

Riders on the storm: the role of populism in the global crisis of democracy and in the functioning of electoral autocracies¹

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We believe that it is important that populist parties, to the extent that they are inimical to democracy, should be revealed as such, treated accordingly and, if necessary, isolated from power. Indeed, it is one of the lessons democrats can learn from Schmitt that the proper identification of the enemy is an essential part of the art of politics.

Koen Abts and Stefan Rummens

Abstract: *It is my contention that populism could be an appropriate framework to describe, explain and connect the phenomena of global crisis of democracy and functioning of electoral autocracies. In order to substantiate this claim, with the method of literature review, I examine first the characteristics of these phenomena. Then I focus on the nature of the relationship between them, in particular on the complex system of new types of autocracies' stability, in which populism could play a crucial role. Populism, understood as an autocratic (re-)interpretation of democracy and representation, could be a particularly dangerous Trojan Horse for democracy. First and foremost, because its idea of a single, homogeneous and authentic people that can be legitimately represented only by the populist leader is a moralised form of antipluralism which is contrary to the pluralist approach of democracy (i.e. polyarchy). For precisely this reason, populism could play a key role in autocracies, especial in electoral autocracies which may use its core elements. Namely, the Manichean worldview, the image of a homogeneous peo-*

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ple, people-centrism and the autocratic notion of representation are very compatible with electoral autocracies, since these regimes hold general elections and their power is built largely upon the alleged will of the people. By using populism, it is possible for these regimes to camouflage and even legitimise their autocratic trends and exercise of power behind the formally multi-party but not fair elections and democratic façade. As a radical turn towards closed autocracies (without de facto multiparty elections) would be too expensive, electoral autocrats need manipulated multi-party elections and other plebiscite techniques that could serve as quasi-democratic legitimisation. Because of this, they tend to use the political logic of populism which could transform political contestation to a life-and-death struggle and provides quasi-democratic legitimisation and other important cognitive functions. Therefore, populist electoral autocracies, as a paradigmatic type of electoral autocracies, could remain with us for a long time, giving more and more tasks to researchers, especially in the Central and Eastern European region.

Keywords: *democracy, autocracy, populism, representation, legitimacy*

Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the phenomena of the global crisis of democracy, populism, and new types of autocracies, in particular regarding the nature of the relationship among them. I argue that the causes of emergence of these phenomena lie partly in the reciprocal reinforcing and mutually strengthening nature of the relationship among them. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the academic discourse on these phenomena roughly simultaneously emerged after 1989. The optimistic assumptions of transitology rapidly turned into scepticism about new democratic transitions and Fukuyama's (1992) thesis of the 'end of history'. Therefore, in the last few decades, most of the work in comparative politics, democracy theory and research on democratisation has approached more pessimistically the internal and external challenges of liberal democracy, as well as the emerging populism and the spread of new types of autocracies.

Firstly, in connection with the growing internal tensions in democracies, well-known authors have pointed out tendencies such as serious intransparency of democratic politics due to overly complex and intricate procedures (Canovan 2002; Reybrouck 2010, 2016), citizen passivity and political apathy with massive depolitisation (as *unpolitical* democracy) (Rosanvallon 2008), and the diminished role of parties and decline of party democracy (Mair 2002, 2013). Liberal democracy has been strongly criticised for its post-political and institutional nature (Mouffe 1993; Ranciere 1999), why populism can be seen as a response to 'undemocratic liberalism' (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017)

and to institutionally ‘constrained democracy’ and ‘liberal technocracy’ (Müller 2016). Similarly, seminal works focus on phenomena such as the growing personalisation, tabloidisation and mediatisation of politics, which has led to a significant erosion in citizens’ perception of democracy’s daily working. In short, the electoral game seems to be an empty image-struggle in a political theatre for many people (Manin 1994, 1997; Crouch 2004; Körösenyi et al. 2020).

Secondly, in addition to internal tensions of democracy, among its external challenges, the focus is primarily on the contemporary process of autocratisation (Lührmann – Lindberg 2019) – understood as counter-wave in democratisation (Huntington 1991) – and its results, namely the rise in the number of hybrid regimes and electoral autocracies (Lührmann – Tannenberg – Lindberg 2018). Research on the changing nature of traditional (closed) autocracies and their stabilisation mechanisms has multiplied since the 1990s (Karl 1995; O’Donnell 1996; Zakaria 1997; Diamond 2002, 2019; Carothers 2002; Morlino 2009; Bogaards 2009; Levitsky – Way 2002, 2010; Schedler 2002, 2013; Cassani 2014; Foa 2018; Guriev – Treisman 2015, 2019). This extremely diffuse literature examines in particular the regime strategies for limiting political contestation and the lack of institutional ‘forbearance’ (self-restraint) (Levitsky – Ziblatt 2018), and more recently, much attention has also been paid to the issue of ‘autocratic legitimacy’ (Gerschewski 2018; Dukalskis – Gerschewski 2017; von Haldenwang 2017; von Soest – Grauvogel 2017; Debre – Morgenbesser 2017; Cassani 2017; Backes – Kailitz 2015).

Thirdly, it is telling that the literature on populism has also significantly increased in volume since the 1990s (e.g. Urbinati 1998, 2013; Canovan 1999, 2002; Mény – Surel 2002; Mudde 2004; Laclau 2005; Abts – Rummens 2007), and has become perhaps the most researched topic in political science in the last decade (e.g. Reybrouck 2010; Urbinati 2013; Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Moffitt – Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016; Pappas 2014, 2018; Judis 2016; Müller 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; de la Torre 2018). Although there is an open debate on what exactly populism means, most researchers agree that populism can be particularly dangerous for democracies, due to its anti-pluralist nature, and its moral, hence irrefutable claim to exclusive representation (Müller 2016). This can easily lead to a degree of extreme polarisation that can undermine the minimum consensus that is required for the functioning of democracy, and which may be compatible with autocratic tendencies, which is referred to as ‘authoritarian populism’ (Norris – Inglehart 2019, Bugaric – Kuhelj 2018, Bugaric 2019) or ‘populist authoritarianism’ (Butler 2018). In my opinion, this is precisely where the above-mentioned phenomena, namely challenges of contemporary democracies and the rise of electoral autocracies can be linked with the concept of populism.

In this paper, I argue that these phenomena are closely related to each other, and populism can be the link, and can provide an appropriate framework for

better understanding the global crisis of democracy, and the rise and functioning of electoral autocracies. In order to substantiate this claim, with the method of literature review, I examine first the characteristics of these phenomena. Then, I focus on the nature of the relationship between them, in particular with regard to the complex system of new types of autocracies' stability, in which, I think, populism plays a key role. Finally, in addition to summarising and drawing conclusions, I will address some possible areas of further research.

