Centrist and Radical Right Populists in Central and Eastern Europe and Their Divergent Visions of History and the EU

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ABSTRACT

This article compares the politics of history and positions on the EU of six ruling populist leaders and their parties (*Fidesz*, PiS, SDS, GERB, ANO, OĽaNO) from Central and Eastern European (CEE) EU member states. Through the comparison of leaders' biographies and longitudinal analysis of party electoral manifestos an overlap between two types of CEE populism and two types of mnemonic actors in the region is found. Radical right-wing populist parties (*Fidesz*, PiS, SDS) are more oriented towards national histories, memory wars against ex-communists, and critical events for losing or gaining their national sovereignty (mnemonic warriors). Centrist populist parties (GERB, ANO, OĽaNO) largely ignore that kind of narratives and focus on anti-corruption or promises of managing the state more effectively (mnemonic abnegators). Radical right-wing populist parties are also more likely to challenge the Brussels elites by using examples from their national histories. Emphasis on national traumas, anti-communism and their leaders' vision of politics labelled here as combat tasks politics seems to be contributing to their Euroscepticism. Combat tasks politics, i.e., seeing politics as a constant battle against political enemies underpins the Eurosceptic narratives of Kaczyński, Orbán and Janša-former dissidents who were politically socialised while challenging militarised communist regimes.

Keywords: Euroscepticism, populism, populist leaders, Central and Eastern Europe, memory wars, combat tasks politics

Introduction

'Hungarians must live together with history's injustice, because Trianon, from Hungary, will never look as a fair treaty (...) we are the last remnants of the old steppe, and have subscribed for survival; we must be accepted the way we are.' - Viktor Orbán

'We did not write history, but the future is in our hands (...) I would personally leave history to the historians.' - Igor Matovič, Prime Ministers Meeting in Budapest June 12, 2020 (Hungary Today, 2020)

By the end of 2020, more than a half of the 11 post-communist European Union (EU) member states were ruled by populist prime ministers. Moreover, among the six Central and Eastern European (CEE) populist governments, there was an even divide between those led by radical right-wing populists (Hungary, Poland, Slovenia) and those led by centrist populists (Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia). The scale was evened after the centrist populist Slovenian government led by a former comedian, Marjan Šarec, fell in March 2020, and when Janez Janša of the radical right-wing populist Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) became the Prime Minister. This has brought further tensions between CEE and core EU countries, which was best witnessed in Janša's letter to the President of the European Council, where he employed historical references. Janša objected to the rule of law conditionality for EU funds usage, aimed at Hungary and Poland, and compared the concept of 'the rule of law' to communist period concepts whose names reflected 'the exact opposites of their essence', such as 'people's democracies' (2020, 2).

Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland often present grievances of anti-communist forces fighting against the Soviet empire and their collaborators. They perpetuated those grievances by comparing them with their fight against what they see as another imperial project, this one led by Western European liberal elites and their domestic ex-communist agents. Janša (1994) shared their anti-communist grievances and wrote about Yugoslav imperialism and treacherous Slovenian communist and ex-communist elites. The domestic memory wars and the significant symbolic capital that the leading radical right-wing populists possess as prominent members of the 1989 revolutions, were the backdrop of illiberal turn in CEE and have been studied intensively (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, Petrović 2019, Vermeersch 2019, Csehi and Zgut 2020). Bernhard and Kubik (2014) argued that memory warriors in power (at that time Orbán) could threaten democracy. We are interested here in the impact of ruling populists and memory warriors on the European level. In other words, could the strength of the pull effect of *Fidesz*'s and PiS radical right-wing populism bringing more EU governments to oppose 'Brussels' and 'globalist elites' be partly explained by (dis-)similarities of their and other CEE populist political actors' visions of history?

In order to answer this question and comprehend radical right-wing populist leaders' visions of history and their employment in political battles, a comparison with CEE centrist populist leaders is called for. The difference between them is evident from opening quotes by Orbán and Matovič in their recent meeting. Therefore, we compare the development and positions of radical and centrist populists. First, we explore host ideologies of CEE populists and how they developed through time. Regarding the usage of history, we also wish to answer just how prominently the CEE populists use history and whether historically driven narratives feature in criticism of the EU, and if so, how. Finally, we want to answer why some populists use history in their politics and others do not. In order to answer the research questions, the paper analysed governing populist prime minister's parties at the time of the research (2020-2021) – the Hungarian *Fidesz*, Polish PiS, Slovenian SDS, Slovak OĽaNO, Czech ANO and Bulgarian GERB. We argue that the background of party leaders and their visions of history play an important part in their parties' and governments' positioning towards Brussels.

Theoretical framework

This paper is based on Stanley's (2008) comprehensive analysis of populism as a thin ideology which does not offer comprehensive answers to societal problems, as conservatism, socialism, or liberalism do (see also Mudde 2004). Populism's "core consists of four distinct but interrelated concepts: 1) The existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: 'the people' and 'the elite'. 2) The antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite. 3) The idea of popular sovereignty. 4) The positive valorisation of 'the people' and denigration of 'the elite'" (Stanley 2008, 102).

While arguing for an ideological approach to populism in CEE, Stanley (2017) differentiated between radical and centrist populism during the 1990s and 2000s. Radical populism, both left-wing and right-wing, aimed to "protect the national economy from global competition, preserve national cultural identity and values, and oppose supranational political integration" (Stanley 2017, 143). Due to historical grievances associated with communist subjugation of CEE, radical left-wing populism was and remained marginal. CEE radical right-wing populists could thrive on the support of some of the descendants of social groups harbouring those grievances, whether bourgeoisie, quisling, clerical or anti-communist groups, which were prosecuted or oppressed during the communist rule.

Centrist populism, on the other hand, was characterised by a "pragmatic approach to the thick-ideological aspects of their appeal, and the foregrounding of qualities such as competence, probity, and newness" (Stanley 2017, 144). Havlík and Pinková (2012) differentiated between exclusively and non-exclusively populist political parties. Exclusively populist political parties mostly correspond with Stanley's type of centrist populist parties, although Havlík and Pinková (2012, 31) use the term exclusively to reflect the key role "played by populism in formulating the party's identity and in its rhetoric". Based on case studies of populist parties in 10 post-communist EU member states, the list of exclusively populist political parties includes Bulgarian NDSV and GERB and Estonian *Res Publica* (Havlík and Pinková 2012), which are also Stanley's examples of centrist populist parties. Their exclusivity hinders their search for host ideologies and their *raison d'être,* particularly when they became prime minister's parties. Radical right populists belong to non-exclusively populist political parties.

Stanley concluded that both radical and centrist populism are highly relevant for relatively new CEE party systems. However, it is the radical right-wing CEE populism that is sending shock waves throughout the EU. Following Jenne (2018, 546), this could be explained by the rise of ethnopopulist state leaders 'who combine nationalism with the revolutionary impulse of populism to amplify the effects of nationalism at the regional or even systemic level'. Ethnopopulism 'equates "the people" with "the nation" and holds that sovereignty should be an expression of the will of the "nation-people"' (Jenne 2018, 550). Vachudová (2020, 332) argued that *Fidesz,* PiS and ANO and their leaders are all ethnopopulists and briefly mentioned different use of historical memories by these parties' leaders. However, we argue that visions of history are one of the main differences between various CEE populist actors and that they have a major influence on their politics, particularly towards the EU. In this vein, centrist populist parties such as ANO cannot be fully subsumed under the same ethnopopulist label as radical right parties such as *Fidesz* and PiS, as centrist ethnopopulism is more contingent.

Populism in Laclauian tradition has also been defined as a discourse and saw both people and certain power bloc as empty signifiers 'filled with particular content depending on the specifics of the political context within which they are invoked and the cultural toolbox at work' (Aslanidis 2015, 11). Although we treat populism as a thin-centred ideology, this view of populism helps us explain why radical right populist leaders have fully transposed their populist rhetoric towards Brussels and most centrist populist leaders have not. We argue that the radical right populist leaders' cultural toolbox consisted of deep and sometimes even personal immersion in historical narratives.

Regarding populist usage of history, in his review of the history of populisms in CEE, Mudde concluded that 'invoking an age-old legacy to explain contemporary populism in Eastern Europe is not particularly useful' (2000, 51). He highlighted a profound change which communism brought to CEE. Twenty years after his article, communist legacy still plays an important role in explaining contemporary CEE populisms, at times even more pronounced. Moreover, events and actors from the interwar and World War II periods, or even earlier periods, complement the narratives of CEE populist leaders. The positive reassessment of dark history has become ubiquitous in Europe not only with radical fringe parties, but even with some ruling parties (for Italy and Netherlands see Couperus and Tortola 2019).

