New enemies and “illiberal” rule of law?
A discourse analysis of populist rhetoric in Hungary

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Abstract

How does political power affect populist rhetoric? The research on populism has failed to describe the difference in discourse between populist parties in opposition and in government. The previous academic debate has consisted of two fundamental areas of focus; definitions that are centered around identity formations, and the political or societal effects of populism in power, referring to issues related to democracy and rule of law. This study argues that populist rhetoric contains both elements and should therefore be studied as such. It aims to increase the understanding of how populism is expressed before and during governance, and how this differs. Using rule of law as an analytical measuring instrument and tools and theories from discourse analysis, Fidesz, the ruling party of Hungary, is examined by qualitative text analysis. The study finds that the idea of “us” as the people and “them” as the elite survives with populism in power, where “them” as the elite no longer consists of domestic political opponents, but rather international political opponents and organizations. Further it finds that the values connected to rule of law are abandoned in favor of a more technical meaning.

Key words: populism, Hungary, Fidesz, discourse analysis.
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1.0 Introduction

Is there a difference between populist rhetoric in opposition and in government? The rise of populism in Europe and America has given rise to increased debate on the subject both academically and societally. As we watch populism reap successes in Europe, such as in the recent Italian and Swedish elections, focus turns to populism in power. Its unique aptness to quickly expand its follower base is intriguing, and at the same time it puzzles those who try to determine exactly what it sounds like. The topic is important to civil society as well as politicians, but the societal debate is filled with contradictions of what populism is, focusing instead on practical effects (Jungar 2022; Svensson 2022). The interest turns to countries such as Hungary, which has shifted from democratic populism with emphasis on human rights, to stable electoral authoritarianism over recent years, all with support from the people (Batory 2022). Pillars of what Prime Minister Viktor Orbán calls “western liberal” democracy have been deconstructed after the preferences of Fidesz. Despite this, rule of law is described as something important by the Hungarian government (Fidesz 2020).

A commonly used denominator for populism is the opposite view of the ruling elite as corrupt and evil on the one hand, and the view of one’s own politics as representative of the people’s true and good opinion on the other (Müller 2016). This demands a certain identity construction and implies a need for change in rhetoric after gaining power. Once in government, this identity construction would be illogical since the populists would now be the elites and the rhetorical antagonism would no longer be compatible with the actual situation. The academic debate focuses on either the identity formations connected to the definitions of populism, or the political and societal effects of the phenomenon. The fact that populism is a rhetorical phenomenon that relates to both these aspects is largely ignored and in need of attention. This paper argues that there is a gap of understanding in the societal and academic debate as to how populists construct themselves and their values connected to rule of law norms, and how this is affected by political power. Answers
to this can be an indicator for how populist parties in other countries might construct their views, should they rise to power. Understanding how populists construct these meanings and how this changes depending on governance could furthermore help predict the policy implications that these meanings might have.

Using discourse analysis of Fidesz statements from both before and after the election victory in 2010, the study found that much of the same rhetoric of “we, the people” versus the corrupt elite remains, with an adaptation to better suit the new situation. It was also confirmed that the party expresses completely different values regarding rule of law before and after gaining power, although the understanding of the concept is still made clear. A strategically deviating construction of the rule of law is now consequently used in debates on the governance of the country, where the content of the discussion relates more to what would be more appropriately labeled as law and order; that is, maintaining a functioning legal system where unrestrained crime cannot thrive.

1.1 Background

In 2006 a recording was leaked to Hungarian media of Ferenc Gyurcsány. In what was meant to be a confidential speech, he admitted that his party had been lying to the Hungarian population about the economy for years. He was leader of the Socialist party and Prime Minister of Hungary. The infamous Őszöd speech sparked outrage and nationwide protests and is together with the 2008 financial crisis seen as a major contributor to Fidesz’ landslide victory in the elections of 2010. Fidesz won with 52% of the vote, which granted them 68% of the parliamentary seats due to a system designed to favor the winning party (Miklóssy 2018). This was the beginning of what the EU has labeled the “rule of law crisis” in the country. In 2011, the year after the election victory, major constitutional changes were conducted and the previously independent judiciary was politicized. Old judges were forced to retire and replaced with government loyalists (Freedom House 2022). Hungary has for a number of years now had the lowest score in the World Justice Project’s Rule
of Law Index out of any EU member state and is no longer categorized a free country by Freedom House (Freedom House 2022; World Justice Project 2022). Katalin Miklóssy (2018) notes that the rule of law is the core problem of democracy in Hungary.

1.2 Aim & research question
Two issues have led to the research question: First, the populist rhetoric is based on anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. After building a platform on an identity as the opposition to a corrupt elite, do populists change this discourse to remain popular once in government? What identities are seen as important? Second, the concept of “liberal” democracies has already been disregarded by Orbán, in favor of the Hungarian alternative, also known as “illiberal” democracy. The Hungarian government is acting in ways that are directly conflicting with the rule of law, and yet they still appear to claim that these very principles guide their operations. How can they claim to honor the rule of law, which is so branded with liberal thought? What does the rhetoric around it look like?

The aim of this study is to increase academic and societal understanding about the populist rhetoric by describing how being in government can influence this rhetoric. Populist rhetoric will be examined as a twofold concept, as inherently related to identity formations and as connected in the debate to rule of law. An analysis will be conducted on how Fidesz perceived and perceives their own role in Hungary and how they viewed rule of law when they were in opposition in comparison to after their landslide victory in 2010. This has led to the following research question: 
*How does political power affect the populist rhetoric?*

1.3 Disposition
The following section describes the previous academic discourse around populism. After that the analytical framework is explained followed by the research design
and method which is concluded with ethical and scientific deliberations. In the analysis section the findings are analyzed, followed by the discussion and conclusion.
2.0 Previous research

The following sections will define populism and present how previous research has treated populist rhetoric in power.

2.1 Populism

The daunting task to define populism infuses respect in scholars who investigate the expanding field, some claiming it impossible. Nikolas Werz states: “populism does not exist, only the many different forms in which it appears” (Müller 2016). Other scholars look to core origins of populism, suggesting an intertwined relationship with the democratic equal vote (Ibid). But that, in and of itself, is an assumption that can only rest on a certain definition of populism. The following section will therefore shortly present the most prominent academic approaches, leading to the understanding of the definition of populism as a thin ideology.