The waves of the storm

Global crisis of contemporary democracies

In the last few decades, many studies have been published on the multiplying challenges to the legitimacy of representative democracies. First and foremost, the critics are targeting the over-institutionalised, over-bureaucratised, and over-technocratised nature of democratic politics and procedures, which could be seen as a response to the terrible experiences of unbridled popular sovereignty in the pre-1945 world. In parallel with the growing dominance of institutions, there has been a significant blurring of the ideological and programmatic identities of mainstream parties, leading to a situation in which citizens see little, if any, difference between them and in which there are no real alternative political visions (Mair 2002; Mouffe 2018). Moreover, after 1989, democracy lost its arch-enemy with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and 'real existing democracies' are now being increasingly compared unfavourably to theoretical models. This fact, and the better educated and more emancipated citizens as a consequence of egalitarianism, mean that people today expect more from politicians and their political system in general (Mudde 2004).

The increasing international institutional complexity of the day-to-day politics erodes state sovereignty, which seems to blur the territorial boundaries of politics, and increases the inherent tension between two essential democratic principles, namely 'power emanates from the people' and 'power of nobody' (Canovan 2002; Lefort 1986). Similarly, in his seminal work, Rosanvallon (2008) argued that the institutional side of democracy alone is insufficient; hence, it should be complemented with institutionalised forms of democratic distrust, such as powers of oversight, forms of prevention and testing of judgments. These could create a *counter-democracy* which is not only able to complement traditional formal institutions, but also to extend their influence. However, it would require active citizenship with attitudes of watchfulness and criticism. Instead, liberal democracy is facing deep crises of legitimacy and declining citizens' confidence in its functioning (Manin 1997; Mair 2013), resulting in a build-up of frustration and so previous apathy and trust is turned into passion and distrust (Reybrouck 2016). These difficulties are reinforced by the fact that

there is a trade-off between transparency to ordinary citizens and institutions that allow them access to politics, a situation which can be exploited by populists who provide a solution to this problem with the promise of a combination of transparency and empowerment by themselves (Canovan 2002). Similarly, the increasing institutional complexity reduces the visibility of decision-makers, hence it may prejudice accountability, to which the populist answer is questioning the whole institutional accountability (Papadopoulos 2002).

In addition, there is the issue of increasing political polarisation that can undermine citizens' and politicians' spirit of compromise and the unity of demos, hence, the very foundations of democracy. Extreme polarisation can kill democracies, since it can shake not only their institutional order switching them to military logic, but can also break the 'soft guardrails' of democracy, namely, norms of toleration and restraint. It means that 'partisan rivals become enemies, political competition descends into warfare, and our institutions turn into weapon', resulting in a 'system hovering constantly on the brink of crisis' (Levitsky – Ziblatt 2018: 212). In other words, extreme polarisation lets the genie out of the bottle by generating antagonistic and no-holds-barred conflicts from agonistic and ordinary conflicts, which is hardly compatible with democracy.

The global crisis of democracy is being further deepened by accelerating globalisation and neoliberalism, since they put nation state democracies under enormous pressure (Merkel 2014). In connection with globalisation, Colin Crouch (2004) introduced the concept of 'post-democracy', which refers to the 'other side of the parabola of democracy' and its symptoms such as passive, quiescent and apathetic citizens on one hand, and private interactions between elected governments and elites which overwhelmingly represent business interests behind the spectacle of the electoral game politics on the other. He points out that 'democracy has simply not kept pace with capitalism's rush to the global' (Crouch 2004: 29). Dani Rodrik (2000) approached this 'gap problem' by formulating his famous trilemma in the dimensions of international economic integration, the nation-state and mass politics: it is impossible to achieve hyper-globalisation, national sovereignty and democracy at the same time, because only two of these things can be attained simultaneously. As an epochal economic transition, globalisation constitutes a means of limiting the power of national elites, which weakens the capacity of democracies to act, and fuels populists' critics.

The problem with globalisation is that it upset the balance of post-1945 'embedded liberalism', which is a 'compromise between the goals of free trade and the domestic control of social and economic development by democratic states' and, it is 'dis-embedding of markets from national control' (Bruszt – Langbein 2017: 298). Key institutions are no more welfare states but global firms and corporations (Crouch 2004), which are out of direct democratic political control

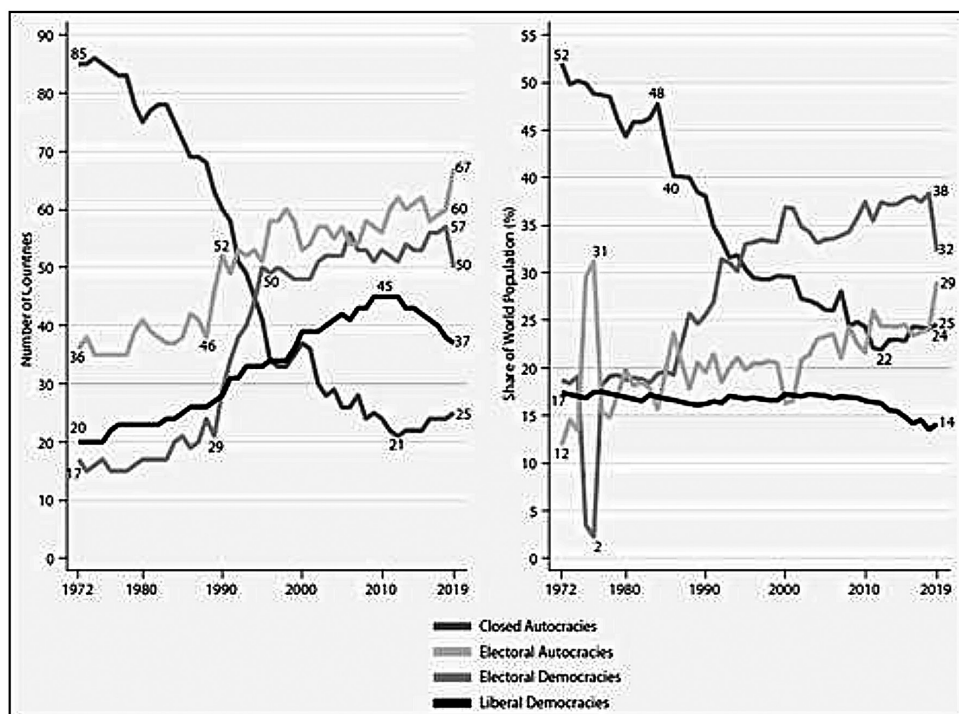
(Bruff 2016). Hence, neoliberalism tends to undermine national sovereignty, 'to the point where the parliaments of putatively independent nations no longer have power over their own policy decisions', but are governed by undemocratic international institutions with 'remote-control power' (Hickel 2016). Although globalisation has also positive impacts, for example in the field of digitisation or citizens' communication opportunities, it is also responsible for the extreme concentration and unequal distribution of wealth, which causes social and economic instability, and massive inequality (Piketty 2014). It generates a 'global precariat' with millions around the world without an anchor of stability (Standing 2011), which generates masses of 'left-behind' people who are receptive to populism (Judis 2016).

The rise of electoral autocracies

In addition to internal challenges, democracies are also faced with the fact that the disappearance of classical dictatorships has been replaced by the rise of *electoral autocracies* (Figure 1). The last few decades have been an era of proliferation of 'intermediate' categories: the growing proportion of electoral autocracies (1972: 23%, 2019: 37%) and electoral democracies (1972: 11%, 2019: 28%) have become a significant majority not only together but also separately, on their own sides of regime types. It is noteworthy that in the last few years, the proportion of autocracies has grown so spectacularly that in 2019, for the first time since 2001, their proportion became higher (51% of countries, 54% of global population) than that of democracies.

