

POPREBEL

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

Working Paper no. 2

Conceptualisation of neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism

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POPREBEL Working Paper series

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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Part 1. Neo-traditionalism

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1.1 The concept of tradition

The term “tradition” refers to “a custom or way of behaving that has continued for a long time in a group of people or a society” (Cambridge Dictionary), or “an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour”, and also “a belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable”. The etymology of the word “tradition” is derived from Latin *traditio*, meaning an action of handing over” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines tradition as “a set of social practices which seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values, implying continuity with a real or imagined past, and usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of symbolic behaviour” (Scott and Marshall, 2005: 668). Another meaning of the Latin *traditio* is “a surrender”, or “a betrayal”, coming from the act of handing over. Beiner points out that “in this regard, tradition appears to have, already inbuilt into its very essence, an element of deceit” (Beiner, 2001:2). As we can see, elements of irrationality are combined here with the concept of long duration, historical narrative, as well as centrality for a group’s identity. There is also a component of playing with meaning, a kind of cultural construction, if not manipulation, involved in the concept.

1.2 Tradition and modernity

Tradition as a concept and as a phenomenon has been a popular subject of philosophical and sociological reflection. Already at the beginning of modernity conservative philosophers spoke of tradition, which represented everything which was important and valuable being threatened by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and their negative consequences (Burke 1790). Traditionalism opposes the rationalism and scepticism of the Enlightenment and at the same time sees principles of political and intellectual order to be beyond human reason and given by God. Burke sees the post-Revolution society as dangerous because it destroys religion, authority and hierarchy and replaces them with relativism and individual freedom of choice. Individual liberty cannot constitute a secure basis for morality or provide people with stable references in their life. In contrast to this conservative view, Karl Marx saw tradition as a burden to our minds (Marx 1852). In general, tradition and modernity were seen as mutually opposite, while the development of modernity was believed to gradually eliminate tradition from social life. Ferdinand Toennies in his famous *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* model of modernisation conceptualises traditional society in opposition to modernity, as based on “close, emotional, face-to-face ties, attachment to place, ascribed social status, and a homogenous and regulated community” (Scott and Marshall, 2005: 239-240), while a modern society is characterised by “urbanism, industrial life, mobility, heterogeneity, and impersonality” (Scott and Marshall, 2005: 239-240). Modern societies, in contrast to traditional communities, are based on rationality. A similar dichotomy can be found in Emile Durkheim in his division between mechanical and organic solidarity.

Modernisation theories advanced in the 1950s and 1960s by such luminaries as Parsons, Lerner, Eisenstadt or Inkeles argued that societies were leaving behind their traditional values in a move towards modern values and a modern society, of which the western world was a model (Parsons 1951, Lerner 1958, Eisenstadt 1966, Inkeles 1969; see also Galland and Lemel 2008). The modernisation theories implied that non-western societies had to reject their traditional values and cultures to become modern. Such ethnocentrism was one of the main criticisms of modernisation theories, i.a. by Tipps or Huntington, who argue that in a modern society one can find both traditional and modern components, or that modernisation may actually strengthen some traditions, as a backlash against questioning them (Tipps 1973, Huntington 1971). Inglehart and DiMaggio note that despite political and economic changes traditional values do remain (Inglehart 2000, DiMaggio 1994). In a similar way, Edward Shils argued that tradition emerges as a result of public demand, of the need to find connection with the past (Shils 1981). He and also Szacki (1971) see tradition as the presence of the past in the contemporary society.

More recent publications also tend to disagree with the negative, dismissive attitude towards tradition, as seen from the perspective of the Enlightenment and rationalism. Alexander believes that we still need a better and more complete theory of tradition. In his view the study of tradition must be interdisciplinary in order to differentiate between three constitutive elements of tradition: continuity, canon and core. He argues that continuity can be found in all traditions as their essential part, while canon and core are possible additional features. Traditions with canon are changeable, and are subject to criticism and judgement, while traditions with core are of “timeless significance”



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(Alexander, 2016:24). Yadgar criticises as false the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, and the antinomy between “(collective) tradition and (personal) liberty” (Yadgar 2013:468). He shows that preconceptions and inherited perspectives of socio-historical reality, derived from tradition, shape our understanding of this reality (Yadgar 2013).

1.3 *Invented tradition*

The dichotomy between tradition and modernity was further challenged when tradition appeared to be an important point of reference in identity construction, including national and ethnic, which refers to tradition in search for identity deeply rooted in the past. With the development of empirical sociology, tradition became an important subject of research, not only of pre-modern societies but also in the context of reflection of the significance of heritage and importance of the past for the present developments. It became clear that tradition is a very useful and powerful instrument which may be used in attempts to construct political and ideological images and to become an essential part of collective identity. The influential book on *Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) shows some examples of such manipulation. The authors of this collective volume demonstrate that many traditions seen as ancient and “genuine”, are actually relatively recent inventions, constructed mainly in the context of building collective identity, especially on the national level. Developing ethnic nationalisms need tradition as justification for their existence, to show the authenticity of their cultural roots, which legitimize their claim for independence and recognition among other nations. Such developments occurred very frequently in the 19th century – the age of romantic nationalisms – but they are also very much present in contemporary societies. In fact, *The Invention of tradition* brings examples from different continents and cultures, which adds to the universality of the concept. This of course does not suggest that all traditions are “invented”; there are many which are genuinely rooted in the ancient past, although this does not mean that they are not subject to contemporary manipulations. Tradition here is closely related to heritage and collective memory, and should be analysed as such (Kowalski 2013).

