POPREBEL

Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism

Working Paper no. 6

Electoral performance of populist parties in Eastern Europe 1989-2019. Policy recommendations designed to counteract the rise of populism.

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POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) is a large Horizon 2020-funded research project on the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. The aim of the project is to describe the phenomenon, create a typology of its various manifestations, reconstruct trajectories of its growth and decline, investigate its causes, interpret its meanings, diagnose its consequences and propose policy solutions.

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

The rise of populism in various countries around the world is a much-discussed topic in both academic and policy circles. Eastern Europe is often identified as a region where the ascendance of populist parties has been particularly prominent. However, there have been few attempts to systematically track the electoral performance of populist parties across Eastern European nations over a prolonged period of time. How successful have populist parties been in elections across Eastern Europe? How does their performance vary across countries, over time, and across different types of elections, and how does it compare to the performance of populist parties in Western Europe? What major events and developments, if any, coincide with the rise of populists in Eastern Europe? More specifically, did the economic and financial crisis and the migration crisis contribute to the electoral fortunes of populist parties? How frequently have Eastern European populist parties been in government, and what are the prevalent patterns of government formation involving populist actors? Finally, what conclusions can be drawn from answers to the questions posed above, and what can be done to counteract the rise of populist actors in Eastern Europe and beyond?

Activities carried out under the Work Package 4 of the POPREBEL project (Task 4.3) focused on ascertaining the number, ideological type, electoral performance and government participation of populist parties in 11 post-communist member states of the European Union over a period of thirty years (1989-2019). In order to place the results in context, comparisons were made to other EU member states where relevant. The specific objectives included:

1) ascertaining the number and ideological type of populist parties in both Eastern and Western Europe and tracing the change in the supply of populist parties over three decades;
2) tracing the performance of populist parties in both national and European Parliament elections and ascertaining the impact of the economic and migration crisis on electoral support for populists;
3) tracing the seat share of populist parties in national legislative assemblies as well as the European Parliament;
4) identifying all cabinets that have included populist parties, distinguishing between mixed and all-populist coalitions, as well as populist single-party cabinets;
5) drawing conclusions from the above, including deriving a set a policy recommendations for counteracting the rise of populism in Eastern Europe and beyond.

The scope of the analysis includes 11 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries that have a history of communist rule and are currently members of the European Union (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia). The analysis traced the electoral performance of populist parties in these 11 countries over a period of thirty years (1989 - 2019). The timeframe of the study corresponds to the period during which formerly communist-dominated countries have been able to conduct multi-party elections. The report covers both national parliamentary elections as well as European Parliament elections. Nine of the 11 countries examined in this report joined the EU in 2004 and held EP elections for the first time the same year, while Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007 and Croatia acceded in 2013.

The data for the analysis was drawn from two political science databases – The *PopuList* and *ParlGov*. *The PopuList* (www.popu-list.org) provides an overview of populist, far right, far left and Euroskeptic parties in Europe since 1989 (Rooduijn et al 2019). *The PopuList* is supported by the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, the Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, The Guardian, and the ECPR Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy. The Parliaments and Governments database (ParlGov, www.parlgov.org), *led by* Holger Döring and Philip Manow at the University of Bremen, is a data infrastructure for parties and elections (Döring and Manow 2020). Covering all EU and most OECD democracies, it contains data on elections results for all countries and all years covered in this report.

2. Activities carried out and results

2.1 Supply of populist parties in the East and the West

This section provides an overview of the number and type of populist parties across 11 Eastern European countries and 30 years. In order to place this information in context, a comparison is made to other EU member states. The data comes from The PopuList. Relying on a widely accepted definition proposed by Mudde (2004), The PopuList (Rooduijn et al 2019) classifies parties as populist in case they endorse the idea that society is separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and argue that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. The classification of parties in The PopuList has been peer-reviewed by more than 80 academics. Only parties have either won (1) at least 1 seat or (2) at least 2% of the votes in national parliamentary elections since 1989 are included in The PopuList.

Being a "thin ideology" (Mudde 2004), populism is compatible with a broad range of ideological positions. Many populist parties are simultaneously far-right or Euroskeptic. Less frequently, populist parties have a far-left ideological orientation. The definition of far-right parties combines a subscription to a nativist ideology that regards non-native elements as fundamentally threatening with an endorsement of authoritarianism, i.e. belief in a strictly ordered society (Mudde 2007). The definition of the far-left employed by the PopuList builds on March (2012), and includes parties that reject capitalism and advocate alternative economic and power structures as well as redistribution of resources from existing political elites. Finally, consistently with Taggart and Szczerbiak (2004), Euroskepticism is defined as entailing both the soft and hard varieties, i.e. including parties that express either contingent or qualified opposition or outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration (see Rooduijn et al 2019).

The number of populist parties varies greatly across European countries. Figure 1 shows the number of populist parties that have had a non-negligeable electoral presence (defined as vote share over 2%) at any time between 1989 and 2019 in the 28 current and former member states of the EU. The average number of populist parties for EU-28 countries was 3.1. During the period observed, Bulgaria had more populist parties than any other country (9), closely followed by Greece and Slovakia (8 each), while Malta had none. In all post-communist Eastern European countries, except Estonia and Latvia, the number of populist parties exceeded the EU-28 average. However, there is no clear East-West distinction, as several old member states, such as Greece, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, also had a relatively high number of populist parties. When interpreting these numbers, it is important to keep in mind that the number of populist parties does not capture their influence, and that the overall number of parties varies greatly across countries, in part as a function of electoral systems.
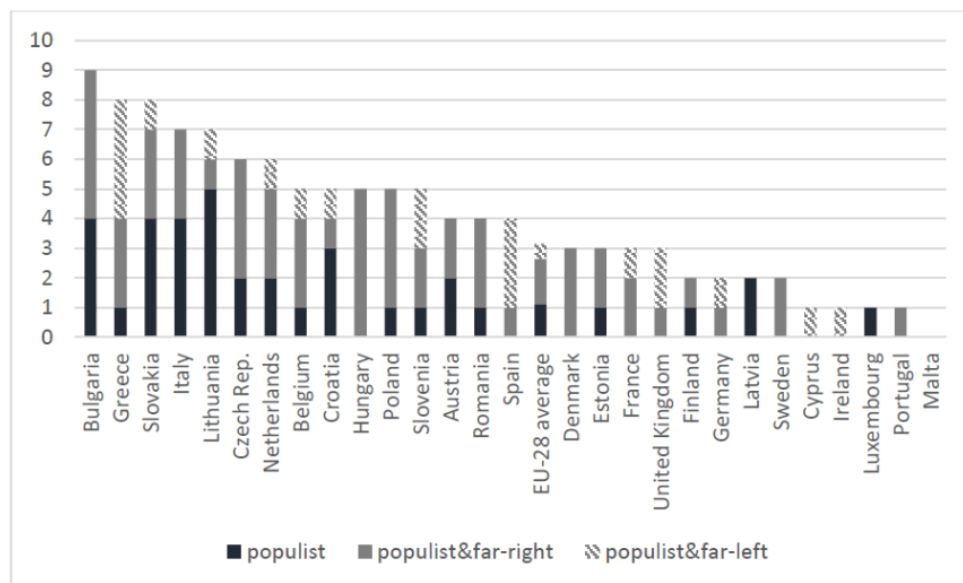

Figure 1. Number and ideological type of populist parties in 28 European countries, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList

The breakdown of populist parties by ideological orientation confirms the assumption that populism often has a symbiotic relationship with political extremism as well as Euroskepticism (Figures 1 and 2). In 23 out of 28 countries, at least a half of the populist parties are simultaneously classified as either far-right or far-left (the exceptions are Lithuania, Croatia, Latvia and Luxembourg, as well as Malta, which has no populist parties). The combination of populism and right-wing extremism is more common than the symbiosis of populism and far-left ideology. This is particularly true in Eastern Europe, where only Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, and Croatia have one or several populist parties that can be simultaneously classified as far-left. In the vast majority of countries, the majority of populist parties in existence between 1989 and 2019 have been Euroskeptic (Figure 2). Cyprus, Estonia and Croatia constitute exceptions – in those countries, less than a half of all populist parties have been Euroskeptic.
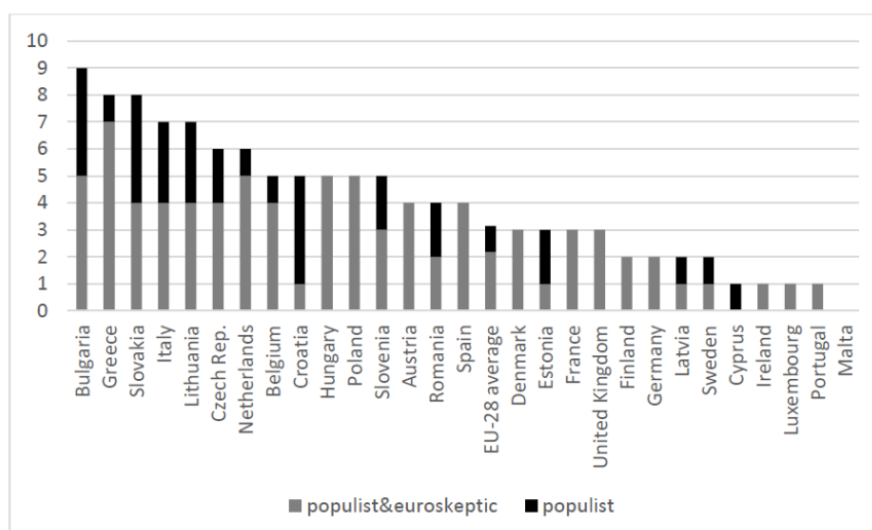
Figure 2. Share of Euroskeptic parties among populist parties in 28 European countries, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList

Across the 28 countries analysed, the number of populist parties participating in elections has more than doubled over the course of three decades. Between 1989 and 1999, 40 populist parties contested elections; the corresponding figure for the 2010-2019 period is 85. The increase in the number of populist parties has been even more pronounced in Eastern Europe (Table 1): while 17 CEE parties (receiving at least 2% of vote in any election) were classified as populist for the period 1989-1999, the respective number was 42 for the 2010-2019 period. The share of far-right populist parties among all CEE populist parties has declined from almost two-thirds in the 1990s to less than a half post-2010. The combination of populism and a far-left orientation is rare in CEE countries. More than a half of CEE populist parties exhibit scepticism about European integration. Since the year 2000, about a third of CEE populist parties can be classified as pure populists –i.e. not subscribing to far-right, far-left or Euroskeptic positions (Table 1).

Table 1. Number and type of populist parties across three decades, 11 Eastern European countries

|	1989-1999	2000-2009	2010-2019
Populist parties	17	28	42
Populist * Far-right	11 (65%)	16 (57%)	20 (48%)
Populist * Far-left	2 (12%)	1 (4%)	3 (7%)
Populist * Euroskeptic	11 (65%)	15 (54%)	24 (57%)
Populist * Far-right * Euroskeptic	8 (47%)	12 (43%)	17 (40%)
Populist * Far-left * Euroskeptic	2 (12%)	1 (4%)	2 (5%)
Pure populist	3 (18%)	9 (32%)	14 (33%)

Source: PopuList and ParlGov

2.2 Performance of populist parties in national elections

In order to trace the electoral performance of populist parties over time, we rely on data on party vote and seat shares from ParlGov. Figure 3 shows the spectacular rise of populist parties in national elections in the 28 countries analysed. While the average vote share of populist parties for Eastern and Western Europe was very similar throughout the 1990s, a significant East-West gap emerged after the turn of millennium. During the first five years after the 2004 enlargement, the average vote share of populist parties in Eastern Europe was about 10 percentage points higher than the respective indicator for Western Europe (Figure 3). Since about 2009, the gap has gradually diminished but not closed.
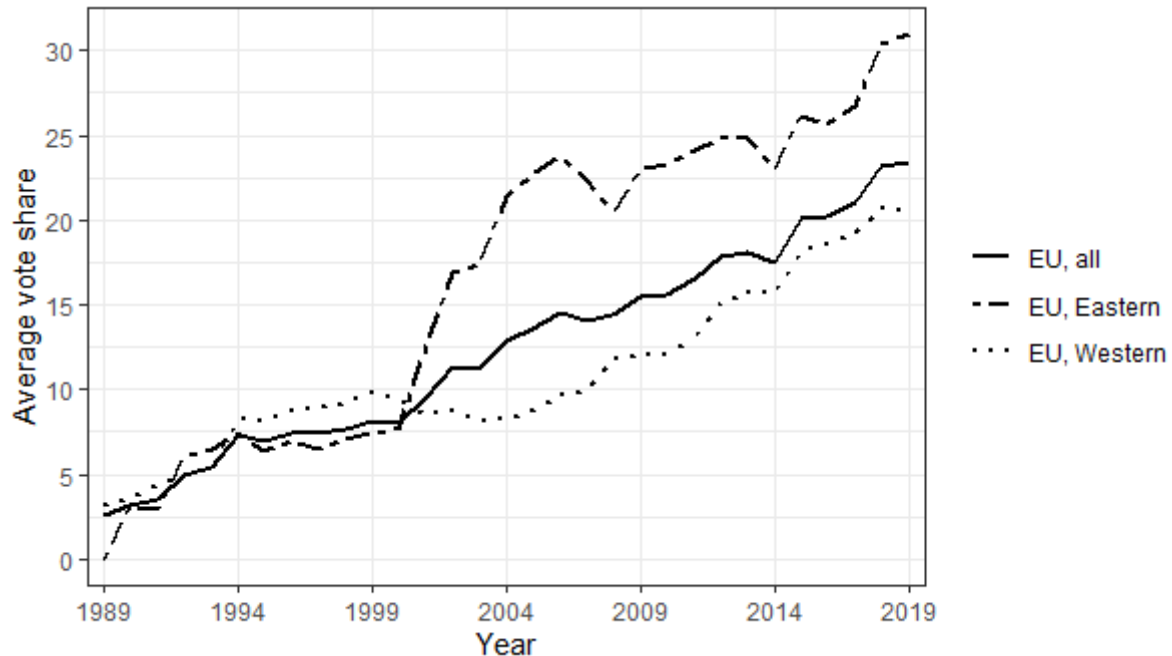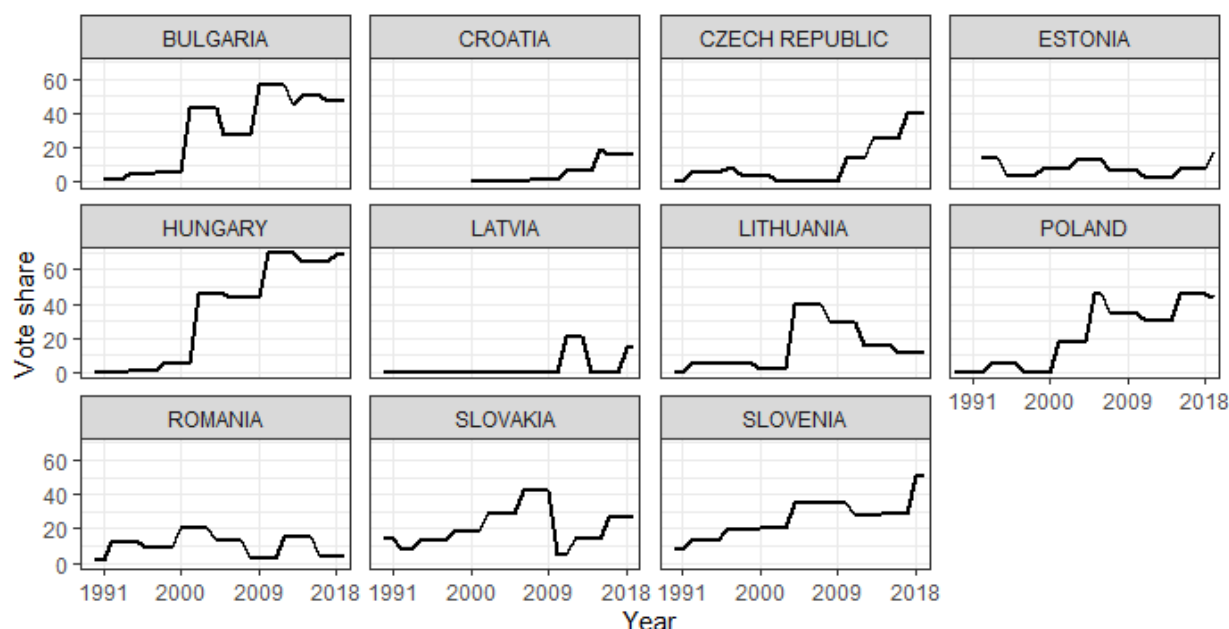

