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Populist Democracies: Post-Authoritarian Greece and Post-Communist Hungary

This article makes the case for a novel democratic subtype, *populist democracy*, indicating a situation in which both the party in office and at least the major opposition force(s) in a pluralist system are populist. Based on a minimal definition of populism as 'democratic illiberalism', and through the comparative analysis of post-authoritarian Greece and post-communist Hungary, the article reveals the particular stages, as well as the causal mechanisms, that may prompt the emergence of populist democracy in contemporary politics. It also points to the tendency of such systems to produce polarized two-party systems, and it calls for further research on the topic.

MOST OF THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE ON POPULISM HAS BEEN concerned with its political emergence and, occasionally, its electoral success. Little is known, however, about what happens when a populist party reaches power. In principle, and rather broadly speaking, there are two possible outcomes: either populism in office turns out to be feeble, in which case it is soon forced back into opposition; or it proves strong and consolidates in power. Assuming now that populism in power is strong and sufficiently solid, how are opposition parties to react? Will they resist populism or will they try to emulate it? In the latter case, there may emerge what I shall term a *populist democracy* – that is, a democratic subtype in which, besides the party in office, at least the major opposition party (and even other minor parties) are also populist.

Motivated by the foregoing puzzles, this article focuses specifically on pluralist systems in which populism has become dominant and asks: How does a populist democracy arise? And how may it affect political liberalism? My arguments are based on the comparative

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analysis of two cases in contemporary Europe that accord with the above definition: post-authoritarian (1974–present) Greece and post-communist (1989–present) Hungary. Analysis will, first, offer an empirical account of how the newly identified phenomenon of populist democracy emerges and becomes dominant; second, it will corroborate the diagnosis of recent research about a fundamental tension existing between populism and liberalism (for example, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012a); and, third, challenge the idea that populism may be a corrective to liberal democracy (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b). As it emerges from the analysis of the cases presented here, once in power, populism stands as *the* major threat to contemporary liberal democracy.

I proceed as follows: in the next section, I define my key concepts, explain the characteristics of the country cases and contend that populist democracy constitutes a novel phenomenon that cries out for conceptual, empirical and theoretical comprehension. The third section is empirical and examines the rise and consolidation of populist democracies in Greece and Hungary; it also elucidates the specific causal mechanisms involved in the process. The last section includes conclusions and, taking the lead from recent political developments in the two countries under examination, points to some key theoretical and normative implications related to populist democracies.

DEFINITIONS AND EMPIRICAL CASES

Having already defined our chief unit of analysis, populist democracy, as a democratic subtype (cf. Lijphart 1999) permeated by competing populisms, our next task is to reconceptualize populism in the context of contemporary pluralism. To this purpose, I propose a most minimal definition of populism as *democratic illiberalism* for the many advantages it offers: firstly, this definition is both adequate, since the characteristics it contains are enough to identify the referents and their boundaries, and it is parsimonious, since no accompanying property is included among the necessary, or defining, characteristics (Sartori 1984: 56). Secondly, the proposed understanding of populism is encompassing in the sense that it can accommodate, if not altogether subsume, most previous definitions of the phenomenon, whether they have

looked at it as an ideology (for example, Laclau 1977; Mudde 2004), a style of politics (for example, Knight 1998), a specific discourse (for example, Hawkins 2009) or a political strategy (for example, Wayland 2001). Thirdly, it points directly to populism's 'negative pole' (Goertz 2006: 30–5), namely, political liberalism; from this vantage point we are now offered a clear, dichotomous view of our object. Populism, in short, may be democratic, but it is *not* liberal. Such an understanding of populism as the polar opposite of political liberalism yields, fourthly, a useful classification of representative democracy *per genus et differentiam* – in other words, one declaring what the common genus is (that is, representative democracy) and what makes the difference (liberalism or populism). For, as Riker (1982: 241) has made clear, despite their incompatibility and mutual exclusiveness, liberalism and populism 'exhaust all the possibilities for democratic theory'.[1]