National movements which search for cultural and axiological legitimization consider tradition to be an obvious and rich treasury from which symbols could be taken, in the process of building national identity and national culture (see Smith 2003; Anderson 1983). In this context Beiner makes a critical point, arguing that the constructivist view of tradition with its claim that national cultures are constructed by political and intellectual elites and imposed on the “masses” is not completely accurate. In his view one should rather speak here of dialogue between “the elites” and “the folk” – people who maintain their traditional customs and then negotiate them with elites rather than simply passively accepting the elite’s constructions (Beiner, 2001). Tradition may become a useful concept, a sort of a cultural code, which refers to well-known symbols and values and, as such, does not need to be defined and negotiated. It is associated with the preservation of what is important, precious and shared by all, and provides comfort and security to those afraid of the change.

1.4 *Neo-Traditionalism*

In the most basic sense, traditionalism is a movement of appreciation of ‘tradition’ in contrast to modernity and its main goal is *protection of authenticity* of culture that – it is assumed – provides stable, permanent and non-relative values to guide the society. Neo-traditionalism, by contrast, is usually seen as an individual or collective strategy whose goal is to *return to what is claimed to be “tradition”* after a period of disruption, in order to find the temporarily lost albeit authentic roots of culture and eliminate unwanted elements of the way of life which were borrowed from or imposed by some ‘aliens’, for example colonizers. Both traditionalism and neo-traditionalism may be seen as ideologies employed in situations of choice or competition between what is seen as established, rooted in the past, values and ways of life of a community, and an alternative that is defined as ‘modern’ and presented as progressive and founded on cultural values and symbols offering and promoting change.

In POPREBEL we see traditionalism and neo-traditionalism as programs, more or less ideologized, of continuously creating ‘tradition’, that is reproducing in a purposive manner a selective version/vision of the past (or its fragment) in order to contest the proposal of modern, globalised, cosmopolitan and liberal culture and society. As a conceptual novelty, we suggest the following additional distinction between these two concepts. While traditionalism is predominantly a program of *societal reproduction*, devised and implemented by such actors as communities, civil society organizations or specialized public-professional bodies, neo-traditionalism is mainly a strategy of *political reproduction*, practiced by governments or political parties.



Neo-traditionalism is a contemporary movement, well known in the post-colonial world where efforts are made to replace the imposed, western values and ways by the society's own traditional ones, suppressed and forgotten, but now revived (see for example Braginsky 2004). In particular, contemporary literature and art in post-colonial societies are in search for their cultural authenticity, and in this process the return to tradition seems an obvious strategy. Tradition here constitutes what is authentic, truly rooted in the local past and local cultural reality, rather than transferred from the West in the process of Eurocentric modernisation. Neo-traditionalism is thus a process of searching for cultural identity in societies who believe that they were deprived of it and that their authentic culture was lost during the period of colonisation or other forms of domination by more powerful 'others. Tradition at the same time provides people with the sense of certainty and belonging, a kind of 'ontological security', a feeling that they live in the world they understand, which has what for them is their authentic meaning. Neo-traditionalism is thus not only a return to tradition against modernisation but also a rejection of what is found in the society's way of life to be 'foreign', or "alien", imposed by cultural (and also often political and economic) oppressors, by colonizers or in the contemporary process of globalisation. Neo-traditionalism is usually part of anti-globalisation movements, searching for "authentic roots" or at least constructing a solid basis for values which may then be presented to the society as authentic. "Established cultural roots" are assumed to constitute not only a solid foundation for the society, but also provides ontological security during times of quick and radical change.

In Europe similar processes are taking place, with tradition becoming a point of reference in the search for the authenticity of culture, while the political agenda behind it is to emphasize the contrast between the original, authentic culture of "the people" and artificial globalization (or, in some parts of Europe, westernization) imposed by those who had power to do it. The political aspect of neo-traditionalism is stressed in its definition in the Encyclopaedia of Governance, where we read that "neotraditionalism is the deliberate revival and revamping of old culture, practices, and institutions for use in new political contexts and strategies. It entails a degree of contestation over culture and memory, can serve as a strategy of political legitimization, and is deployed in different ways by both elites and ordinary people. It is especially salient in contexts of rapid social change or when people question the nature or benefits of that which is presented as "developmental" or "modern" (Galvan 2007:599). Neo-traditionalism in its political dimension appears to be a useful, and indeed very widely used instrument of mobilisation of support in the hands of populists, who appeal to "masses" in the name of the value of their tradition, against "elites", who are globalised, cosmopolitan, and alienated from "the people".

1.5 Neo-traditionalism and security

Neo-traditionalism should be seen within the context of the construction of collective identity, but also as a strategy for regaining a sense of belonging and restoration of the meaning of life in a rapidly changing social and cultural but also political and economic reality. Tradition may be a useful tool in the construction of the boundaries of an ethnic enclave, which provides security to immigrants. This perhaps partly explains why diasporas often tend to be more conservative in their attitudes to culture and values than other members of their society back home.