Mudde also saw Václav Havel's and György Konrád's anti-politics as a source of populism in post-communist Europe. Anti-politics were formulated during the time of communist oppression but also propagated while these two former dissidents were acquiring power and founding new, liberal parties. It consisted of 'a belief in "moral politics," a strong anti-elite rhetoric, and a deep hostility towards political parties' (Mudde 2002, 47). Centrist populist political leaders such as Babiš and Matovič resonated more to these characteristics of anti-politics and branded their parties as movements (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020).[1] We argue that another vision of politics, present with some former dissident politicians with similar backgrounds, can help explain the current rise of radical right-wing populist parties shaking the foundations of the Western liberal order. Combat tasks politics,[2] i.e., seeing politics as a constant battle against political enemies underpins the illiberal turn performed by CEE leaders Orbán, Kaczyński and Janša. Contrary to their anti-politics dissident colleagues who were aligned to now defunct liberal parties (Konrád to the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ), Havel to the Civic Movement), these three former dissidents had an extraordinary resolve in building their conservative parties, staying at their helm, and keeping them rather homogenous.[3] They also became mnemonic warriors, i.e., political actors who believe in a single mythical past and that the 'wrongs of the past are part of the tissues of present politics' (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 15). Another type of mnemonic actors described by Bernhard and Kubik are mnemonic abnegators who 'avoid memory politics...are either uninterested or see no advantage in engaging in them' (2014, 14). This type of mnemonic actors is relevant for the understanding of CEE centrist populism.

We argue here that the current ruling anti-Western CEE populism should be analysed as a confluence of nationalist historical narratives embedded in certain social and political groups and positioning of major political actors during the last phases of socialism, throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Positions taken by leading contemporary CEE radical right-wing populists in the early 1990s such as Orbán being a young liberal attacking Antall's conservative government (Lendvai 2016) and Jarosław Kaczyński branding his Centre Agreement party (PC) as opposing nationalism and criticising extreme clericalism of the Christian National Union (Stanley 2008; Millard 2010) indicate a need for an evolutionary and comparative approach to CEE populism.

Data and Methods

Our case selection was guided by the need to place focus on the currently most important populist parties in the observed region, those that can shape public opinion, memory politics and relations towards the EU from a position of power and influence. This meant that we limited our research to populist government parties presently in power. The *PopuList* database (Rooduijn et al. 2019) was used as a determinant for the classification of parties as populist. Data on government parties was added from the *ParlGov* database (Döring and Manow 2021). Juxtaposing the criteria yielded 6 candidates for analysis: *Fidesz*, PiS, SDS, OĽaNO, ANO and GERB. The analysis unfolded on two levels.

In the first level of analysis, we looked at the leaders' worldviews and political actions and histories of their respective parties, based on various sources such as biographies,[4] programmatic books, media reports, as well as existing research. Our aim was to compare their visions of history in relation to attitudes towards the EU.

In the second level of analysis, we conducted party manifesto analysis. CEE party manifestos (11 EU member states) from the *Manifesto Corpus* (CMP/MARPOR) dataset (Volkens et al. 2021) were paired with additional information from the aforementioned *PopuList* database and the *ParlGov* database. Such a case selection process ultimately yielded a reduced subset of 108 party electoral manifestos for a three-decade period (1990-2020).

The manifesto analysis included two steps. In the first step, we undertook a party manifesto change analysis. Based on Stanley's (2017) characterisation of radical populism and our hypothesis on the importance of visions of history for the differentiation of radical and centrist populism, we looked at trends in parties' views on the legacy of communism, the EU, and nationalism. The second step revolves around party manifesto emphasis analysis and employs text mining to look at frequencies of terms employed in manifestos, as well as to explore quasi-sentences (basic textual units in the *Manifesto Corpus*) which pertain to notions of the past, i.e., the usage of history and historical imagery. Word frequencies are analysed for statements pertaining to the EU, nationalism, and bilateral foreign relations.

A detailed description of the variables used for the manifesto analysis is provided in the *Appendix*.

Finally, in the discussion we compared the results of party histories and manifesto analysis, but also national contexts (type of state socialism, mode of transition from communism, country power status) in which these parties act.

Why and How Do Radical Right Populists Challenge the Western Liberal Order?

CEE relations towards the West have gone through considerable change through the last thirty years. Previous narratives of Western betrayal often warned the West not to repeat their historical mistakes and disengage from CEE. This could be discerned from a 2009 *Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe* (Adamkus et al. 2009). Signed by some of the most prominent figures of the revolutions of 1989, such as Lech Wałęsa and Havel, it argued that:

> *(...) a strong commitment to common liberal democratic values is essential to our countries. We know from our own historical experience the difference between when the United States stood up for its liberal democratic values and when it did not. Our region suffered when the United States succumbed to 'realism' at Yalta.*

They also stated that 'a new generation of leaders is emerging who do not have these memories and follow a more "realistic" policy' (Adamkus et al. 2009). However, some members of the new generation of leaders and their fellow dissidents would end up using these memories to oppose a pro-Western liberal consensus. Orbán and Kaczyński defied Western elites while using events and periods from their national histories, which showed the heroism of their nations and indifference of the West.

Orbán's and Kaczyński's narrative of Western betrayal implies a strict detachment from the Western influence. In his speech marking the 1956 Revolution, Orbán (2018) said that the 'mystery of Hungarian survival is inexplicable' and that Hungarians remained Europeans 'even after we were sold off at Yalta, and in '56 when we were abandoned to our fate'. But Orbán warned that today they will not surrender their sovereignty to 'a European empire: a European empire led not by the elected leaders of nations, but by Brussels bureaucrats'. Jarosław Kaczyński's reformulation of Polish relations with the West and the EU focused on his vilification of Germany. In his book *Poland of our Dreams*, he wrote on German imperial ambitions in the EU and insinuated that Angela Merkel's coming to power was part of a larger plan (2011, 24). This was later interpreted by the media as if Kaczyński implied that the Stasi helped Merkel come to power, which he did not deny (Krzemiński 2011). Kaczyński, moreover, complained that Polish political elites (particularly Donald Tusk) were more subservient towards Germany than Hungary after Orbán came to power or Czechs. Kaczyński (2011) continued that Poland had, due to WWII experiences, more legitimacy in criticising German politics compared to Czechs who always emphasize Lidice massacre, although Poland experienced such massacres on weekly bases.

Janša's SDS has profiled itself as a close ideological ally of *Fidesz* since the early 2010s following Janša's second short spell as the prime minister of Slovenia. Business and media connections between the two parties have thrived ever since (Juhász 2019). Although Janša was not perceived as a Eurosceptic, the SDS also started recently challenging the Western liberal order. The SDS' ideologue Branko Grims (cited in Mlinarič 2019) indicated the direction of his party after *Fidesz* was threatened with expulsion from the EPP:

The Visegrád Group has its own views, and these views are in my opinion the only healthy foundation for the long-term future of the EU. The EU envisioned by the globalist Macron, who supports violence against disabled people with tear gas, such a Europe of imposed multiculturalism and cultural Marxism LBTQP (sic) has no future.

Krastev and Holmes (2019) argued for psychological explanations of Eurosceptic illiberal turn in Hungary and Poland. After the accession to the EU, there was a feeling of disappointment and accession fatigue and these societies did not want to continue with the imitation of Western role models. Particularly influential was the demographic anxiety reinforced during the migration crisis (Krastev and Holmes 2019). We argue that combat tasks politics also drove them to transpose the battle which they waged as the opposition to ex-communist and liberal domestic elites (Bernhard and Kubik 2014) onto the European-level and into an opposition to Brussels and globalists.

Three former anti-communist dissidents analysed here possess a siege mentality which is easily transposed to a conspiratorial worldview. This worldview has been expressed by accusing their opponents as protagonists of the deep state. This is unsurprising as all three of them started their political careers while their opponents were communist dictatorships with strong surveillance apparatuses (Millard 2010) and were politically socialised while challenging militarised communist regimes. In his famous 1989 speech at the reburial of Imre Nagy, Orbán demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and attacked reform communists who were engaged in liberalisation of the regime but wanted to cling to power. Kaczyński brothers were members of the Solidarity trade union and Lech Kaczyński was interned during the military rule of General Wojciech Jaruzelski in 1981. Janša was arrested in 1988 for leaking classified documents of the Yugoslav People's Army and sentenced to prison, which provoked the rise of anti-regime opposition in Slovenia.[5]

Fidesz started as a liberal pro-European party, yet by 1997 it was the only parliamentary party which had not participated in government (Bozóki 1999). Orbán and other *Fidesz* members of plebeian[6] background started resenting cosmopolitan and elitist liberals of SZDSZ which were in coalition with ex-communists (Lendvai 2016). Lakner argues that *Fidesz* defined itself by "modernised" anti-communism, which "is a flexible concept that continuously acquires fresh content" (2007, 95). *Fidesz* reinvented itself as a conservative party and won the 1998 national parliamentary election. However, they lost power to ex-communists in 2002. The socialist government soon lost credibility after the infamous 2006 speech by the wealthy Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in which he confessed lying to the public, prompting an anti-elitist backlash. The ensuing protests coincided with the 50th anniversary of the 1956 revolution and the opposition waged memory wars against the socialist government. *Fidesz* then won the 2010 election with a landslide.