Figure 3. Populist party vote share in national elections, 1989-2019
Note: Eastern Europe defined as 11 post-communist countries. Western Europe defined as all other member states, except Cyprus and Malta.
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

The electoral fortunes of populists vary extensively across the 11 Eastern European countries covered in this report (Figure 4). Croatia, Latvia and Estonia have contributed little to the observed rise of populists in the region. Hungary and Bulgaria, on the other hand, have registered some of the highest populist party vote shares among all EU countries. In Hungary, populist parties (Jobbik and Fidesz+ KDNP) took 68% of the vote in 2018 elections, a result surpassed only by Italian elections of 2019 in which populists (Lega Nord, Five Star Movement and others) received 69% of the vote. Hungary and Bulgaria can also be characterized as having experienced a steep, early onset of the populist wave. In Bulgaria, populist vote share jumped to 43% in the 2001 elections (from 5.3% in previous elections) due to the popularity of a new party – National Movement Simeon II. In Hungary, Fidesz, which is classified as populist from 2002, received 41% of the vote in 2002 – in sharp contrast to populist vote share of 5.5% in preceding elections. Lithuania also experienced a sharp increase in populist vote share in the 2004 elections owing to the popularity of several new parties (Labour Party, Liberal Democratic Party). In other countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia), the rise of populists has been more gradual. Finally, Figure 4 also suggests that the electoral fortunes of populist parties can also be reversed: significant drops in populist vote share from one election to the next have occurred in Lithuania, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Latvia. In sum, much of the rise of populists in Eastern Europe can be attributed to the electoral appeal of new parties established after 2000.
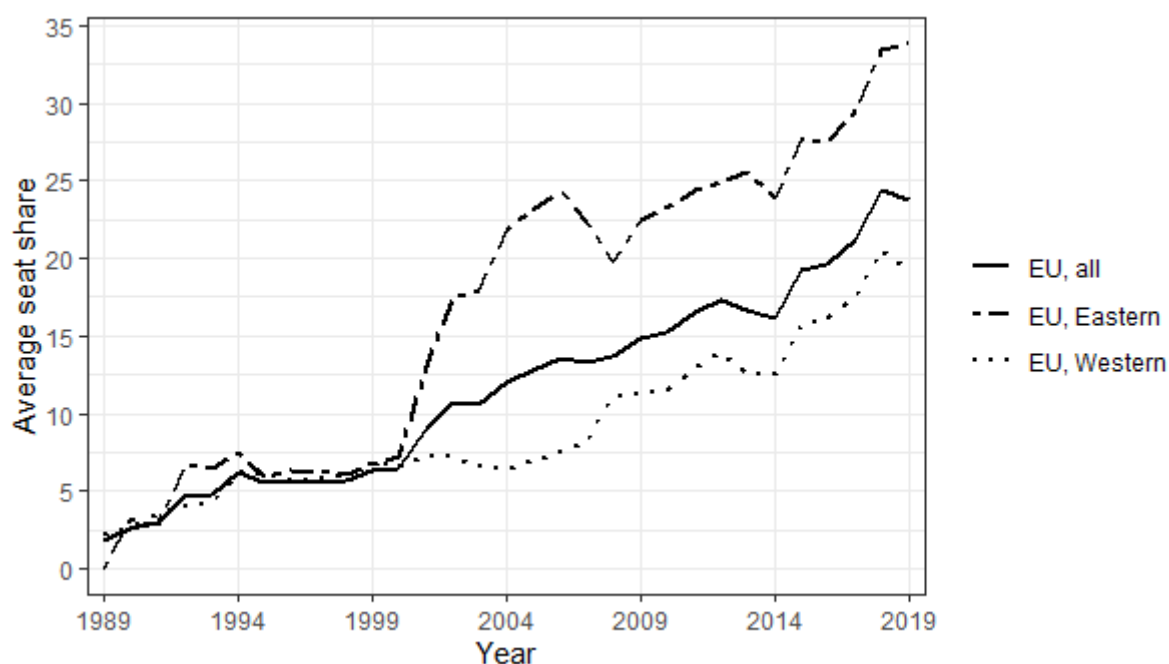
Figure 4. Populist party vote share in national elections in Eastern Europe, 1989-2019
Note: the lines represent populist party vote shares based on most recent elections for given time point.
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

As almost all Eastern European countries use proportional voting systems, the vote share obtained by populist parties corresponds closely to their seat shares in national legislative assemblies. Figure 5 depicts average populist party seat share in national legislative assemblies for Eastern and Western Europe. During the observed period, several Eastern European countries have had parliaments where the majority of seats were held by populist parties (Figure 6). Examples include Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia. Hungary is the extreme case: since 2010, more than 70% of seats in the Hungarian parliament have been occupied by members belonging to populist parties. Malta is the only country in EU-28 that never had a populist party in the parliament.
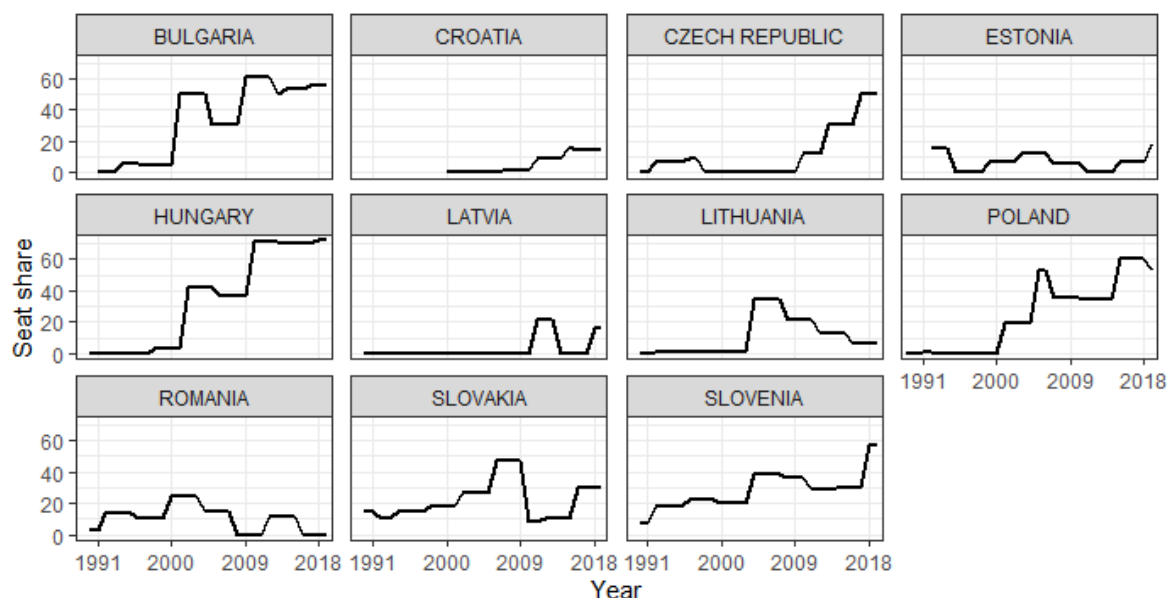