The concept of ontological security is based on the assumption that rapid political transformation, or deep change in the economic, social and cultural environment disturb stability and deprive people of their sense of living in the world which is secure in the sense that they understand it, that it makes sense to them. Their culture provides them with instruments to describe, classify, systematize their world, so that they may live in the meaningful social (but not only social, also natural and spiritual) environment. This provides a sense of security, a comfort of living in the world which makes sense, which is predictable due to its familiarity and the cultural competence of people who know how to survive and to achieve success, whatever it means to them. Anthony Giddens (1991) points out that the alternative to everyday normality of experience is chaos, which causes a sense of insecurity. Ontological security is a key component of a person's identity, a sense of belonging, of having a secure place in the world. Radical change, such as migration, revolution, rapid political transformation, deep change of the economic environment, deprive people of the sense of security (Bauman 2006). This is an unbearable state of mind, which causes fear, frustration, anxiety, and may lead to violence. Therefore, it is essential that a remedy should be found, that people are able to find a way to restore the meaning of the world and to regain security. Here tradition comes as a solution, at least for some individuals and some communities. While some members of a society in which such a loss of ontological security is widespread react to it in an individual, constructive way, through their own autonomy and independence, entrepreneurial activities and other forward-looking initiatives and strategies, many of those who are weaker, or less fortunate, less equipped with



competences required for such positive, future- oriented strategies, find tradition to be a chance of survival in the changing society. In search of meaning and stability of norms and values, they hide behind secure boundaries of tradition, which provides them with easy, simple answers to difficult, complicated questions, gives moral directions, releases from the need to make difficult choices and (what is of particular significance) of bearing responsibility for consequences of these free choices. Tradition tells them what is good and what is bad, who are friends and who are enemies, makes order in the world of society, of values and cultural practices. The world is meaningful again, while their individual and collective identity acquires legitimacy in ancient roots, sacred rituals, religious blessing.

The turn towards tradition is often accompanied by political preference towards strong leadership. In order to regain a sense of security, people often vote for a leader who promises guidance without too much involvement and responsibility. Promising a glorious future is accompanied by naming enemies responsible for the unwelcome changes, including new, unfamiliar ideas and cultural ways. What remains for insecure citizens is just to follow the leader and watch the traditional order to be restored, or at least a new order but with reference to tradition which legitimizes it.

1.6 Neo-traditionalism in Central and Eastern Europe

In this context neo-traditionalism appears in post-communist Europe as a strategy to escape from the unknown, alien and dangerous new values and ways of life which come to the region from globalisation and from the EU. Rapid changes which followed the 1989 political and economic transformation, radical openness to the world followed by the wave of new ideas and cultural ways which entered the previously largely isolated region, generated processes among which the loss of ontological security was prominent. The society was becoming pluralistic, if not in the sense of the presence of many cultural minorities and/or immigrants (as the Eastern European regimes were not particularly keen to receive immigrants from outside of Europe, while the potential immigrants themselves preferred anyway to go to other, better known and more promising destinations), so at least in the sense of new economic, political, and, above all, cultural divisions developing and becoming more visible in the society. Openness to the world, and in particular to the EU, meant that new ideas began to flow. New cultural and philosophical concepts, new values, new ideas of how society should be organized began to replace the old, well-established order, to which the societies were accustomed. Various minorities (sexual, religious and other) became more visible in the public sphere and public space. What previously seemed to be certain and stable, including religious doctrine and family structure, is now becoming questioned, contested, and relative. The economic system has become pluralistic, less predictable, and less regulated. All these and many other developments generated the loss of security experienced by very many people in post-communist Europe. To protect themselves from this danger Eastern European societies became open not only to change, but also to the alternative idea of traditionalism. They listen eagerly to those from the populist, right-wing side of the political spectrum and the supporting media, who were telling them that they should recreate their own tradition and with it the people's healthy and moral way of life and sense of security. Tradition is presented as a sacred treasury of society, heritage received from the ancestors, legitimised by antiquity but also by religion. Looking to the past for security may also take form of individual and collective nostalgia, in which the past is idealised and becomes a source of positive emotions and comfort, though the present may by contrast seem to be even more alien and difficult to accept (Routledge et.al. 2011). Using the demand/supply dichotomy, one may say that the loss of economic and ontological security created a demand for its recovery, to which populist movements responded with a supply of tradition as a remedy.

Tradition, the populist argument holds, was destroyed in Central and Eastern Europe first by communism and then by Western liberals. Both of those enemies of tradition, paradoxically, offered modern alternatives which can in many ways be seen as similar: secularism, liberal concept of family, repudiation of a traditional concept of ethnic, culture-based nation to be transformed into a modern type of society (a Soviet, supra-national society in the communist model and a liberal cosmopolitan society in the contemporary Western world). Right-wing populists often make this comparison, presenting liberal Western Europe in its current form of the European Union as dominated by leftist cosmopolitan liberals, thus continuing after communism a similar socialist domination of post-communist societies. Central and Eastern Europe, when in the EU, was to be deprived of its hard-won national identity and sovereignty and gradually dissolved in the multi-cultural cosmopolitan European super-state. Populists offer neo-traditionalism as a remedy. The danger of Western leftist liberal ideas and values are to be overcome by the traditional, sacred values on which the true national cultures of the Central and Eastern European societies are built: religion, family and ethnic nation. Traditional religiosity, the patriarchal model of the family and exclusive nationalism are to become effective and attractive



alternatives to secularism, sexual liberation and promotion of equality of sexual minorities, and the idea of multicultural, multi-ethnic civic nation. In this way, right-wing populists propose to build the future, the new type of modern society, on traditional values, which are often also presented as the core of truly European civilization, to which Europe should and one day will return. All that was and is alien and foreign in the communist and liberal models of society is to be rejected.

