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THEORISING AN OMNIPRESENT CONCEPT. MEMORY AS A THICKENING FACTOR OF POPULISM

Abstract

Within various fields of social sciences, populism is being constantly re-conceptualised to create a possibly most holistic definition of the phenomenon, one which would encompass all of its structural features and allow it to be applied to the largest number of empirical manifestations. Nonetheless, across different disciplines a growing consensus gains traction to define populism through the framework of ideology. As such, populism is understood as possessing a capability to attach itself to more powerful ideological concepts – nationalism, socialism, fascism. Thus, the central question in the study of populism as ideology needs to focus on the mechanics of strengthening populism in a given case. What makes one populism more radical than another? Using Freeden's ideational approach and Mudde's work on factors influencing intensity and efficiency of populism, this paper argues that the perception of the past in a given community, constructed through collective memory policies and expressed by means of historical revisionism, works as a 'thickening agent' fostering electoral success and increasing political durability of populist governance. Although seeking to create primarily a theoretical contribution, it will also encompass evidence of that modality from studying collective memory policies under Poland's Law and Justice Party rule between 2015 and 2019.

Keywords: populism, memory, symbolic thickening, historical revisionism, ideational approach

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS POPULISM (NOW)?

Populism, understood both as a conceptual framework of governance, as well as a pragmatic style of conducting politics, has been among the most popular terms overshadowing a vast body of research in social sciences. Over at least the last fifteen to twenty years, parallel to the wave of populist electoral triumphs, numerous attempts have been

made to settle definitional debates about the nature of populism and its perennial components. These debates have been marked, however, decidedly by a tension concerning the direction such definitional process should advance in. Two strong, mutually opposing currents emerged. The first, whose proponents approach the task of defining the concept from a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, including Ernesto Laclau,[1] Chantal Mouffe,[2] Jan Kubik,[3] Cas Mudde,[4] and Pierre Rosanvallon,[5] seeks to create an all-encompassing definition of this socio-political phenomenon, one which would provide an accurate fit to describe its numerous mutations appearing worldwide. In this regard it is indispensable to notice that especially Laclau and Mouffe focused primarily on carving out a distinct identity of left-wing populism, thus addressing at best a fraction of the phenomenon's empirical manifestations. Yet, as Rosanvallon points out, it is indispensable to applaud them for studying populism with the seriousness it deserves, as it constitutes much more than a mere illiberal disease, a sort of pejorative stigma intuitively attributed to critics of established political parties, institutions of liberal democracy and dominant post-war frameworks of governance.

DEFINING POPULISM – IDEOLOGY VERSUS STYLE

For purposes of conceptual clarity, it is necessary to present and assess the opposite views on populism. Contrary to the works of the above-mentioned authors, numerous studies pushed for a more case-study based, context-sensitive explanation, thus putting more emphasis on domestic conditions leading to the rise and subsequent consolidation of populist power rather than identifying its universal nature. More importantly, however, such studies predominantly focus on the populist populations, not the populisms themselves. In other words,

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[1] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York, 2005).

[2] Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (New York, 2019).

[3] Marta Kotwas and Jan Kubik, 'Symbolic Thickening of Public Culture and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Poland', *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, xxx, 2 (2019), 435–71.

[4] Cas Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004), 541–63.

[5] Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Populist Century* (Cambridge, 2021).

they look for sources of populist success among people voting for political formations without clearly defining the concept itself. As such, they provide an elaborate examination of emotions those people are governed by, attitudes towards institutions they represent and their overall relationship with democracy, but do not offer a coherent understanding of what it is they vote for. The array of explanatory factors of populist success these studies offer is immeasurably vast. In their most recent work, Sierakowski and Sadura[6] attribute the rise of Law and Justice Party [Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS], and Hungarian Civic Alliance Fidesz to Poland and Hungary, respectively, having very low levels of societal trust, both towards other people and institutions of the democratic state. Norris and Inglehart[7] focus on cultural factors within society, whilst several scholars, to name only Hochschild,[8] seek to explain the rise of populist through reactions to economic frustration of specific parts of the electorate. These electoral groupings, broadly characterised by lower economic standings, systemic marginalization and inability to anyhow benefit from globalization exist in almost every country. Political formations seeking to capitalise on them are equally omnipresent. This individualised approach to the study of populism, however, does nothing to help establish its all-encompassing definition and later provide for a systemic critique of the concept. Studies producing endless typologies of populism inherently and somewhat deliberately omit the nature of the phenomenon, almost as if such a thing did not exist. It is both counter-productive and harmful for the process of understanding how populism works, or, more specifically, what makes it work.

