalization have become losers both in their domestic income structures and global roles. By and large, most Western countries are currently presented as losers in an identity crisis – at least some strata in the developed states – although in different ways. The emerging split between the US and the EU is deeper than usual and this separation may last for a long period. As Angela Merkel sharply formulated in her Munich speech, the EU is at a 'watershed moment', since 'the times in which we could completely depend on others are on the way out', and hence Europe 'has to take its fate into its own hands' and 'fight for our own history' (on 28th May 2017, after the G-7 meeting).[2]

Despite the 'polycrisis' of the EU, the populist tide has already turned in Europe, while it seems to be a protracted process in US. After the initial shock, Brexit and the Trump presidency have generated a resistance in the EU, causing a decline for the support of extreme right parties and an increase of support for EU unity. There is greater and greater consent in Europe that, after the Austrian, Dutch and French elections, the EU has consolidated to some extent in a 'reverse wave', and Trump's politics have been considered a global 'balkanization', or a systemic destabilization. An exception to this can be found in NMS countries, however, where authoritarian leaders want to start a new populist initiative based on Trump's example. At the EU level, the symbolic turning point can be seen at its 60th birthday. After a long debate on differentiated integration, a 'multi-floor' EU will take shape. This multispeed EU will increasingly be institutionalized by separating the various forms/levels of integration in the Core and Periphery as 'floors' in the EU architecture.[3]

With the increasing Core-Periphery Divide, it is important to emphasize that, at the NMS level, while the individual NMS countries have experienced a common failure in the catching up process, they have done so in various ways. Namely, the Baltic States have been relatively successful, while the 'continental' NMS have produced a much more controversial EU integration. As many analysts have pointed out, the Hungarian and Polish versions of populism proved to be 'early comers', and they have also elaborated the essential features of 'media populism' as domination or hegemony by soft power even before the above mentioned global 'eruption of populism'. These Polish and Hungarian authoritarian populisms, however, have actually been strengthened by this turning tide in global politics. The 'early comers' of authoritarian populism have also begun a new course by joining the current wave of global populism through reinforcing their former authoritarian efforts in a direct reference to the new international situation created by the geopolitical crisis and the Trump presidency. Therefore, a comparative study of Polish and Hungarian populisms may significantly contribute to the understanding of this new wave of global populism, especially in the case of using soft power instead of hard power for the stabilisation of an authoritarian system, i.e. by turning mediatised politics into the main weapon of populist rule.[4]

This 'populism from above' or populist elite/governments is paradoxical in the NMS context, since their rule has been prepared by – and later based upon – the permanent anti-elitist negative campaign of the newly emerged politico-business elite. They have created enemy images inside ('liberals') and outside ('Brussels') and this Eupopulism has worked rather well in stabilizing the populist regimes by shifting the burden of the deepening social crisis to the 'meta-level' of identity politics. These populist regimes in Poland and Hungary have been engaged in serious conflicts with the EU, and the other NMS countries have also been conflicting to a great extent with the EU's rules and values in the recent crisis period. In the refugee crisis, this has manifested in the hate campaigns against migrants fostered by the new populist elite of the Visegrad Group (V4 states) who claim to protect 'both the country and Europe as a whole' against the invasion of 'aliens'.[5]

2. The 'alienation' of the New Member States from the European Union

The 'populist eruption' or 'populist surge' appeared earlier and took a specific form in the Eastern periphery of the EU. Several authors have therefore issued a warning to the EU, arguing that as long as EU integration is seen as a project of the political elite and the rich, it will carry the seeds of its own destruction. The growing polarisation in our societies needs to be addressed by finding better ways to combine the benefits of open markets and EU integration with democratic inclusion, social protection and fairness. Rebalancing is even more complicated in the EU integration context, where the divide between winners and losers does not merely follow the traditional fault lines along the functional and the personal distribution of income and wealth, but often also carries strong nationalistic connotations in the North-South and East-West conflict. Actually, the former President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, earlier identified populism as the greatest danger for Europe in 2010. The situation worsened to a great extent, hence the current President of European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, issued a warning in 2016 that the EU was in a battle with 'galloping populism'.[6]

The main issue in the NMS case is that what has been considered to be merely an unpleasant/unwanted or marginal side effect of 'differentiated integration', has proved to be the systemic feature of the NMS position in the EU. After more than ten years of membership, their marginalization/peripheralization has proceeded with a deep divergence between the Core and Periphery. This process has been pre-programmed into the EU workings from the very beginning as the failure of the 'Convergence Machine' (World Bank), since the Copenhagen criteria have been insufficient to outline a special regional strategy of catching-up process with a proper cohesion policy. Whereas the pre-accession conditionalities insisted only on legal formalities and opening to the free market, the actual capacity to fulfil the obligations of membership was missing in NMS because when acceding to the EU the NMS countries were not at all able 'to withstand the competitive pressure' in the EU. Given their weak socio-economic competitiveness versus the more competitive Core, the increasingly 'negative externality' has contributed to the final failure of the Eastern enlargement. Thus, the failure

of running ahead through 'integration by legislation', neglecting its economic and political feasibility (Scharpf 2015), hit the NMS countries much more than the Core countries and it has generated even deeper alienation of the NMS populations. The NMS countries have suffered because of their weak global competitiveness, mostly due to the poor performance of their institutions, resulting in a very low trust in the political elites (see Tables 1 and 2).