The term electoral autocracies is generally understood to mean that, compared to closed autocracies, their 'modern' predecessors in the 20th century, these new regimes are 'electoral' primarily because they exercise their autocratic political power under conditions and (more or less managed) risks of (de facto) multi-party elections based on universal suffrage. They are no longer primarily aiming at stabilising their power by means of narrowing voting rights, open lack of pluralistic competition (i.e. one-party systems) or direct physical violence, although they could also move in these directions, of course. Instead, these regimes prefer to limit political competition by systematically distorting the conditions of contestation (making an uneven playing field) which, in practice, means that the democratic polity is completely bypassed, occupied, hollowed and reshaped by autocrats. According to Schedler, the manipulated elections do not ensure political competition (and thus the democratic quality of this regime), but they are quasi-authorisations on the façade of quasi-democracies. Due to their electoral nature, and people-centrist (quasi-democratic) legitimisation claims, these regimes are often populist, but – like Singapore – not always.

Figure1: Number of countries per regime type (left) and share of population (right).



Source: Lührmann et al. 2020: 13.

In parallel with the spread of these electoral autocracies, transitological optimism of post-1989 and the euphoria of the early 1990s has vanished in a few years: democracy is no longer ‘the only game in town’ in global trends, and it has become less dominant in the world. However, formally almost everyone sees themselves as the champion of democracy, but substantively raise serious doubts as to the genuine commitment to democratic principles of lots of political leaders. Latin America, Africa and Eurasia (especially the post-communist and post-soviet regions) provide countless examples of stagnated or even reversed democratisation (de-democratisation) and autocratisation (Cassani – Tomini 2018; Lührmann – Lindberg 2019). As a result, the Millennium was already marked by reckoning with transitology (Carothers 2002) and rising literature on hybridisation (Diamond 2002).

The developments of the last two decades are well illustrated by the fact that the description of the ‘gray zone’ and ‘mixed regimes’ between full-fledged democracies and classical dictatorships started mainly from the direction of ‘democracy with adjectives’ (Collier – Levitsky 1997), and it has been in-

creasingly supplemented by concepts derived from autocracy (Gerschewski – Schmotz 2011), which has, by the way, created a vague ‘terminological babel’ (Armony – Schamis 2005). In order to grasp these regimes, researchers have developed concepts and models such as delegative democracy (O’Donnell 1994), illiberal democracy (Zakaria 1997), defective democracy (Merkel 2004) or managed democracy (Wolin 2008). On the other hand, the autocratic nature is more emphasised by terms such as semi-authoritarianism (Ottaway 2003), liberal autocracy (Zakaria 1997; Diamond 2003), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky – Way 2002, 2010) and electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2002, 2013).

The basic dilemma of this literature is whether these regimes are *sui generis* regime types or they are only (diminished) subtypes of two main categories (democracy and autocracy/dictatorship) (Cassani 2014; Procházka – Cabada 2020). The answer to this question partly depends on the authors’ definitions of democracy and its counter-concept and, more broadly, on the nature of opposition between them. Giovanni Sartori, in his seminal book (1987) distinguishes between *contrary* and *contradictory* nature of oppositions, the former for opposites that are not contradictories and the latter for two terms that are not only mutually exclusive but also completely exclusive (Sartori 1987: 182). Only the latter refers to an opposition and a clear definition where no third possibility exists (*tertium non datur*). Therefore, Sartori identifies democracy via its contradictory counter-concept, namely autocracy, where the essential difference is the different nature of investiture (empowerment):

‘Autocracy means auto-investiture, that someone proclaims himself ruler or has hereditary right to it. By contrast, democracy stands for a system that hinges on the principle that no one can proclaim himself ruler, and political power cannot be inherited. As you can see, the contrast between democracy and autocracy brings into play the principle of investiture and legitimacy of power. However, the principle of investiture does not vary by degrees: there is no transition between the different options. Moreover, the principle of democratic investiture is the reverse of the autocratic investiture. And the test (on-the-spot) is easy: it is the elections. Any regime, whose »controlling« political staff is chosen through free, competitive, and non-fraudulent elections, has to be classified as democracy’ (Sartori 1993: 83, translation my own). Following this, ‘the autocratic principle is repudiated, the democratic axiom is that man’s power over man can only be granted by others-and this always and only on a revocable basis (for otherwise the grantors of power would, at the same time, renounce their power). Henceforth, leaders must result from a free, unfettered designation of those who are to be led. That is equally to say that whenever this empowering *others* to designate *you* is being tampered with or counterfeited – either because dissent is impeded or alternatives are not offered – democracy is killed at its inception’ (Sartori 1987: 206).

In order to avoid counterfeiting of dissent, argues Sartori, guarantees are needed: 'electoral power per se is the mechanical guarantee of democracy; but the substantive guarantee is given by the conditions under which the citizen gets the information and is exposed to the pressure of opinion makers. (...). When all is said, we say that elections must be free. This is true, but it is not enough; for opinion too must be, in some basic sense, free. Free elections with unfree opinion express nothing. We say that the people must be sovereign. But an empty sovereign who has nothing to say, without opinions of his own, is a mere ratifier, a sovereign of nothing' (Sartori 1987: 86–87). To the paradox of a democratic façade that can mask autocratic rule, according to Sartori, 'literal democracy' (rule of the people *per se*) cannot answer, since 'while elections and representation are necessary instruments of large-scale democracy, they are also its Achilles' heel. He who delegates his power can also lose it; elections are not necessarily free; and representation is not necessarily genuine' (Ibid. 30–31.). The remedy and the safeguard against this situation for Sartori is the normative or prescriptive definition of democracy. In this sense, democracy is not only elective polyarchy (descriptive definition) but *selective polyarchy* or a *polyarchy of merit*. Therefore, democracy is a 'system in which no one can choose himself, no one can invest himself with the power to rule and, therefore, no one can arrogate to himself unconditional and unlimited power', and the 'principle »all power to the people« must be gradually modified, as a democracy develops itself, into the principle »all power to nobody«' (Ibid. 206, 72). Examining these principles – embodied only in liberal-democratic states – in any regime, we are able to test its democratic quality in a dichotomic way (yes or no), although the issue of degree of democracy remains important.

In the hybrid regime literature, the question of the nature of democracy's counter-concept comes up in the difference between *dual* and *trial* approaches. Illustrative in this respect are the two, perhaps most used concepts of this research field, namely competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky – Way 2002, 2010) and electoral autocracy (Schedler 2002, 2013). The former, with its triple division (democracy, hybrid regime, dictatorship), is an example of *tertium datur*, where simultaneously important characteristics of both democracy and authoritarianism exist. The autocratic criterion for Levitsky and Way is evidence of 'centrally coordinated or tolerated' electoral manipulation, systematic civil-liberties violations, or an uneven playing field (access to resources, media and the law of opposition). Regimes with these features have formal democratic institutions which 'are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. "Such regimes are competitive in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic because the playing field is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair" (Levitsky – Way 2010: 5).