This paper attempts to make a contribution to these efforts by examining the role of collective memory in the populist ideology. The use of the latter phrase is both deliberate and consequential, as the following text assumes the ideational perspective on studying populism. It draws on the work of Michael Freeden (1996)[9] and

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[6] Przemysław Sadura and Sławomir Sierakowski, *Społeczeństwo populistów* (Warszawa, 2023).

[7] Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*, HKS Faculty Research Working Paper Series n. RWP16-026 (Cambridge, 2016).

[8] Arlie Russel Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land* (New York, 2016).

[9] Michael Freeden, 'Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology', *Political Studies*, xl, 4 (1998), 748–65.

his conceptualization of thick- and thin-centred ideologies. Freeden, originally working on nationalism, argued that existing ideologies vary depending on their explanatory power and capacity to cohabitate with one another. Nationalism was for him an example of a thin-centred ideology, that is, one that does not encompass enough claims about reality to be able to explain the entirety of socio-political conditions of social life. As such, it needs – and, in fact, has the capacity to – attach itself to more powerful ideological concepts, thus allowing it to appear even on opposing ends of the political spectrum. The same can be said about populism, which, for purposes of this paper, is understood as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people".[10] Various populisms differ in intensity and degree of radicalism of their claims, as well as their legitimacy of power, electoral tactics and, most importantly, durability whilst elected to govern. There are both left-wing and right-wing populisms, although there is a considerable asymmetry between them in favour of the considerably more frequent right-wing permutation. Moreover, as it will be later specified in the text, left-wing populism rarely attributes so much importance to memory politics as right-wing does, explaining why this paper will use the latter variety as basis for empirical analyses. Be that as it may, the central question in the study of populism as ideology needs to focus on the mechanics of intensifying populism in a given case study. What makes populism more radical in one country than in another?

The existing theoretical attempts at explaining these differentiations have been, at best, meagre, often inherently drifting towards the aforesaid taxonomical tendency, multiplying 'types of populisms' without any coherent structure or sense, abandoning the efforts for building a comprehensive theorem. Proponents of the political-strategic/organizational approach, notably Kurt Weyland, highly critical of the ideational perspective, place more emphasis on form over substance in populism, being more inclined to define it rather as a style of governance and policymaking than an ideology *per se*.

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[10] Cas Mudde, 'Populism. An Ideational Approach', in C. Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford, 2017), 29.

They argue that it is not the structure of populism that makes it work, but the way it is performed.[11] They rely on singling out the notion of existing frustrations, mostly economic and cultural, in a given electorate, and further depict populist leaders as 'tricksters', and simply able to enchant the voters with promises of bringing justice for their previous misfortunes. This is, undeniably, true in some cases, but offers at best a partial explanation of populists' successes, while failing to tackle the issue of durability. Demand-side theories explain why populists take over power in the first place, but they fail to explain their persistence and survivability. Populist politicians rarely produce skilful political managers and apt governors, yet they do not lose as much electoral support as conventional wisdom would expect them to. Obviously, it is not only memory politics, nor any other individual thickening factor for that matter, that exclusively and entirely allows them to keep afloat, but this argument serves a different purpose in the present text. It aims to prove that populist success cannot be explained through classifying it as a purely transactional relationship between voters and rulers.