Thus, admitting also the responsibility of the NMS countries for the failure of the catching up process, I now focus upon the EU side to find reasons for the emergence of this 'resentment club', mostly in the context of the deep disillusionment of NMS in EU global crisis management in their region. The main issue is that the specific 'alienation' has been the product of the deepening Core-Periphery Divide because after a quarter century the NMS have lost in many ways. Altogether, the NMS have produced a vicious circle of dual economies and societies in the EU, in which the one-third versus two-thirds societies have emerged as the winners and losers, with the deepening 'partitions' of the countries between the developed and backward regions, as the 'West of the East' and 'East of the East', documented recently by the *EU Regional Competitiveness Index 2017* (European Commission 2017a) and by the *Social mobility in the EU* (Eurofound 2017). At the same time, the oligarchization process in NMS has been noticeable internationally, and the oligarchs loyal to the populist regimes have received a large share from the EU transfers as well.[7]

The special regional program was missing in the Copenhagen criteria, which was based on the 'integration by legislation', since only the abstract-general modernization scheme was in the minds of the EU politicians and experts. However, without a tailor-made specific regional catching-up strategy there has been an increasing collision with the too general modernization theories and its 'trickling down' phantasies. Moreover, the effects of the negative externalities resulting from the weak competitiveness of NMS have been reinforced by the global financial crisis, and later by the 'polycrisis' in general and the refugee crisis in particular. In the last decades, the North-South Divide has been high on the agenda, and the Eurozone crisis has increased this priority due to the Greek collapse. Altogether, the specific problem of the 'East' has not been addressed; but rather only in its ugly results of the authoritarian populisms, but never looking for its underlying reasons.

The results of this backsliding process have widely been documented in the rankings of many policy institutes. The large overview about the 'cohesion challenge' in all member states has recently shown the various convergence and divergence processes in the EU. This holistic approach has concluded that despite of some processes of general 'structural' cohesion in basic legal dimensions, the parallel processes of the specific complex 'individual' cohesion in the Eastern periphery have been worsened by and large, first of all in Poland and Hungary, and also in the Czech Republic (Janning 2016). This general description of the EU divergences fits best to the NMS and leads closer to the reasons for the specific 'populist eruption' in NMS that has resulted in their 'alienation' from the EU (Schmidt 2015: 48, see also Zaorálek 2017). Accordingly, in NMS, populism has appeared in all basic elements of state capture, mass clientelism and the weakening of civil society.[8]

I try to explain in this paper that this alienation of NMS concerns the present 'concrete Europe' (usually called 'Brussels'), and not the 'abstract Europe', as 'our homeland'. The NMS populations have criticized many EU policies at the particular level, nevertheless – despite the political campaigns of their populist leaders – they have kept their strong European

identity at the general-symbolical level, since Europe exists in the minds of the NMS populations first of all in the long term, historically and culturally. Paradoxically, the more the NMS populations lose faith in the current cohesion/integration policy of the EU and in their direct future, the more they identify themselves as 'proud Europeans' and support EU membership. Obviously, they feel the need to belong to the community of Europeans in the chaotic global world, and wish to have a future for themselves at least for the longer run.[9]

Actually, as Roger Liddle has pointed out: 'Jacques Delors (…) argued that the single market had to be accompanied by a more social Europe. But the British blocked progress from the start. Even worse, the enlargement to central and eastern Europe was undertaken without any increase in the EU budget or any other form of 'social' preparation. This has proved a major error. We have lost the social dimension to the EU. EU economic integration, together with globalisation, has been allowed to run amok through our societies.' (Liddle 2016: 3) The general mood of the EU leaders has been conceived in the neoliberal modernization theory with its over-generalized 'trickling down effects' of European integration, counting only on the 'positive externalities'. In this evolutionary world view the positive effects of EU membership would appear quasi automatically for NMS, and sooner or later would reach the large majority of populations without a special strategy for the 'Easterners' that would take into account their historical and cultural idiosyncrasies. The drastic social and political changes of peripherialisation have become obvious in NMS since the global crisis and Eurozone crisis, as the 'two crises challenged the creditability of the nexus between economic integration and prosperity' leading to the 'general dissatisfaction and disappointment about the performance of these democracies' and therefore 'populist parties often appeal to fears and resentments against the EU' (Brusis 2016: 264–265). Or, simply said, alienation from the EU in NMS has risen because of 'Liberalism's Failure to Deliver', as Krastev (2016) argues.