Figure 5. Populist party seat share in national legislative assemblies, 1989-2019
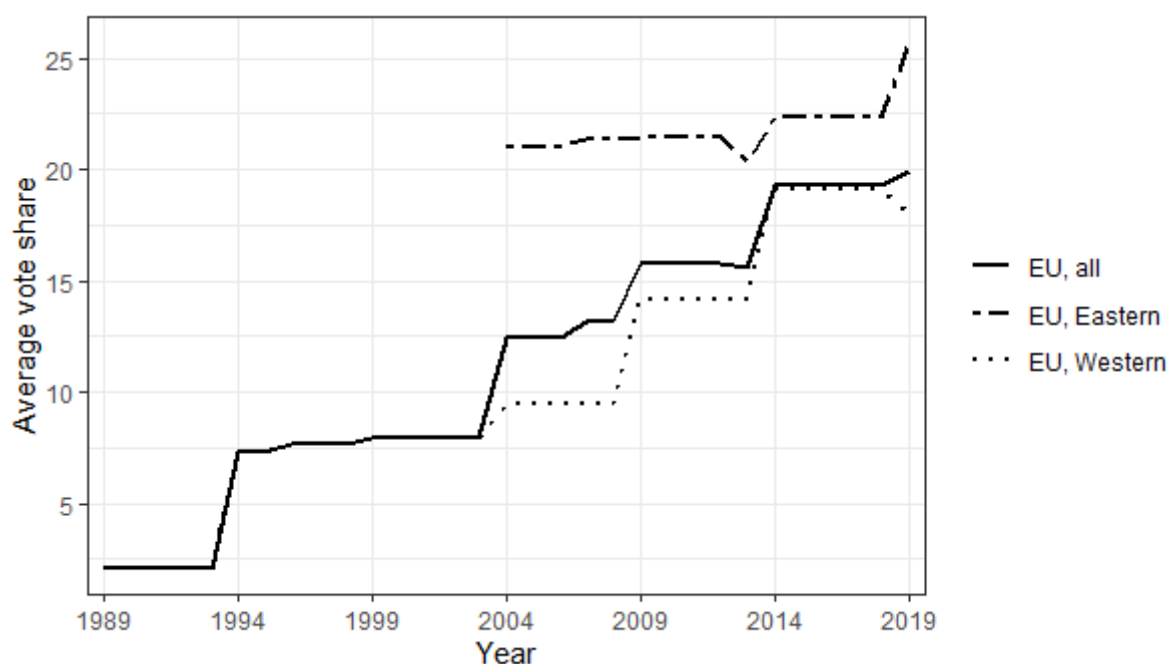Source: PopuList and ParlGov

Figure 6. Populist party seat share in Eastern Europe, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

2.3 Performance of populist parties in European Parliament elections
While Western European countries have witnessed a gradual rise of populist parties in European Parliament elections since the mid-1990s, many Eastern European countries recorded high and very high levels of support for populists in the very first EP elections held (Figures 7 and 8). In Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia, populist parties took around 25% of the vote in the first EP elections. In Lithuania, populist vote share in the 2004 contests was 37%, and in Bulgaria - 42%. In Hungary, populist parties received 50% of the vote in 2004, and broke all records five years later, taking 71% of the vote in the 2009 EP elections. Croatia, Latvia, Estonia and Romania are distinguished by very low levels of support for populists in EP elections. Overall, the East-West gap in populist performance in EP elections is not surprising, as it mirrors the regional differential in populist support in national elections.
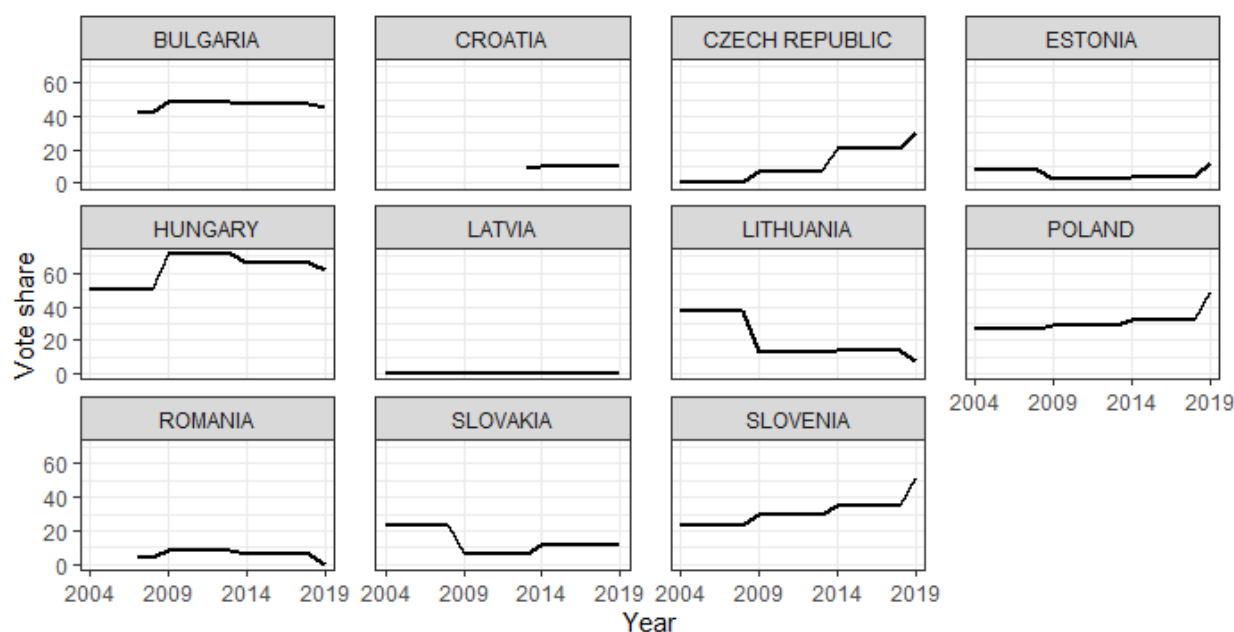