Neo-traditionalism as rejection of modernity and backlash against liberal values in the context of Central and Eastern Europe is composed of several elements:

1. Rejection of communism – stemming from anti-communist opposition, but reinforced and reshaped to fit contemporary political needs. The current right-wing populists in Central Europe emphasise the fact that they are first ones to be truly anti-communist and to be a real alternative to communism (and post-communism). Positioning themselves in such a way allows them to gain political traction, and – if in power – to rewrite the past and reinvent the present.
2. Rejection of post-communist politics – denial of the legitimacy of previous governments, especially those including former communist-era elites (e.g. the Hungarian ex-prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány), but also those who were previously in the opposition (e.g. the Polish ex-prime minister, Donald Tusk). In the Polish case, the nature of political transition, based on consensus (Round Table) and not conflict, also comes into question and the new, post-communist elites are accused of failing to introduce a clear break from their communist predecessors. Such a rejection appeals particularly to those that feel distrust towards politics and suffer from economic deprivation (Goodwin & Eatwell, 2018) which may be associated with the postcommunist transformation.
3. Rejection of liberal and progressive 21st century modernity – while the desire to join Western European partners dominated much of the political agendas of the first two decades of post-communist transformation, right-wing populists in Central and Eastern Europe questioned this process. On the one hand, they argue that in order to achieve full sovereignty and a clear break from the communist past, the CEE societies must “rise from their knees” and become independent from the West, drawing on their own traditions. On the other hand, by constantly presenting Western Europeans as too liberal and too leftist, they paint the picture of two opposed ideological camps that can never find common ground.

The binary division between the traditional, pure East and the leftist, corrupt West, is a construct used in right-wing populist discourses in the region, often in reference to the intellectual divisions of the past centuries. Such divisions reflect those between Slavophiles and Westernisers, or between reformists and Sarmatians, in different national and historical contexts. Contemporary right-wing populists identified a political opportunity in such polarisation, “inventing tradition” in the name of the people and the nation, against the cosmopolitan elites. Ideological polarisation fits their own agenda, provides them with fuel and potency, and attracts powerful allies.

Neo-traditionalism as a strategy, also for political mobilisation, is often supported by religious authorities. Tradition is here an alternative to openness to the world, unfamiliar, decadent, dangerous, and first of all alien, foreign. Traditional animosities are recalled from mythologised historical narratives, which present others, especially in the case of Central and Eastern Europe, Western ‘others’, as not trustworthy, culturally different in a significant way, as people who have forgotten traditional values and who bring their culture to the verge of suicide. Too much pluralism, immigrant minorities with their cultural differences, secularity and relativism, often even the image of ‘civilization of death’ are contrasted with the own sacred and healthy tradition which alone may save ‘the people’, the nation from disaster.

As a reaction to systemic change in society neo-traditionalism appears also to be a political world-view, strongly linked to cultural illiberalism and authoritarianism. Liberal values, because they promote individualism, relativism and free choice, are seen as a danger to cultural certainty and stability represented by tradition. Authoritarianism calls for strong leadership, needed for consistent guidance and security without responsibility for individual choices. Neo-traditionalism as a political and social strategy and ideology is collectivistic – it emphasizes the importance of a community rather than of individuals, who ought to see themselves first and foremost as members of a community of people rooted in the same tradition, sharing the same cultural practices, and in general thinking alike. As a social doctrine neo-traditionalism promotes traditional roles in society, in particular in the family, traditional gender and sexual roles. Multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are seen as dangerous to this unity and integrity of community based on



tradition. But neo-traditionalism also proposes a new concept of freedom. The idea here is that freedom offered by the liberal society is an illusion, because it deprives an individual of security and forces them to face difficult choices. In the neo-traditional society individuals will be free because they will enjoy security provided by tradition, with all difficult questions answered and all dilemmas solved. Freedom will be not “from something” but “towards something”. A similar argument is made by more traditional circles of the Roman Catholic Church, which also argue that individuals are free if they know what to do because they completely trust the authority of the church. In the neo-traditional society individuals will be free and comfortable in the familiar and cosy environment of tradition.

It needs to be emphasized that return to tradition does not of course mean that people move to a kind of pre-modern agrarian community. Neo-traditionalism is rather a mobilizing strategy, and a kind of collective identity – an image and meaningful actions, which refer to tradition as a source of stable and legitimate values which explain the world in simple terms, describe problems in simple categories connected with value judgements, and restore the feeling of belonging to a stable and secure community.

Part 2. Neo-feudalism: more than a metaphor? Personal dependencies providing security within capitalism

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While there exist globally agreed definitions for some patterns of capitalism¹ (e.g. crony capitalism, oligarchic capitalism, state capitalism), there is no such agreement as to the definition of economic neo-feudalism (or feudal-capitalism, as it is also known), despite the fact that – as we will see – it is present in academic discourses relating to regions of the world as distinct as South America and Europe and Africa and Asia. This paper aims to conceptualise neo-feudalism as a distinct socio-economic pattern in three steps:

- Firstly, we develop a special taxonomy, which aims to distinguish neo-feudalism from other patterns of capitalism, arguing that it is not a synonym or a metaphor for a system that is better known under a different name but is **the best way of explaining those specific situations in which personal dependencies provide a sense of security**.
- Secondly, we attempt to identify neo-feudalist discourses in different regions.
- As a last step, we aim to **distinguish region-specific (cultural) and global (structural) motives for neo-feudalism**. As the latter can be present anywhere in the global economy, this paper argues that – despite the fact that ‘feudalism’, *as a historical term*, is related to specific historical periods and geographical regions – neo-feudalism, *as a term of the comparative social sciences*, applies to socio-economic situations anywhere in the world.