The eruption of populism has become a topical issue everywhere in NMS, first of all in the form of the strengthening radical right parties and movements (see Minkenberg 2017). Due to the current crisis, the EU has become a popular 'punching bag', an easy target and prey. In fact, the EU is often not really the main concern of many of its critics, since the populists use opposition to European integration as a vehicle for their ultimate objective: to strengthen their influence and power at home, as has been the intention of the NMS populist leaders. Furthermore, EU institutions and policy settings are prone to populist attack not only from a purely economic position, but much more from a cultural 'nativist identity angle'. The distribution of responsibilities between the EU institutions and the member states has made Brussels an easy scapegoat, accused of ignoring the social consequences of its policies and, even worse, undermining the capacity of the nation state to deal with them. Identifying the EU exclusively with the market dimension and disregarding its potential role in the other policy fields would accentuate its distance from the citizens and open the way for attack by the governing populist elites.[10]

Indeed, a great number of elements in EU politics and policy fuel the anti-EU sentiments from a *nativist-identity perspective*. Charges of 'homogenisation' by undermining, or even erasing, national specifics and identity are commonly brought up by populists, mainly on the right side of the political spectrum. The inevitable loss of input-legitimacy from a national perspective can easily be transformed into allegations of eroding the sovereignty of the member state and the will of its citizens, eventually leading to the populist call to

'take back control' by 'the return of the people'. Moreover, the often highly technical issues to be resolved at the central level make it easy to depict EU policies as designed by soulless technocrats detached from the life of ordinary people and accused of 'fake' policy-based, pre-determined evidence-making. Although trust in the EU has actually held up better than trust in national institutions, nonetheless, the output-legitimacy of the EU has also suffered from the decreasing credibility in the efficiency of the technocratic elite.

In general, upon entry, the NMS countries had two historical burdens that have been instrumental in the emergence of the specific regional form of new populism. These issues have been discussed above as the cultural identity and civic identity in the EU. First, as to cultural identity, there has been a relative backwardness that has manifested as a civilizational delay in NMS compared to the West, which has been referred to by Piotr Sztompka as 'civilizational incompetence' (Sztompka 993; 2000). This relative backwardness embraced the whole society and appeared in 'longue durée' terms of the industrial and post-industrial civilization as a lack of apropriate cultural patterns and skills at the time of the entry. In fact, these societies have experienced a series of half-made modernization waves in the last centuries. In this respect, EU accession has proved to be just the latest in this series of incomplete, one-sided and controversial waves of modernization. Second, as to civic identity, due to their missing skills, the majority of the NMS population has been unable to take advantage of the new opportunities of the systemic change, and this situation has even worsened with increasing social exclusion. Many people have felt excluded from Europe and violated in their national feelings, and this has also eroded their civic identity. Nevertheless, new urban strata have also been formed in NMS, which have been leading the anti-populist fight in their widening social protest movements.[11]

Altogether, the two conflicting tendencies of regaining national sovereignty and returning to Europe can only be harmonized in the long run and in an emerging welfare society. The state socialisms posed a danger for national identity, and as the divergence from the EU mainstream has grown, the NMS populations have increasingly nurtured the feeling that their national identity has been jeopardized by the EU. This has been exploited by their populist leaders to create an enemy image of 'Brussels' and to launch the 'blaming Brussels' game for all evils. In this identity crisis, some 19th century ideas and wordings of the emerging nations have returned in the politics of historical memory, supposedly because of the new threat to national sovereignty. The threatened majorities have accepted conspiracy theories and enemy images to explain the ever-changing world around them and to legitimize their inward looking strategies. The new populist regimes have pushed all social and political conflicts into the cultural realm of identity crisis, elevating them from the social reality to a mythical meta-level of true patriots and amoral traitors, in the fashionable dual terms of Carl Schmitt. This dual image of friends and foes has appeared inside and outside, therefore the social and national populism has turned more and more to Eupopulism, depicting the Brussels elite as the main enemy of the nation. While this exercise of seeking enemies at home and abroad has been in the forefront of domestic politics in NMS, the 'desecuritization' process has deepened in all respects, in social fields and public services. The populist governments have been shifting the focus of anger and dissatisfaction to the other fields through soft power and 'mediatised' governance, or through governance by the hegemonic state-controlled media.[12]