The problem that arises is: How are we to distinguish between liberal and illiberal democracy? The obvious solution is to stipulate empirical indicators that both mark the continuum from liberalism to populism and establish clear boundaries between the two. Political liberalism is relatively easy to assess. Largely following Rawls (2005), it is understood as a type of democratic politics premised upon the idea that in society coexist a pluralism of incompatible ideological doctrines that divide otherwise free and equal citizens by multiple, but often overlapping, class, ideological, religious, geographic or other cleavages. For all such divisions, however, the characteristic of liberal systems is their pursuit of 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls 2005: 131–72) premised upon constitutionalism – that is, 'the development of counterweights to the unbalanced supremacy of the people [including among others] enforceable human rights, constitutional courts, the territorial and functional division of powers, and the autonomy of the central banks' (Mény and Surel 2002: 10).[2]

Populism *qua* democratic illiberalism, on the other hand, is more difficult to pin down.[3] This problem is solved, however, when viewing populism *in* democracy as the complete opposite of political liberalism and as featuring three interrelated –and mutually reinforcing– characteristics: first and foremost, the idea that society is split along a single cleavage, ostensibly dividing the good 'people' from some evil 'establishment'; second, the promotion of adversarial and polarizing politics rather than of moderation and consensus

Table 1
Two Faces of Representative Democracy

Liberal	Populist
Multiple cleavages	Single cleavage
'Overlapping consensus'	Adversarial politics
Constitutionalism	Majoritarianism

seeking; and third, the adherence to the majority principle, as well as a certain predilection for personalist authority over impersonal institutions and the rule of law.[4] Put in a nutshell, while the key idea in political liberalism is that voters should control officials, populism's key idea is that officials are to serve the voters. Table 1 presents a summary of democracy's two faces and the key characteristics of each of them.

As the foregoing suggest, populist democracy is a distinct type, or species, of representative democracy and, as such, it contrasts and is inimical to democracy's other major variant, which is political liberalism. A populist democracy, therefore, is not just another democracy 'with adjectives' (Collier and Levitsky 1997), such as, say, a 'defective' (Croissant and Merkel 2004) or 'quasi' (Villalón 1994) democracy; nor is it to be confused with 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2010), a hybrid regime with characteristics of both democracy and authoritarianism.[5] Populist democracies, in short, are definitely democratic but, to a larger or lesser extent, illiberal. During the post-war decades, such democracies had been held in check by the wide expansion of political liberalism in the Western world and far beyond it; yet, as suggested by the experience of the two countries examined in this article, a reversal of that trend may already be underway. In what follows, I will try to show how such populist democracies have come about in both contemporary Greece and Hungary, as well as how this development has affected political competition in these countries. Before that, however, a note on the cases under study is in order.

Comparing Greece with Hungary is, to be sure, quite a challenge, not least for the dissimilar historical paths those countries have taken: Greece, with a long legacy of Ottoman rule in past centuries, followed during the twentieth century a trajectory more akin to that of the other states of Southern Europe (Malefakis 1995) in which democracy has alternated with authoritarianism. Hungary, on the

other hand, for a long time part of the Habsburg Empire, would have turned into a typical Central East European state if post-Second World War realities had not forced it to become a communist regime. Be that as it may, after the collapse of authoritarianism in Greece (1974) and of communism in Hungary (1989), these countries made their respective transitions to pluralism with considerable success and, albeit for only a brief time, they experienced political liberalism.[6] However, liberal democracy was soon substituted in both countries by populism, which permeated parties in government and in opposition alike. As it happened, competing populisms gave rise to party systems characterized by two-party formats, but with polarizing mechanics that caused in both country cases the collapse of their respective political centre with dire social and economic consequences. By focusing precisely on the dynamics of Greece's and Hungary's populist democracies, this article tries to make sense of this new phenomenon, as well as serve as an alert for liberal democracy's current regression in both Europe and other parts of the world.
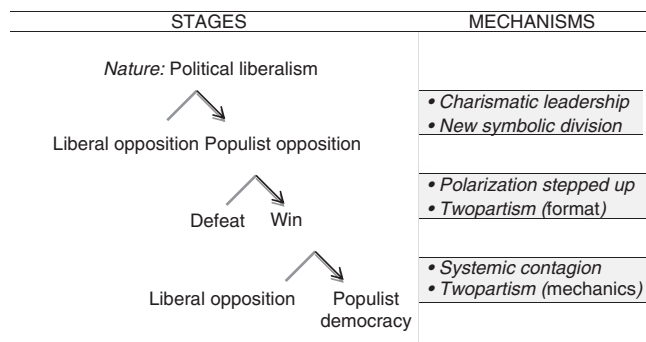
THE RISE OF POPULIST DEMOCRACIES