After the fall of communism, Jarosław Kaczyński was one of the most prominent critics of the negotiated Polish transition arguing that it should have been more radical in jettisoning communist elites. After Wałęsa won the 1990 presidential election, Jarosław Kaczyński became the head of the presidential chancellery. Wałęsa soon dismissed Kaczyński as 'he needed people who could "do a job, not just wage a war"' (cited in Davies 2016). In 1992 Kaczyński brothers' PC party had a brief spell as the nominally ruling party supporting radically anti-communist minority government led by their member Jan Olszewski. Olszewski's government lost the confidence vote after just five months in power and Olszewski left PC (Szczerbiak 2001). PC then lost relevance but joined the winning Solidarity Electoral Action coalition in 1997 and in 2001 the successor party PiS was founded. Attacks on *układ* (agreement) i.e., corrupt system ruling Poland was one of the crucial elements of Kaczyńskis's narrative, prominent in the PiS's road to power (Millard 2008). Also, the attacks on their political enemies based on their (Wałęsa) or their family's histories (Tusk) were used. These sorts of accusations were more than an electoral strategy. This was an attempt to employ populist ideology and create a division 'between the truly patriotic Poles (the real victims and heroes of communism) and the traitors associated with the post-communist networks of communist apparatchiks as well as neoliberal traitors of the true anti-communist opposition; both the latter groups are accused of having penetrated the Polish state at the expense of the ordinary people' (Karolewski 2019, 241). PiS came to power in 2005 and ruled in coalition with populist and Eurosceptic Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (SRP) and League of Polish Families (LPR), but lost power after two years. After two consecutive Civic Platform governments and a wire-tapping scandal of 2014 in which Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski was taped while bluntly discussing foreign partners over an expensive dinner, PiS came back to power in 2015.

Janša's road to power was even more turbulent. He was Minister of Defence during the Slovenian war of independence[7] in a centre-right coalition government. He stayed in that post as part of the left-liberal government led by Janez Drnovšek of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDS), but was impeached by the parliament for 'transgression of the civilian sphere by the military' in 1994 (Turner 2007, 1113). The SDS became the main opposition party and Janša regularly accused the long-time president and ex-communist Milan Kučan of organizing a Slovenian deep state. Although the SDS was originally envisaged as a social democratic party[8], already in his book on the creation of the Slovenian state, Janša (1992) accused Kučan of not caring for his plight in the late 1980s and the left liberal LDS for naïve pacifism, which could not have led to Slovenian independence. In the next book, Janša (1994) intensified these accusations and compared the inactivity of political elites after the First World War when Slovenia lost parts of the Slovenian-inhabited lands with ex-communist's inaction in the early 1990s. He also emphasised his father's suffering, who 'knew nothing about politics' but was taken hostage by Yugoslav partisans and barely escaped death (Janša 1994, 25). This was

Janša's early attempt to create a division between ex-communist and liberal corrupt traitors and the plight of ordinary man.

In 2004, when the SDS came to power, it was a member of the EPP, promising liberal economic reforms with the aim of Slovenian adoption of the euro (Turner 2007). During his brief second term as prime minister (2012-2013), Janša was accused of various corruption affairs. After his government received the vote of no confidence, Janša was convicted on corruption charges and then imprisoned in 2014. He left the prison by the end of the year as his case was reviewed by the Constitutional Court.

Centrist Populists as Ideologically Inconsistent Mnemonic Abnegators

Centrist populist prime ministers Boyko Borisov, Andrej Babiš, and Igor Matovič had different career paths and came to politics after more or less successful careers as entrepreneurs. Unlike leaders with a dissident past, they had no symbolic capital related to the fall of communism and are far less oriented towards the past. Also contrary to radical right-wing populists, they either cooperated with social democrats (Babiš) or social democrats in their countries were predominantly socially conservative (Bulgaria, Slovakia).

Bulgaria already had a peculiar case of a pro-Western populist prime minister. In 2001, the former Bulgarian Tsar Simeon II founded the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) and won the election the same year on an anti-corruption and pro-foreign investment platform. Borisov, who was a former owner of a security company and a bodyguard to Todor Zhivkov and Simeon II, became the face of Simeon's party fight against corruption and organised crime. In 2006 Borisov founded Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) and won the 2009 election. He secured three terms as Bulgarian prime minister, a remarkable feat for post-1990 Bulgarian politics. Regarding

Borisov's politics of history, he exhibits mnemonic abnegation by (virtue of) not dealing with historical issues and by being 'oriented toward the country's "European future"' (Ganev 2014, 229). Prior to 1990 Borisov was a member of the Communist party and worked as a lecturer for the Ministry of Interior. Ganev (2014) mentioned two occasions where Borisov used family and national memories and they indicated a rather ambiguous stance towards Bulgarian socialism. After GERB defeated ex-communists in 2009, he dedicated his victory to his grandfather, who was killed by the Communists in 1944. Although GERB is a centre-right party[9], Borisov praised the economic accomplishments of Zhivkov's communist regime in 2010. In a programmatic text to the EPP community Borisov belittled his competition on the centre-right the Union of Democratic Forces, which was founded by the dissident Zhelyu Zhelev in 1989. Borisov (2008, 47) presented GERB as overcoming communist past, but differentiated between 'those who sincerely desired change to those who wanted it for the personal rehabilitation it would bring and the attendant social compensations'. GERB represented 'the large and increasing share of people with economic initiative and effectiveness, confident in their own abilities and capacity' (Borisov, 2008, 47).

In Czechia, the 2010s were marked by the Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) party. Initially having been founded as a *movement* in 2011 by the billionaire businessman Andrej Babiš, ANO gradually increased its popular support and ultimately emerged victorious in the 2017 parliamentary elections.

The Czech case probably best exemplifies different variants of populism. ANO and its leader Andrej Babiš have been described as representatives of a distinct, *technocratic* form of populism (Havlík 2019). What makes this type of populism special is that, unlike Kaczyński or Orbán, Babiš's proposals are mostly 'directed toward supposedly simpler and faster decision-making' instead of being ideologically driven (Havlík 2019, 12). Even after a decade of political career, he is still understood to be a politician 'with shallow ideological anchoring' (Cirhan and Kopecký 2020, 113). The 2021 parliamentary elections seemed to have somewhat challenged this notion, however. In his latest electoral campaign book Babiš (2021) started emphasizing his closeness to Orbán and denounced uncritical acceptance of Western ideas and West's inability to integrate immigrants. Despite this, after losing the elections the party hinted it would move back to a more moderate and centrist orientation by claiming it would represent left-wing voters (Česká televize 2021). ANO should therefore still be considered a centrist populist party (Havlík and Voda 2018), one whose technocratic appeals place strong focus on managing the state more effectively, akin to a (family-owned) business (Babiš 2017). The party is a member of ALDE, but Babiš is far from a consistent follower of its ideology and Euro-optimism (Hloušek and Kopeček 2020).

Babiš's biography can be understood as the shaping factor in how he approaches historical legacies. By his own admission, he was in Morocco at the time of the Velvet Revolution and was unaware of its start (Babiš 2013). Coupled with the weight of allegations of cooperation with communist secret services, Babiš acknowledged his lack of dissident symbolic capital:

> *I am one of those opportunists who during the ancien régime crawled into the [communist] party in order to be able to travel abroad. I am probably not a historical moral ideal.*
>
> *(Kubátová 2011; cited in Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020, 50)*

Due to this, ANO and Babiš are inclined to be mnemonic abnegators, although prominent mention of interwar legacy can be found in their materials. This is best exemplified in Babiš's 2017 book *What I Dream About When I Happen to Fall Asleep*, which reveals a sort of 'make Czechia great again' narrative built on references to interwar economic glory. Existing national myths of exceptionally democratic Czech people (Williams 1997) are cast aside in favour of stressing Czech entrepreneurial talent. This is also signified by the historical figure Babiš references and compares himself to – the entrepreneur Jan Antonín Baťa.[10]

Unlike other CEE states, Slovakia had a prominent populist option in power as early as the beginning of the 1990s and had favourable conditions for the emergence of populist parties throughout the whole post-1990 period (Spáč 2012). OĽaNO (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities) emerged as a registered party in 2011 as a project of the businessman turned politician Igor Matovič. The gradual rise in the support for the party culminated in its victory in the parliamentary elections of 2020.

OĽaNO has profiled itself as an above all anti-establishment and anti-corruption *movement*. Even though they can be classified as a centrist populist party, with time they have grown closer to conservatism (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020, 108). Nevertheless, OĽaNO is one of the best examples of ideological diversity (Hloušek, Kopeček, and Vodová 2020, 111) and has liberal and conservative strands. Comparisons of Matovič and Babiš are common due to their business background, but it is important to note that the character of the two populisms they spearhead differs. Unlike Babiš, Matovič has eschewed the technocratic-managerial vision and primarily opts for anti-corruption glazed political performance (Kopeček and Vodová 2020, 101).