2.1 A taxonomy of personal dependencies within capitalism

In this paper we argue that **economic neo-feudalism (or, as a synonym, feudal-capitalism) is a distinct pattern of capitalism, which describes the emergence of personal dependencies providing security, that occurs alongside the capitalist mode of production.**

This definition distinguishes between personal (*de facto*) and impersonal (*de jure*) power (as a source of dependency). Broadly speaking, personal power is coordinated not through impersonal (bureaucratic or market) mechanisms but through personal (aggressive or ethical) mechanisms.² Both institutional economics (Robinson and Acemoglu, 2006; as antecedents see Weber, 1978) and political anthropology (Kubik, 2018) show interest in such a distinction, which may be made – within economies – on the basis of whether the power of the customer or buyer prevails in an impersonal or a personal manner. The first may include cases when the buyer is given a discount not because of his personal identity, ability, etc., but because he is buying in bulk, i.e. his purchasing power; such a discount could also be given to others, regardless of their personality, should they buy in similar volumes. The monopsony (predominant purchasing

¹ Patterns of capitalism can be sometimes clearly detected as a dominant feature of an economy, while sometimes it remains almost irrelevant and hidden (for such a flexible definition of ‘pattern’, see Hayek, 1948).

² By further reflecting on Kornai (1983) and then Polányi (1944), Vahabi (2009) also lists these four types of coordination mechanisms.



power of certain products) of Wal-Mart also allows it exercise impersonal power over suppliers, as Wal-Mart’s price-cutting policy is applied to any and all suppliers; for this reason the owner of Wal-Mart can be referred to as a neo-feudalistic knight (Farmer, 2006) and not just in a metaphorical sense.

To be able to interpret neo-feudalism as a legitimate socio-economic pattern requires not only a universally valid definition but also clarification of how it is distinct from other similar varieties of capitalism in which personal dependencies emerge. Table 1 summarises these varieties of capitalism, in which the two types of relations between state and business actors³ (mutual and hierarchical) intersect with three types of situation related to legitimation:

- a lack of legitimation,
- legitimation gained through providing (a sense of) progress,
- legitimation gained through providing (a sense of) stability, security.

Table 1.
A taxonomy of patterns of personally coordinated state-business relations

	Political and business actors as ‘mutual hostages’	Hierarchical relations between political and business actors
Secretive (or for private interest)	Crony capitalism	Mafia state
Seeking legitimation – through the provision of progress	Developmental state	Patronage state
Seeking legitimation – through the provision of security	Oligarchic capitalism	Feudal capitalism

This taxonomy highlights how crony capitalism (Kang, 2002) or the mafia state (Magyar, 2013) – no matter the extent to which they overlap⁴ – can be distinguished from the neo-feudalistic pattern of capitalism, whereby the former can be characterised by its secretive nature. The developmental state – which became a dominant feature in several Asian economies – or the ‘patronage state’ tends to provide (a sense of) progress in economic growth or in personal wealth (Schoenman, 2014) rather than security. In oligarchic patterns – at least in the definition of oligarchic capitalism offered by Baumol (2007) – growth-oriented visions are in the background, and legitimation is rather gained through correcting or replacing certain ‘state failures’, but without an unambiguous hierarchy between the state and business operators.

At this point it is important to emphasise once again that these categories do not offer systemic explanations – i.e. national economies cannot necessarily be described as feudal capitalistic, crony capitalistic, etc. – but describe *patterns* in the Hayek sense (Hayek, 1948), which may occur in one economic situation but not in another; therefore, both patterns may be present in a national economy simultaneously. For example, the same government may play secretive crony capitalistic ‘games’ with the banking sector, while seeking to establish neo-feudalistic power relations in the energy sector – whereby it seeks to legitimise its control through the promise of stable public utilities costs – and also have a patronage network, to which it promises fast income growth through the clientelistic distribution of European Union funds. The promise of progress through greater income and of stability through greater security will in any case

³ A division similar to the relations between the state and the business sectors, or based on the mutual interdependence or the patron-client principle (‘clientele principle’) is recommended also by Shlapentokh and Woods, (2011, 99), or Kang (2002).

⁴ Parallels are often drawn between the special personal hierarchy of mafias – where there is no source of income held independently from the leader – and the right of feudalism.



be interwoven eventually, as income growth is inconceivable in the long run without increasing a sense of security, and a sense of security could not be increased if the income level is decreasing over the long term. Therefore, these distinct ideal-typical categories may not crowd out but rather reinforce each other.

It must be noted, however, that any attempt to produce a shared ‘academic’ understanding of the concept is undermined by the journalistic or metaphoric use of ‘neo-feudalism’, whereby it is employed, for example, to describe the giant fortune-generating and inequality-producing nature of pure American capitalism (Wollenberg, 2018, 66). The emergence of large fortunes or inequality – even though it ascribes to capitalism an aggressive character – could hardly be described as neo-feudalistic insofar as the formal equality of sellers or buyers is not compromised by personal discrimination in the course of exchange relations (Kotkin, 2020).

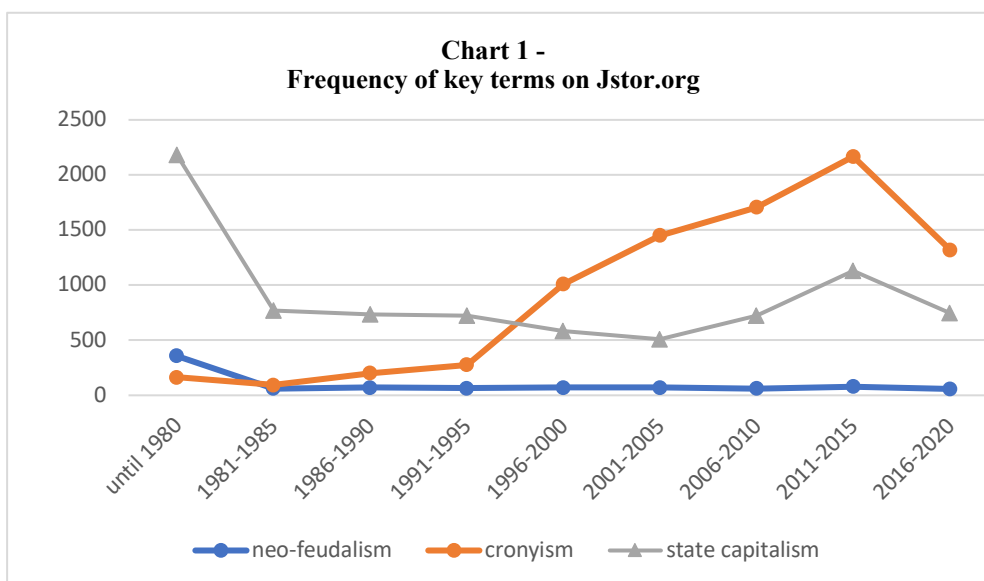
2.2 Towards a universal definition of neo-feudalism