Figure 7. Populist party vote share in European Parliament elections, 1989-2019
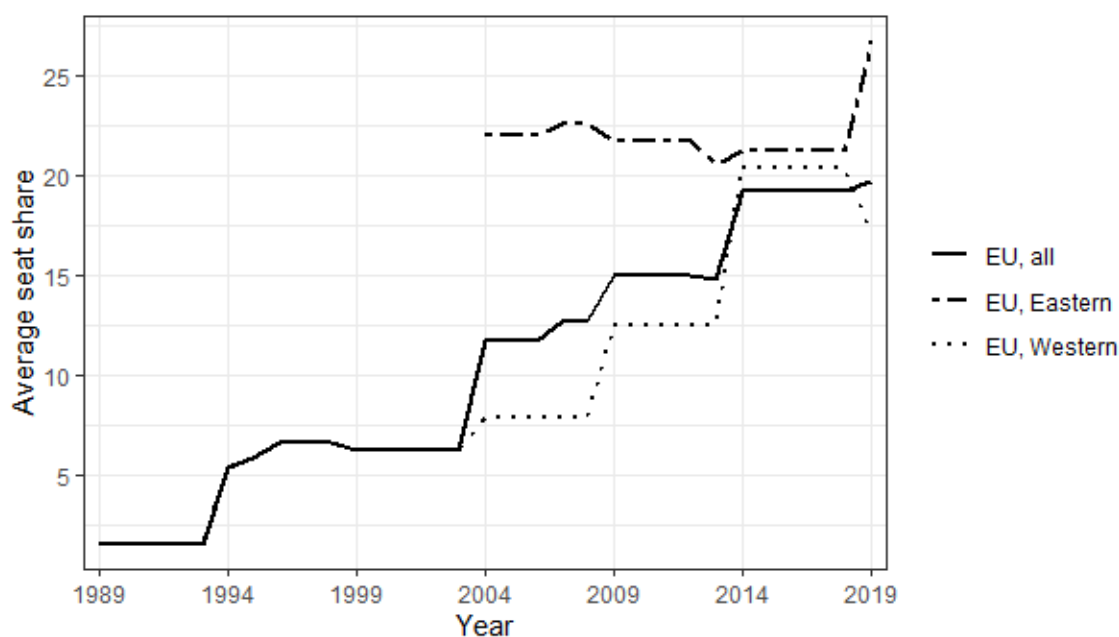
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

Figure 8. Populist party vote share in European Parliament elections in Eastern Europe, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

The electoral fortunes of populists are reflected in the share of each country's EP seats taken up by populist parties. Eastern European countries, as a group, have had a significantly higher average representation of populists than Western European countries in all EP terms since 2004, except the 2014-2019 term when the average seat share of populists in both the East and the West was slightly over 20% (Figure 9). Latvia is the only Eastern European country that never had a MEP from a populist party. The Czech Republic had no populists represented in the EP until 2014 and Estonia had none until 2019. Bulgaria and Hungary, in contrast, have always had at least a half of their respective EP seats occupied by politicians affiliated with populist parties (Figure 10).
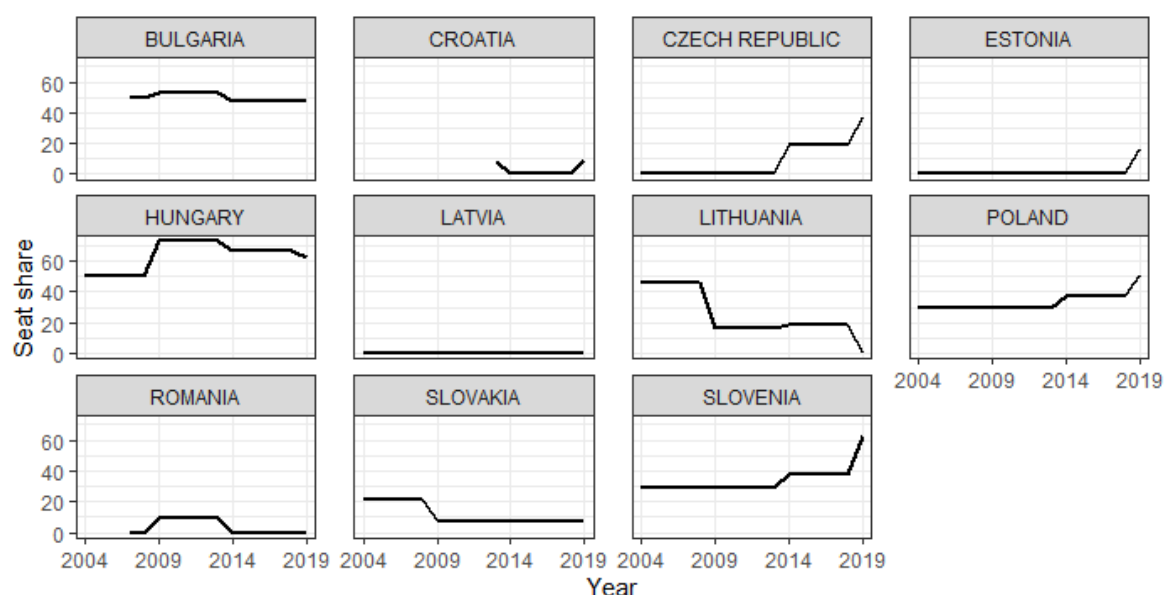

Figure 9. Populist party seat share in European Parliament elections, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

Figure 10: Populist party seat share in European Parliament elections in Eastern Europe, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

2.4. Populist parties in government

Across Europe, populists have increasingly moved from the political periphery to power. Figure 11 illustrates this shift. In 1989, only one out of the 28 countries analysed in this report had a populist party in government. In 2019, populist forces participated in governments in twelve countries. In most cases, populists were included in mixed cabinets to-gether with non-populist parties. However, during the observed period, there have been 13 governing coalitions in-volving populist parties only (e.g. the Berlusconi IV cabinet in Italy, the Tsipras I and II cabinets in Greece) as well as 13 populist single-party governments (e.g. Tsipras III). Countries that have experienced rule by all-populist cabinets since 2005 include Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.
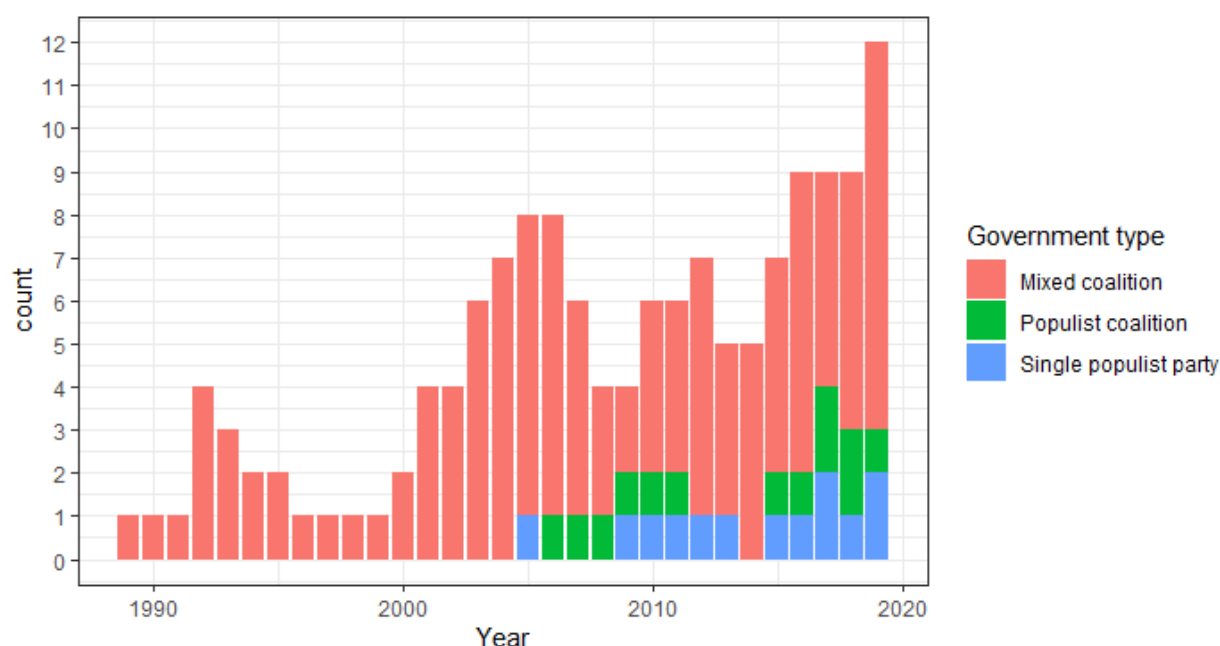
Figure 11. Populist parties in government in Europe, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