Matovič is a younger politician with no biographic linkage to either the old system or its downfall. His anti-elite criticism has mostly been focused in the present and against the former Prime Minister Robert Fico and his *Smer* party. Despite also being, for the most part, a mnemonic abnegator, it should be noted that Matovič's OĽaNO has taken issue with communism and its legacy throughout the years.[11]

Party Manifesto Analysis: Anti-communism as a Backdrop and Rising Nationalism and Euroscepticism of Radical Right Populists

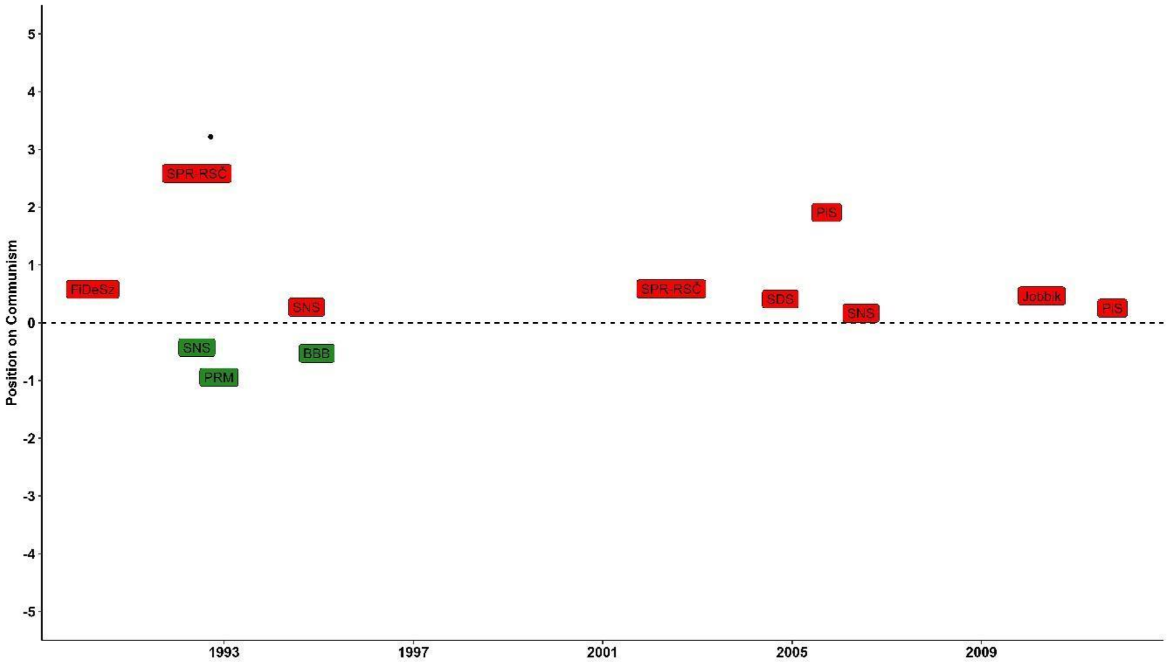
In this section, we explore the change in party positions along the scales measuring positions on communist legacy, the EU, and nationalism, over time. The analysed manifestos were divided in three subcategories. The upper 20% of the distribution was coloured red in the figures to showcase the most Eurosceptic, most nationalist cases or the ones that had the most negative vision of the communist legacy. Conversely, the lower 20% of the distribution was coloured green in the figures to highlight the least Eurosceptic (i.e., most pro-EU), the least nationalist, etc. cases. The rest of the distribution was coloured yellow.

There were only a few cases that touched upon the legacy of the communist past, which is not surprising as manifestos are primarily policy oriented. However, all of the radical right-wing populist parties analysed in the paper are present here (but none of the centrist populist parties) and all presented a clearly negative picture of the communist past (Figure 1). *Fidesz*' 1990 manifesto was staunchly anti-communist and focused on economic reforms and overcoming of 'the Russian occupation' and 'an Asian despotic reign'. *Fidesz* also managed to introduce anti-communist rhetoric in their later preparations for elections.[12] For instance, Orbán in his 2014 speech denigrated Socialists by calling them Communists and saying that Hungary was 'devoured by the great post-communist rumen'.

The PiS 2005 manifesto started with the call for lustration in order 'to consolidate and strengthen the state'. Their 2011 manifesto stated that Poland should be a successor of the Second Polish Republic and not of communist Poland. It also combined anti-communism with threats from the outside calling for 'the liquidation of informal social networks created in the Third Polish Republic by people who were associated with the

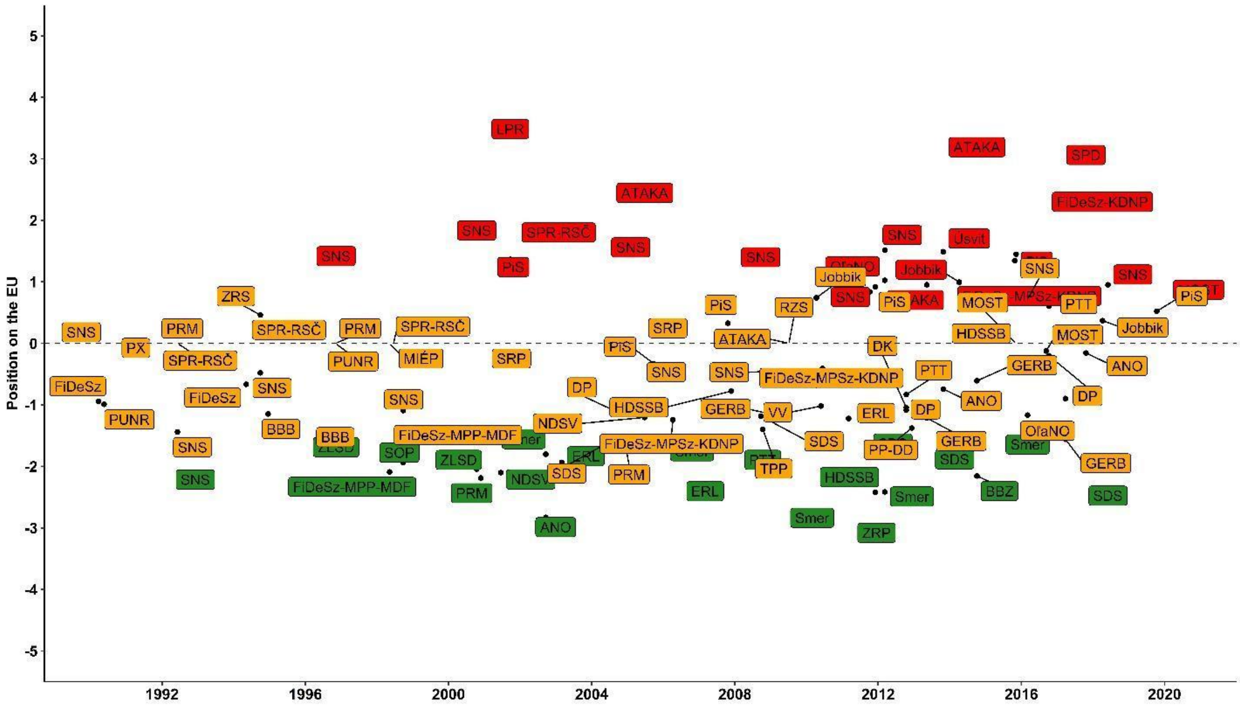
PZPR apparatus and its subordinate secret services, with known foreign connections'. The SDS 2004 manifesto used anti-communism in order to accuse the European and Slovenian left for seeing the EU only as a means to achieve their long held Marxist dream of the death of national states.

Figure 1. *Position on Communism*



There was an increase in Eurosceptic attitudes during the last decade, with much more pro-EU stances during the 1990s, when the respective countries were not part of the Union (Figure 2). While most political parties do not show much variation in their EU attitudes over time, one party does stand out in its transformation – *Fidesz* has moved from rather pro-EU manifestos during the 1990s[13] to clearly Eurosceptic positions in more recent years, akin to the attitudes of PiS. The significance of 2005 Polish elections is also visible as it signalled the growing importance of Eurosceptic parties such as PiS and LPR in CEE politics.