As will shortly emerge from the comparative analysis of our cases, the rise of populist democracies consists of a three-stage process, each stage involving specific mechanisms. Setting off from a state of nascent political liberalism (*nature*), those stages involve: the emergence of a relatively strong populist opposition party, populism's ascent to power and populist contagion to other major parties. It will be shown that each stage is prompted by specific mechanisms that involve agency, the production of new symbols, specific electoral strategies and structural constraints. Significantly, the path from political liberalism to populist democracy allows for contingency as, at each stage, the return to original liberalism is always a likely outcome. Figure 1 condenses the above points and may serve as an outline of the analysis to follow in this section.

Starting Point: Nascent Political Liberalism

If Greece (along with Spain) represents a paradigmatic case of democratization in Southern Europe, Hungary's own passage from communism to pluralism was perhaps Eastern Europe's most successful.

Figure 1
The Stages and Mechanisms of the Emergence of Populist Democracy

STAGES	MECHANISMS
Nature: Political liberalism	
Liberal opposition Populist opposition	• *Charismatic leadership* • *New symbolic division*
Defeat Win	• *Polarization stepped up* • *Twopartism (format)*
Liberal opposition Populist democracy	• *Systemic contagion* • *Twopartism (mechanics)*

After their respective transitions to democracy, both countries, led by moderate reformist governments, were quick in introducing liberal democratic institutions, enabling multiparty systems and pursuing pro-European Union (EU) policies. Let us, then, briefly review in this subsection the onset of political liberalism in our two countries.

To start with Greece, the emergence of a new democratic order in 1974 under the leadership of Constantine Karamanlis was premised upon political liberalism, the promotion of moderation and a strong quest for consensus (Pappas 1999). The new government legalized all political forces, including the Communists, persecuted the leaders of the previous authoritarian regime and organized a referendum (during which Karamanlis insisted that his party maintained a neutral stance) that abolished the monarchy (Diamandouros 1986). Greece would also make a bold bid for full membership of the EU and began earnestly to prepare for it. As soon as early 1975, the government introduced a new constitution safeguarding the rule of law, civic rights and individual liberties. While drafting the constitution, and in spite of its overwhelming majority in parliament, the government showed moderation and tried to reach consensual solutions in many important issues (Alivizatos 1990: 134).

At the same time, Greece's party system appeared to rest on three poles, each dominated by a single party (Mavrogordatos 1984). On the right, the dominant force was New Democracy (ND), the party founded by Karamanlis and determined to institute a new

liberal democratic structure. By 1977, there had also emerged within the right camp the extremist National Front party through a splinter from New Democracy. On the left, the dominant force was the Greek Communist Party (KKE), rivalled by a smaller party of reformist communists (originally known as KKE Interior) that had split from the former as early as 1968. The most contested pole was that of the centre, initially dominated by the liberal Centre Union-New Forces Party (CU-NF; later renamed the Union of the Democratic Centre – EDIK). The most puzzling formation was the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok), a party newly founded by Andreas Papandreou, which, while surpassing even its communist opponents in extremist sloganeering, still made use of the traditional practices, such as political patronage. As it soon became evident that the Union of the Democratic Centre would not be able to hold the liberal centre, the question became: Would Pasok move in to claim it as a liberal reformist party or as something else?

In Hungary, the post-communist government failed to adopt a new constitution, opting instead to revise the document that had existed since 1949. In practice, however, reforms were extensive and in accordance with the principles of Western liberalism, thus providing 'a comprehensive ideological framework for shaping the political and economic aims of the transition', including a programme 'for limiting the state; separating the branches of power; depoliticizing the economy [and] the public administration; protecting individual freedoms and creating a constitutional state; as well as creating a market capitalist economy' (Körösényi 1999: 152). Particularly pronounced in Hungary's new institutional order were the limitations imposed on the majoritarian principle (and, consequently, on majority governments) by such means as increasing by law the prerogatives of the parliament and parliamentary opposition; creating counterweights, such as the Constitutional Court and the Ombudsman, or offering opportunities for direct democracy through referendums.