In a second step, we seek to analyse how the term ‘neo-feudalism’ has been used in academic discourse. As we will see, the definition offered above covers most of the socio-economic situations describing ‘neo-feudalistic’ in the past.

Ever since the rise of capitalism, phenomena resembling or alluding to feudalism can be identified both in cultural fields (by humanities scholars) as well as in economic-political structures (by social scientists). Accordingly, the expression ‘neo-feudalism’ appears as a humanities term describing *nostalgia* of an artistic and cultural nature (Tonsor, 1979; Rogers, 2002; Shlapentokh and Woods, 2011; Kollai, 2020) – the analysis of which does not fall within the scope of this study. But the term is also used to describe a unique political-economic pattern, although neo-feudalism has not been widely embraced by social scientists. If you search for ‘neo-feudalism’, ‘new feudalism’ or ‘feudal-capitalism’ on Jstor, you will find just 765 articles, whereas ‘crony capitalism’ and ‘cronyism’ – fashionable expressions to define varieties of capitalism – produce 8332 hits (Table 2, Chart 1).

Table 2 – Geographical focus of ‘neo-feudalism’ within academic discourse
(Analysis of all articles containing term ‘neo-feudalism’ on Jstor.org)

North America	South America	Western Europe	CEE	Asia	Asia	TOTAL
3	13	4	10 (Eastern Europe)	18 (India, Japan, Pakistan, Israel)	4	52



However, it is telling that the term is not tied to a particular part of the world but is used with reference to virtually all regions of the world economy. Still, no attempt has been made to use these **regional descriptions of neo-feudalism to provide a universal interpretation with global relevance**, although the similarity of these cases would allow it. For example, in South America, renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm describes a Peruvian phenomenon which – in his opinion – could provide an answer to a crucial question: Why do people not resist the development of personal dependency? Based on Hobsbawm’s findings, the reason is that being subjugated to power centres – large estate owners – provides opportunities as well as (although not in a previously set manner) access to a social safety and communication infrastructure, enabling individuals to enjoy a degree of income stability (compared to utterly free-market wage-work) (Hobsbawm, 1969, 45).⁵ The South African interpretations of neo-feudalism are also related to rural regions, where ‘the relationship between the farmers and their workers is rather personal’, with the farmers exploiting their workforce for low wages, while maintaining a kind of social and cultural infrastructure for them, based largely on personal decisions (Moorcroft, 1976). However, dependencies may emerge not only under rural circumstances but wherever households are connected to state or business actors through almost personal (and, to some extent, mutual) dependency. Such a situation was outlined – and described as neo-feudal – by renowned sociologist Amitai Etzioni during the establishment of modern Israel, where political parties organising immigration helped immigrants even before their arrival through the provision of educational and healthcare services or job placements, and thus the immigrants immediately found themselves in a new and close loyalty bond, which offered mutual advantages (Etzioni, 1962).⁶ The post-Stalin Central and Eastern European totalitarian regimes were also described as feudal in the sense that regimes supplied a degree of (relative) security to the people (Földi, 1989). This attribute could be applied to post-socialist autocracies or populist democracies as well (Aslund, 2007, Inozemtsev, 2011).

In addition to semi-peripheries, phenomena described as neo-feudalistic have been identified in the core regions of the world economy as well. Japanese corporate culture – in which patrons give personal attention to subordinates and thus despite their corrupt behaviour can count on forgiving loyalty in return – has also been described as neo-feudalistic (Donleavy, 1995), as have Western European trade union leaders, who do not just represent the membership, but regard the organizations as their personal domains (Seton-Watson, 1971). Certain political-economic patterns in the USA have also been interpreted, in a rather elaborate manner, as neo-feudalistic: e.g. criticism of social policy of ‘buying’ people’s loyalty (Reisman, 1961) or criticism of elitist American visions propagating social charity by the wealthy, that, in fact, is a legitimising strategy of the otherwise closed, clique-like functioning of this elite (Shlapentokh and Woods, 2011).