In contrast, Andreas Schedler's typology distinguishes basically democratic regimes (liberal democracy and electoral democracy) from non-democratic regimes (electoral authoritarianism and closed authoritarianism), which is a clear example of Sartori's category of *tertium non datur*. The boundary between democracy and autocracy lies on the borderline between electoral democracies and electoral autocracies. Importantly, Schedler notes 'when »democratic defects« cancel the democratic essence of electoral regimes, we should call the animal by its name: autocracy. (...). When we conceptualize non-democratic regimes as instances of democracy, however deficient, we stumble into the methodological pitfall of »conceptual stretching« (Sartori 1984)' (Schedler 2013: 80). Contrary to Levitsky and Way, in Schedler's view, the *differentia specifica* is not the existence of elections but the genuineness of political competition. Electoral autocracies 'establish the entire set of formally representative institutions that characterize liberal democracy', but 'unlike electoral democracies, they subject these institutions to severe and systematic manipulation' (Schedler 2013: 6). Moreover, while the approach of Levitsky and Way sees elections as competitive because of their multi-party nature, according to Schedler these manipulated elections do not ensure political competition (and thus the democratic quality of this regime), but they are quasi-authorisations on the façade of quasi-democracies. Therefore, 'representative institutions make for lovely decorations in the shop windows of authoritarian regimes' (Schedler 2013: 69).

The riders on the storm

In the second part of this study, after a brief conceptualisation of populism, I will demonstrate, firstly, that populism understood as an autocratic interpretation of democracy and representation, could be a particularly dangerous Trojan horse for democracy. Above all, because its idea of a single, homogeneous and authentic people that can be genuinely represented only by populists, a representative claim which is a moralised form of antipluralism. Secondly, I will argue that populism could also be an important feature of electoral autocracies. By means of populism, it is possible for these regimes to hide and even legitimise their autocratic trends and exercise of power behind their formally multi-party elections and democratic façade, as well as the creation of an uneven playing field for political competition.

Populism as a dangerous impostor of democracy

Firstly, I sketch my 2x2 regime typology and the concept of democracy based on Robert A. Dahl, Giovanni Sartori, Andreas Schedler and the V-Dem project. In this approach, there are two subtypes of autocracies [1) closed autocracies, 2) electoral autocracies], and two subtypes of democracies [3) electoral democra-

cies, 4) liberal democracies]. In closed autocracies, ‘the chief executive is either not subjected to elections or there is no meaningful, de-facto competition in elections. Electoral autocracies hold de-facto multiparty elections for the chief executive, but they fall short of democratic standards due to significant irregularities, limitations on party competition or other violations of Dahl’s institutional requisites for democracies’ (Lührmann – Tannenberg – Lindberg 2018: 61).

To be counted as (electoral) democracies, ‘countries not only have to hold de facto free and fair and multiparty elections, but also – based on Robert Dahl’s famous articulation of “Polyarchy” as electoral democracy – achieve a sufficient level of institutional guarantees of democracy such as freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, an elected executive, and freedom of expression. A liberal democracy is, in addition, characterized by its having effective legislative and judicial oversight of the executive as well as protection of individual liberties and the rule of law’ (Ibid.).

Regarding the relationship between populism and representative democracy, I have previously distinguished three main approaches in the mainstream populism literature (Benedek 2019). The first approach (populism as ‘opportunity’) identifies populism as a Schmittian concept of political *logic*. It proclaims a necessary and desirable populist turn of democracy and politics in general, seeing it as an opportunity for emancipatory politics and democracy which neither radicalise nor eliminate political conflicts (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018). However, interpreting populism as political ultimately means that all political actors are more or less populist, which makes the term quite redundant and unusable for describing politics. Namely, if the term of populism tries to explain everything, it explains nothing.

The second and mainstream approach of populism defines *per se* democracy in a minimalist way, and typically interprets it with a paradoxical tension between the democratic-populist and liberal-constitutional pillar. In this sense, populism is an ideology ‘that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, «the pure people» versus »the corrupt elite«, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde 2004: 562). Therefore, populism used to be seen as a ‘signal’ of diseases and dysfunctions of liberal democracy, and as a not always reprehensible democratic answer to the predominance and prevalence of the liberal pillar (Mény – Surel 2002; Mudde 2004; Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Pappas 2014; Judis 2016). However, the focus of this view of populism is not on the harsh anti-pluralism and political exclusion of populism, which remains a demagogic-like term, which is still far too broad a concept to be really useful. The latter means that with this approach it is particularly difficult to say exactly who are populists and who are not, since nowadays almost every politician often speaks in the name of *the* people, and criticises loudly (domestic or international) elites and political opponents.

Therefore, populism refers to a kind of vague border between the mainstream centre-right and centre-left parties and politicians on one hand, and their ‘challengers’ on the other. Hence, populism has become a rather arbitrary term for separating Angela Merkel, Sebastian Kurz and Joe Biden from Matteo Salvini, Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump. It is not surprising that many politicians and parties are borderline cases, moving in and out of the populist category from researcher to researcher and from time to time, such as Bernie Sanders, Emmanuel Macron or Jeremy Corbyn. Finally, it often seems that politicians of the populist side of the boundary are slowly constituting the majority, inflating the stretching term populism, and making it easy to accuse the users of this term of political-ideological bias and overtone.

For these reasons, I propose the narrowest and strictest approach to populism which sees in it a clear *danger* for democracy. Democracy is understood here as a more robust concept with inherent features of the liberal-constitutional pillar, while populism can be seen as an unequivocal danger for it (Abts – Rummens 2007; Müller 2016; Urbinati 2013). From this point of view, populism is a manipulated way (like a Trojan Horse) for new political players ‘to acquire power quickly, without waiting for increasing popularity through times and electoral competitions’ (Urbinati 2013: 153), and which exploits social distress and democratic dysfunctions. In this study, I am following Sartori’s above mentioned definition of democracy as an *electoral and selective polyarchy* which can be characterised by the principles of popular sovereignty and limited power. I consider it very useful to supplement this approach by the analysis of French philosopher Claude Lefort. He defines democracy as a system where the *locus of power is an empty place* (Lefort 1988: 17–19, 224–235). While in the pre-modern times, the locus of power was embodied by the king, in modern democracies ‘they only hold public offices on a temporary basis, subject to a regular political and electoral competition’ (Abts – Rummens 2007: 412). The unity of a political community refers no longer to the organic unity of a homogeneous body but the unity of the *political stage* (i.e. essential pluralism). Therefore, in a democracy, the identity of the political community and the will of the people can ‘never receive a final interpretation and the democratic process can never come to a closure’ (Ibid. 413).