Altogether, 15 European countries had governments involving populist parties during the period of 1989-2019, including all 11 Eastern European member states. In CEE, most governments that included populist parties also included non-populist forces (Figure 12). In 2019, populists formed coalitions with non-populist parties in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. In Poland, the Morawiecki II cabinet was formed by the populist Law and Justice alone. Since 2005, Poland has had three more single party populist governments, all formed by Law and Justice (Marcinkiewicz I; Szydlo; Morawiecki I). Poland is also the only EU country that has been governed by a coalition of as many as three populist parties. This has occurred twice during the observed period (Marcinkiewicz II; Kaczynski). Other examples of single- party populist governments in CEE include the Borisov I cabinet in Bulgaria (Citizens for European Development) and the Babis I cabinet in the Czech Republic (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens). The third Borisov government in Bulgaria consists of two populist parties (Citizens for European Development; National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria).
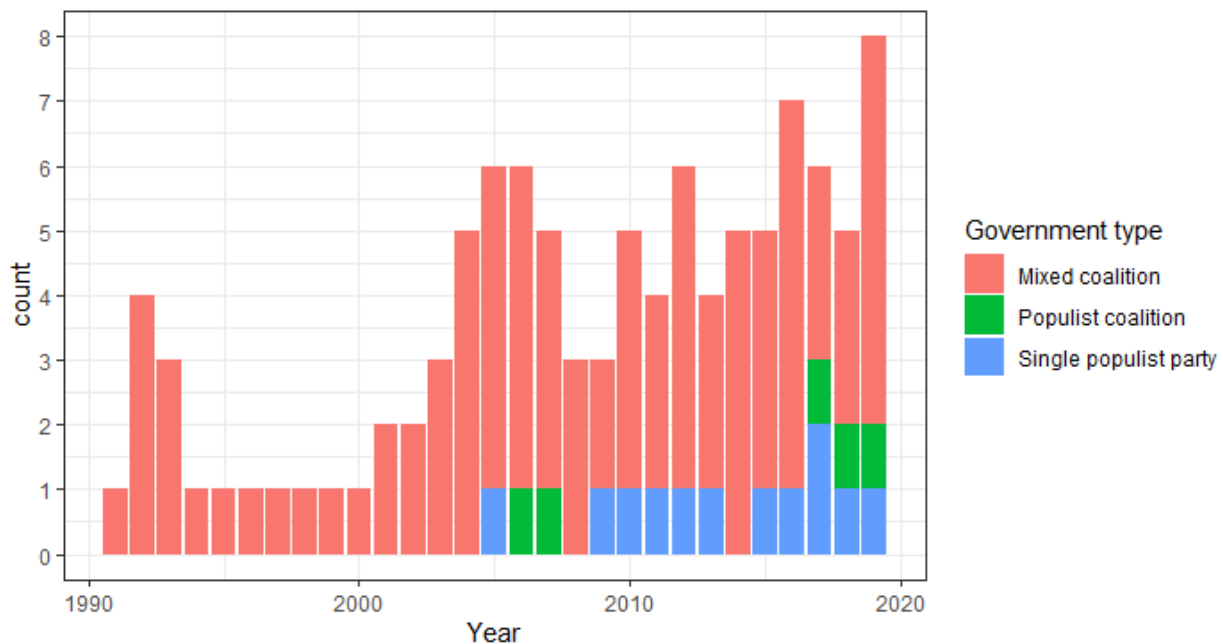
Figure 12. Populist parties in government in Eastern Europe, 1989-2019
Source: PopuList and ParlGov.

What happens to populist parties when they move from opposition to government? Do they lose support? Do they change their discourse? Do they compromise their policies if participation takes place within a coalition? Much of the scholarly work in the 1990s and early 2000s predicted dire outlooks for populists in office. Factors such as the protest nature of populist parties, inexperience in policy-making and inability to live up to their promises drove the expectation that populists are destined for success in opposition but failure in government (see e.g. Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Canovan 1999; Mény & Surel 2002; Heinisch 2003; Mudde 2007). More recent studies find no evidence of electoral losses. Even though some parties decline electorally after their first experience of government, "there is no evidence suggesting that voters wished to 'punish' these parties due to their behaviour in office" (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015: 168). Grzymala-Busse (2019) proposes that populist parties maintain their popularity largely thanks to generous, if selective, social policies. Findings are mixed on ideological changes. Some studies suggest that entry into government does not bring moderation in populist discourse (Bobba and McDonnell 2016), while others maintain that electoral success makes populist parties tone down their populism (Rooduijn et al 2014). Albertazzi and McDonnell (2015:3) find that members of populist parties evaluate their parties' experiences in power very positively, and conclude that when in office, populists have demonstrated their ability to introduce key policies in line with their core ideologies and election promises, and shown that they can survive incumbency, despite compromises and disappointments that it may bring.

Once in office, modern populism seeks to establish an order that is democratic but not liberal (Pappas 2019: 71). Key features of this order include personalist rule, the pursuit of political polarization, seize control over the state by filling

government jobs with party loyalists, emasculating liberal institutions, strengthening the executive, using patronage to reward supporters and weakening opponents, and imposing an illiberal constitution (Pappas 2019; Mudde 2013). Once populist power has been established, there are three potential pathways that a nation may take (Pappas 2019). First, populism may entrench itself and become systemic, prompting weakly liberal parties to also shift in a populist direction. Kriesi (2014) argues that by articulating a new structural conflict between globalization 'losers' and globalization 'winners', populist challengers push established parties to start competing for the mobilization of the 'losers' – a move that has potential to transform party systems. This is particularly true for Central and Eastern Europe where party systems are not fully institutionalized (Kriesi 2014). The second possible trajectory entails populism turning into autocracy – or into outright dictatorship if all opposition is eliminated. The third potential outcome is dispersion of populism across the political system and a return to liberal democracy. However, populism can be revived if liberal institutions or forces remain weak, if a crisis breaks out that raises doubts about liberalism's effectiveness and legitimacy, or, crucially, if a new charismatic populist leader emerges that reunites the populist constituency (Pappas 2019: 80-81). Finally, government structure influences the outcomes of populist rule. Coalition governments constrain the behaviour and policy approach of populist governments (Taggart and Kaltwasser 2016). Populists in power do not endanger democracy as long as they have to cooperate in coalition governments with mainstream parties which are electorally more important (Kriesi 2018).