3. The authoritarian populism in ECE: The blind alley of Poland and Hungary

The leading policy institutes as 'ranking institutions', such as The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), have described the socio-economic changes and the political landscape of East-Central Europe (ECE) in great detail. Due to the failure of the catching up process, the ECE populations have lost trust in both the new democratic institutions and the political elite who have made systemic corruption the main feature of the new political order (Table 1–2). Accordingly, these ranking institutions have concluded that there has been a general decline of democracy in ECE in recent years (see Table 3). All in all, populism has become a 'megatrend' that has dominated in their reports on the ECE countries. Populism has been, to some extent, an endemic feature of all parties in the region—including the mainstream parties—and it has reached its peak with the current ruling parties in Poland and Hungary. Hence, the populist drug has been instrumental to the ECE's survival of the global crisis and to bridging the gap between unrealistic expectations and the region's worsening realities. Finally, it has turned to 'Eupopulism', blaming 'Brussels' for all evils. These two countries have taken the catching-up exercise over the last quarter century very seriously, and thus the identity crisis has been deeper there due to the increasing social deficit (Aniol 2015). The illusion of a linear/evolutionary path to democracy and prosperity has evaporated, since the majority of ECE societies has become loser. The clear winners are the rent-seeking, parasitic elite, where there is a high level of 'systemic corruption' (Table 4).

ECE's populism departs from general populism's people-versus-elite dichotomy and Manichaean approach to political contestation in a manner specific to the region's historical trajectory and to the emergence of ECE's facade democracies over the last quarter century. Accordingly, there are three *periods* of populism in ECE—shy, soft, and hard-populism—following the reduction of politics. And there are three main *types* of populism—marginal, business-centred (soft), and politics-centred (hard)—which follow specific forms of oligarchization in a given ECE country. I apply the term *shy populism* to describe the ECE's first period of populism in the nineties, when a naïve optimism dominated the public discourse and populism was weak and marginal. The distinction between *soft* and *hard* populism in ECE dates back to the 2000s. Soft populism emerged with its deep people-versus-elite dichotomy in a narrowing political arena. This reduction of the politics was due to the socio-economically based exclusion of the masses from politics that led to partocracy. Hard populism is characterized by more severe threats to the constitutional framework, since it challenges the fundamental principles of liberal democracy such as 'checks and balances'. Ben Stanley (2017) makes a distinction between centrist populism as moderate anti-elitism and radical populism as strong responses to the difficulties of the NMS transitions, which more or less corresponds to soft and hard populism. During the global crisis, there have been clear, classic moves from soft to hard populism, thus, soft and hard populism have to be distinguished not only analytically, but also historically. In the Polish and Hungarian cases, hard populism has appeared in its classic form in response to the global economic crisis, whereas in the Czech and Slovak cases, soft populism has only hardened in the 2010s.[13]

In recent years, Poland and Hungary have made a sharp turn towards hard populism, which has also been termed 'velvet dictatorship'. They have tried to 'nationalize the elites' and claimed to 're-establish the national and ideological constraints that were removed by globalization (…) to re-establish the bond between the elites and the people.' (Krastev 2017: 2). In this spirit, the Polish PM Beata Szydlo came up at the March 2017 Summit 'with a message that the Union will not dictate the terms of how we are to rule our country' (Skrzypek 2017: 2). The failure of the catching-up process had become evident earlier and the disappointment has been greater in Poland and Hungary than in the other ECE countries. Thus, the great hope has turned into deeper alienation in Poland and Hungary, as it has come up several times cyclically in their history.[14]

The ECE Roadmap as seen from Poland and Hungary has demonstrated that the recently emerged authoritarian populism in these countries is a new danger for the region. It has led to a blind alley in their Europeanization and Democratization, to lowering their rankings in global competitiveness, increasing social deficit and splitting the countries into two – developed and backward – parts. Giving an overview on regional developments, Martin Brusis (2016: 263) has pointed out that Poland and Hungary have been pioneering in this drift towards populism. They were trendsetters already in the eighties in their early start in Democratization and Europeanization and their populations had a high expectation for prosperity and democracy in a short period. Thus, their reactions to their failures in catching up have shown close similarities. Accordingly, there are 'remarkable structural similarities between the party systems of Poland and Hungary' (Brusis 2016: 270), including the 'Orbán-style' measures to weaken the Constitutional Court and to colonize the public media by the right-wing populist parties. The Financial Times has reported that Viktor Orbán and Jaroslaw Kaczynski have pledged to wage a 'cultural counter-revolution' together to radically reform the post-Brexit EU. It has quoted Orbán as saying that 'Brexit is a fantastic opportunity for us. We are at a historic cultural moment. (…) There is a possibility of a cultural counter-revolution right now.' (Foil, Buckley 2016; Financial Times 2016). Orbán is a proud populist, claiming to represent people, mistaking 'popular' for 'populist' in a self-styled 'illiberal democracy'.[15]