The political strategic approach or PSA means that populism is to be understood as a political strategy. This view sees the opportunistic and charismatic leader as the defining part of populism and was long the dominating understanding of populism (Weyland 2021; Kenny 2021). The discursive approach, or frame analysis, refers to populism as a form of discourse. It means that there is a risk in the current debate of overly black and white categorizations which may sometimes lead to confirmation bias in interpretation of political actors, where what is classified as a populist construction of a corrupt elite may simply be critique on political grounds (Aslanidis 2016; Katsambekis 2022).

A view that has been predominantly used the later years has been the ideational approach. It was developed by Cas Mudde (2004) who means that populism is a thin ideology, consisting of the antagonism between two homogenous groups: the pure people on the one hand, and the corrupt elite on the other. This means that
political plurality is rejected, since contradicting opinions of the populists are discarded as not genuinely being in the people’s true interest, something only the populists are able to determine since they represent the true people (Mudde 2004; Hawkins et al. 2018). It also juxtaposes populism against the rule of law and argues that populism is by definition against constitutionalism (Galston 2018; Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016). This is highly relevant for the Hungarian case, where the government has been accused for years for a “rule of law crisis” (Kelemen et al 2021).

Critics of this view say that it is problematic to attach one contested concept: “populism,” onto another: “ideology.” Furthermore, they point out its failure to acknowledge the different degrees of populism (Aslanidis 2016). However, in this case the lack of nuance could prove useful, as the subject of investigation is not whether Fidesz is a populist party, but rather their rhetoric on identity connected to rule of law. Populism and ideology being contested is only problematic so long as the relevant phenomena are not being properly defined and clarified before beginning a discussion.

It must be mentioned that many also use the definition Populist Right Wing Rhetoric. The idea is based on the definition for thin ideology with a strong in-group, where the focus lies on ostracized groups instead of elites, mostly consisting of immigrants and people that are not ethnically recognized as the “true people” (Pelinka 2013). This would suit well to investigate the interrelation between the rhetoric on identity and the rule of law issues in Hungary, since many of the accusations toward the country concerning rule of law are related to legislation against immigrants. It may appear as the perfect definition for the study, but the generalizability is wider when using the thin ideology, which can also apply to leftist populism and thereby help to understand populism in power in all parts of the world. It is also more likely to help find more interesting results related to identity constructions over time, instead of simply an increase in racism. This paper will therefore use the ideational definition of populism.
2.2 The rhetoric of populism in power

The scientific field is divided both in theoretical definitions of populism and how it is interconnected with rhetoric. The interest in European populism has grown with the expansion of the phenomenon during the past decades (Mudde 2004; Moffitt 2016; Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Krause & Wagner 2019). Many studies focus on how populist rhetoric is being used against minority groups and immigrants (Beland 2020; Wirz et al. 2018). Others investigate its effects on society (Arendt, Marquart & Matthes 2015; Hameleers & Schmuck 2017). They fail to fully describe the phenomenon itself or bring full comprehension of the difference in rhetoric between opposition and government. Some investigate why certain populist parties lose support when they have been in government and why others remain supported (van der Brug et al. 2005). Suggestions have been made that the rhetoric plays a vital role in this phenomenon (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015). This begs the question if populists change the way they express themselves once they have become the elite of the country.

As we are forced to accept a new authoritarian stability in countries such as Hungary, and the risk of other countries following them (Eiermann 2017), inquiries arise of the differences between populism before and during power. Focus has mainly been on the relationship to democracy, claiming that politics that needs wide support tends to be populist (Müller 2016). Some even question how threatening populism really is to democracy, claiming it should become rhetorically less populist once in power (Akkerman 2016; Bernhard 2020; Krause & Wagner 2019). Others mean that this is not the case empirically and that it is in fact inherently connected to democratic erosion and, in the worst case, authoritarianism (Muno 2022; Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015 Schwörer 2021). This discussion is overly focused on democratic effects of populism in power and lacks attention to how the populist discourse itself changes on these issues between opposition and governance. Investigating this will result in a contribution to an underlying understanding of the phenomenon.
The research question emanates from a gap in the academic literature: The vast majority of previous research on populism in power is centered around at least one of the following two perspectives; 1) an identity centered perspective, where the very definition of populism relates closely to different kinds of group or identity formations (Aslanidis 2016; Beland 2020; Hawkins et al. 2018; Kenny 2021; Mudde 2004; Pelinka 2013; Wirz et al. 2018), or 2) a consequence centered perspective, where populism is interlinked to the dismantling of democracy and rule of law (Albertazzi & McDonnell 2015; Galston 2018; Kaltwasser 2013; Müller 2016; Muno 2022; Norris 2020; Pappas 2013; Schwörer 2021). Both perspectives compose the aspects of highest interest when it comes to populism in power, and yet few have investigated it in respect of the interrelation between these two. I will describe populist rhetoric in respect to both approaches and fill an important gap in the literature by analyzing populists’ own constructions of identity and rule of law.
3.0 Theoretical framework

The populist rhetoric referred to in this paper consists of two parts, based on both definition and analytical foundation: what populists say that they are, and what populists say that they do. The already covered populist definition is inherently tied to the first part, identity constructions. Given the extensive academic and social debate on what populists do in terms of democratic values and the rule of law, this is the natural second part of populist rhetoric to analyze. The government of Hungary has dismantled the free media and the independent judiciary, actions that are in direct conflict with the liberal understanding of democracy and EU norms of rule of law (Pappas 2013). Yet the first look into the material shows that Fidesz claims to respect the rule of law and that being questioned on this is phrased by them as a personal attack (Fidesz 2018). Using the ideational definition of populism and the analytical indicator of rule of law, all within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, this study sets out to examine the rhetoric around this development. The following sections will describe discourse analysis as a theory and define rule of law within the constructionist logic.