Regime trajectories in populist-ruled Hungary and Poland illustrate the aforementioned tendencies. In 2020, five years after the populist Law and Justice party rose to power, the Freedom House downgraded Poland's status to a semi-consolidated democracy. Hungary, ruled by populist governments led by Fidesz since 2010, had acquired the status of a semi-consolidated democracy already in 2015, and in 2020, it was further downgraded to a transitional/hybrid regime (Freedom House 2020). The dynamics of democracy scores of the 11 East European countries are summarized in Figure 13. The results demonstrate the potential of prolonged populist rule to lead to an erosion of democracy and the rise of personal manipulative authoritarianism.
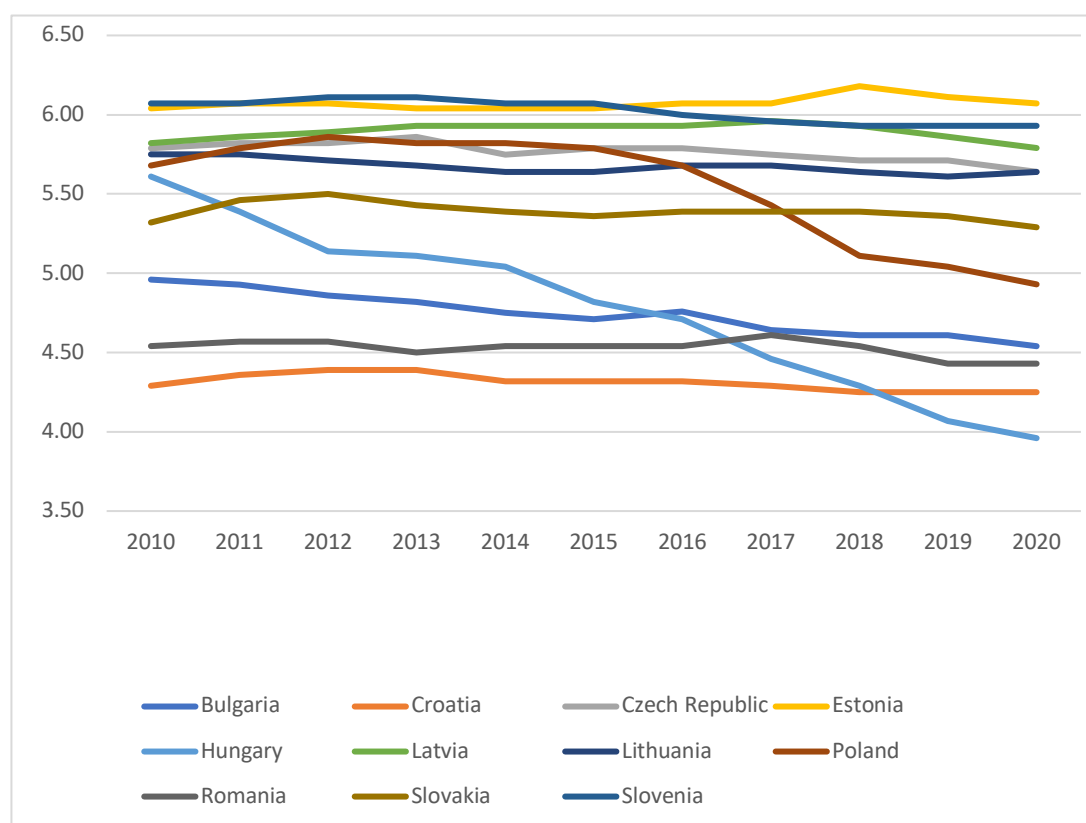
Figure 13. Change in democracy scores in Eastern Europe
Note: 1 represents the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress.
Source: Freedom House (2020)

2.5 Did the crises matter?

The rise of populist parties has often been linked to Europe's recent crises, including the economic and financial crisis that started in 2008-2009 and the migration crisis that culminated in 2015. How do these explanations fare when measured against empirical evidence?

First, our data strongly suggests that the severity of economic downturn during the economic and financial crisis does not explain patterns of populist party vote gain in CEE. As evident from Figure 4, the rise of populism in Bulgaria, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia predates the economic crisis. In fact, significant gains in populist party vote share occurred in the context of rapid economic growth of the early and mid-2000s. The severity of the recession experienced during the crisis does not predict the electoral fortunes of populists. Figure 14 graphs average annual GDP growth over a period of three years (2008-2010) against change in populist party vote share across consecutive national elections held before and after the onset of the crisis. The Baltic countries experienced some of the deepest recessions in the world, with GDP contracting by almost 15% in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in 2009 compared to the previous year. Yet, a comparing the results of elections held before and after the onset of the crisis suggests that populist parties made no electoral gains in the three Baltic states (Figure 14). In Hungary, the recession was much less severe, with negative GDP growth limited to just one year (-6.7 % in 2009). Yet, populist party vote gain amounted to more than 25 percentage points, as revealed by comparing the results of national elections held in 2006 and 2010. Poland was one of the few countries in Europe that did not experience a recession between 2008 and 2010. A comparison of elections held in 2007 and 2011 shows that populist parties lost 5 percentage points of the vote. Slovakia recorded negative growth amounting to -5.5% of the GDP in 2009. In elections held in June 2010, populist parties lost more than 40 percentage points of the vote compared to the 2006 elections (Figure 14). In Bulgaria, the recession was relatively mild (GDP contracted by 3.4% in 2009). Yet, populist parties made significant electoral gains in the 2009 elections (an increase of more than 25 percentage points compared to the 2005 elections). In sum, macro-economic performance during the economic crisis does not predict the electoral trajectories of populist parties in Central and Eastern Europe.
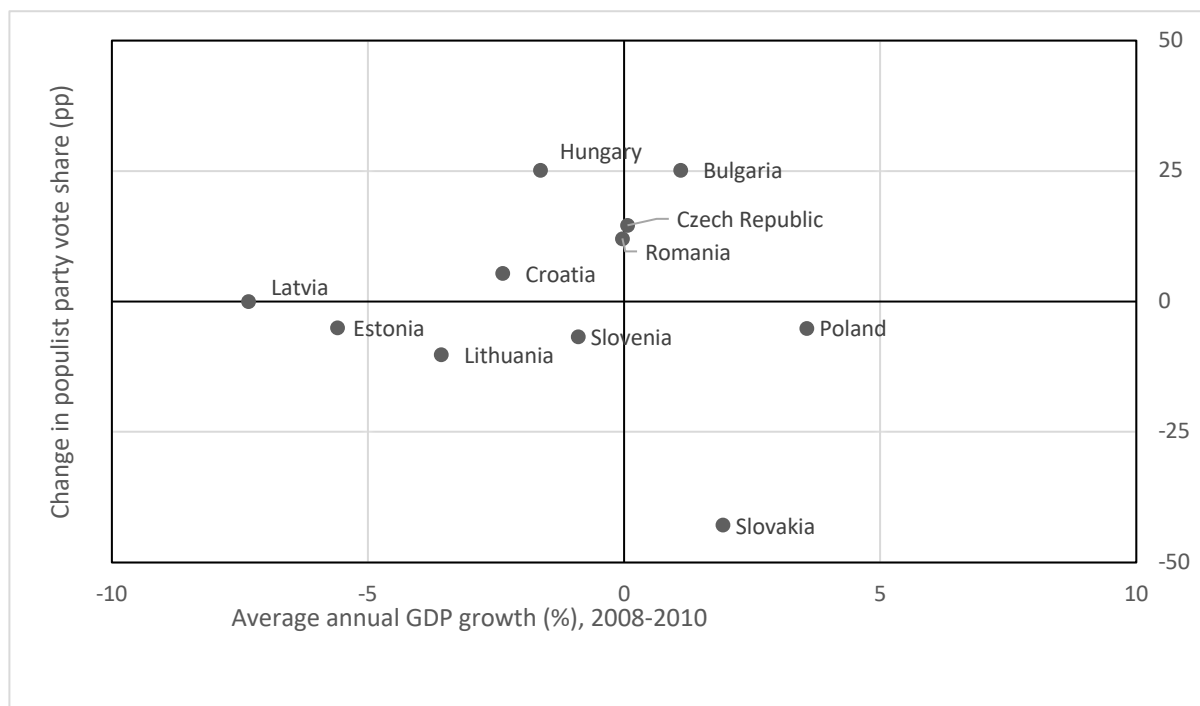
Figure 14. Severity of economic crisis and change in populist party vote share
Source: PopuList, ParlGov, World Bank

The effect of the migration crisis on the electoral success of CEE populist is more difficult to untangle. While the CEE countries were not the main destination for migrants and asylum-seekers and many of them located off the main migration routes, the direct impact of the crisis on the region was limited compared to Southern or Western Europe.