Poland and Hungary have also excelled in identity politics, using the politics of historical memory. They have begun a journey to the past; the ruling populist parties cultivate the 'politics of historical memory' for consolidating their power. There has been consensus in the international literature that 'the examples of Poland and Hungary suggest, when populists accede to power, they can succumb to authoritarian tendencies'. Namely the Polish governing party, Law and Justice (PiS) 'has combined radical social conservatism, inspired by Poland's Catholic traditions, with a critical view of the EU – although it does not advocate rejecting Poland's membership – and an embrace of the authoritarian political traditions of pre-war Poland.' (Rohac et al. 2017: 1, 7)[16]

The ECE states had a tradition of closer cooperation and some kind of Central European identity that led in 1991 to the alliance of Visegrad States, known also as the Visegrad Four (V4), in which both Poland and Hungary have been active in recent years. In the ECE states, the 'in-between feeling' has always been very strong, provoked from time to time by the bitterness of the neglect by the West. It was very much so after WWII, and the Yalta syndrome still haunts them. The threat of a 'new Yalta' between the West and Russia

is a burning topic nowadays in ECE, but the roots of this political paranoia, such as feeling abandoned by the West, are deeper. This is a traditional myth in the East, with its particular forms in Poland and Hungary, and also in the former Czechoslovakia. The touch-stone of ECE cooperation is the V4, which is a Janus-faced organization with many family quarrels within the common trend that has been demonstrated by their similar stand in the refugee crisis and with their common incentives for the blame-game against Brussels in the refugee crisis (Kucharczyk, Mesežnikov 2015). The V4 is a 'security community' (Karl Deutsch) in the greatest sense of 'securitization', since nowadays securitization can be and should be everything, embracing all segments of life and all fields of society in this Age of Uncertainty. The desecuritization process began earlier as a loss of 'social security' and as an ongoing process it has produced in the general 'desecuritization' of the ECE societies.[17]

The geopolitical desecuritization has appeared at the EU level and, in the refugee crisis, it has been transferred by the populist regimes to the meta-level of the identity politics. The arrival of migrants is perceived as a threat to the preservation of national culture and language, hence the outright hostility reigns in ECE when it comes to immigration. Thus, the fears about 'native identity' posed by the influx of immigrants from a different ethnic, cultural, and religious background largely dominate the public debates and are often ruthlessly exploited by populists. As Orbán (2016) has emphasized, there has been a fight between 'sovereigntists' and 'unionists'. In this spirit of alienation and separation from the current EU politics in general and from the immigration policy in particular, the Visegrad States prepared a V4 Joint Statement (2017) for the March 2017 Rome Summit, although they did sign the Rome Declaration (2017).[18]

4. Conclusion: Can the EU stop the populist authoritarian regimes in NMS?

The populism tide has been stopped in the EU, unlike in the Anglo-Saxon countries. The immune system of the developed democratic countries in the EU Core seems to have defeated the new populist wave. After the Austrian, Dutch and French elections the new wave of populism may disturb the EU workings, but it does not threaten the EU in general or the consolidated Western democracies in particular. Nevertheless, the situation is still worrisome, since there are no similar positive signs in the Southern and Eastern Periphery. The relative consolidation of the Core has only deepened the gap between the Core and Periphery in the EU and stimulated the further eruption of populisms in NMS. The simultaneous internal and external crises taken together can only be overcome in the South, facilitated by their longer membership in the EU and participation in the Eurozone. However, the perspectives of the Eastern Periphery to join the closer integration process is much more problematic in the next future given the extravagancies of NMS populisms (Foa, Mounk 2017).

Although some US experts have claimed that the deconsolidation process of democracies has become global, in my view it reflects mostly their own pessimistic mood, since for the first time the US is a loser in the global arena. These US scholars like to overgeneralize, since working in mediatized politics also needs a mediatized political science. Hence, they

echoed the End of History in the nineties with the final victory of liberalism, and in turn, in the 2010s they propagate the End of Liberal Democracy with the final victory of populism. Europe has its own way, and European scholars are much more balanced in evaluating the various populisms in this new wave without panicking. Obviously, the Core countries have actually opted for a multispeed Europe, and rightly so, because they have the only opportunity to move ahead with 'a coalition of the willing', usually termed as enhanced cooperation. While the rhetoric of the Rome Declaration does not identify any preferred scenario, there have still been some preparations for a multispeed Europe. It is basically a two-speed Europe, although in some policies it can also be multispeed. The main point for the new breakthrough is constructing a renewed EU around the Eurozone, including fiscal policy and some more integrated social policy.[19]

Whereas in European Studies only the bare bones of the new theory about European Renewal can be found, overcoming the new populism needs not just pure theory, but genuine political and policy solutions that respond to the real problems. No wonder that NMS experts demand active measures: 'To rise to the populist challenge, Europe's political elites need to do more than just to pursue their traditional strategy of isolating and delegitimizing populists. Instead, they have to offer policy solutions that resonate with their electorates and address the grievances that are currently driving voters into the open arms of populist charlatans.' (Rohac et al. 2017: 1) The backsliding of democracy in NMS has been widely discussed in international political science and media, but the EU has not yet found the ways and means to stop it (see Verhofstadt 2017). Indeed, at the present historical moment, after a quarter century of systemic change in the 'East', Europe is again at a crossroads, and beyond solving the problems of the EU in general, finally also a special strategy for the NMS region is needed.