As in Greece, party politics in early post-communist Hungary was played out among a moderately large number of parties taking positions along a left–right continuum and neatly divided into three ideological camps: the national-conservative right, the socialist left and the liberal centre. The former camp comprised the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKGP) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). The socialist camp

consisted of the reformed communists, now presenting itself as the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP). Finally, the liberal camp included the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) and the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz). In such a moderately pluralist political and party arrangement, and to the extent that each camp was characterized 'by the very similar socio-cultural composition of their core political elites and electoral bases' (Körösényi 1999: 32), early post-communist Hungary was effectively divided by several cross-cutting cleavages along class, territorial and ethnic lines.

The turn of events in both countries during their earlier phase of pluralist politics came with the collapse of the liberal centre. In Greece, the centrist Union of the Democratic Centre, under the pressure of increased polarization and unable to face bilateral opposition from both right and left, won a meagre 12 per cent in the elections of 1977, and by 1981 it had all but disappeared. Meanwhile, New Democracy and Pasok had moved to appropriate the vacant space created in the middle, and to lay claim to the politically homeless centrist voters. Of the two parties, it was Pasok that was able to advance into, and eventually capture more of, the centre space (Nicolacopoulos 2005: 263–4). Still, rather than abiding by the principles of political liberalism, Pasok followed a distinct populist course whose consequences were soon to appear.

In Hungary, the liberal pole that existed between left and right had been represented most prominently by Fidesz, initially a youth-based party formed in 1988 to fight against communism and promote liberalism. Priorities changed, however, when party president Viktor Orbán was left in unchallenged control of the party in 1993, after which Fidesz began its march to the right and, from there, to populism (about which more will be said below). Nor was the Alliance of Free Democrats able to defend liberalism as, following the 1994 elections, it entered into a political alliance with the Hungarian Socialist Party that lasted until 2008.

What explains the decision of the leaders of the left-of-centre Pasok in Greece and right-of-centre Fidesz in Hungary to turn to populism rather than political liberalism, whether in its social democratic or its liberal conservative variant? The answer lies in the fact that, given the circumstances, populism was far more electorally rewarding than any other option available to them. Indeed, for such charismatic leaders as Papandreou and Orbán, yearning for a fast

accession to power, political liberalism appeared as a suboptimal choice since it would have involved: (1) high costs for building, and democratically running, party organizations; (2) an obligation to play by the rules of the game, including a commitment to ideological and political moderation; and (3) voter supply shortages as, had they decided to narrow down party appeal to liberal-minded voters, their support could not yield a majority. Instead, in both Greece and Hungary, and due to the undisputed control they exercised over their parties, the leaders of Pasok and Fidesz found it cheaper and electorally more rewarding to use populism as the means to increase their parties' bases so as to be in a position to win state power. This brings us to the opening stage of our analytical scheme.

Stage 1: Populist Ascendancy

How did Pasok and Fidesz develop as successful populist opposition parties during the 1970s and 1990s, respectively? It emerges from comparative analysis that two interrelated mechanisms have been at work in both countries. The first was the presence of extraordinary (that is, charismatic) leaders exercising full authority over their parties, and aiming at the radical transformation of national politics (Pappas 2012). The second mechanism has been the division of society into a *single* cleavage, ostensibly dividing it into two broad categories: the 'people' versus some 'establishment'. The interconnection between the two mechanisms should not be missed. Although it has been a common assertion that populism builds upon a 'we versus them' Schmittian divide, we are often little aware of the fact that such a divide is the handiwork of creative leaders through a process of new symbolic production, let alone the fact that such a process entails the deliberate formation of novel social and political identities. The above processes are premised upon the use of highly emotive and sharply polarizing tactics which contrast sharply with liberalism's rationality and moderation. As previously, I begin with Greece and then turn to Hungary.