Empirically, a fitting set of examples proving this thesis is to be found in the Latin American political landscape, where, interestingly, the dominant variation of populism so far has been the left-wing one. These populisms are decisively less saturated with memory narratives, at the expense of economic postulates and demands of greater wealth redistribution. They still maintain the primary feature of populist politics, namely the dichotomous vision of us-versus-them society, but the source of privilege of the elites is rarely explained through domestic historical idiosyncrasies. In countries where left-wing populists are or have recently been incumbent, memory politics has been neither an integral part of their electoral manifestos and discourses, nor a fundamental element of their everyday governance agenda.[12] If anything, the role of the past in the populist narratives of left-wing Latin American leaders is both more abstract and more global, referring to meta-phenomena such as the legacy of colonialism, slavery and the exploitation of the Global South by the richer

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[11] Kurt Weyland, 'Populism. A Political-Strategic Approach', in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, 54.

[12] Cath Collins *et al.*, *The Politics of Memory in Chile: From Pinochet to Bachelet* (Boulder–London, 2013).

northern countries.[13] Lula da Silva, especially during his first spell as president (2003–10), wanted to improve the position of Brazil vis-a-vis global rivals, not the position of 'true Brazilian people' against domestic elites.[14] The same can be said of Evo Morales in Bolivia and, especially, Nestor and Cristina de Kirchner in Argentina. All of them prioritized redistribution politics over memory and symbols of the past – and have achieved considerable successes in limiting material inequalities in their respective countries. Nonetheless, they were either voted out of power or violated the constitution and democratic electoral principles to remain in office. Again, if populist voters were merely cynical customers of politics, and if populism was a purely transactional deal, the face of populist politicians would have been different. It is not all about demand.

Therefore, the quest to create an all-encompassing conceptual framework for populism needs to also encompass a closer look on its supply side. What is it that voters find in the populist proposition that makes them consistently choose it over any other electoral offer, even though sometimes they might not gain from that choice materially, or the gains are minimal? Mudde singles out three factors deciding on intensity, efficiency and longevity of populism in a given case: nativism, authoritarianism and the degree to which the will of the people manages to bypass democratic intermediaries, such as governmental institutions or the rule of law.[15] Those, he further argues, are 'thickening agents', or factors, of populism. It is indispensable to note that these factors themselves do not guarantee a populist success. It comes about only because the thickening agents are successfully weaponised in electoral campaigns and thus the supplies match the demands. These factors, however, are the root cause of populist triumphs, tools that allow for identifying the demands and successfully conceptualising them.

Be that as it may, the three thickening agents ought to be treated as an open list of ideas, as it does not exhaust all domestic conditions and contextual sensitivities allowing for populists to grasp and maintain power. Hence this paper aims to expand Mudde's taxonomy,

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[13] Merilee Grindle, *Reflections on Memory and Democracy* (Cambridge, 2016).

[14] Claudia Zilla, 'Brazil's Foreign Policy under Lula', *German Institute for International and Security Affairs Working Papers* 2017, https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/brazils-foreign-policy-under-lula [Accessed: 7 Nov. 2023].

[15] Mudde, 'The Populist Zeitgeist', 541–63.

as it argues that the perception of the past of a given community, expressed through collective memory policies and constructed by means of historical revisionism, works as another 'thickening factor' contributing to electoral success and political durability of populist frameworks of governance. It will seek to offer theoretical insights into the concept of memory as a thickening agent of populism and will aim to provide significant definitional contributions primarily to the theoretical debate on the topic. Nonetheless, to strengthen the conceptual argument, evidence in support of it will be presented, based on a detailed examination of the mnemonic strategies of the Law and Justice government in Poland between 2015 and 2019. As already stated, there is a considerable asymmetry between right-wing and left-wing variations of populism with regard to the level of employing memory politics as a tool to solidify their electoral support, namely the right-wing variant using it with much greater frequency – which explains the choice of case study and empirical evidence.

MEMORY AS A THICKENING FACTOR OF POPULISM

Populist mnemonic strategies are based on a cult of the past which frequently evolves into its compulsive repetition and recreation. Populists believe in the power of historical analogies, which then make the culture of historical re-creation flourishing everywhere in the public space. Building on Napiórkowski's observations of Polish historical revisionism,[16] it becomes apparent that populist memory politics is, put simply, a strategy of an eternal return, according to which nothing ever really happens or changes. Across various areas of social sciences and non-fiction writing, this notion has been amply studied, to mention only Timothy Snyder's *Road to Unfreedom*,[17] where he, similarly to Napiórkowski, coins the term 'politics of eternity' to describe the ever-present attempts by populist politicians to replicate the reality of an unspecified past in the present day, Anne Applebaum's usage of the concept of 'restorative nostalgia' towards the British Empire as a key determinant of pro-Brexit sentiments,[18] as well as

[16] Marcin Napiórkowski, *Turbopatriotyzm* (Wołowiec, 2019).