According to Lefort, the original logic of the empty place of power can be degenerated in both ways of *diversity-in-itself* and *unity-in-itself*: ‘(...) when power appears to have sunk to the level of reality and to be no more than an instrument for the promotion of the interests and appetites of vulgar ambition and when, in a word, it appears *in society*, and when at the same time society appears to be fragmented, then we see the development of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division’ (Lefort 1988: 19–20). The predominance of liberal logic and institutions reduces

political struggle ‘to a mere struggle between particular interests, where no reference is made to the idea of the “common good” or the idea of democracy as a common project’ and fails to grasp ‘the way in which the political stage allows for the symbolic integration of society’, where society is threatened with disintegration. On the other hand, the ‘opposite illusion of *unity-in-itself*, where the need for a representation of the unity of society is met with the imaginary fiction of the *people-as-one*. (...). This fictional belief in the homogeneous unity of the political community generates a logic which disregards the idea of otherness at the heart of democracy and aims at the suppression of diversity within society. This logic thus implies the closure of the locus of power and imposes the sovereign rule of the people-as-one’ (Abts – Rummens 2007: 413–414). The interpretation of democracy as a political regime where the locus of power is an empty place is very useful to understand populism as a desire for a closure of this empty place. Therefore, this essential anti-pluralist nature of populism is not compatible with modern democracies, at least as I conceptualised them before, following the approach of pluralist democracy based on Dahl’s concept of polyarchy. Lastly, in Table I you can see my short conceptualisation of populism, which goes beyond the mainstream approach, since this puts more emphasis on such characteristics like claim of unlimited power (in the name of people), inherent antipluralism, extreme polarisation and autocratic representation.

Table 1: List of items of populism

Item	Description
Manichean worldview	Clash between bad and good, crisis, friend-enemy logic (polarization)
People-centrism	Aim of politics is to enforce the will of the people against the enemies of the people, absolutization of the will of the people, rejecting limits of power
Imagination of homogeneous people	Genuine people and its will are united (inherent antipluralism)
Autocratic representation	Moral, exclusive and acclamative representation

Populism as antidemocrats’ Trojan Horse

To understand the relationship of populism and democracy (conceptualised previously) it is necessary to recall that populism is above all a moralistic imagination of politics. A ‘way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified (...) people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior’ (Müller 2016: 19–20). In this sense, elite-critique is

a necessary but not sufficient condition to qualify someone as a real populist, as the latter is not only anti-elitist but always antipluralist, claiming that *they, and only they* can legitimately represent the people. I think this *political exclusion* is the point. In the case of populists, 'other political competitors are just part of the immoral, corrupt elite, or so populists say, while not having power themselves; when in government, they will not recognize anything like a legitimate opposition'. The populist core claim also implies that whoever does not really support populist parties might not be part of the proper people to begin with. In the words of Lefort (1988: 20), 'the supposedly real people first has to be »extracted« from the sum total of actual citizens'. Therefore, 'populists are no longer ordinary adversaries, but political enemies who hold an incompatible view of the symbolic structure of the locus of power itself' (Abts – Rummens 2007: 422). Employing a *pars pro toto* logic, populists interpret the part of real people as the whole of the political community. They involve antagonistic oppositions creating impenetrable cleavages in the society, which undermines the possibility of even a minimal political consensus, which would be an essential condition for democracy. Illustrative in this respect is the fact that given their moralised antipluralism, populists frequently oppose the outcomes of elections, particularly when the numerical calculus does not justify their extraordinary and charismatic political role. One need only think of Donald Trump's speech, after (and while) losing the 2020 US presidential elections, in which he tried to undermine the legitimacy of elections; or there is the message of Viktor Orbán after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections: 'the nation cannot be in opposition'. Shortly, the problem is never the populist's failure to represent the people's will, rather, 'it's always the institutions that somehow produce the wrong outcomes' (Müller 2016: 32).

This kind of antipluralist notion of the people is articulated by Carl Schmitt's famous critiques of liberalism and parliamentarianism (Schmitt 1988). He claimed that liberalism was an outdated ideology and parliaments were a mere façade for special interests, and electoral accountability is peculiar to the market rather than politics. In contrast, the people are the real sovereign and popular will could be represented only by (personal) leaders and not by procedures. Therefore, 'the public manifestation of the consent of the people in the form of identification with and acclamation of its leader is the only valid accountability because it is the truly political one, not procedural and formal, not mediated but immediate' (Urbainati 2019: 122). According to Schmitt, 'the unanimous opinion of one hundred million private persons is neither the will of the people nor public opinion. The will of the people can be expressed just as well and perhaps better through acclamation, through something taken for granted, an obvious and unchallenged presence, than through the statistical apparatus (...). Compared to a democracy that is direct, not only in the technical sense but also in a vital sense, parliament appears an artificial machinery,

produced by liberal reasoning, while dictatorial and Caesaristic methods not only can produce the acclamation of the people but can also be a direct expression of democratic substance and power' (Schmitt 1988: 16–17). Since '*volonté générale* cannot be constructed or discovered through extensive deliberative processes, but manifests itself directly by means of popular acclamation', the legitimacy of the leader is based on the fact that he participates in the common and homogeneous identity of the political community and articulates the general will of the people (Abts – Rummens 2007: 416). In this sense, that kind of representation is rather *presentation* or *embodiment* than democratic representation. Therefore, one of my core arguments is that acclamation does not belong to the democratic investiture (which means free, fair and competitive elections) but to the Sartorian auto-investiture, in which someone proclaims himself as ruler and the only legitimate articulation of popular will, while the rights of being legitimate representatives of the political community of any other rivals are denied. When a populist leader declares that he is the only true representative of the people's will even beyond and outside the electoral mandate, he 'calls into question not simply a bad or corrupt performance of state institutions but electoral politics itself, its advocacy character' (Urbinati 2013: 153).

In doing so, populists use extreme forms of political polarisation creating antagonistic moralised cleavages. Thus, they divide society into mutually delegitimising and excluding tribes and undermine democratic principles of norms of toleration and restraint which served as the 'soft guardrails of democracy' (Levitsky – Ziblatt 2018). Without guardrails and any mutual respect of people we cannot talk about a common political stage that would be required for democracy. If 'politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it' (Rancière 1999: 26–27), democracy could be seen as a special kind of political stage, where recognition of pluralism as diversity of individuals, and as legitimate competition of various political actors and as well as a distribution and separation of power (such in polyarchy) are essential. In this sense, democracy is a regime where the pluralistic conception of politics is vital and where power is limited and belongs to no one, hence it is an empty place. Indeed, 'those who exercise power do not possess it; that they do not, indeed, embody it; that the exercise of power requires a periodic and repeated contest; that the authority of those vested with power is created and re-created as a result of the manifestation of the will of the people (...). The reference to an empty place, on the other hand, implies a reference to a society without any positive determination, which cannot be represented by the figure of a community' (Lefort 1988: 225–226). By contrast, populism runs starkly counter to these principles. Populists try to give a final and substantive interpretation of the will and the identity of the people with a phantasmal image of the organic unity of the political community, which means a substantive closure of the originally open and endless democratic pro-

cess. The logic generated by this closure of the empty place of power and identity constitutes the very logic of populism, which therefore should be understood as an *autocratic interpretation of democracy and representation*, and not, as the mainstream literature on populism alleges, one of the two pillars of democracy.