3.1 Discourse analysis

This study emanates from a combination of three discourse analyses, which consist of the following as presented by Marianne W. Jørgensen and Louise Phillips (1999): discourse theory; critical discourse analysis; and discourse psychology. The most influential to the paper was discourse theory. They vary in their interest of different degrees of abstraction in discourse, from societal structuration of discourse to more concrete everyday use of language. Discourse psychology is more interested in the people’s speech and written language in for instance media or interviews. Critical discourse analysis is interested in a higher abstraction level although everyday speech is interesting as well. Discourse theory takes interest in the larger lines of division in the discourses of a society. This refers to how meanings are constructed
and changed on a structural level over time (Ibid), and has therefore contributed the most to this study.

They also differ as to what degree the discourse should be seen as mainly constitutive or as having a dialectical relation between being constitutive and constituted. This refers to a debate on whether meaning is created by the way in which we discuss things, or whether some things are also discussed according to the meaning already assigned. Out of these three teachings, critical discourse analysis sees the discourse as most constituted, in other words it views the relation as most dialectical, with reference to strong and longstanding power dynamics and hierarchies hindering some groups to simply change a discourse or a narrative at their own will (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). It would have been interesting to use in a study on how for instance immigrants are being constructed without their own input, but these kinds of power dynamics are not the interest of this study. That said, this view of discourse as more constituted for some means that the socially impactful enjoy a higher wherewithal to alter or control discourses. This notion will be borrowed from critical discourse analysis, where Fidesz are seen as agents in the discourse change.

Discourse psychology sees the relationship as less dialectical and takes interest in the different contexts where language takes place. This interest has influenced parts of this study as well. Discourse theory sees discourse as completely constitutive, arguing that nothing is fixed and that all lines in a society can be redrawn, and every social phenomenon can be charged with new meaning or divested of meaning altogether (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). Once again, discourse theory is most suitable for the aim of understanding populist rhetoric, due to the interest in how constructed meaning can change. The main idea of discourse theory is that social phenomena will never be complete. Meaning can never be definitively fixed, and this opens for constant conflict on identity and society. Society is a net of processes of meaning construction (Laclau & Mouffe 1985).
3.2 Rule of law

Rule of law is another contested concept both politically and theoretically. Some trace the idea back to Aristotle, who is to have said “it is better for the law to rule than one of the citizens,” and that “even the guardians of the laws are obeying the laws” (Bingham 2011). Another source is claimed to be the French revolution’s heritage of principe de légalité and the German Reechstaat (Alvarez 2022).

The European Union is one of the main critics of the political development in Hungary today. Their definition is very trade-centered: “Rule of law guarantees fundamental rights and values, allows the application of EU law, and supports an investment-friendly business environment. It is one of the fundamental values upon which the EU is based on.” (European Commission 2022). Their criticism of Hungary shows that human rights is included as a main part of these rights and values that they mention (European Parliament 2022).

John Finnis (2020) sees the rule of law as a morally desirable structure or procedure in a legal system. He compares it to the concept of natural law or natural right, which is a normative idea of right and wrong where sub-bias and inattention does not control outcomes. This can help create “positive laws” as he calls it. In this system laws are coherent, possible to apply and comply with (therefore retroactive punishment cannot exist), relatively stable, understandable to those they control, and followed by the officers of the law. He also adds that laws need to be established in coherence with other laws. This positivist stance could lead to an endless philosophical debate on who is to determine morality, but on the other hand it is very liberal and rights-focused despite its attempts of neutrality. The idea that a constitution can be comprised of higher or lower grades of values that correspond with what is modernly seen as human rights is still commonly associated with rule of law. When gaining a two-thirds majority, the Fidesz-KDNP government was legally able to alter the constitution, and yet they have been accused of dismantling the rule of law – because the rule of law does not only mean that the law rules rather than the people, but that certain values, that are not specified in complete clarity, ought to be included in the constitution and in lawmaking as well. This could help
explain the different versions of rule of law in the material. However, the fixed idea of right and wrong is not very compatible with the more fluid constructivist approach of discourse analysis, which sees meaning as constructed and temporary. Furthermore, the heavy criticism on Hungary comes mainly from the EU, which as mentioned emphasizes human rights and democratic values. With that in mind, this paper will refer to the rule of law as following the criteria of Finnis while leaving room for the notion that moral right and wrong can be constructed, and additionally including the EU’s emphasis on rights and values.
4.0 Research design & method

The work began as deductive since the beginning of the research question came from a general academic and social debate and not from the material itself. However, as the time for initial analysis arrived, it quickly became clear that a first glance of the material was necessary to establish reoccurring narratives and formulate more exact questions for analysis. Therefore, it became increasingly inductive. The study commanded two separate analyses for the manifesto from 2007 and the speech and articles that have been made after the 2010 election.

4.1 Research approach

Discourse analysis was used as a method and a theory to recognize patterns of socially constituted meaning in a discourse, which was helpful when studying identity and rule of law constructions in Fidesz’ texts. Theoretically it builds on social constructivism, which is based on the notion that the world is socially and culturally constructed. This does not mean that the world is not also physically real, but that everything has a socially attributed meaning. It is often compared to invisible layers that are socially shared and affect how people collectively view phenomena and physical things (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999). Except from the meanings attributed to already existing objects and phenomena, new things can also be created due to social structures. The Hungarian “Child protection law” is for instance socially constructed completely differently in Hungary compared to the Western world, where it is instead called an “LGBT+ ban in children’s books” (Rankin 2021), but the law itself was also designed and passed due to existing social constructions of LGBT+ people as a threat to children. The idea of how exactly these layers come about and our level of control over them varies with different thinkers (Fairclough 1995; Focault 1993; Laclau & Mouffe 1997).
4.2 Case selection

To answer the research question, a single case study of Fidesz was conducted using qualitative text analysis, comparing texts from before and after their majority governance. As for external validity, Esaiasson et al (2017) write that so long as the population for the case selection is homogenous, and the question is universally formulated, the results can be assumed to be generalizable. The population was currently governing populist parties in countries with elections, that have been in government for at least 2 years. Elections are a demand due to the hope of generalizability to democracies, and Fidesz is identified as a typical case, given that they are exhibiting typical populist sentiments. The fact that their reign has affected the democratic situation of the country could be seen as an argument against this choice, but there are few contemporary parties that meet the criteria and therefore it was chosen despite this.