As early as the beginning of 1977, Papandreou had already been able to purge, or effectively silence, all intraparty opposition to his person, and established his unrestrained power over party cadres and followers alike. Pasok became in effect a personalistic party (Panebianco 1988) characterized by the lack of internal party

democracy and the omnipotence of the leader. Once the sole source of ideology and major tactician within the party, Papandreou attacked the new liberal foundations of the young Greek democracy, questioned its legitimacy and rejected its goals. In complete antithesis to Karamanlis's liberal polity design, he aimed at a new political and socioeconomic order based on state socialism and participatory egalitarianism. By calling for general 'change', his populism had three main thrusts: the uncompromised intransigence against the ruling New Democracy party, an exceedingly generous social policy of radical wealth redistribution and an ultranationalist stand against Turkey, as well as an implicit rejection of Greece's Europeanism.

A master at politicizing resentment, Papandreou thus offered the Greek people a wholly new symbolic master narrative, according to which society was divided between two inherently antagonistic groups, an exploiting 'establishment', both foreign and domestic, and the 'people' always standing in opposition to it. Largely as a result of this new division, Greek politics assumed a highly confrontational style, both in the parliament and on the streets.[7] Inside parliament, as Featherstone (1990: 189) describes, 'highly charged debates, invoking populist rhetoric . . . served to enlarge the differences between the parties in the public mind.' Pasok's strategy, more particularly, as Pridham and Verney (1991: 47) explain, was 'not so much to influence government policy in a particular direction, but rather to discredit the governing party and drive it from power'. In such a political climate, 'rational debate about policy differences [was] the exception. The preferred mode of political discussion has been rhetorically emotive and ideologically heavy, allowing ample reference to the historical sins of the opposing camp and frequently conducted on a personalities basis' (Pridham and Verney 1991: 47).

Turning to Hungary: when it first appeared, shortly before the fall of communism, Fidesz was an anti-communist liberal movement full of alternative ideas (Hanley et al. 2008: 411). Initially operating under a collective leadership and with strong appeal, especially to a youthful audience (at the time, the party refused to grant membership to anyone over 35), Fidesz distinguished itself as a party supporting minority rights, uncompromised secularism and economic pragmatism. However, it was not long after that that, as the party's popularity grew, its leadership realized that power was within reach only if the party moved to the political mainstream. This involved a

dilemma: would the party turn to the social democratic left by diluting its anti-communism, or should it turn to the right by sacrificing its liberalism? A resolution came during the party congress held in 1993 at Debrecen, in which the model of collective leadership was also abandoned in favour of an individual party executive. New party leader Viktor Orbán, a co-founder of Fidesz, charted a clear strategy of distancing the party from the left and penetrating deep into the right. In the process, the new leader was to reinvent Fidesz as a typically populist party.

With the general elections approaching in 1994, and unchallenged as party leader,[8] Orbán modified Fidesz's ideological stance by labelling it a 'national-liberal' party. Although this did not bring immediate electoral gains, Orbán remained undeterred in his decision to continue his march rightwards. Intolerant of any motion for potential cooperation with the government after elections, he toned down the party's liberal and anti-clerical tenets, poaching instead such traditional conservative themes as family, God, order and the fatherland. 'Family', writes Enyedi (2005: 704), 'became the central category of the party's program and the word ''*polgar*'' (meaning both ''civic'' and ''bourgeois'') was chosen as a new label for identification'; at the same time, Fidesz also accepted most clerical demands and turned into a champion of Hungarian nationalism. To cap it all, Fidesz withdrew from the Liberal International only to later (2001) join the European People's Party. Evidently, Orbán had spotted the opportunity: with the socialists in power and the right in disarray, he saw Fidesz 'as now taking the leading role in the realignment of the center-right parties in opposition to the new government' (Lomax 2007: 114). From now on, Fidesz would never abandon its new discourse 'built on the metaphorical polarization between the communist past and present, the clash of national and international interests, and the opposing interests of the ruling ''elites of luxury'' and the ''working citizens'' ' (Rajacic 2007: 650).

By 1998, two intertwined developments were clearly visible on Hungary's political scene. First, as the Christian Democratic People's Party had practically ceased to exist, and the Hungarian Democratic Forum offered to sign an electoral agreement, Fidesz was now the dominant force on the right. It also had become 'the most centralized, most homogenous and most disciplined party in the country under the firm leadership of its charismatic leader' (Enyedi 2005: 708). Second, *largely as a result of such leadership,*

Hungarian politics became polarized along a single cleavage between the left, represented by the Hungarian Socialist Party and its minor allies on one side, and Fidesz, now in firm control of the right, on the other side.