An election, to be democratic, needs to allow the expression of dissent. This is why democracy implies the rule of majority, not that of unanimity. However, acclamation 'does not allow, or does not appreciate, the expression of dissent', because 'in a populist assembly there is no need to count votes and acknowledge minorities, because the leader will be a leader of the whole, not simply of the majority' (Urbinati 1998: 119). The populist leader must be charismatic, which means he is endowed with extraordinary gifts: he has a 'superior capacity to discern the common good, as judged by the people' (Müller 2016: 33). Hence, the substance of the mandate (i.e. the will of the people), and the crisis (as state of exception) which legitimises populist politics, only depends on the arbitrary interpretation of a populist leader (as the sovereign). Therefore, contrary to democratic accountability, a populist leader is free from any mandate on the part of the people and he is accountable only to himself, hence the outcome of elections could be questionable (in democracies) and could have only ritualistic functions (in autocracies). In this logic, the populist leader is the alpha and the omega of politics, while the mass of citizens are only destined to be a passive audience of the leader's performance, and only to reflect the will of people interpreted by the leader and approve his blank-cheque authorisation. The populist claim is ultimately tautological, as it says, 'if you do not agree with the will of the people *as interpreted by myself*, and do not recognize me as the only legitimate leader who can articulate this will as popular sovereignty, you are not the part of the (real) people'. Therefore, elections without free alternatives became 'nothing more than the people's periodic renunciation of their sovereignty. If presumed representation is insecure, election without choice is fraudulent' (Sartori 1987: 30). In summary, 'if one does not want to renounce a notion of democracy that incorporates the limitation of power, a bill of rights, and discussion as the peculiar form of political life, one is forced to conclude that populism is not an expression of democracy' (Urbinati 1998: 122).

However, as I have already mentioned, democracy, as a logic of the empty place of power, can be subverted not only in the populist direction, where this place of power is occupied and closed by a substantive image of the people as a homogeneous unity, but also in the way of the logic of liberalism. This liberal illusion of *diversity-in-itself* means reducing power to an instrumental function, and the people to a fiction, and it regards only individuals and coalitions of interests and opinions as real, hence the very notion of society is denied (Lefort 1988: 232–233). This kind of institutionalisation, where power disappears and is replaced by a totally anonymous rule of law, could be seen as the opposite form of distortion of democracy, where the populist illusion of people-as-one

is replaced with another undemocratic imaginary fiction. In that sense, in part Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser are right when they say that ‘in a world that is dominated by democracy and liberalism, populism has essentially become an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism’ (Mudde – Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 116); however, it would be more precise to say that populism is an illiberal and *quasi*-democratic response to over-institutionalised world.

As we have seen, one of the core elements of the global crisis of democracy is this kind of liberal depolitisation, which has triggered populism. Populists attacks liberal democracy and further increases its legitimacy crisis with anti-institutionalist messages and extreme forms of polarisation, undermining citizen’s trust in democracy. They promise to raise democracy to the highest level and give back the control to the people (to the ‘silent majority’), who are the principal sources of sovereignty, hence populism always has a democracy-creator or rebuilders myth and rhetoric. With the antagonistic and polarising way of politics, they are able to both increase citizens’ depolitisation, passivity and resentment, thanks to emerging negative views and attitudes towards the everyday functioning of democracy, and on the other hand, repolitise and activate people in the name of a better life. Therefore, populism both triggers and embodies the global crisis of democracy, and it is both a consequence and symptom of the latter. For that reason, ‘the danger is populism – a degraded form of democracy that promises to make good on democracy’s highest ideals (»Let the people rule!«). The danger comes, in other words, from within the democratic world – the political actors posing the danger speak the language of democratic values’ (Müller 2016: 6). Consequently, populism should be seen as a Trojan Horse of antidemocrats who want to acquire power formally in the name of people but want to exercise it *de facto* without them. In sum, real populists are a small but very dangerous group to democracy. e.g. Bernie Sanders or Sebastian Kurz are not included because they do not claim that they and they alone could represent legitimately the people, contrary to Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán.

Populism as electoral autocracies’ fig leaf

In the final part of my study, I would like to present populism in the framework of electoral autocracies where it could be an essential element of them. Namely, the characteristics of populism (Manichean worldview, image of a homogeneous people, people-centrism and autocratic notion of representation) are very compatible with electoral autocracies, since these regimes hold general elections and their power is built upon the alleged will of the people. These regimes are able to camouflage or even legitimise their systematically distorted and limited competitive nature, and new repressive tendencies with populism which could be a fig leaf covering up the autocratic exercise of power behind the formally

multi-party but not fair elections and democratic façade. As we have seen, in the autocratic (re)interpretation of democracy and representation, populism not only absolutises the will of people but also expropriates the right of determination of its content exclusively for the populist leader. Thus, democracy's battle cry 'all power to us' is not converted gradually into the principle that *nobody* should have *all* power, which is to 'simply bring a reinforced absolutism back to life' which fulfils the criteria of a perfectionist's betrayal of democratic principles (Sartori 1987: 72). It is especially important to see that populism is not only an anti-elitist promise of ensuring the will of homogeneous people without any (liberal) constraint but also a cognitive software which is able to create continuously antagonistic dichotomies. In these political cleavages, one is either an obedient follower of a populist leader or belongs to the enemy's camp which needs to be overcome at all costs and, hence it is regarded, often explicitly, as a morally inferior antithesis of the in-group. Indeed, if legitimate opponents turn into illegitimate enemies of the people (and of the leader) in this Manichean worldview, then the most serious steps to eliminate them could also be justified. Therefore, this view of politics and democracy is highly compatible with autocrats' intentions to preserve and strengthen their power.

In view of the above, although populism may play different roles in different types of regimes, in all cases it fundamentally strengthens the processes of autocratisation. Hence, as opposed to a mainstream (minimalist) approach to populism research, I do not think that populism (as I have conceptualised) could have a positive effect on the quality of democracy and democratisation even during the processes of autocratic deconsolidation and democratic transition (cf. Mudde – Kaltwasser, 2017: 86–93). Instead, (1) in democracies, populism, by *spreading* an autocratic (re-)interpretation of democracy and representation, can pose a significant threat and could trigger autocratisation. As we have seen, this interpretation seeks to replace the essentially pluralistic approach of democracy (based on limited power and the principle of majority) with an exclusionary, irrefutable and moral claim of representation and articulation of common good. Good examples of this are politicians like Viktor Orbán after 2002, Jarosław Kaczyński after 2005 or Donald Trump after 2016, and their parties.

Secondly, (2) populism in power (still in democracies) seeks to contribute in several ways to a successful regime change (autocratic transition) with the help of government and state's resources, through a massive, centrally controlled and managed autocratic (re-)interpretation of democracy. Such contributions include populism as a source of legitimacy and a form of justification; as a tool of moral and cognitive intimidation and demobilisation of dissidents and protesters by extreme exclusionary logic; or populism as a creator and maintainer of favourable political environment and cleavages for autocratic steps. Each of the aforementioned persons in power sought to increase their capacity to act by straining and dismantling safeguards of democracy. Although not all of them have

achieved successful autocratic transition, upgrading the intensity of populism (using the resources of governments and states) is a common feature of them.