Fidesz is a case where populists have been re-elected recently after serving in a majority government (Tait 2022), thereby the relevance is high and there is no issue of distance in time. Although Hungary has been plagued since independence by corruption problems and a parliamentary system that facilitated for any government to push through new laws in a pace too fast for a healthy democracy (Miklóssy 2018), worsening after the Fidesz-KDNP takeover (Freedom House 2022), Fidesz still receives immense popular support (The Week 2018), begging the exact question this study is based on: what their discourse looks like while in government. The generalizability extends beyond the current population from which the studied cases can be selected, since this is likely to grow. The results can therefore give indications for the rhetoric of populist parties that may soon be in government.

4.3 Material

The material consisted of a 2007 party manifesto, a 2018 “State of the Nation” address which has been written down, and two more recent articles related to identity and rule of law. The first two were obtained from the party’s EU webpage, and the
articles are published on Fidesz’ domestic page. This material was chosen because of the direct insight in the party’s views. Newspaper articles and interviews produced by other actors would have taken us further from the answer to the original research question, which relates solely to the party’s rhetoric and not to how they may be represented by others or to the truth behind their statements. By analyzing strictly Fidesz-published material, the study can move closer to the answer. An additional factor was accessibility. If more speeches and articles from before the 2010 election had been available in English, there would have been perfect conditions for comparability. Even so, an adjustment in accordance with the difference in genres proved unnecessary due to the similarities in discourse patterns between the material. It was easy to notice emphasized narratives and values despite the genre difference.

4.4 Discourse analysis

Together with the previously put forward theoretical framework, three concrete tools were used to answer the question, all collected from discourse theory. First, a central aspect of discourse theory as explained by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), which searches for conflict on definitions, with the tools hegemony and antagonism. Given that meaning is socially constructed, no discourse can be completely established: there is always going to be a struggle between different discourses. This originally refers to when two identity constructions cannot co-exist. Several identities can exist in contingency, but if one hinders the other from being completely fulfilled, they are in contestation (Ibid). This was used in a broader sense to investigate both identity and rule of law in terms of fluid or fixed meanings, and to chart where a conflict of meaning is taking place in the discourse.

Secondly a concept borrowed from Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) was used; the idea of identity and national discourse. In the case of Fidesz it quickly became clear that these are intertwined with the populist rhetoric and easiest approached using a combination of these ideas. The national discourse is a way of describing the world
where the nation states are what make up the world and where each individual nation is different to all others with one unique language, one ethnicity, one culture and so on. This is of course not true, but it is nevertheless the core of the nationalist idea. Hence, Jørgensen and Phillips argue that nationalist discourse will never completely be able to describe the true state of the world. It is instead used here to recognize the patterns in Fidesz’ discourse. The tool relational national identity searches for the “us” and “them” in discourses (Ibid) and was integrated in this analysis to spot populist identity formations.

The third concept was nodal points. Discourses are continuously reconstructed in rhetoric around unfixed or partially fixed words or phrases. The nodal points can be central to a discourse without being explicitly mentioned, and they lack meaning without other signs so called equivalence chains. Equivalence chains consist of a string of other concepts and terms that grant the nodal points substance. That way it is possible to trace and characterize changes in discourses based on the different chains of meanings that they have equalized (Jørgensen & Phillips 1999; Laclau & Mouffe 1985). This can help charting what different meanings are associated with “rule of law,” such as democratic values, human rights, justice, order, and so on.

When analyzing discourse in any other than the original language there is always a need for respect in decisive interpretations, even more so when it is unclear whether the webpage is automatically or manually translated, which was the case for the shorter articles. There is also a cultural aspect which an outsider will never completely understand and must be wary of before making premature assumptions. To mitigate these risks, one must read with humility and maintain consistent reconsiderations of whether other explanations were possible, and if so, which ones. A more tangible solution is also to analyze on a slightly higher abstraction level such as my solution of using discourse theory, where the exact wording is subordinate in importance to the differently built narratives.
4.5 Operationalization

Before the material could be analyzed, it needed to be coded using text-coding. This is conducted through several readings of the texts, marking statements that are related to the subject of interest in assorted color codes. Jørgensen and Phillips (1999) write that discourse analysis consists of asking questions of the text at hand. Based on the first impression of the data, systematic questions were formulated to investigate both pools of material in the same light, and to enable a comprehensive comparison. The same questions were asked systematically, and a model was designed to categorize the different answers into before and after the 2010 election. Revisiting the research question to formulate the most suitable theoretical framework, two main themes were established: Identity and Rule of law. The process is illustrated in model 1.0:

![Model 1.0](image)

Resulting from this operationalization were the following questions:
- What conflicts are showing in the discourse? Where is there antagonism or hegemony?
- How is identity constructed? Who are “us” and who are “them” in the discourse?
- What equivalence chains are constructed related to the rule of law?
The analysis took place in two steps; reading the text and marking quotes that answer the questions with different colors for different questions and selecting quotes to examine more closely using the tools from discourse theory and the rule of law definitions.

4.6 Ethical and scientific deliberations

The largest risk of the study is the fact that the author is unrelated to the Hungarian culture and previously unknowing of the history of the country. The political-cultural differences between Sweden, which is the context of the author, and Hungary, risks subjective interpretations of what is to be seen as acceptable democratic values, justice, and order. This could lead to interpretations that display the Hungarian culture and zeitgeist in an unnecessarily unflattering light, or in the worst case, a partly misunderstood rendering. This, together with the fact that discourse analysis is based on the notion of socially constructed and unfixed meanings, risks leading the author on a tightrope walk which is not to underestimate. To counteract the risks of either too high subjectivity or overly rooted meanings, a mixture of definitions and theories have been used to build a specifically tailored theoretical framework for the study. This has enabled keeping the analysis very close to the aim and research question but has instigated some problems of its own. The more complicated an analytical framework is built, the worse are the chances for exhibiting good reliability. Therefore, this study attempts to be as transparent as possible in all choices and analyses.
5.0 Analysis