There is a need for *political* solutions, turning against the NMS authoritarian populisms by the key political actors in the Core countries, but also for *policy* solutions, solving the deep socio-economic problems of the East that have been reinforced by the deep and protracted global crisis. There have been some half-hearted efforts by the main democratic forces in the European institutions to stop the violations of European rules and values in NMS, but so far they have proved to be insufficient and unsuccessful. On 29th April 2017, Orbán was summoned to the EPP (European People's Party) Presidency concerning the grave violations of the EU rules by passing anti-CEU and anti-NGO legislation. The EPP Presidency has issued a declaration strongly condemning Orbán's politics and instructing him to correct these acts: 'We will not accept that any basic freedoms are restricted or rule of law is disregarded. This regards academic freedom and the autonomy of universities. (…) The EPP believes that NGOs are an integral part of any healthy democracy, that they represent the civil society and that they must be respected.' Moreover, 'The EPP has also made it clear to our Hungarian partners that the blatant anti-EU rhetoric of the 'Let's stop Brussels' consultation is unacceptable. The constant attack on Europe, which Fidesz has launched for years, have reached a level we cannot tolerate.' (European People's Party 2017: 2) As a result, on 17th May 2017 European Parliament voted with a large majority (393 vs 221 votes) to trigger the Article 7 procedure to stop the violations of European rules and values by the Orbán government. It led to a rule of law debate in the European Parliament on 7th December 2017 as a preparation for the Hungary Report in stage '7.1' of the procedure. Even more

so in the Polish Case, in which the European Commission already triggered the start of the Article 7 procedure on 20th December 2017, since the Polish government was not ready for the dialogue. In fact, both Poland and Hungary are in the 'rule of law process' in EP, nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether the EU institutions can be effective in stopping hard populism in NMS.

Finally, to summarize the solution of the NMS crisis I can refer to Jürgen Habermas' recent message (Habermas 2017: 3) that has been a wake-up call for the EU, since inaction is counterproductive. This message is basically optimistic and duly complex, and he suggests three lessons drawn for the European polycrisis. *First*, its new global role necessitates for Europe a growing distance from the US also in defending the liberal democracy, since 'Europe's geopolitical situation had already been transformed by the Syrian civil war, the Ukraine crisis, and the gradual retreat of the United States from its role as a force for maintaining global order (…) Suddenly Europe finds itself thrown back upon its own resources in a role of a defensive custodian of liberal principles'. *Second*, there is a need to strengthen civic identity in the European construction: 'European unification has remained an elite project to the present day because the political elites did not dare to involve the general public in an informed debate about alternative future scenarios'. *Third*, Habermas demands going beyond the vague term of multispeed Europe by elaborating a concrete perspective for the EU as a whole: 'the unresolved crises foster right-wing populism and left-wing dissidence as regards Europe. Without an attractive and credible perspective for shaping Europe, authoritarian nationalism in member states such as Hungary and Poland will be strengthened.'

Footnotes:

1. In this paper I focus on the populist eruption in the mid-2010s, since I have discussed the former period based on the large body of literature in my previous paper (Ágh 2016b). There is an 'eruption' of academic literature and media on the new version of populism, too, see e.g. Chopin (2016), Easterly (2016), Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg (2016), Judis (2016), Kaltwasser et al. (2017), and Müller (2016), see especially Stanley (2017). These authors argue that in the last years there has been a new turning point in populism, e.g. the latest Freedom House Report is titled *Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy*, and it starts with the statement that '[i]n 2016, populist and nationalist political forces made astonishing gains in democratic states' (Freedom House 2017a: 1). See also the latest Report of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe 2017), *Populism – How strong are Europe's checks and balances*. In the following I concentrate on the NMS populism and I do not deal with populism as an ideology (see Aslanidis 2016) or with its global level phenomena.
2. 'Wir Europäer müssen unser Schicksal in unsere eigene Hand nehmen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 29th May 2017, see also Merkel (2017).
3. After the election of Trump, the ratio of supporters for the far right has sunk in the EU from 16% to 13% (Schminke 2017). On the general mood in the EU see European Parliament (2017); Manevich (2016); and Wike et al. 2016.
4. It has been widely discussed in both international and regional media that populist forces in NMS have been encouraged by the Trump victory and they have also launched a new offensive, see e.g. Balkan Insight (2017), HVG (2017) and Lyman (2017).
5. In this paper I rely on the large databases of the ranking institutions (Bertelsmann Foundation 2016; Economist Intelligence Unit 2017; Transparency International 2017; and World Economic Forum

2016 – see Appendix) and I continue the analysis of my former papers about the Core-Periphery Divide (Ágh 2016a; 2016d).