Finally, (3) populism in autocracies – as an already hegemonic, autocratically (re-) interpreted notion of democracy and distinct political logic – can make a valuable contribution to addressing the uncertainties affecting the regime. Contemporary examples are Vladimir Putin's Russia, or Viktor Orbán's Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey and Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines, countries with autocratic transitions in the 2010s. Although significant differences can be observed between these countries, these are electoral autocracies in the approach of this study (de facto multiparty elections without sufficiently achieving the criteria of polyarchy) and in the light of V-Dem's data (Lührmann et al. 2020) in which populism plays a crucial role. In this case, populism already fulfils a key role of autocratic regime stability. Hence, unlike (traditional) closed autocracies who essentially justify their leadership based on transcendent, hereditary, output-oriented or doctrinaire ideological ways, electoral autocracies use, inter alia, a massive pseudo-democratic legitimacy (i.e. ruling in the name of people), which is highly compatible with populism. Therefore, they exercise autocratic power behind a democratic façade, especially under conditions of formally multi-party elections and other plebiscite techniques. To minimise the risk of unsuccessful popular feedback they limit political competition by creating an uneven playing field on one hand, and often use the populist interpretation of democracy and representation on the other hand. Consequently, they typically supplement the traditional autocratic toolbox (repression and co-optation) with a quasi-democratic software that can mask or even justify moral and political inequality. Hence, *populist electoral autocracies are the paradigmatic type of electoral autocracies, which means a symbiosis between autocratic hardware and populist software*. In this regime type, the tricky autocratic auto-investiture is masked by the pseudo-democratic language of populism and its political consequences. On the part of the autocratic hardware, the populist software receives significant resources, both public and private, for maintain polarising mechanisms (which continues the development of enemy images), and in the opposite direction, an autocratic regime can gain much-needed pseudo-democratic legitimacy and justification of (sometimes even openly declared authoritarian) rule, and an arbitrarily exercise of power, provided by populism.

Tannenberget al. (2021) examined regime legitimisation strategies for 183 countries in the world from 1900 to 2019. Building on Max Weber's three classical ideal types of legitimisation (charismatic, traditional, rational-legal), they differentiated four types of justification, namely rules based on *performance*, the person of the *leader*, rational-legal *procedures*, and *ideology*. They found that electoral autocracies tend to rely on leader and ideology. The final reference point in electoral autocracies is often explicitly the person (and party) of the leader whose right to power is either acknowledged properly through elections,

or the problem is somewhere in the representative institutions. In my opinion, this is (the person of leader) where electoral autocracies can be easily linked to populism. Tannenberget al. proved that leader-based claims to the right to rule are significantly more typical in the case of populists (in Latin-America and Europe between 1995 and 2018) than non-populists. In the light of legitimisation, we can say that populist electoral autocracies basically rely on the person of the leader and elections, although these are not fair elections.

This can bring us closer to a more complex approach of stability and legitimacy mechanisms of new autocracies, which is an increasingly researched field of current political science (Gerschewski 2013, 2018; Dukalskis – Gerschewski 2017; Mazepus 2017; Morgenbesser 2017, 2020). In my opinion, this kind of complexity is the key element to understand the flexibility and adaptability of those regimes which are responsibly for sometimes quite an astounding level of resilience. The stability of autocratic regimes is based on three, mutually reinforcing pillars of *repression*, *co-optation* and *legitimation* (Schedler 2013, Gerschewski 2013). These pillars are capable of counteracting the risk of regime collapse, which could come from the directions of the disobedience of citizens, from organised resistance by actors of opposition and, from a division within the elite (Morgenbesser 2017). Repression seeks to ‘make disloyalty a less attractive option for political elites and collective action more difficult for citizens’ (Ibid. 208), while formal and informal co-optation ‘make it easier to persuade a significant »stakeholder« not to exercise his power to obstruct’ (Shleifer – Treisman, 2000: 8–9.). However, electoral autocrats cannot rely in the longer term entirely on strategies of repression and co-optation. Therefore, they also have to and want to gain legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018; Dukalskis – Gerschewski 2017; von Haldenwang 2017; von Soest – Grauvogel 2017; Debre – Morgenbesser 2017; Cassani 2017; Backes – Kailitz 2015), especially pseudo-democratic legitimacy. This is very useful to make their rule less costly, and elicit a proper response of the citizenry, from active consent to compliance with the rules, or from passive obedience to mere toleration. They use elections to strengthen their legitimacy and justify their right to rule, and to gain a ‘moral windfall that is otherwise unavailable to them’ (Morgenbesser, 2017: 209).

In the stabilisation mechanisms of electoral autocracies, populism could play a key constitutive role in every dimension. As a specific form of repression, populism, with its delegitimising nature and political exclusion against every possible opponent of the regime, is able to limit the very existence and impact of political alternatives. Hence it could be seen as cognitive violence and repression which engenders acquiescence through the generation of fear in thought-world, making it fearful to belong to the out-group (i.e. enemy) of the people. In a different perspective, populism could also be a strategy of co-optation, since the motivation of co-opted actors could be not only the fear but a utilitarian cost-benefit calculus of consequences of being a victim of populist political

exclusion. Finally, populism could serve an autocratic regime as a source of legitimisation in many ways. Especially, the autocratic leader is able by means of populism to use a pseudo-democratic language and to speak effectively in the name of the people, thereby to play the role of a democratic elected and legitimised leader. On the other hand, populist autocrats could conceal, and even legitimise or justify their absolutistic nature of exercise of power, the uneven playing field of political competition, the moral inferiority of the opposition and autocratic tendencies on the basis of the alleged will of people articulated by the leader. Moreover, the populist claim of exclusive and moral representation gives some kind of charismatic legitimacy beyond the legal and electoral system. Indeed, populist autocrats transform themselves from ordinary politicians to prophets who have a holy mission. In addition, populism constantly requires and constructs crises and extraordinary situations so as to legitimise themselves as a strong leader in the waves of a permanent storm, which is a very attractive trait of populism in the eye of autocracies. Overall, populism could be seen as a paradigmatic type of autocratic auto-investiture, hence it is very compatible with electoral autocracies.

Following this, elections and other plebiscitary techniques are crucial in populist electoral autocracies, since the successful acclamation and authorisation of populist autocrats is implemented through these institutions which are available to obtain people's recognition as an approved (legitimate) leader. Contrary to democracies where uncertainty appears in connection with the identity of the winner in a fair and roughly balanced political competition, electoral autocracies want to contain the uncertainty of electoral outcomes and to prevent the uncertainties of regime change. Therefore, the main goal of their bricolage-style polity, especially electoral institutions, is to limit or even eliminate the risk of fall from power. Hence, they 'establish the entire set of formal representative institutions we associate with liberal democracy – while deploying a broad range of manipulative strategies that prevent them from being effective' (Schedler 2013: 54). Populist electoral autocracies, as electoral autocracies in general, exercise their autocratic power behind the institutional façades of democracy, using various strategies of repression, co-optation and legitimisation. These institutional manipulations occur in formal institutions' power (legislature, courts and decentralisation) and pluralism (elections, parties, media and civil society) (Ibid. 54–76), which aim to break the Dahlian concept of a 'chain of democratic choice'. The seven elements of this chain (empowerment, freedom of supply, freedom of demand, inclusion, insulation, integrity and decisiveness) are responsible for elections 'fulfill the promise of effective democratic choice', and importantly, they, 'like a real chain, hold together only so long as each of its links remains whole and unbroken', which implies 'that elections may be considered democratic if and only if they fulfill each of them' (Ibid. 83, 86). Develop the autocratic toolbox for breaking this

democratic chain and play unfair is an open-ended 'sport', leaving room for new 'inventions' (Schedler 2013, Morgenbesser 2020). Schedler presents examples from disempowerment strategies through supply- and demand-side restrictions to such external interferences like intimidation and corruption.