[17] Timothy Snyder, *Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London, 2019).

[18] Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (London, 2020), 83.

the works by political scientists David Runciman,[19] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin,[20] and others. What differentiates such strategies from memory-driven actions of other governments, is the totalitarian nature of the former. Memory in populism, as already mentioned, is both the subject and the object of populist politics. It interacts neatly with other thickening factors of populism from Mudde's taxonomy. Because of the unspecified nature of the past it refers to, it amplifies the nativist component of the populist ideology, reminding 'the people' that there were times when they did not have to share the benefits of their sovereignty with any type of 'the other'. Playing on the concept of sovereignty, it successfully strengthens the populist narrative in a twofold manner. In countries with vivid memories of non-democratic past, such as the post-communist Central and Eastern European states, it seeks to reintroduce a notion of existential threat to real independence – mirroring the past experience. Those societies were forced to submit to foreign powers, whose dominance some of them have never *really* shaken off their shoulders. It is utterly irrelevant who and what those powers were and are now, therefore the ideological orientation of yesterday's oppressors and of today's populists themselves does not matter at all. What matters is the promise of protecting (or truly regaining) the agency of 'the true people' in governing their own state. As such, collective memory in populism can be both a defensive and offensive weapon. It stewards the national identity of the nation-state, and it constitutes a fertile ground for mobilization to wrestle the future of the nation away from the hands of foreign powers.

Using Freeden's thick and thin-centred ideology framework, the role of collective memory in populism can be studied by means of an already existing theorem, which simply has not yet been applied to the matter at hand. As already established, populist leaders, both in their electoral promise and the subsequent governance, seek to create, or rather re-create a mythical land of the past, in which the state and all its products belong directly to the 'original people' of the community they govern. For that to happen, they employ both the empirical tangible acts of memory politics – anniversaries, public celebrations of historical figures and events, revealing of monuments, roll calls – as

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[19] David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London and Cambridge, 2019).
[20] Roger Eatwell, *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy* (London, 2018).

well as all-encompassing narratives explaining the world of today, not only as a way of commemorating the past, but as a legitimate tool to recreate it according to their own criteria. It needs to be stated clearly, in order to avoid conceptual confusion, that not all commemorative political actions perform this dual nature – it is only a feature of populist memory politics. To put it colloquially, beyond populism, the past *stays* in the past, it does not attempt to colonise all of the present. The concept of memory as re-creation, advanced by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi[21] and further expanded by David Rieff,[22] assumes that a mnemonic agent, parallel to performing an act of commemoration, re-creates the entirety of socio-political conditions existing in the moment the original event was taking place. Thus, for instance, commemorations of resistance against totalitarian regimes will be used as an opportunity to depict present-day political rivalries as equally dichotomous struggles against non-democratic oppression. Anniversaries of wartime clashes and massacres will aim at reminding the people that an existential threat to their nation still exists. It is fundamental to recognise that such populist instances of re-creating the past alongside merely commemorating it fail to comply with the definition of a commemorative rite. Already Durkheim[23] established that during collective commemorations, a social group stages its own existence, confronting itself with its own identity. A re-creative instance offers a simplistic vision of the identity, often revisionist, i.e., purely composed of past glory – victories, heroic moments, sacrifices for the greater good of the nation. It does not encompass any elements of confrontation with more difficult, interpretatively complex notions, as this would also require facing the inglorious episodes in the collective past. It would fall outside the binary vision of the world populists strive to advance.

By establishing alternative historical narratives about the common past, often failing to adhere to cognitive-driven principles, populism re-narrates the past of the community in line with its present-day political motivations. And since the nature of populist political actors

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[21] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Exile and Expulsion in Jewish History. Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391–1648* (New York, 1997).