2.3 Neo-feudalism: a phenomenon of global relevance

Table 2 showed that neo-feudalistic patterns were found in essentially all regions of world economy, separately from each other. Interestingly, this seems to contradict the existing academic argument that there could be region-specific cultural reasons behind neo-feudalistic personal dependencies, as if this pattern of capitalism was not a global but a local phenomenon, as if neo-feudalism was possible only where old feudalism had also previously occurred (Vitányi, 2012; Szalai, 2017; Szelényi, 2019; Zafirovski, 2019).⁷

While not questioning the indisputable relevance of cultural socialisation driving neo-feudalistic patterns, we must not overlook **structural reasons for personal dependencies**, which do not originate in the past but can rather be traced to features of the post-Fordist global economy, in line with the Polanyian theory of contra-movement of mass demand against alienating capitalist mechanisms. It implies the feeling of insecurity due to volatile (uncertain) economic

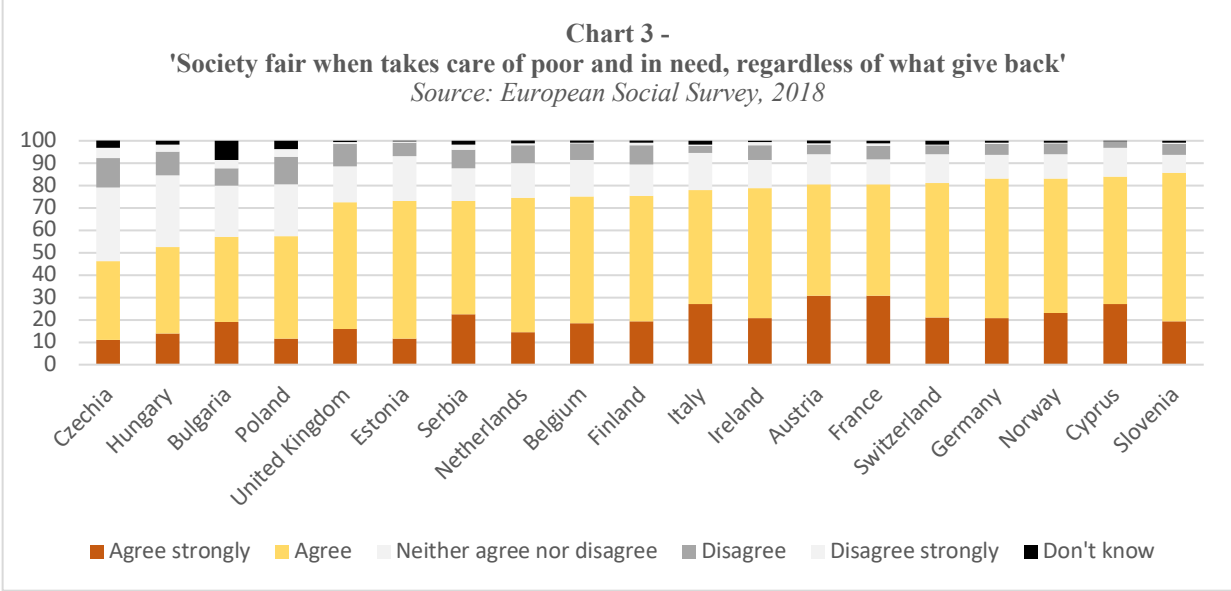
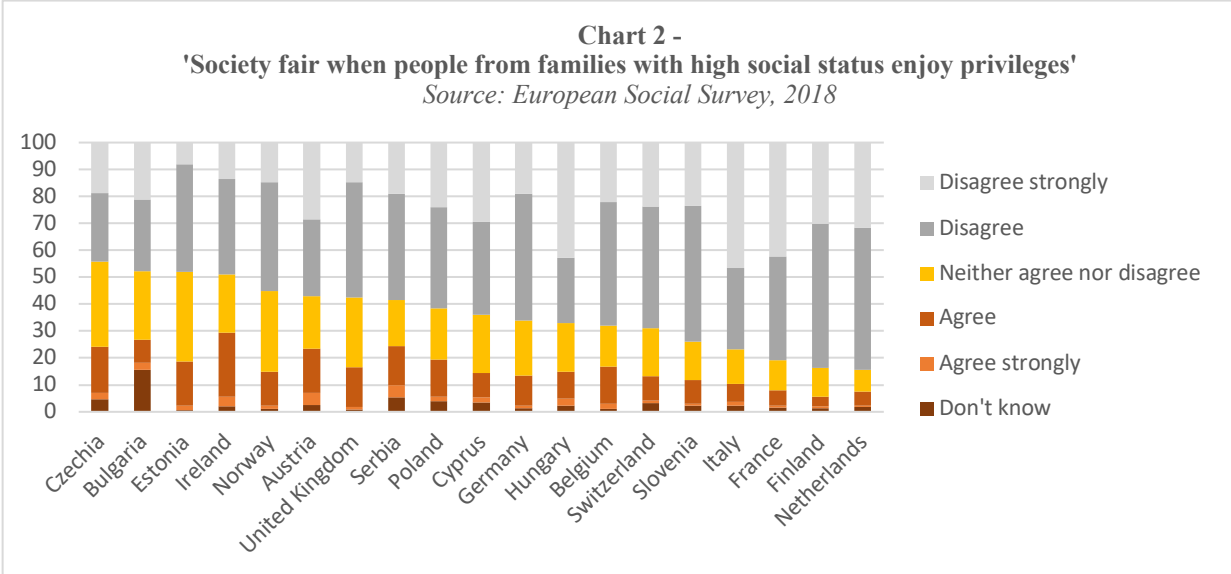
⁵ ‘The real bottleneck in such areas is in the economic and social infrastructure, most obviously transport, but also sanitary organization, education, etc. Without social investment and planning these are not provided. (...) they were to some extent provided out of the profits of the large haciendas...’