6. The current paper of Rohac, Zgut and Győri has provided a large overview of the populist parties in the EU. Moreover, they have pointed out that the particular feature of the new populism is that 'Europe's populists routinely channel subversive Russian propaganda' (Rohac et al. 2017: 1). Jan-Werner Müller describes populism as a specific form of identity politics and analyses these three populist techniques of governing (Müller 2016: 2–3, 44).

7. See also European Commission (2017b; 2017c). The Budapest daily Népszava on 7th March 2017 published an overview of the NMS oligarchs as 'small Trumps' – beyond Hungarians - with a list of Boris Kollár (SK), Andrej Babis (CZ), Zbigniew Stonoga (PL), Ivan Pernar (HR), Alvars Lembergs (LA) and Veselin Mareski (BG).

8. There is an increasing literature on the failures of Eastern enlargement (Börzel et al. 2017; Börzel, Schimmelfennig 2017; Bruszt, Langbein 2017; Dimitrova, Kortenska 2017; Fouéré 2016; Schimmelfennig, Winzen 2017; Schlipphak, Treib 2017; Sedelmeier 2017;) and also on the weak civil society in NMS (see Foa, Ekiert 2017).

9. See the latest data in European Parliament (2017). I have discussed this paradox of European identity in NMS in my paper, 'The clash of 'Europeanization' and 'Traditionalization' narratives in Hungary' (forthcoming) in the research project: 'National narratives and Europe after the crisis: Towards deeper union or disunion?' led by Hussein Kassim and Adriaan Schout.

10. See Buti and Pichelmann (2017). In the mid-2010s, populists in government has become an important topic in international political science, see e.g. the Special Issue of *Democratization* with the comparative paper of the guest editors, Taggart and Kaltwasser (2016), also Antal (2017) and Batory (2016) on the Hungarian case.

11. For instance, Rutter (2017: 1) has emphasized that it is 'very often cities leading the battle to restore progressive values', by referring to Bruce Katz book (*The Metropolitan Revolution*), arguing with the cities as 'antidote to populism'. There has been a new wave of mass demonstrations in NMS mostly by young people brought up in democracy.

12. The biggest drop of press freedom in the world in 2016 was in Poland (6 scores) and Hungary suffered a similar drop (4 scores). As a result, PL is in 66th and HU in 84th place (Freedom House 2017b: 27). PL is in 54th and HU in 71st place on the list of Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders 2017). In fact, the Orbán government may be a classic case of velvet dictatorship by the means of soft power. Democracy Reporting International (2017) has selected and well documented 5 facts on Hungary's illiberal state. Among them 'Media bias observed following state media takeover' and 'Excessive spending in biased referendum amounts to "political PR"' deserve special attention concerning the role of soft power in the authoritarian populism.

13. There has been a rich and innovative literature on Czech and Slovak soft populism, but there is no space here to discuss it (Bútora 2013; Gyárfášová, Mesežnikov 2004; Hanley 2016; Havlík, Hloušek 2014; Havlík, Pinková 2012; Havlík, Voda 2016; Mesežnikov et al. 2013; Sikk, Hanley 2012; Učeň 2004; 2010).

14. I have dealt in my former analyses (Ágh 2016c; 2016e) with the parallel developments in Poland and Hungary and the V4 issues at length. In a recent paper, Adam Balcer (2017) has elaborated the historical and cultural parallels between Poland and Hungary in depth, and he has pointed out that this narrative is relevant for the other ECE states as well. After the electoral victory of PiS many analysts have pointed out that Poland was not as successful in socio-economic development prior to 2015 as it was treated in the international press, see Hanley, Dawson (2017), Rae (2017) and Sczerbiak (2017).

15. 'People call him a populist. 'Because I am', he retorts. The problem is nobody knows what [that] means. It does not sound bad in Hungarian ears. Being a populist means that you try to serve the people. It's positive.' (Interview with Orbán in Politico, 2015).

16. In their journey to the past, Poland and Hungary have very low rankings in the 'preparedness for the future' according to the *Wake Up 2050 Index* (Wake Up Foundation 2017). In fact, they hold the last

places in the region. Out of 35 OECD countries – with a maximum score of 100 – Hungary is in 30th place (score 37.2) and Poland in 31st place (score 36.6).