The analysis will be presented as follows: first a table of the categorized and compared findings is introduced, to grant the reader an overview. The rhetoric on identities will then be presented from the time of opposition and illustrated using quotes, followed by findings of rhetoric on identities from the time of governance, to facilitate comparisons. After that the findings on values connected to rule of law is presented in the same way. The next section summarizes what the study found, followed by a discussion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>When in opposition</th>
<th>After 2010 election win</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity:</td>
<td>“Us”: Hungarian people: Families with Christian values. Victims of incompetent government. Fidesz: competent &amp; trustworthy leaders = source of safety. “We, the people”.</td>
<td>“Us”: Stronger “Us” vs. “Them”, where “Us” is clearly defined. Hungarian people and Fidesz: Successful &amp; with high potential, but constantly forced to stand up against unfair criticism from international community and opposition. Discourse of war. Even stronger discourse of “We, the people”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rule of law:</td>
<td>Equivalence chain of emphasized values: democracy, human rights, morality. Western values, elites who respect the law, absence of arbitrariness. Aligns with Finnis/EU definition.</td>
<td>Equivalence chain: law and order, bringing criminals (or political opponents) to justice. Has mostly separated from Finnis/EU definition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.0
5.1 Identities

5.1.1 Identities in opposition
“Us” as Hungarians

“One of the key themes in Hungarian history has been its longing for freedom, and awareness of this can be raised all over the world by keeping the memory of 1956 alive”. (Fidesz 2007 p.47)

“Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union was established to turn Hungary into a free, independent, and prosperous country.” (Ibid p.19)

“The new centre-right has a nation-centred outlook, is devoted to democracy and competition, and is socially aware. It is nation-centred in its desire to preserve Hungarian cultural values and protect Hungary’s economic interests”. (Ibid p.7)

The most prominent as well as hegemonic identity construction by Fidesz during opposition is the nationalist one. The history of colonialization and the quelled uprising in 1956 are fresh in the Hungarian memory, and many statements in the data show that there is immense pride in resistance and self-definition, something the country has been starved of historically. Another important sentiment that could be noticed several times is that nationality is necessary for survival and prosperity. It is based on a discourse of safeguarding, an understandable attitude for a very newly independent nation that has merely a few decades ago struggled for freedom based on the exact same nationalist ideas. The nationalism only becomes ugly to the rest of the world when the country is not perceived as an “underdog” any longer. Therefore, when discussing such a concept as freedom, there is a substantial risk of misinterpretation of another’s use of this term. Is it the individual sense of freedom as in the EU’s human rights that is being discussed, or is it, as in this case, the freedom of an entire nation from oppression or economic and political pressure?

Two important parts of this nationality centered discourse are family and Christianity. The Hungarian family is accentuated several times in the data as the most important community unit that needs more attention and support. It is understood
that this family consists of a nuclear family in the more traditional idea of a family, and that this emphasis is a stance taken against other forms of families, such as families within the LGBTQ+ community: “In order to establish a firm and just society, there must be a reinforcement of the most important and strongest community unit: the family” (Fidesz 2007 p.8). Like the concept of family is used to entail a specific kind of family, the historic significance of Christianity is primarily used to make conservative points and underline the importance of Christian values. True Hungarians can appreciate Christianity and all that it stands for whether they are religious or not. This is connected in the discourse to the safeguarding of the Hungarian nation: “The historical churches make up an integral part of our national culture; the conservation of architectural, artistic, and other cultural values preserved by the churches is our responsibility; therefore government support of religious communities is the common aim and task of believers and non-believers” (Ibid p.21).

Another strategy the party uses in the manifest is to transfer the responsibility of conservative choices to the churches by arguing for their increased power. They frame the churches as comparable to state institutions due to their welfare-like activities and argue that the system should “not differentiate between people according to which institution’s services they make use of”. (Ibid p.22) They go on to say: “When in government, we will ensure real equal opportunities and support the value-conserving and renewing activities of church institutions through sector-neutral financing.” Using these words to paint the current system as twisted and unbalanced, whereas their own system would favor the churches above other parts of civil society.

“We, the people” vs. “Them” as political elite

“It is now common knowledge that our country has been betrayed and plundered in recent years.” (Fidesz 2007 p.5)

There are countless statements throughout the data that demonstrate the construction of an in-group, consisting of “we, the people.” The polar opposite out-group
consists of the political elite. It is both expressed and implied that they are to blame for those things going wrong in the country, and it is toward them that “we, the people” direct their grievances. But there is internal antagonism in the discourse on the government; it is portrayed simultaneously as corrupt and deceitful on one hand, and clueless and incompetent on the other. The political elite is described as cunning by stating that they are trying to find ways to abuse their power by for instance imposing laws without a mandate from the electorate. This is discussed in a danger-centered discourse: “There is also a real threat that the government may increase this fee at its own discretion: the first such rise has already been implemented” (Fidesz 2007 p.17). The conflicting constructed identity opposing this is the one of ineptitude: “Recently it has become obvious that the socialist-liberal coalition has no clear idea of Hungary’s future […] It is now our duty to show that Fidesz is capable of guiding the country out of this seemingly hopeless situation.” (Ibid p.7).

The populist notion of anti-plurality is common in the data. The narrative of “with us or against us” is recurrent, where the then socialist-liberal government are to be dismissed in favor for Fidesz. The party is therefore phrased as a reasonable political option that stands for mature politics, as opposed to the government that stands for politics of hate: “In order to rebuild our country, everyone must join hands as long as they share a desire to replace the politics of hate with peace and rationality, to see responsible government instead of lies and the arrogance of power, growth instead of austerity measures, respect instead of humiliation, a just state instead of chaos” (Fidesz 2007 p.9). Another example is from the section on national security, where the party outright claims the existence of the nation’s “true” interests, and they also claim to be able to represent them by designing a new intelligence service “which is not tied to political interests, but sees as its prime objective the preservation of the nation’s true interests and values.” (Ibid p.14).

**Immigrants**

Another found identity in the data is immigrants. In the first text, immigration is merely mentioned twice. It is presented here for comparison with the dramatic in-
crease in focus on this group later, where the Hungarian identity relates as an opposite to the immigrant. The two statements that were made on the subject make clear that immigration is not desired and that immigrants are to be seen as a threat. They are even worried that shared EU immigration policies might encourage Hungarian minorities that live outside of the country to migrate back to the homeland. The discourse of danger continues throughout the text, shown most clearly in the security section: “Our security policy programme is based on the premise that our times are inherently beset with a multitude of risks and sources of danger. These include terrorism, ethnic and religious conflicts, international crime, the sale of illegal weapons, and migration.” (Fidesz 2007 p.14).