However, the political impact of the crisis was significant, and provided new opportunities for populist actors. Given the CEE populist parties' symbiotic relationship with the far-right and Euroskepticism (Table 1), opposition to immigration, multi-culturalism and to EU policies adopted in response to the crisis (such as the refugee relocation and resettlement) have been central to the CEE populist agenda. Still, an analysis of populist electoral performance over time does not allow us to conclude that the migration crisis has been a major catalyst of the populist rise. In Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland, the populist tide had occurred about 10 years before the migration crisis – by the mid-2000s, populists had received 40% or more of the vote in national elections in all three countries. The migration crisis does not seem to have further boosted the performance of populists at the polls (Figure 4). In Lithuania, populist vote share peaked at about 40% in the mid-2000s and has consistently declined since. In Slovakia, support for populists collapsed in 2010 but the subsequent gradual comeback over the past decade may have been aided by anti-immigration sentiments. Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, and Slovenia also registered noticeable populist electoral gains since about 2015 (Figure 4). While the extent to which populists in these countries capitalized on anti-immigration sentiment varied, the migration crisis seems to have led to increased support for populists in about half of the CEE countries.

3. Conclusions

This paper focused on mapping the electoral performance of populist parties in 11 Central and Eastern European countries by ascertaining their number, ideological type, electoral performance and government participation over the period of 1989-2019. The analysis demonstrates a remarkable rise in the number populist parties. During the period of 1989-1999, 17 CEE parties were classified as populist whereas in 2010-2019, 42 parties belonged to this category. Populist ideology frequently coincides with extremism and Euroskepticism – more than a half of the populist parties in CEE exhibit scepticism about European integration. Central and Eastern Europe is a not a unified entity, however: the electoral appeal of populist parties and its dynamics over time vary extensively from country to country. Croatia, Latvia and Estonia have contributed little to the observed rise of populists in the region, while Hungary and Bulgaria have registered some of the highest populist party vote shares in the EU. Across Europe, and specifically in Eastern Europe, populists have moved from the political periphery to power: all 11 Eastern European countries have had populist parties in government at a certain time point between 1989-2019. In 2019, populists were included in governments in eight Eastern European countries. Populists in power typically participate in a coalition with non-populist parties. All-populist coalition government and single-party populist governments are less common but occur with increasing frequency -- examples include Poland, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. Prolonged rule by populists is associated with democratic backsliding and the rise of personalist authoritarianism, as demonstrated by the trajectories of Hungarian and Polish regimes. Finally, the rise of populist parties in CEE countries cannot be attributed to Europe's recent crises, including the financial and the migration crisis, as a significant rise in populist support occurred already earlier, and there appears to be no correlation between macro-economic performance and electoral gains of populists.

Recommendations to non-populist actors on how to counteract the rise of populism:

Rebuild trust in democratic institutions and decision-making processes. The rise of populism does not stem from objective economic or societal changes, instead it is associated with disappointment in mainstream politics. Citizens are more likely to vote for populists when they do not trust political institutions and feel alienated, disenfranchised or unrepresented. While the erosion of trust in democratic institutions is a problem worldwide, the challenges are especially stark in Eastern Europe where trust in political institutions, in particular political parties, has been low.

Strengthen the rule of law. Corruption undermines trust in political institutions and political elites. Populists in power use patronage to reward supporters and to consolidate their position. The EU's Rule of Law report is an important new tool for assessing the rule of law situation in the member states; the European Rule of law Mechanism should be developed and strengthened further. Making access to EU funds conditional on respect for democratic values and the rule of law is a major step in the right direction. Another important step is to strengthen the European Public Prosecutor's Office so that it is able to effectively investigate and prosecute fraud involving EU money.

Strengthen core democratic values. Attacks by populist actors on democratic institutions undermine faith in democracy**.** The public should demonstrate strong demand for democratic leaders who respect the rule of law as well as international human rights standards. It is important to foster public understanding of democratic principles by offering high quality and widely accessible civic education.

Safeguard minority and women's rights. The prevalent form of populism in Central and Eastern Europe is **cultural populism** which emphasizes nativism, religious traditionalism, law and order and sovereignty, and paints migrants as enemies. Countering this type of populism requires relentless attention to protecting the rights of minorities, including ethnic, racial, religious and sexual minorities, as well as women's rights.

Support and empower civil society. It is important to encourage, assist and support grassroot movements, civil society groups and other nonstate actors with democratic agendas. These organizations defend the rights of different population groups, especially those most vulnerable, and make their voices heard. To counter the rise of populism, one must fight restrictive policies that suppress civil society and democratic participation.

Protect elections. Personalist autocrats seek to undermine free and fair elections. The risks are heightened in the context of disruptions caused by the pandemic. Safeguarding the integrity of elections and strengthening mechanisms ensuring the legitimacy of results are central to protecting democracy against the autocratic challenge posed by populism.

Safeguard the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. Independent judiciary is a strong counterweight to authoritarian acquisition of power. The justice system needs to be purified of politicization and corruption, their ethics and accountability improved. Non-populist actors should speak out against attacks on courts and counter efforts to undermine judicial independence.

Counter populist narratives and strengthen independent media. Populists exploit media to define their agendas, transform political discourse and expand the boundaries of acceptable speech. Media contributes to legitimizing the issues, rhetoric and communication styles of populists, contributing to their electoral success. Critical, free and independent media can reduce the visibility of populist viewpoints and counteract the rise of populist attitudes in the society.

Curb political polarization. Populists inflame cultural controversies, engage in culture wars and exploit identity politics in order to divide societies. It is important that non-populist actors refrain from rhetoric and actions that further increase polarization and partisan hostility. Maintaining channels of communication across party lines and emphasizing that which unites, rather than what divides, becomes particularly important in the context of intense polarization.

Mainstream parties should not enable populism. Political mainstream should not include populist parties in coalition governments. Doing so, they enable illiberal tendencies, and contribute to the legitimation of populist narratives, arguments and policies.

Mainstream parties should not copy populist strategies, even if this seems to promise electoral success. Instead, they should promote debate and build dialogue on issues that are important for the electorate. Mainstream parties should foster positive patriotism to offer an alternative to defensive nationalism.

Counter the trend of executive dominance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. States of emergency facilitate the concentration of power in the hands of executives, weaken parliaments, hamper societal debate and enable populist leaders to implement authoritarian measures. Populists in office can use the crisis to expand their powers, and those not in office can exploit it to criticize mainstream governments.

Invest in education that equips citizens with cognitive skills that help them cope in a rapidly changing world. Citizens are facing major challenges posed by globalization, digitalization, environmental changes and the transformation of labour markets. Inability to cope with these rapid changes is cited as a major cause of disorientation, while feelings of fear and insecurity are associated with an increased likelihood to support authoritarian alternatives to democracy.

Build transnational alliances. An effective response to populism requires transnational cooperation. Fund and support pro-democracy networks, including grassroots level initiatives. Promote and strengthen civic education on European values to reduce regional lagging in democratic standards.

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