17. Zaorálek (2017) identifies 'physical and cultural insecurity' as the reason for the ECE alienation and argues for 'the stronger emphasis on social cohesion' and 'strengthening of the European social pillar'.

18. The Rome Declaration (European Council 2017) advocates 'a Social Europe' with 'social progress as well as cohesion and convergence'. It can be, indeed, the solution for the Core-Periphery Divide, and the coming future will show whether it remains poor rhetoric.

19. For the preparation of a multispeed Europe, the representatives of four core states – Germany, France, Spain and Italy - met in Versailles on 6 March 2017 (see Kisilowski 2017). Outlining the EU scenarios, however, Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg (2016: 34) have issued a warning that '[t]he distinction between euro and non-euro countries undermines political cohesion (…) the establishment of a core Europe against the will of those left behind would lead to the opposite direction and risk creating new dividing lines in Europe.'

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Appendix:

Table 1: World Economic Forum (WEF), Institutional trust in East-Central Europe and the Baltic States, Rankings in 2008 and 2015 in 133–148 countries						
country	compar.	institutions	pubfunds	poltrust	favouritism	transparency
BG	76–50	116–97	113–116	112–94	110–97	118–111
CZ	31–31	62–54	91–105	115–92	104–96	103–77
HR	72–74	85–89	80–98	91–113	92–102	88–120
HU	58–69	76–114	94–108	111–97	114–135	113–136
PL	46–36	66–65	50–54	99–104	64–75	127–109
RO	64–62	84–92	75–106	106–120	117–119	128–110
SI	37–56	46–58	41–71	45–90	56–84	29–70
SK	47–65	78–102	95–122	121–110	127–136	54–84
EE	35–30	31–23	39–28	51–37	39–23	17–24
LA	68–49	65–64	69–76	102–95	97–99	78–71
LT	53–35	59–51	67–63	95–66	70–67	61–59
Comparativeness rankings (1), institutions in general as the 1st pillar (2), followed by the 1.03, 1.04, 1.06 and 1.11 special indicators as (3) diversion of public funds, (4) public trust of politicians, (5) favouritism in decisions of government officials, (6) transparency of government policymaking.						
Source: World Economic Forum (2016).						

Table 2: World Economic Forum, Public trust in politicians, Rankings between 2008 and 2015 in 133-148 countries

country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
BG	112	104	95	85	97	130	110	94
CZ	115	121	134	139	146	138	107	92
HR	91	96	104	115	114	124	122	113
HU	111	128	130	128	129	113	120	97
PL	99	82	76	90	100	101	100	104
RO	106	116	119	133	141	109	112	120
SI	45	70	96	116	133	133	105	90
SK	121	132	132	136	139	121	113	110
EE	51	53	32	30	42	38	34	37
LA	102	119	92	84	89	84	87	95
LT	95	108	110	113	95	83	67	66

Source: World Economic Forum (2016).

Table 3: Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), Democracy Index 2016, Rank and scores (1–10), 167 countries

country	(1) rank	(2) score	(3) elec.	(4) gov.	(5) part.	(6) cult.	(7) civil
BG	47	7.01	9.17	6.07	7.22	4.38	8.24
CZ	31	7.82	9.58	7.14	6.67	6.88	8.82
HR	54	6.75	9.17	6.07	5.56	5.00	7.94
HU	56	6.72	9.17	6.07	4.44	6.88	7.06
PL	52	6.83	9.17	5.71	6.67	4.38	8.24
RO	61	6.62	9.17	5.71	5.00	5.00	8.24
SI	37	7.51	9.58	7.14	6.67	5.63	8.53
SK	42	7.29	9.58	7.14	5.56	5.63	8.53
EE	29	7.85	9.58	7.86	6.11	6.88	8.82
LA	41	7.31	9.58	5.71	5.56	6.88	8.82
LT	38	7.47	9.58	5.71	6.11	6.25	9.71

(1) general rank, (2) overall score; and special scores for (3) electoral process and pluralism, (4) functioning of government, (5) political participation, (6) political culture and (7) civil liberties

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2017).

Table 4: Transparency International; Corruption Perception Index between 2012–2016; Ranking in 2016 in 166 countries with scores between 2012 and 2016						
country	rank	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
BG	75	41	41	43	41	41
CZ	47	55	56	51	48	49
HR	55	49	51	48	48	46
HU	57	48	51	54	54	54
PL	29	62	62	61	60	58
RO	57	48	46	43	43	44
SI	31	61	60	58	57	61
SK	54	51	51	50	47	46
EE	22	70	70	69	68	64
LA	44	57	55	55	53	49
LT	38	59	61	58	57	54
Source: Transparency International (2017).						