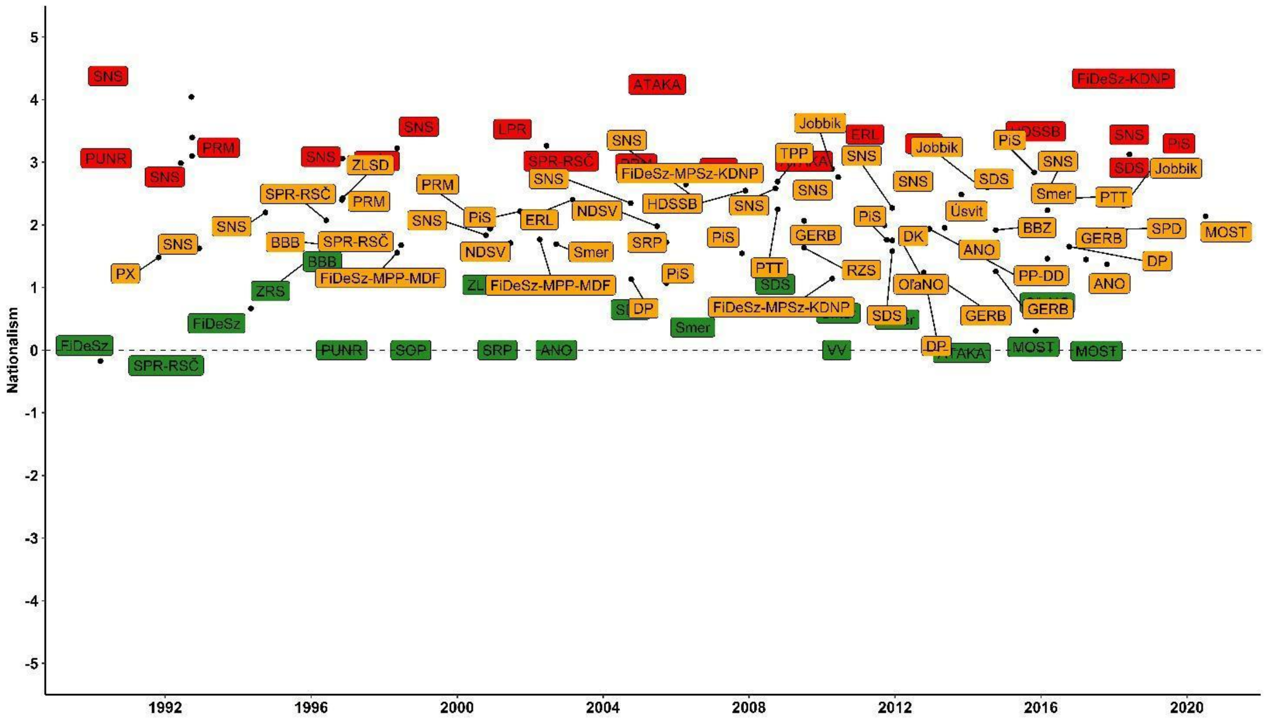
Figure 2. *Position on the EU*



Whereas with attitudes on the EU one could observe a wide range of positions, the whole distribution of the nationalism scale was skewed to the upper part of the scatterplot (Figure 3), implying that populist CEE parties in general tend to be rather nationalist. However, radical right populists are far more nationalist, than GERB, ANO and OľaNO. Again, *Fidesz* stands out with its clear progression from a less nationalist to a more nationalist position.

Fidesz changed its stance from even acknowledging anti-national stances in their 1990 manifesto to fervent nationalism in manifestos published in 2010s. The change was most prominently expressed in their 1997 declaration, where Orbán stated that the Socialist government was 'not under national influence' (Lendvai 2016, 42). However, as stated before, their 1990 manifesto was strongly anti-Russian. This is interesting from the perspective of Orbán's current close relations to Putin. *Fidesz* has preserved its combat mode but switched from denigrating Eastern values to condemning the Western ones. Orbán saw similarities with Putin's Russia in its preservation of Christian values in contrast to Western secularism (Rohac, Győri and Zgut 2017).[14]

Figure 3. *Nationalism*



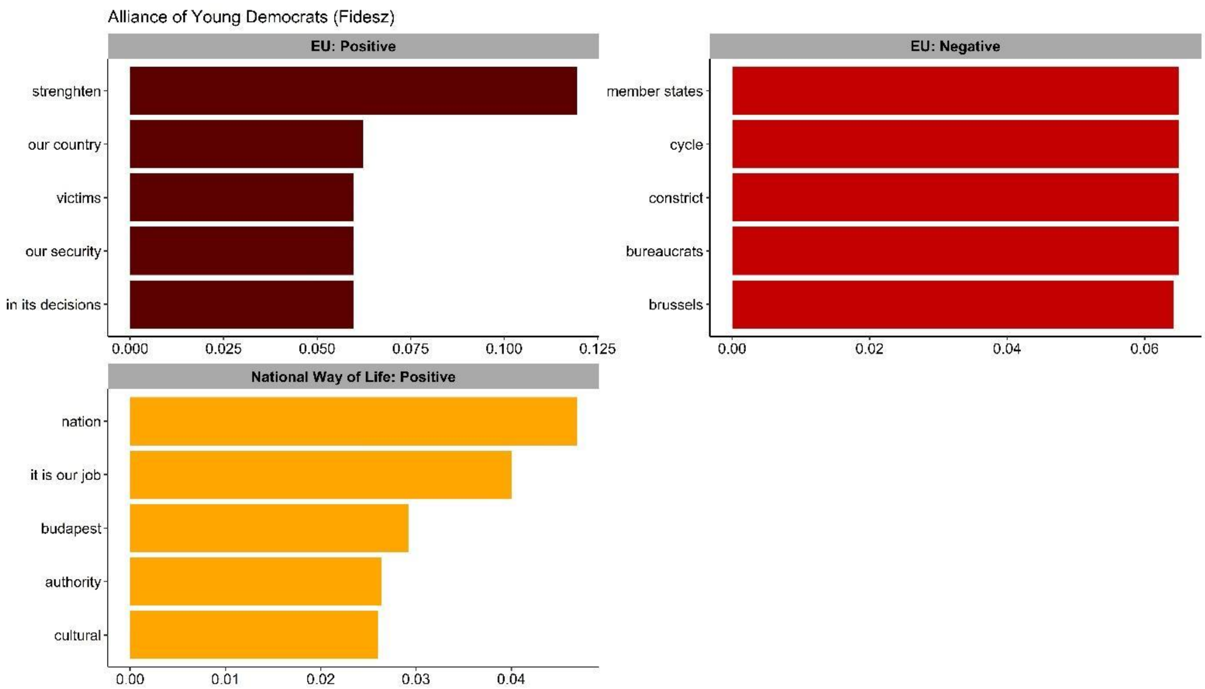
Usage of History in Party Manifestos: History as a Fighting Arena in Radical Right Narratives and as Instances of Cooperation in Centrist Narratives

The frequency analysis for *Fidesz,* showed that they portray Hungary as a gateway between East and West and underlined the wish to maintain national sovereignty and not become a victim (again) (Figure 4). In addition, the analysis of quasi-sentences used in original manifestos pertaining to topics of the EU, foreign relations, and nationalism, revealed a strong emphasis on preservation of national heritage. The role of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and its commemoration was especially pointed out. When discussing the vision of the Hungarian nation and neighbourhood policy within and without the EU, the 2006 manifesto also included the following statement:

> *The content of the cross-border national unification is to organize the Hungarians living on both sides of the border, in all their Hungarian homelands, into a unified cultural and economic community and region.*

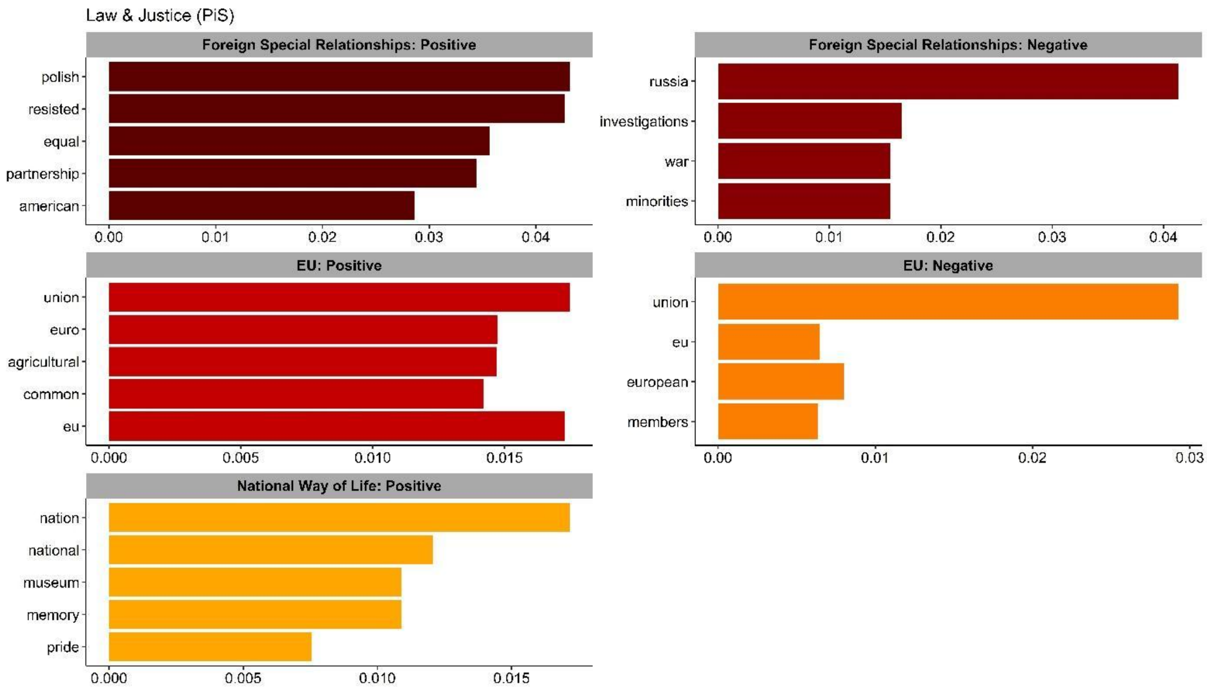
This was a clear example of the deeply historically rooted thinking of *Fidesz* and the wish to promote trans-sovereign nationalism, based on the perpetuation of the remembrance of the 1920 Trianon Treaty as a moment of Hungarian national tragedy. On the other hand, the EU and Western European leaders were presented as ruthless bureaucrats not understanding Hungary and Central Europe and proposing one size fits all policies, particularly regarding immigration.