[22] David Rieff, *Against Remembrance* (New Haven, 2012).

[23] Jeffrey Olick, 'From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), 105–40.

is inherently exclusionary, anti-pluralist and forwards a dichotomous vision of reality, the past in their projections matches all these characteristics, leading to a further weakening of democratic norms, structures and sentiments. Given that, in line with the ideational approach and Mudde's taxonomy, the primary aim of populists is to create and subsequently strengthen the dichotomous vision of the world, common narratives about the past of a nation or other community are used not as subject of historiographic study, but more as a Durkheimian social fact, subject to contextual reinterpretations. The story populists tell about the past is value-driven. Its main feature is blurring the difference between historiographic evidence and falsehood. Collective memory narratives do not need to be historically accurate, nor do they require a nuanced examination of the facts and processes of the past. As evidenced by several instances of public rows and conflicts between populist politicians and academics, the former actors negate both the possibility and the necessity to apply scientific principles to the study of the past. Poland's Law and Justice government officials criticised and threatened institutional sanctions against prof. Barbara Engelking from the Polish Academy of Sciences for her statements about 'complicated relationships' between Poles and Jews fighting during the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising.[24] Earlier in their tenure, they proposed an amendment to the law regulating the functioning of the Institute of National Remembrance,[25] introducing a possible penalty of up to three years of imprisonment for suggesting complicity of 'the Polish nation' in Nazi crimes against Jews during the Second World War.[26] Other governments, including Hungary's Fidesz (regarding studies on ethnicity and homogeneity of the Hungarian nation)[27] and US

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[24] Vanessa Gera, 'Scholars Defend Polish Holocaust Researcher Targeted by Govt', 28 Apr. 2023, https://apnews.com/article/poland-holocaust-scholar-government-0272a1b2c39415950fb72eb7526b8d14 [Accessed: 7 July 2023].

[25] Mateusz Mazzini, 'Poland's Right-Wing Government is Rewriting History – with Itself as a Hero', *Washington Post*, 27 Feb. 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/27/polands-right-wing-government-is-rewriting-history-with-itself-as-hero/ [Accessed: 7 July 2023].

[26] Mateusz Mazzini, 'PiS and Polish History', *Foreign Affairs*, 27 Apr. 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/poland/2017-04-27/pis-and-polish-history [Accessed: 7 July 2023].

[27] Meilin Scanish and Norman Eisen, 'History in the (Un)Making: Historical Revisionism in Viktor Orbán's Hungary', https://www.brookings.edu/articles/

administration under Donald Trump (on the topics of slavery, racial and social justice, with particular criticism towards The 1619 Project commemorating slaves' arrival to North America)[28] have made similar, if not identical, attempts to curb independent scholarly inquiries into the past and replace them with politicized narratives deprived of factual basis.

What makes the past created by populists different from memory politics advanced by other political actors is precisely their antagonism towards science and total subordination to present-day political aims. It is purely an imagined past, the description of which oftentimes is in direct contradiction to established historical facts. It provides a false idea of greatness, created entirely by the 'true people' and now dissolved by the rule of alien, corrupt elites and harmful ideologies – notably communism and neoliberalism. As observed by Tucker, such historical revisionism is applied for therapeutic purposes.[29] It serves to prove to the people that they were once great and are still capable of greatness. It will only materialise, however, once their voice becomes the dominant one. The people, here equated to the makers of a nation's greatness, need to be heard, and the only political actors that guarantee this outcome are the populists.

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY
UNDER POLAND'S LAW AND JUSTICE.
THE CASE STUDY OF MEMORY-THICKENED POPULISM

The common past, expressed through collective memory policies and constructed by means of historical revisionism, i.e., based on non-cognitive, value-driven principles, possess the necessary qualities to act as a thickening factor of populism. A useful case study to provide empirical evidence in support of this thesis is the mnemonic strategy of the PiS government , ruling Poland since 2015. Since its all-out electoral victory in October 2015, PiS re-introduced memory

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history-in-the-unmaking-historical-revisionism-in-viktor-orbans-hungary/ [Accessed: 30 June 2023].