5.1.2 Identities in power
“Us” as the Hungarian people vs. “them” as global elite

“The Hungarian cause is bound to win. Now everything is in place: experience, courage, battle-hardened troops, international prestige, a country on an ascending course, great plans, and what seems at the moment to be inexhaustible strength.” (Fidesz 2018).

There is hegemony in the discourse around who constitute the in-group. Hungarians are described as the “Indigenous people” of Hungary and emphasis is put on their inherent right to decide for themselves who is going to count as Hungarian and who is not, around a discourse of being on the brink of war. Family is an equally important theme as during opposition and mentioned very often in the material. The Christian identity and the ethnic uniqueness are further underlined in Orbán’s ‘State of the nation address’, along with expansionist sentiments: “I believe that families form the unifying backbone of the entire country. I believe that everyone who commits to having children should be given all the support possible. [...] And I believe that if we do just this, then in the Carpathian Basin there will be more of us Hungarians, rather than fewer. I believe that we Hungarians have a future if we remain Hungarian: if we cultivate the Hungarian language, defend our Christian and Hungarian culture, and preserve independence and Hungarian freedom.” (Fidesz 2018).
The elite is mostly not constituted of other political parties anymore, although there is some conflict in that part of the discourse, where they are at times described to be too influential. We will return to the political opponents. Mostly however, the discourse of a corrupt elite remains, with an interesting alteration of who this elite consists of. There is a keen sense of pride in national resistance against any powers that are perceived as oppressive. This narrative has thrived in the era of Fidesz governance. If Soviet was the first superpower that Fidesz had to face, the superpowers that are now perceived as trying to impose their ideas and rules on the nation are global institutions such as the European Union, the IMF, and the UN. It is clear with the new identities that those who stand for freedom are Hungary, and the global elite are only trying to seem as though they stand for freedom, despite trying to force their own politics onto Hungary: “Fidesz and the KDNP have stopped political correctness in its tracks. Eurobabble, liberal grandstanding and “PC” platitudes have been ditched. We’ve sent the muzzle back to Brussels and the dog lead to the IMF. Just look around, in a Europe of forced coalitions and liberal media dictates. In Budapest the fashion is for straight-talking: clear words and sentences. In Budapest we want to say what we think, and we want to do what we say.”. (Fidesz 2018).

“We the people” vs. political opponents

“But most absurd of all is that in these dangerous, migrant-battered times there is a national party which has seen better days, and which has now come up with the idea that Islam is the last hope for humanity. […] Someone should pinch us quickly, so we wake up.” (Fidesz 2018).

Fidesz did construct themselves as synonym with the Hungarian people during opposition, but the assertion of this has increased. Most notable is when Orbán lists different accounts on which the political opponents have criticized the Fidesz government’s politics, and by extension, failed the Hungarian people: “On the most important issues they have not stood by us, and have not stood by the country. They did not support us when the fence was being built. They withdrew to the sidelines during the referendum on the mandatory migrant quota. They did not support the
amendment to the constitution. [...] They denied the reality of the mandatory migrant quota and the Soros Plan. The people can see this and know the truth; this is why the opposition in Hungary today is in a hopeless situation”. The anti-pluralism is strong and can be seen for instance in his accusation of the political opposition as being against the church: “All it can say is as far as spiritual issues are concerned is that the churches should keep their mouths shut, and had better keep a low profile.” (Fidesz 2018). Surprisingly, there are some quotes from the material that show that the rhetoric of political opponents as elites has somewhat survived, despite Fidesz being in charge for over a decade. This can be seen for instance when a ban on NGOs that work to help asylum seekers is discussed: “We shall order a complete financial transparency screening, and if somebody does not refrain from their dangerous plans we shall simply expel them – however powerful or rich they may be.” (Ibid).

A frequently mentioned nemesis of the people in the texts is Hungarian borne billionnaire George Soros, famed for his international economic influence, his philanthropy with democracy strengthening institutions, and in Hungary, the conspiracy theories surrounding him, eagerly fueled on by Viktor Orbán and Fidesz. He is described as the worst of all, with images based on what can only be described as science fiction-like plans for a new human race, “Homo Soronensus”, which would somehow be easier to accomplish if immigration were to be set loose into Hungary. This is also constructed within a discourse of battles: “The forces opposing us, George Soros’s network and the international bureaucrats he has bought, have in no way given up.” (Fidesz 2018).

**Immigrants**

If the manifesto from the time of opposition focused most on political opponents as the main antagonist, the Fidesz government’s main enemy is the immigrant, and by extension, those who want immigrants in Hungary. Immigrants are no longer mentioned in the passing as one of many dangers but are instead portrayed as the main threat to Hungary’s security. They are moreover no longer a passive threat but are also actively trying to invade Hungary and Europe to take over the countries there.
Some are described as already being occupied without realizing it. Africans and Muslims are attacked the most, with critique to what Orbán calls “Islamisation” of European countries and mixing of different ethnic groups: “If this mass of several hundred million young people is allowed to travel north, then Europe will soon come under horrendous pressure. Furthermore, the majority of the cities of Europe will clearly have majority Muslim populations [...] If things continue like this, our culture, our identity, and our nations as we know them will cease to exist. Our worst nightmares will have become reality [...]” (Fidesz 2018). Protection of the borders is discussed, and the “threat” of immigrants can now come from the West instead of the South. The discourse of war culminates in the discussion of immigration: “We have successfully defended our southern borders with the building of the fence, the legal and physical border defences, the exemplary steadfastness of our police and the leadership of Sándor Pintér” (Ibid).

5.1.3 Summary: Identities
When reviewing the different identities, there are several different “us” versus “them” narratives that have changed over time. The common denominator is that whomever the enemy “them” is constructed to be, the “us” stands for both the people and Fidesz, and they have become increasingly interchangeable over time. The concept of “them” is redefined and attributed new meanings, while “us” is nearly identical over this time period with an even more fused together meaning of people and Fidesz. This explains why, when in government, any verbal or political attack on the party and its ruling can be framed as a direct attack on the Hungarian people and is even used as arguments against these same critics. The very fact that they criticize is thereby turned against them.

