



## The politics of populism in Hungary

by Robert Csehi, Abingdon, UK and New York, USA, Routledge Studies in Democratic Crisis, 2022, 242pp., £130.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978036747686; £38.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781032075679; £27.29 (EBook), ISBN: 9781003035862

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## BOOK REVIEW

**The politics of populism in Hungary**, by Robert Csehi, Abingdon, UK and New York, USA, Routledge Studies in Democratic Crisis, 2022, 242pp., £130.00 (hardback), ISBN: 978036747686; £38.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781032075679; £27.29 (EBook), ISBN: 9781003035862

In his penetrating book on the politics of populism in Hungary, Robert Csehi sets out to scrutinize the actual impacts of populism on the political in Hungary after 2010 concerning the polity, politics, and policy dimensions. This goal distinguishes him in the already burgeoning literature of populism that embraces the ideational approach and assesses the Hungarian case. While maintaining the ideational approach toward populism, the author constructs insightful bridges that enable how the populist narrative meets the political by assessing illustrative cases in each dimension by exploring the narratives, decisions, and to some degree responses. From this point, it not only confines itself to the identification or the detailed description of the populist government in Hungary but also reveals the consequences of the eight-year-long populist experience (the book covers eight years from 2010 to 2018). This also allows the reader to trace the lines of the transformation of the contents of the core aspects of populism in the country in this period like the people, the non-people, the elites, and the representation of the general will.

To see the impacts, the use of triple categorization (polity-politics-policy) embarks on a deep dive into the institutional, inter-relational and ideological reflections of the politics of populism in Hungary. While the constitutional changes, the application of legal discrimination and the decline in the quality of democracy constitute the polity dimension; the government's relationship with the media, its increasing influence over the existing party systems, and the rise of Eurosceptic populism comprise the politics dimension; and lastly the government's family and cultural politics are the taken as the main constituents of the policy dimension. Accordingly, the structure of the book is designed as follows. Alongside an introduction and conclusion, the book comprises three main parts and eight core chapters addressing the changes in the polity, politics, and policy dimensions and their consequences on the political. The three chapters of the first part examine the scope of the institutional transformation that supposedly strengthened "the will of the people" after 2010 and expose the polity implications by tracing the institutional reforms to create (and re-create through amendments) a populist constitution and the increasing legal practices in tightening up the legitimate boundaries of the liberal (and supposedly non-representative) organizations and in bringing discrimination, and finally the decline of liberal democracy on the grounds that it does not represent the will of "the people". The following three chapters of the second part attempt to shed light on the impacts of populism on politics by elaborating on the government-media relationship and certainly the former's growing role of delegitimizing the latter (opposition media) on the ground that it lacks popular representation, or it represents the non-people or the elites; on party politics with great respect to the transformation of the traditional cleavages into a populist- anti-populist divide, the level of the right-

wing turn in party positions and people's attitudes; and the populist re-assessment of the EU politics or in the authors' words "Eurosceptic populism". The last two chapters of the third part deal with the policy implications of populism as an ideology dividing the population as the people and the elite, and the people and the non-people in socio-economic and cultural contexts. While the redistributive practices favor working families, the cultural policy of the government aims to build a cultural hegemony or overthrow the cultural establishment controlled by "the elites" who are allegedly not representing the homogenous Hungarian people.

Although the book primarily deals with the eight years of the politics of populism in Hungary, the conclusion part brilliantly links the main issues that are discussed throughout the chapters with the post-2018 developments because the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban and his party, *Fidesz*, won the elections that took place in 2018. This not only highlights the continuities of the populist impact but also allows the central claims to prove themselves with examples of the ongoing experience of populism in Hungary. To describe the resilience of the populist government and the effective use of the morally justified antagonism between the top-down definition of "the people" and provocatively defined "the elites", the author suggests the concept of "smart populism", which categorically helps to distinguish those populists who have an ability to command difficult situations from others.

The author organizes each chapter in the same format by firstly locating the core concepts of the chapter in the populism literature to examine the developments in Hungary. It not only enables to build of bridges between the literature and the case study in each chapter but also makes the book methodologically consistent. The conceptual elaboration of the term "Eurosceptic populism" in chapter six (125-128) is one good example, although there are many others. This sort of assessment helps to make sense of different attitudes linked to different categorizations like Euro-rejectionism and functionalizes the main concept of Euroscepticism. Despite this methodological strength, this format does not bring out the interactions between the populist impacts in those three dimensions even if certain connections like populist constitutionalism and family politics are seen in some chapters, and therefore the role of interaction on the conceptual and political boundaries of these dimensions remains unquestioned. Furthermore, while the use of narratives, decisions, and survey data draws a broader picture to identify the divergences and convergences between political actors and the electorates, it does not explain how the narrative travels or is received by the people or what sort of role this interaction plays on making decisions realized. This consequently creates an analytical gap.

Overall, the book provides a comprehensive picture of the impact of populism concerning the polity-policy-politics dimensions of the political in Hungary after 2010. It also attracts further research on the implications of the politics of populism in other countries and ascertains the links between such dimensions in different contexts. Therefore, the book appeals to a wider audience of anyone interested in the actual impacts of the rise of populism in this populist age of world politics.

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