   [28] Nicole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New American Origin Story* (London, 2021).

   [29] Aviezer Tucker, 'History – Myth or Reality: Reflections on the State of the Profession', *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, i, 1 (2007), 125–35.

politics atop the policymaking agenda, ushering in a comprehensive overhaul of Poland's mnemonic ecosystem. As Welsh[30] argued, in post--transitional realms of the Central and Eastern European countries, politics of the past was traditionally exercised *instead* of politics of the present. It was used as a secondary area, only brought up to draw attention away from more pressing issues. Dobrosielski complements this argument by stating that for the most part of the post-transitional period, with only episodic eruptions of popular interest, the Polish collective memory ecosystem was a 'paradise lost',[31] an idyllic inasmuch as mythical space to which no changes could be made for fear of making more damage than good. It immediately becomes apparent that the memory would provide a fertile ground for thickening of populism, as an absence of comprehensive, established, societally supported narratives about the collective past created room for new narratives being introduced into the public sphere by populist leaders. As a prominent Polish historian and essayist, Józef Czapski, quoted by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, notes: in Poland "historians are proprietaries of National Identity, just as preachers are in Israel".[32] Thus, the approach that prevailed in Poland was to 'leave history to the historians', a phrase often used liberal and leftist pundits, and keep it away from day-to-day political debates. This is not to say that no memory-related legislations had been passed in Poland before PiS took over power, but their scope, public gravitas and political clout was marginal, far from the top of the political agenda. However, with PiS in power since 2015, a qualitative change of this modality has taken place. Paraphrasing Welsh's argument, politics of the past in today's Poland is put in motion as an integral part of politics of the present. Memory determines the shape of both policymaking and public discourse on an all-encompassing range of topics, from traditional ones, such as identity and relations vis-a-vis the Jewish minorities, to areas previously free from mnemonic disputes, such as economic policy and international security. The mnemonic conflict thus expands to cover the totality of social

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[30] Helga A. Welsh, 'Dealing with the Communist Past: Central and East European Experiences after 1990', *Europe-Asia Studies*, xlviii, 3 (1995), 413–28.

[31] Paweł Dobrosielski, *Spory o Grossa. Polskie problemy z pamięcią o Żydach* (Warszawa, 2017), 14.

[32] *Ibid*., 261.

interactions.[33] In short, memory becomes the criterion by which it is possible to determine who is who in Poland – who belongs to the true people and who represents the corrupt elite, the distinction central to populism.

Given that it provides a sharper and more rigid definition of the two opposing sides in the us-and-them dichotomy, it undeniably thickens the populism of PiS. First, as Napiórkowski observes, PiS exhibits a profound resentment towards memory abnegators, who are seen as agents of globalism and modernization. In a speech during the official opening of the Polish History Museum, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated that "the Polish collective memory has been delayed after 1989"[34] and "it is now time for Poles to tell their own story".[35] He later observed that PiS is making considerable attempts to create exactly that: a native Polish narrative; but it is being constantly blocked by "the elites of the Third Republic" and "the foreign agents from abroad".[36] Morawiecki's speech provides a fitting example of using collective memory as a thickening factor to reinforce the populist way of explaining the world. Here, the true people are deprived of their identity by corrupt elites, while nativism, as Mudde observes, clashes with globalism, of which these foreign agents are a manifestation. Morawiecki also hints at the notion of returning to the past – a moment in time when the Poles had forged a strong, distinct, native identity, which later became somewhat delayed, blocked by enemies of the true people. A seeming contradiction might arise from the fact that Morawiecki refers to the period before the democratic transition, that is, Poland under communist rule. In fact, however, this is not a contradiction at all. Firstly, his reasoning is not based on cognitive principles, but rather value-driven. Secondly, the Polish political realm prior to 1989 can easily be depicted in line with the us-versus-them dichotomy: the true people, i.e., anti-communist patriotic freedom fighters, defend their identity against a foreign-imposed invader. By stating that his

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[33] Mateusz Mazzini, 'A Three-Dimensional Model of Enlarging the Mnemonic Conflict: The Case of Poland Under Second Law and Justice Government', *Slovo*, xxxi, 1 (2018), 45–67.