Figure 4. *Fidesz Word Frequency Analysis*



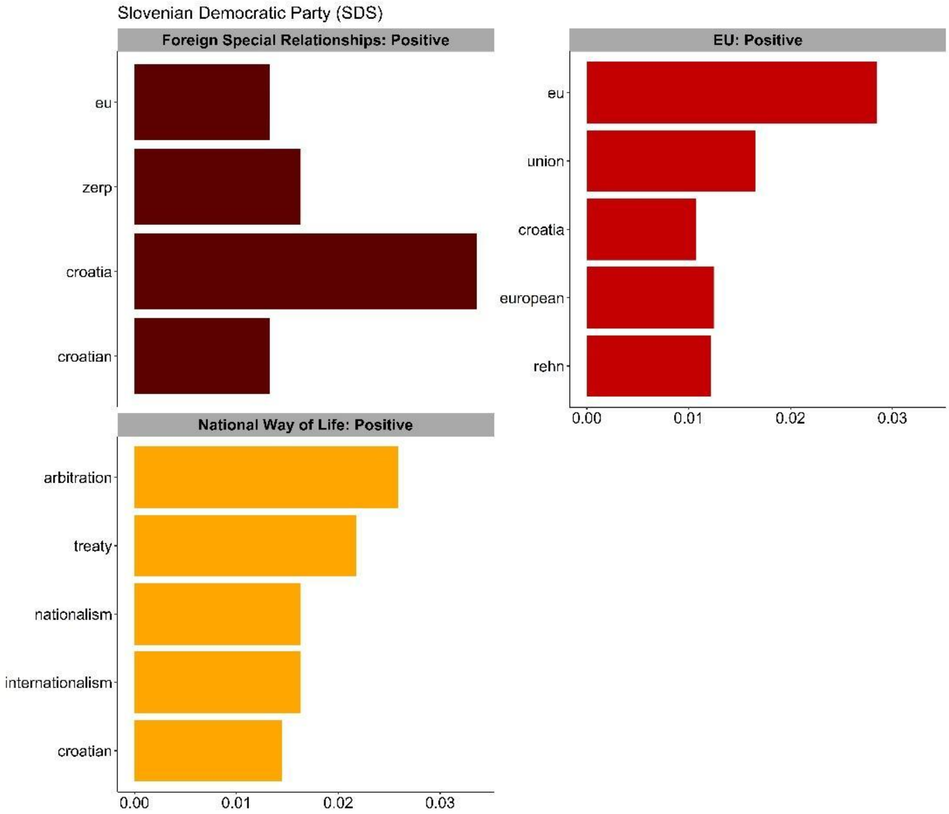
The word frequency analysis for PiS (Figure 5) has confirmed the paramount role the negative relationship with Russia and the memory of war (Katyn) play in this party's foreign policy imagery and narrative on the past. In their 2015 manifesto, PiS attacked Tusk personally for not reacting to German revisions of the Second World War history and not insisting on calling the Katyn massacre of 1940 a genocide. In addition, sentences related to nationalism emphasised memory and the importance of museums for patriotic education. After coming to power, PiS engaged in orienting Polish memory politics away from Tusk's cosmopolitan vision embodied in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and towards a more nationalist version (Logemann 2017). PiS' vision of the current EU was also rooted in their anti-German sentiments. In their 2015 manifesto they warned that avoiding the hegemony of one state and its attempt to erase cultural diversity was the goal of the founders of European integration in 1951 and that this should not be reversed today.

Figure 5. *PiS Word Frequency Analysis*



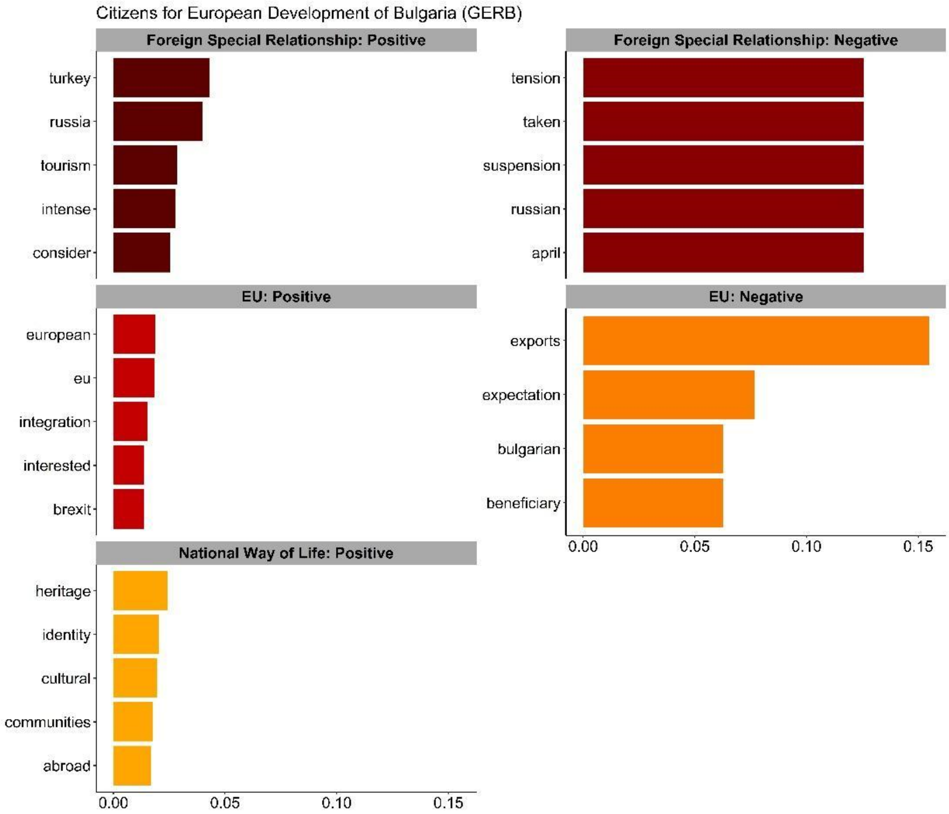
Text mining for the SDS confirms the role its southern neighbour, Croatia, plays in foreign policy and foreign relations imagery, especially considering the bilateral arbitration case concerning the maritime border dispute in the Northern Adriatic (Figure 6). Although the SDS' manifestos could be interpreted as pro-EU, the 2004 manifesto already issued a warning against the dissolution of nations in the EU and pro-EU statements were often a praise for warnings by EU institutions and leaders to Croatian authorities regarding the dispute. Particularly interesting is the 2018 manifesto which gave an overview of Slovenian history from the 9th century manuscripts written in Slovenian, to the non-communist anti-fascist TIGR organisation of the 1920s and emphasised the end of the 1980s events in which Janša was involved and which led to Slovenian independence. The 2018 manifesto positively assessed the EU because with the accession to the EU: 'many borders that divided the Slovene ethnic space in the past have fallen'. It also twice mentioned United Slovenia (*Zedinjena Slovenija*), a mid-19th century programme of uniting all Slovenians, whose borders included parts of neighbouring EU member states. This bears resemblance to *Fidesz*'s trans-sovereign nationalism and together with radical right's common emphases on turbulent national histories could point to underlying causes of the recent Eurosceptic turn.

Figure 6. *SDS Word Frequency Analysis*



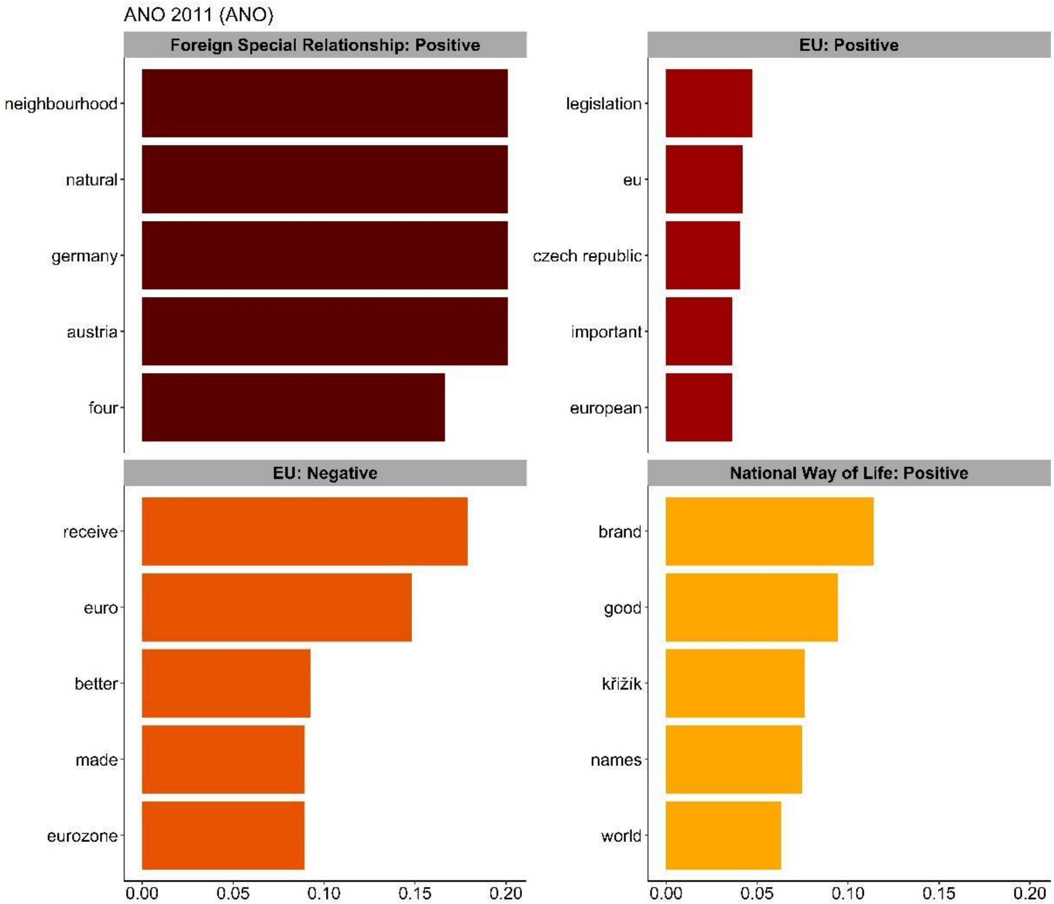
The analysis of term frequencies for GERB (Figure 7) has shown the importance of Russia in both positive and negative foreign policy connotations. Yet, contrary to PiS, GERB placed an emphasis on contemporary economic and security concerns (the Ukraine crisis) and repeatedly called for coordination and cooperation between East and West. GERB did not use history in its policy justifications, yet its manifestos did include wordings such as 'historically unique situation' and 'historical achievement', both referring to the perception of favourable geopolitical conditions for Bulgaria regarding its membership in NATO and the EU.