My main point here is that populism, as a software (or more accurately a malware, like a Trojan Horse) of autocratic (re-)interpretation of democracy and representation, is fully compatible with these hardware-like techniques. Populists in office, seek to moralise political conflict as much as possible, therefore, 'there is never a dearth of enemies – and these are always nothing less than enemies of the people as a whole' (Müller 2016: 42). The life-and-death struggle of populists from an alleged underdog position could take place from a hegemonic position too, where populists actually become the new elites of the regime (and they turn often to internal enemies). Enemies always form a network in which formal and informal domestic and global actors are intertwined and consistently serve the interests of each other. Ultimately, governance of populist autocrats is a permanent campaign in well-constructed images of crisis, which could conceal or even legitimise state capture, the absence of an effective system of checks and balances, mass clientelism and corruption, and the suppression of critical civil society. They establish a populist constitution, 'in both the sense of a new sociopolitical settlement and a new set of rules for the political game' (Müller 2016: 62), in order to institutionalise the uneven playing field of political competition.

As a radical turn towards traditional (closed) forms of autocracies (without *de facto* multiparty elections) would be too expensive, electoral autocrats need manipulated multi-party elections and other plebiscite techniques that could serve as quasi-democratic legitimation, as well as populism that could transform political contestation to a life-and-death struggle and provides other important cognitive functions. Moreover, populism could be a political reality-shaping tool in the hands of autocracies, making it easier to deal with possible challenges, as it makes the perception of political reality of citizens more flexible. The latter is especially crucial, as the tribal logic created by extreme forms of polarisation is able to put in brackets the actual content of daily political conflicts, because the point is the mere antagonistic political confrontation and identification with the in-group and its leader. Therefore, populist autocracy, as a paradigmatic type of electoral autocracies, will remain with us for a long time, giving more and more tasks to researchers involved in them, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

Summary and conclusion

In this study, I have argued that populism could be an appropriate framework to describe, explain and connect the phenomena of the global crisis of democracy and functioning of electoral autocracies. I have conceptualised democracy as

a term of polyarchy and presented my regime typology (closed autocracy, electoral autocracy, electoral democracy, liberal democracy) based on seminal works of Robert A. Dahl, Giovanni Sartori, Andreas Schedler and the V-Dem project. My concept of populism (Table I) goes beyond the mainstream approach of populism research, since this puts more emphasis on such characteristics as claim of unlimited power (in the name of people), inherent antipluralism, extreme polarisation and autocratic representation. I have demonstrated that in contrast to principles of pluralist democracy the populist idea of a single, homogeneous and authentic people that can be legitimately represented only by populists is a moralised form of antipluralism and political exclusion. The populist notion of representation is presentation or embodiment rather than democratic representation; therefore, one of my core arguments is that acclamation does not belong to the democratic investiture (free, fair and competitive elections) but to the Sartorian auto-investiture. In the latter someone proclaims himself as ruler and the only legitimate articulation of popular will, while the rights of being legitimate representatives of political community of any other rivals are denied. With the antagonistic and polarising way of politics, populists are able to both increase citizens' depolitisation, passivity and resentment, thanks to emerging negative views and attitudes towards the everyday function of democracy, and on other hand, repolitise and activate people in the name of a better life. Therefore, populism both triggers and embodies the global crisis of democracy, and it is both a consequence and symptom of the latter. Consequently, populism should be seen as a Trojan Horse of antidemocrats who want to acquire power formally in the name of the people but want to exercise it *de facto* without them. In sum, real populists are a small but very dangerous group to democracy.

Following this, populism could not have a positive effect on the quality of democracy and democratisation even during the processes of autocratic deconsolidation and democratic transition. Instead, in democracies, populism, by spreading an autocratic (re-)interpretation of democracy and representation, can pose a significant threat and could trigger autocratisation. When populists come to power in democracies, they seek to contribute in several ways to a successful autocratic transition with the help of the government and state's resources. Finally, populism in autocracies can make a valuable contribution to addressing the uncertainties affecting the regime. To minimise the risk of unsuccessful popular feedback of electoral autocrats, they limit political competition by creating an uneven playing field on one hand, and often use a populist interpretation of democracy and representation on the other hand. Hence, they typically supplement the traditional autocratic toolbox with a quasi-democratic software that can mask or even justify moral and political inequality. Therefore, populist electoral autocracies are the paradigmatic type of electoral autocracies, which means a symbiosis between autocratic hardware and populist software. On the part of the autocratic hardware, the populist software

receives significant resources, both public and private, to maintain polarising mechanisms and in the opposite direction, autocratic regimes can gain much-needed pseudo-democratic legitimacy and justification of rule, and an arbitrary exercise of power provided by populism. In addition, in the stabilisation mechanisms of electoral autocracies, populism has a key role. Populism could serve as cognitive violence and repression making it fearful to belong to the out-group (i.e. enemy) of the people, or as a regime strategy for co-optation (utilitarian calculus of potential actors of opposition for being a victim of populist political exclusion). In the aspect of legitimation, autocrats using populism could gain pseudo-democratic legitimation, moreover the populist claim of exclusive and moral representation gives them some kind of charismatic legitimacy beyond the legal and electoral system. Finally, populism could be a political reality-shaping tool in the hands of autocrats, as the tribal logic created by extreme forms of polarisation is able to put in brackets the actual contents of daily political conflicts, because the point is the mere antagonistic political confrontation and identification with the in-group and its leader.

The relationship between the rise to power of person- and leader-centred populism and the day-to-day functioning of contemporary (electoral) autocracies has already been noticed in the literature (e.g. Bugaric 2019; Norris – Inglehart 2019; Peters – Pierre 2020). The combined phenomenon of populism and processes of autocratisation provides more and more empirical examples in Latin America (Levitsky – Loxton 2013; Balderacchi 2018) and Central and Eastern Europe (Bugaric 2019; Peters – Pierre 2020). Here important questions could arise, for example: can we explore some patterns and special trajectories (analytical, historical, territorial and regional, etc.) relating to cases and, consequently, can we eventually predict to a certain extent some possible future scenarios? It could be particularly useful to identify cases in which populism accompanies and serves a complete regime change and processes of autocratisation from opposition to power in democracies, and later, beyond a successful autocratic transition, plays as a constitutive part in electoral autocracies. As I see it, today's world provides countless potential empirical cases, even in the European Union and our region, in Central and Eastern Europe.

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