[34] Napiórkowski, *Turbopatriotyzm*, 112.

[35] *Ibid.*, 112.

[36] *Ibid.*

party will create native Polish narratives against all odds, returning the voice to the people and moving against the institutional actors who allegedly obstruct it (even if they have democratic mandate), Morawiecki encompasses all three notions singled out by Mudde: nativism, authoritarianism and disregard for institutions, effectively thickening PiS's populist framework of governance.

A fitting illustration of that modality was the commemorative programme of the 50th anniversary of the March 1968 student protests that led to the expulsion of thousands of Polish Jews by the then communist authorities of Poland. During the ceremony, held at the University of Warsaw on 7 March 2018, PM Mateusz Morawiecki delivered a speech outlining his party's interpretation of the March 1968 protests, their socio-political context and consequences. In his speech, Morawiecki referred to the expelled Polish citizens as "members of the nation of Polish Jews",[37] thus creating an artificial ethnic category inside the legal definition of Polish citizenship. The Jews that left the country might have, in fact, been Polish citizens from a legal point of view, but they did not share the same moral (as argued by Müller) and ethnic/nativist features (Mudde). Hence they cannot belong to the true people – also because there were many Jewish people among the communist elites, and membership in the elite stands in direct opposition to the true people; it constitutes the opposing spectrum of the us-versus-them dichotomy. Later Morawiecki proceeded to draw parallels between the way the communist authorities quashed the student movements and the political struggle between his government and its opponents, both domestic and from abroad. He concluded his speech by stating that "he considers himself and his Cabinet to be heirs to the March 1968 as a freedom fighting movement".[38] A critical discursive analysis of this phrase allows one to identify all the paramount features of using memory to establish an exclusionary definition of the people and thus, to thicken PiS's populism. First, the entire modality is being set in a dichotomous realm. The division between totalitarian rulers and democratic/patriotic opposition is as sharp as it would be in an ideal populist framework. Hence it

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[37] Speech by Mateusz Morawiecki during the 50th anniversary of March 1968 events, Warsaw University, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDklsByZcQU&ab_channel=KancelariaPremiera [Accessed: 1 Sept. 2022].

[38] *Ibid*.

results in an easily applicable case of Rieff's framework of memory as re-creation. The democratic-versus-antidemocratic dichotomy of the socio-political conditions of March 1968 is transplanted onto today's political struggle. If Morawiecki equates 'himself and his government' to anti-communist 'freedom fighters', then the present-day ideological opponents of PiS are equal to the totalitarian authorities of 1968. Following that reasoning, PiS remains the only political actor that has a moral right to take part in the democratic electoral process – others are deprived of their moral and legal legitimacy. Firstly, because, as heirs of totalitarian authorities, and equalled to them, they do not embody democratic values. Secondly, as synonymous to a foreign-born rule, political actors opposing PiS lack the nativist component to compete for the privilege of representing the true people – the essential criterion for populists in defining electoral rights. As a result, the populist incumbent appears to be the only legitimate actor to stand in a democratic election. The election, in turn, evolves into a plebiscite of support for the populists itself, echoing Müller's and Mudde's observations about populist incumbents being inherently anti-democratic through their inability to give concessions to other players. In populism, a monopoly over collective memory brings about a monopoly over political power.

Another influential instance of collective memory which illustrates its thickening function of populism in Poland under PiS rule is the interpretation of the 2010 presidential plane crash in Smoleńsk, which resulted in an unprecedented wave of commemorative street events. For eight years after the crash, PiS and its supporters held monthly commemorative demonstrations in the strict centre of Warsaw: these became the first public instance of memory politics in the Polish collective memory landscape designed and executed in line with the framework of populist memory politics, while being central to carrying out present-day governance of the country. It simultaneously served as a platform for PiS politicians to comment on current affairs and create analogies between the past and the present, in the same way as Morawiecki did during the 1968 commemorations. The monthly Smoleńsk commemoration marches draw a razor-sharp line of division for the us-versus-them dichotomy – one which was later weaponised with considerable success by PiS and party chairman Jarosław Kaczyński himself to redefine the membership criteria for the Polish national community by means of collective