Figure 7. *GERB Word Frequency Analysis*



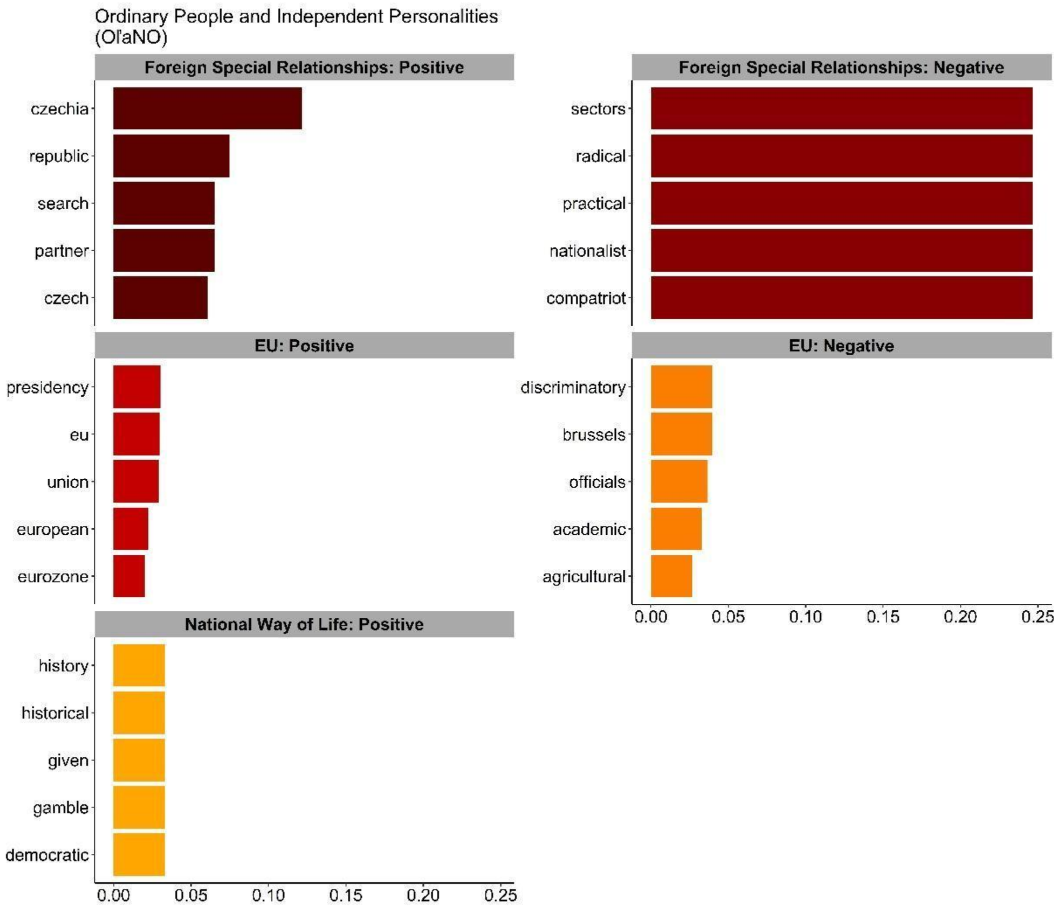
Text mining for ANO reveals an approach to the nation which is mostly devoid of historical thinking and legitimation (Figure 8). However, among the most frequent terms are references to historical inventors and entrepreneurs, such as the 'Czech Edison' František Křižík active during the late 19th and early 20th century, which serve as international brands for the Czech nation. Even though Babiš did advocate a strong Europe and asserted Czech membership in the EU, he also pointed out that his country should be critical of happenings within the Union. Moreover, ANO's national-level populism somewhat spilled over to how it approached the EU. Much like Czechia itself, it is stated that the EU should also be made more efficient. We additionally find populist elements in other sources such as Babiš's book, where he calls for 'new blood' in the EU – 'capable and experienced people, certainly not incapable and worn-out politicians, who have been serving their parties since high school' (Babiš 2017, 279). However, this criticism was primarily for domestic use and ANO was ‘a constructive actor abroad’ (Sychra and Kratochvíl 2021).

__Figure 8.__ ANO Word Frequency Analysis



OĽaNO term frequencies (Figure 9) reflected a mildly Eurosceptic profile (sense of discrimination by Brussels bureaucracy), strong links with the neighbouring Czechia and concern over international aid to war-torn Ukraine. OĽaNO’s 2012 manifesto, despite asserting Slovakia’s EU belonging, was swift to develop a distinctly critical tone with its rather negative mention of ‘irresponsible’ and ‘well-paid’ Brussels officials. The mild Euroscepticism did, however, wane over time. Later manifestos (2016 and 2020) were, although not void of it, much more subdued in their criticism. In fact, in 2016 OĽaNO was critical of internal conflicts in Europe, of rising levels of populism and illiberalism in Europe[15] and of putting all the blame on Brussels. In the 2020 manifesto they ultimately defined themselves as eurorealists, confirming a critical but ultimately pro-EU attitude (OĽaNO 2020). Despite the terms 'history' and 'historical' featuring high in the nationalism topical category, this party did not present a coherent narrative rooted in historical imagery quotes. The comparison of 2012 and 2016 manifestos show that as their relation towards the EU changed so has their vision of history. In 2012 they lamented the history of Slovakia being 'insufficiently studied and popularised'. This is reflected in the 'insufficient level of the nation's historical memory and weak national pride in its homeland'. In 2016 they stated that the 'history of Slovakia shows that all essential steps, if they are to be successful, must be taken in a multilateral framework, with the help and support of the allies'.

Figure 9. *OĽaNO Word Frequency Analysis*



These results indicate that the visions of history by party leaders are mostly reflected in their parties' manifestos. Radical right-wing populist parties are oriented towards national histories and critical events for losing or gaining their sovereignty, while centrist populist parties largely ignore them.

Discussion: Why Some Populists Use History?

The political legacies of the interwar and the Second World War period are still visible in narratives of some of the CEE populist right-wing parties. The analysed CEE radical right leaders rehabilitated or promoted interwar authoritarian rulers: Admiral Miklós Horthy was proclaimed to be one of Hungary' 'exceptional statesmen' by Orbán (Stephens 2017; see also Benazzo 2017) and, in a far less controversial example, Marshal Józef Piłsudski became an object of Kaczyński brothers' admiration and appropriation (Biskupski 2012). The politics of history of both PiS and *Fidesz* feature prominently fighting against 'pedagogy of shame' i.e. against critical approaches to national histories, particularly those questioning the role of their nations in the WWII atrocities (Radonić 2020, 78).

However, this research suggests that it is the legacies of communist dictatorships and their demise that shape contemporary political events most strongly. The analysis of radical right government parties and their leaders have shown that they were defined by their anti-communism, particularly when compared with centrist populists. This anti-communist narrative has recently been used in their fight against the EU. Bernhard and Kubik (2014) showed that the type of state socialism and the mode of transition led to the presence of memory warriors in Poland, Hungary and Slovenia. Half a decade later in all of these countries' memory warriors came to power. Reformed communism and negotiated mode of transition allowed post-communist elites to become legitimate political actors more easily. However, they also became carriers of liberalisation and Europeanisation and more susceptible to accusation by the centre-right of being corrupted national traitors, which led to the emergence of radical right ruling populism.

Table 1 indicates that the party founder's background could have played a role in their relations towards history, type of ruling populism, but also in their stance towards the EU at the beginning of the 2020s. All of the radical right ruling populisms were led by former dissidents who emerged as political actors prior or during transition by negotiation. As already argued, it could be that due to their backgrounds and visions of history these actors transposed their populism against post-communist elites to attacks against Brussels elites. As it is more likely that these former dissidents see themselves as embodiments of sacrifices their nations made to gain sovereignty, it is also more likely that they will take the EU's interference in internal affairs of their countries as personal and defy it. They can also more easily present themselves as part of the people fighting foreign elites and reconcile their populism with being part of the established elite. Jobbik, for instance, also combined nationalist historical narratives and Euroscepticism, although it was led by younger leaders with no dissident background. However, Jobbik lacked long standing networks and legitimacy of Orbán, who has been 'fighting' foreign and domestic elites for more than two decades.