The hegemonic intervention has succeeded if one discourse dominates where there has previously been conflict (Laclau & Mouffe 1997). The hegemony lies in Fidesz’ construction of the Hungarian identity as “us,” where some Hungarians such as political opponents or immigrants are disregarded. There is antagonism in the constructions of “them.” The only hegemony related to the construction of “them” is the ongoing discourse of danger. Aside from the elite, immigrants and Muslims
were also discovered as a frequently used group against which to construct the Hungarian national identity, and they were often used interchangeably in the later texts. Part of the explanation for this is of course the increased relevance after the 2015 refugee flow into Europe. It is also important to make clear that another part of the reason for this is blatant racism, where open discussions of the horrors of mixed ethnic groups are part of Orbán’s speeches to his people.

5.2 Rule of law

5.2.1 Rule of law in opposition

“We dreamt of a country where everyone could live in peace and security, where those in power were on the side of the law and morality. We expected that, with the change of regime, honesty, credibility and accountability would be basic prerequisites.” (Fidesz 2007 p.5)

Fidesz’ manifesto can establish their complete understanding of – and even emphasis on – the values connected to rule of law before the 2010 election. The mediated values in the equivalence chain are directly aligning with the Finnis and EU definitions of rule of law; human rights, personal security, law-bound elites, and moral right. It is important to Fidesz (according to what they claim in the manifesto) that arbitrariness and moral corruption does not have a place in the legal sphere or any other part of society. What the West considers to be morally right is emphasized as important to Fidesz: “Co-operation between Europe and the United States of America in the international organisations with utmost consideration to international law and human rights in a multilateral framework relying on equality is indispensable. However, Hungary is interested in maintaining close bilateral partnership with the United States in politics, economy and culture on the basis of shared values” (Fidesz 2007 p.45).

Before their election win, Fidesz saw the then ruling socialist-liberal government as having let the law acquire a life of its own, where the people could no longer be protected of it, far less expect protection from it. There are accusations of corruption
or arbitrariness in the judiciary, where the elite can enjoy special treatment that the rest of the Hungarian people cannot. They used a security discourse to motivate why the then government should not be allowed to continue what they branded dangerous lawmaking. They name corruption as one of the key issues in the country, and the rich and powerful are implied to be the same people who are making the political decisions. “We must ensure that no official body involved in crime fighting will tolerate infringement of the law by its own membership. We will put a stop to the practice (that rightly irritates people) whereby a selected few is given preferential treatment when facing the law. This practice is unacceptable, enforcement of the law cannot take one’s financial circumstances and political contacts into consideration when passing judgement.” (Fidesz 2007 p.20). They also accuse the current government of pushing through so many new laws in such a rate through the legal system that their inhabitants are struggling to be law-abiding citizens: “Nobody can be expected to show observance of the law if laws change every month.” (Ibid p.34).

Competence before politics as a value in recruitment is emphasized in the Security section among other parts, with accusations of a politicized military where high-ranking officers are claimed to have been hired on questionable merits (Fidesz 2007 p.14). The same value is completely left out when discussing the law, despite a poorly functioning justice system being one of the main grievances of the text. The law itself did despite this not receive a separate section of the document, but it permeates the entire document: “Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union rejects outright the introduction of co-payments for medical appointments and the daily fee for hospital stays – as well as the implementation of these measures – since both were imposed by the government without a mandate from the electorate, and both have consequences detrimental to the medical professions and patients alike” (Ibid p.17). The criticism of these laws is based on the effects they have on the healthcare system, but the very first criticism is that the implementation was unlawful. In the view of Fidesz, the proper procedure for introducing a new law was ignored.
5.2.2 Rule of law in power
The party now uses rule of law to describe general issues with the law or discrimination to establish themselves as one of many other democratic countries that are merely struggling a bit with rule of law, and not experiencing a worse crisis than any other country: “According to Hidvéghi, these accusations are another example of Brussels using important issues and ideas such as corruption or the rule of law for political blackmail against a conservative, Christian Democratic government” (Fidesz 2022). But the equivalence chain of meanings connected to it has almost completely changed. Moving from underlining of values such as a fair justice system and political freedom during opposition, the party has now turned instead to an emphasis on law and order, and actively turning away from liberalism: “it is now irrelevant whether this is the consequence of the weakness of liberal democracies, the repercussions of an earlier colonial and slave-trading past, or the greedy, subversive actions of a George Soros-style empire: the facts remain. Whatever the reason, Western Europe has become an immigrant zone.” (Ibid).

The old emphasis on human rights and political freedom is fully abandoned in favor of using the legal system to exercise one’s power, motivated around a strong “us” and “them” discourse: “Naturally we shall fight, and if needs be we shall deploy an ever more powerful legal arsenal. Here, for a start, we have the “Stop Soros” legislative proposal. We are linking any activities related to migration and migrants to a national security licence, and we shall divert a proportion of the foreign funding intended for NGOs, or pseudo-civil society organisations, to the border protection budget.” (Fidesz 2018). It can be seen here that the party uses the rule of law in a technical meaning, referring to the existence of a functional legal system. They create ad hoc laws to target specific groups that do not agree with the party on an ideological level. Orbán could as well call it “illiberal” rule of law, since his party has found a way to construct another understanding of rule of law in the same way he did with democracy: they still claim the concept although only the very shell of its original meaning remains. But rule of law is still a value that is worth mentioning in Orbán’s speeches directed to his own people: “I must also say a few words about
the dispute between Western and Central Europe. It seems the courses of development of these two parts of Europe have diverged. Naturally democracy, the rule of law and the market economy remain in common.” (Fidesz 2018). The rule of law here means something different to the party than it does to the Western international community, and the definition has strayed away from the Finnis and EU definitions of rule of law, going as far as calling the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe “one of the Soros network’s chief ideologues.” (Ibid)

Balázs Hidvéghi, a member of the European Union Parliament (EP) of Fidesz, shows the antagonism in the dislodged meanings of the concept when he accuses the EU of double standards about rule of law problems. It appears an attempt to remove the focus from Hungary’s rule of law issues by using the same definition as the EU to turn the attention to other countries instead: “The circumstances of the death of Slovakian Jozef Chovanec, who died in Belgian police custody, had not been clarified for more than two years. The EU also did not take the appropriate steps to reveal the truth, he said. He quoted Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who recently spoke about systemic racism in his country. ‘Both cases show that there are rule of law problems in Belgium and the Netherlands, but the EU is keeping silent about them,’ he emphasized.” (Fidesz 2020).