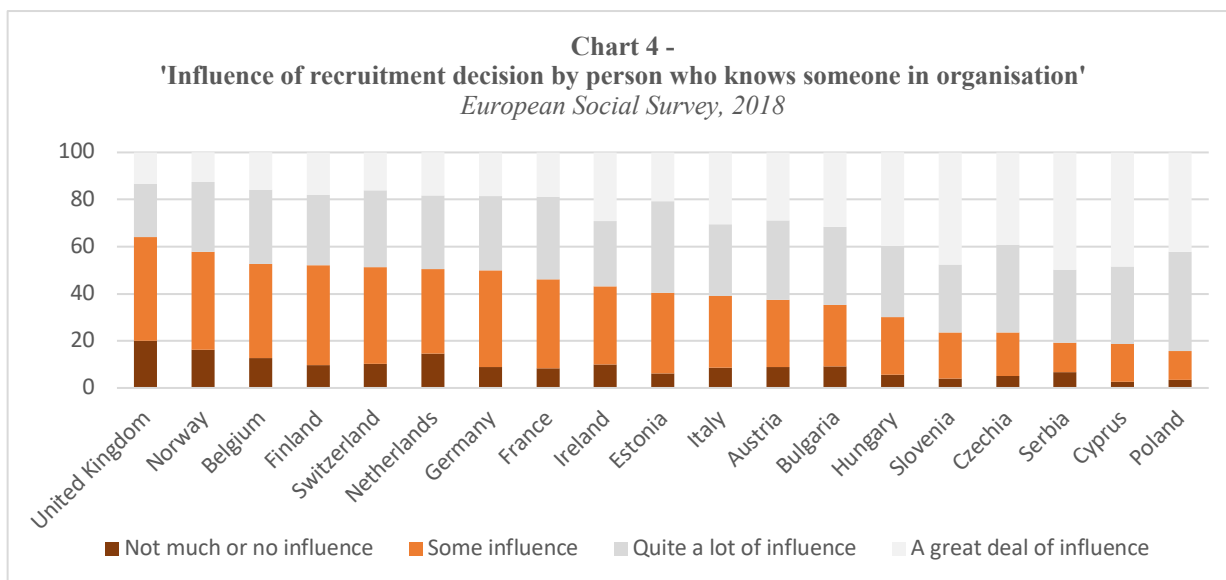
⁶ ‘as in a feudal state, there are no true citizens, but only vassals and sub-vassals’. The modifier ‘neo-feudalistic’ refers to something similar in case of India as well: ethics-based strong mutual political loyalty, and mutual support between political dynasties and voters.

⁷ An interesting outlook towards the discipline of history can the question of ‘local cultural drivers’ make more complex: historians’ discourse – which could have a non-negligible effect on public opinion – tends to discuss feudalism already not in a Europe-centric manner, but as a general epoch of world history. This approach highlights such regional variants of feudalism like the Egyptian, Japanese, Indian, Chinese, moreover, the Aztec one. (Bloch, 1961.) Meanwhile, the world of Latin and North American latifundia has also been described as ‘belated feudalism’ for a long time.



processes as well as the disintegration of the working class into favoured ‘insiders’ of working clans (e.g. IT developers) and ‘outsiders’ (short-term contracted workers, self-employed, precariat, suffering from ‘coercive speech’ from bosses beyond formal obligations), or the increasing role of personal networks in career pathways as a whole. These structural drivers are not bound to any region but are global, which suggests that demand for or acceptance of neo-feudalistic patterns can occur anywhere. Local, region-specific cultural drivers can significantly boost or colour this process, as many investigations have revealed. Interestingly, these cultural drivers do not seem to stem directly from a monarchist nostalgia but rather indirectly from the absence of traditions of civic engagement, civic consciousness, acceptance of universalistic ethical norms, and the commitment to broader communities rather than narrower networks. It can explain why such ‘plebeian’ countries like Estonia (or Ireland) can show weak immunity to privilege (Chart 2). In addition, a lack of mutual trust among citizens – common in the CEE region, especially in the Visegrad countries – could be a strong cultural factor behind neo-feudalism, since such attitudes tend to result in individuals exhibiting trust in a ‘person above’, rather than in their fellow citizens (Chart 3). Finally, a lack of strong market and bureaucratic norms can also create space for personal relations in decision-making processes (Chart 4).





Scrutinizing demand factors does not mean we should underestimate supply factors or overlook the possible impact of Machiavellian politics – but these topics are beyond this paper’s scope. Economic populism does not necessarily offer security or welfare but only the *sense* thereof, and demand for it – for example, due to the sense of economic uncertainty – may be stirred up by politicians, by frightening the electorate with images of external threats. Still, as emphasised above, it would be an overstatement to refer to neo-feudalism as a complete systemic explanation of entire national economies. It is, rather, one of several patterns that can operate simultaneously, and a pattern that may not be sustainable, as a considerable (and growing?) sector of the public will not be satisfied only by the *sense* of security provided by neo-feudalism because demand for material progress (an increase in welfare) cannot be quenched in the long term.

3 Conclusions

Based on literature reviews that consulted the major relevant works, we are proposing novel definitions of the concepts that will provide the conceptual foundation of the data-gathering phase of the project. One of the central assumptions of POPREBEL is that the study of the rise of right-wing populism must never lose sight of the complex interaction of the supply and demand factors, an interaction that develops over time and has therefore an important historical dimension. The return of “tradition” and “feudalism” is obviously not a process of mechanical replication of past phenomena but rather a heavily politicised reconstruction of certain past ideas and practices – usefully seen as traditional and feudal – in the present-day context of cultural and ideological conflicts, in which populist actors of various hues play an increasingly central role. In many if not all discourses of right and far-right populists, “tradition” is invariably invoked and, when they come to power, they engage in the political-economic strategies that are best described – we argue – as neo-feudal. Once we have at least some empirical data, we will begin the next phase of our conceptual and theoretical work in which we will map out the relationships between the discourses and practices that are labelled here as neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism.



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