Dissident background was not the necessary and sufficient reason for combining nationalist historical narratives and Euroscepticism as the comparison with original and less successful radical right parties shows. Jobbik and other radical right parties such as LPR, L'SNS, or Ataka started on the radical right and thus had far less electoral potential, while *Fidesz*, SDS and PiS are radicalised mainstream parties (Buštiková and Guasti 2017). Nevertheless, it could be argued that dissident background gave far more prominence to these narratives at the EU level as it created strong bonds between politicians from different member states. Dissident background of populist prime ministers can help explain why after coming to power they became Eurosceptic or intensified their Euroscepticism, contrary to the majority of either left or right Euroscepticisms which usually de-radicalise after coming to power. Mateusz Morawiecki PiS' Prime Minister, born in 1968 as a son of a radical anti-communist dissident, also presented himself as being an active supporter of Solidarity during the 1980s. This indicated that narratives of anti-communist struggle are present even with younger generations.

Table 1. *CEE Populist Government Parties*

PARTY	**State socialism**	**Mode of transition from communism**	**Country power status**	**Founder's background**	**Founder's vision of history**	**Type of ruling populism (2020)**	**Party EU position (end of 2021)**
ANO (Czechia)	Hard-line	Regime collapse	EU middle power	Entrepreneur	Mnemonic abnegator	Centrist	Utilitarian pro-EU, recent move towards West defying Euroscepticism
OĽaNO (Slovakia)	Hard-line	Regime collapse	EU small state	Entrepreneur	Mnemonic abnegator	Centrist	Self-declared Eurorealist
Fidesz (Hungary)	Reformed	Negotiated	EU middle power	Dissident	Memory warrior	Radical right	West defying Euroscepticism
PiS (Poland)	Reformed	Negotiated	EU major power	Dissident	Memory warrior	Radical right	West defying Euroscepticism

GERB (Bulgaria)	Hard-line	Elite control	EU periphery	Entrepreneur	Mnemonic abnegator	Centrist	Strongly pro-EU
SDS (Slovenia)	Reformed	Negotiated	EU small state	Dissident	Memory warrior	Radical right	Strongly pro-EU, recent move towards West defying Euroscepticism

Note: Columns State socialism, Mode of transition from communism are from Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 275 and Founder's vision of history is adapted from the same source.

The macro variable of state's power status could also point to the importance of dissident background. Being a small and open EU economy in the cases of Slovakia and Slovenia or being a peripheral EU member state being kept out of the Schengen Zone in the case of Bulgaria constrains espousing ruling anti-EU stances. Thus, Janša's dissident background can help explain the Slovenian government's move towards Euroscepticism. Namely Slovenia as a small state and a Eurozone member has far less leeway than Czechia in challenging Brussels. A Slovenian prime minister therefore risks far more in embracing Euroscepticism than his Czech counterpart. Moreover, Janša had to take a longer path when transforming his party from being strongly pro-EU to being Eurosceptic, than Babiš whose party originally had a utilitarian pro-EU position and operated in a far more Eurosceptic political environment.

The results indicate that Stanley's four core concepts of populist ideology could be applied not only to opposition parties and national politics, but also for prime minister's parties and their international relations. Radical right populist leaders have worked on creating an image of antagonistic divisions between their pure nations (sometimes even speaking in the name of all CEE nations) and morally and culturally corrupt Brussels' elites. They argued that they are protecting the idea of popular sovereignty as they did during the end of communism. Paradoxically, CEE centrist, i.e., exclusively populist parties had more trouble to develop comprehensive populist European politics, as they lacked important roles in the decisive moments of their national histories and had weak connections with their host ideologies.

Conclusion

The rise of Euroscepticism among radical right-wing populist CEE leaders could be partly traced to their dissident backgrounds and memory warriors' visions of history. This is particularly conspicuous when they are compared with centrist populist leaders who have disrupted national party systems but have different backgrounds. They have not engaged in memory wars and have less intensively challenged the Western liberal order.

Populist leaders' politics of history are connected to their stances towards the EU. Memory warriors fighting against ex-communists and liberals are more inclined to equate the EU and the Soviet Union; liberalism and communism. *Fidesz* and its leader Orbán best exemplify the transformation from the 'return to Europe' narrative of the 1990s to the 'standing up to Brussels' in most recent years. By highlighting the Hungarian national traumas of the Trianon Treaty and the 1956 Revolution, Orbán weaves a victimhood narrative and projects collective grievances towards Brussels and the 'alienated liberal elites'. Jarosław Kaczyński has followed Orbán's rising authoritarianism longing to have a 'Budapest in Warsaw' and also emphasizes historical grievances. Invoking Nazi Germany crimes in Poland and current German hegemony seems to be the basis of his stance towards the EU. Janša's politics of national history are similar to Orbán's and Jarosław Kaczyński's, with anti-communism and trans-sovereign nationalism as prominent features, and he has started using references to the communist period when criticising the EU.

Centrist populists can likewise demonstrate a critical attitude towards the EU, but their grievances with Bruxelles are clearly not as pronounced. In practice, this means they may take issue with certain parts of EU policies or criticise the profile of people working in EU institutions (alienated elites). By doing so Matovič and Babiš, for instance, possibly dodge being called what is pejoratively known in Czech and Slovak an *eurohujer* – an uncritical, slavish Eurooptimist. Borisov and his party project, on the other hand, see themselves as a culmination of a long-held dream of Bulgarian inclusion in the West and opening up possibilities of economic prosperity. The EU is seen as a tool for realisation of Bulgarian national interests and historical longings and does not figure as an object of criticism. Despite their differences and unlike in the case of right-wing populists, this paper found no usage of national historical narratives to combat the EU by the three centrist populist leaders, who also acted as mnemonic abnegators. Centrist populists also lacked ideological consistency and party cohesion to present themselves as recognizable political actors on the European scene. The label of ethnopopulism cannot be as easily ascribed to these populist leaders as to their radical right-wing populist colleagues, who have clear ideological goals and ambitions of generating systemic changes. This paper indicates that divergent backgrounds and visions of history could be one of the key factors differentiating between radical right and centrist populism.

By the end of 2021, all of the centrist populist leaders have lost their prime ministerial posts. Only OĽaNO was able to cling to power by appointing a new Prime Minister Eduard Heger, who is also former businessman, but far less populist than Matovič. On the other hand, Orbán, Janša, and Morawiecki have all met with Marine Le Pen in October 2021, their joint photos symbolising a pan-European radical right coalition against Brussels.

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Endnotes

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[1] However, they lacked the intellectual rigour of Havel and Konrád.

[2] The term 'combat tasks' was used by Ken Jowitt to describe the functioning of Leninist parties which 'require combat environments to preserve their organizational integrity' (1992, 122). Likewise, radical right-wing populist parties need combat tasks in order not to become stale bureaucratic parties not believing in their ideological mission. Exactly that happened to Leninist parties in the 1980s in the Soviet Union and all over CEE.

[3] See a 'pro-politics' statement made by *Fidesz* in its 1994 manifesto: 'We are not hypocrites. We have the goals of a political party. So, we have no reason to hide the fact that what we want is the greatest possible parliamentary mandate, the largest possible political influence.'

[4] The focus on leaders' biographies is justifiable as all analysed parties have a presidentialised leadership (see Hloušek 2015).

[5] The development of radical right populist prime minister's parties in CEE indicates the importance of studying generational replacement among political elites. For instance, the comparison of the Hungarian, Polish and Slovenian radical right governments with Croatian right-wing, but staunchly pro-European, HDZ government indicates that the period in which the opposition to communism developed could help explain the presence or lack of populist backlash. In Croatia a mass movement advocating more national sovereignty developed in the late 1960s (the Croatian Spring), but was quashed by the end of 1971. Actors from this generation were involved in Croatia's fight for national independence, but also in Western betrayal narratives during the 1990's. Croatia, on the other hand, lacked genuine anti-communist opposition during the 1980s, when current CEE radical right populist leaders came to prominence.

[6] Orbán (2012) even defined himself as a right-wing plebeian.

[7] Ten Day War (June-July 1991) between the Yugoslav People's Army and the Slovenian Territorial Defence.

[8] Original name of the party was the Social Democratic Party, but it was changed to the Slovenian Democratic Party in 2003.

[9] Todorov claims that GERB is a personalistic party without ideology, even though it is a member of the EPP (2019).

[10] Jan Antonín Baťa was the half-brother of Tomáš Baťa, the founder of the famous Czech shoe brand Baťa. After his half-brother's death, he found himself at the helm of the company. Baťa also wrote a book titled 'We Are Building a Country for 40 000 000 People' (*Budujme stát pro 40 000 000 lidí*), an enthusiastic vision of the future of Czechoslovakia.

[11] Most notably, they have campaigned to tax the pensions of former secret service agents and have further banned some acts of Czechoslovak communist nostalgia.

[12] Indicatively, since 2014 *Fidesz* has not used regular manifestos.

[13] It is telling that *Fidesz*' focus on joining Europe was in 1990 framed in a stark contrast to the failed 'Bolshevik system'.

[14] According to Snegovaya (2021) *Fidesz* is the only pro-Russian party analysed here.

[15] A particular note is made of Hungary's worrisome path.