memory narratives. Given that the interpretation of the disaster advanced by PiS was based on the supposition that the deceased president, Lech Kaczyński, did not die in the plane crash but was murdered in a terrorist attempt resulting from a conspiracy set up by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin and then Polish PM, Donald Tusk, memory was again employed as an offensive, pro-active weapon of drawing the lines between 'us' and 'them'. Mudde's 'true people' in this context are the Smolensk marches attendees, those who stay true to the vision of Poles as heroic freedom fighters, killed by Russians due to their unbreakable spirit. In turn, the other end of this dichotomous spectrum is occupied by the corrupt elite, one which sells its nation out to foreign masters. Both are separated as much as it is possible – ideologically and even physically, through the metal barriers dividing the march attendees from bystanders every month. To the degree to which, as Kubik and Mudde stipulate, no dialogue is possible between them, let alone a compromise. However, the mnemonic interpretation of the Smoleńsk crash extends well beyond the event itself. Alongside commemorating it, other instances are re-introduced into the present-day discourse, including the 1940 Katyń massacre, the Soviet dominance of Poland and the 1989 democratic transition; each is interpreted through the same dichotomous framework. Memory is employed again for purposes of re-creation, also serving the aim of legitimizing the political actions of the populist incumbent. If the incumbent successfully manages to portray himself as equal to noble and heroic historical figures, then they become a morally and ideologically just representative of the true people. Those who, in turn, fail to adhere to the said moral and ideological posture, or, speaking in collective memory terms, fail to subscribe to the monopolistic collective memory narrative presented by the populist incumbent, will be deemed unworthy of membership in the national community. This modality is very apparent in the Smoleńsk crash mnemonic rites, as well as the entire mnemonic narrative that emerged afterwards. Specifically, Smolensk rallies were meant to establish a cult of personal remembrance of Lech Kaczyński as a grand, heroic historical figure who sacrificed his life for the country. If he is successfully presented as heir to the freedom fighters, his opponents – that is, those who question PiS's interpretation of the past – are automatically identified as continuators of wartime invaders and communist occupiers. Therefore, they fall

outside the nativist tribe, they represent alien rule and pose a threat to Poland's democracy. Again, memory of Smoleńsk thickens all three elements of populism as an ideational concept, and, as a result, the very populism itself.

CONCLUSIONS

As such, the example of PiS and its mnemonic strategy proves that not only does memory work as a thickening agent of populism, but it seems to be a very efficient tool in this process. The definition of the true people, central to any populist framework of governance, becomes extremely rigid and concrete following a total overhaul of a nation's collective memory ecosystem. Employing historical revisionism, i.e., value-driven and non-cognitive interpretations of the past, exacerbates existing social conflicts and generates new ones, thus covering the entirety of public life and fuelling the dichotomous vision of the world. Every area of social interaction can then be seen through the lenses of true people confronting a corrupt elite. Moreover, as seen in the case of Poland during PiS's second tenure, as well as other examples cited in the paper: Brazil, Turkey, and – to some extent – the US, memory can be a populist lifeline, a factor allowing them to stay afloat in absence of other, more tangible and efficient tools. When the economy slows down, redistribution policies fail to reach the electoral base or their sources dry out, and external events, such as the war in Ukraine, occur – memory becomes a safe haven for populists. The last resort they can always employ, as it is the only fragment of the political debate that remains possible to be fully mastered. As stated above, the past is what one makes of it – as such, it is immune to present-day economic or geopolitical circumstance, all of which only proves the capacity of memory politics to increase the durability and survivability of a populist incumbent.

One obviously has to remember that all thickening agents are extremely context-sensitive and their efficiency will vary from one populism to another. In more consolidated mnemonic regimes, where commonly accepted narratives about the past exist, rooted in both national identity and public discourse, thickening of populism by means of memory might not be so effective. In the case of Poland under PiS, however, there is a direct consequence: a mnemonic revolution fuels

a populist consolidation. Indeed, a monopoly over collective memory allows for a monopoly over political power.

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