5.2.3 Summary: Rule of law
Fidesz’ emphasis on rule of law persists and is still used as a rhetorical tool. By examining equivalence chains, it could be established that since gaining power, there has been a change in what meanings are constructed as important and valuable. Going from values remarkably close to the chosen definition of this study, aligning rhetorically with the meanings connected to the liberal conception of rule of law, the leap is considerable between the time in opposition and the time in government. It is now used in a way that makes it seem closer to the concept of law and order, referring to a functional legal system in a state, where criminals are caught and brought to justice. The absence of arbitrariness is no longer part of the equivalence chain for rule of law, but the value is still understood perfectly and sometimes used in debates when facing criticism from the EU. Their current conception of rule of law could be described by Orbán as “illiberal,” in the sense that it now distances
itself from the Western liberal notions of human rights and democratic values, and thereby has lost its original meaning. Pluralism is inherent to the rule of law, and the more power a populist party has, the more difficult it will be to uphold both rule of law and a populist line. The rule of law will therefore likely be conceptualized differently by populists in opposition compared to in government.

5.3 Summary: Analysis
The Hungarian identity as protagonists has stayed the same in structure, with changed formations of the main antagonists. The elite are no longer mainly domestic political opponents, but rather political critics from the global elite, consisting of individuals such as George Soros, international organizations such as the EU, and global organizations such as the IMF and the UN. There were also some phrasings that constructed domestic political opponents as the elite even after Fidesz had been in power for more than ten years, proving that the original discourse is not completely abandoned despite the logical dissonance. Another consistency shows in the use of a security frame to motivate both why opponents should not be allowed to pass laws without electorate approval and why Fidesz needs to pass ad hoc legislation.

Expressed values connected to the rule of law have shifted away from nearly perfectly aligning with those connected to the study’s chosen definition, such as human rights, morality and controlled elites. It is now rarely connected to the same meanings, although they are at times highlighted to equate Hungary with other countries. Mostly the equivalence chain related to rule of law now entails legality and societal order. The expressed values connected to rule of law were found to be highly interconnected with identity formations, to the extent that the task of dividing the two themes became challenging.

The global organizations are not always constructed as the enemies, and often wise certain committees and even individual people within these organizations are seen
as the true issue by Fidesz, rather than the entire organization. This study understands that the relationship between Hungary and the mentioned international organizations does not only relate to the issues of rule of law and democracy, and that the identities found in this text were dependent on the specific questions asked. The historic aspects of the relationship could have also been studied using, for example, role theory, which would, it would seem, lead to different scopes of focus and perhaps different conclusions. However, that would have also answered a different question than the one asked and served a different purpose than the one formulated.
6.0 Discussion

The study has found that populist rhetoric as consisting of identity formations and discussions of important values become increasingly intertwined with political power and are best investigated in relation to one another.

Previous research has not investigated the difference in discourse between populism in power and populism in opposition from an identity and value centered perspective. This study has established that despite abandoning many of what appeared to be their core values, populists do maintain a consistent line in the main structures of the discourse, such as the surviving narrative of “we, the people” versus “them, the elite”. However, there are changes in the discourse as well. The identity formation of “we the people” may be mostly the same, albeit increased with political power, while the identity formation of “them” is changed. It has moved from domestic political opponents to facilitate for continued construction of “them” as elites, constructing instead international political opponents as the new elite. Thereby this study has been able to prove that populists do change the way they express themselves once in power, but that the populist rhetoric remains.

As established, the academic debate has been largely preoccupied with either definitions centered around identity or what populism does to politics or to society, going as far as claiming that populism lessens once in power. This investigation of the difference in discourse proves the opposite is true for what populism sounds like – the rhetoric is even more populist after the election win. This provides an underlying understanding of the difference. As for the meanings bound to rule of law, the study found a complete switch in emphasized values. Despite this, there is proven consistency in the very understanding of rule of law, despite the term being used completely differently. This implies a conscious deconstruction of the meanings connected to rule of law for political purposes.
7.0 Conclusion

This paper has investigated the populist discourse and how it changes depending on political power. By applying discourse analysis as a theory and method and using the rule of law as an analytical measurement, Fidesz has been examined for changes in rhetoric between the time in opposition and the time in power. The research question was “How does political power affect the populist rhetoric?” And the study found that: 1) the identity formations in populist rhetoric, which consist of a corrupt elite versus the pure people, can be adapted by populists to continue using them when in power; 2) conceptualization of rule of law can change when populists reach government position. The aim of the study was to fill a gap in the academic debate and increase understanding of the populist rhetoric by describing the difference before and after governance, and this purpose has been achieved.

Further research will be needed on the subject for understanding whether the current misuse of rule of law is solely a political strategy to confuse the debate and avoid accountability, or whether there are other factors yet uncovered. As for identity formations, the findings of this study could be supported by a larger study consisting of several other populist parties in power. Another question that awakens is whether different tactics (perhaps more attuned to the country’s historical context) from global actors such as the EU, the UN and the IMF would have had different effects on Fidesz’ rhetoric.

Another interesting strategy discovered during this study is the Fidesz policy of completely leaving out the names and party names of any opponent in their articles, and instead framing the situation as criticism from themselves, by naming a representative from the own party instead, followed by that person’s quote on the situation. The picture is also of the named Fidesz politician. Aside from not being named or showed, the opponents’ exact quotes or actions are never disclosed, instead referred to in Fidesz’ criticism of a vaguely described action, such as “Orbán: ‘The left’s unreasonable claims about the child protection law are false’”, without much
specification. This of course leads to several new questions, such as whether this is a strategy used pre-governance and by other populist parties in power.
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