Stage 2: Populism in Office

Despite their political youth, both Pasok and Fidesz, led by internally powerful and publicly vocal leaders who used polarization as an integral part of their tactics to impose a view of society as being divided between the mythical 'people' and an infamous 'establishment', were able to win office by 1981 and 1998, respectively. Pasok, with an impressive 48.2 per cent of the vote, formed a single-party government; Fidesz received fewer voters than the Socialists but won the most seats (148 out of 386) in parliament and formed a government in coalition with the conservative Independent Small-holders' Party and the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Paradoxically, polarization did not decrease when the populists came into office; instead, they opted to step up polarization and mass mobilization rather than promoting moderation.

There are two possible explanations for the intensification of polarization: electoral expediency and overpromising. According to the first explanation, the populist governments' polarizing tactics intended to achieve three goals: solidify the heterogeneous social alliances that had elevated them to power; thwart their major party opponents from regaining legitimacy; and compel voters from the smaller and ideologically more proximate parties (such as leftists in Greece and rightists in Hungary) to vote for them lest the major oppositions return to power.[9] According to the second explanation, once the populists came into office, polarization became for them a much cheaper strategy for the maintenance of power than implementing painful liberal reforms. By controlling the state and its resources, the populist governments in both Greece and Hungary were now in a position to fulfil past promises to their particular electoral constituencies and reap further electoral gains, while passing the cost to the entire society. As will be shown next, this logic would also appeal to their major opposition parties, New Democracy and the Hungarian Socialist Party, once they had returned to power.

At any rate, the acceleration of polarization had important consequences at the party system level: to the extent that Greek and

Hungarian society had already been split into two antagonistic camps, each country's party system was reshaped from multipartism into twopartism. This subsection analyses and puts into perspective those two crucial mechanisms for the development of populist democracies.

Greece, first, represents a clear case in which, 'far from subsiding, polarization increased after PASOK's victory' (Kalyvas 1997: 89).[10] Pasok employed a discourse presenting 'the social and political space as divided into two opposing fields' (Lyrintzis 1987: 671) and portrayed Greek society as torn between the 'forces of light' (meaning Pasok and sympathizers) and the 'forces of darkness' (meaning New Democracy and its own well-wishers). In Pridham and Verney's words (1991: 46), 'Despite PASOK's ''Socialist'' title, its self-presentation was essentially as a populist force which was ''non-Right and anti-Right''.'

Related to the increased polarization was also the transformation of Greece's party system into a simple two-party format (Pappas 2003) – that is, a system in which the two major parties could govern alone (Sartori 1976). Indeed, after 1981, apart from Pasok and New Democracy, all political forces were either rendered politically insignificant or altogether eliminated: the extreme right National Front became absorbed by New Democracy; the Reformist Communist Party (thereafter presenting under various designations) was weakened to the point of near-extinction; and several flash parties appeared and disappeared without trace. Only the Communist Party maintained a continuous and stable presence in parliament, but lacked 'intimidation potential', namely, the ability to determine the overall pattern of competition within the party system. After 1981 Greek twopartism made possible the alternation in power of the two major parties, Pasok and New Democracy, at regular intervals.

Similarly in Hungary, polarization rose sharply after Fidesz rose to office and made its presence felt 'in all spheres of life – from the nomination of theater directors to the orientation of women's magazines' (Illonszki and Kurtán 2007: 1002). 'From the late 1990s,' writes Palonen (2009: 320), 'there has been a steady division of the political spectrum into two camps that continuously produce themselves as a political unit through the construction of the other camp as their counterpart. They are named ''left'' and ''right'', denoting the socialists and liberals against the right-wing ''civic'' camp.' Once in power, Fidesz became the champion of the right and

a defender of the cultural nation, the traditionalist rural and religious social strata. Fidesz immediately 'established a repertoire of specific right-wing language and policy which [it] could appropriate and deploy in targeted fashion to make itself a credible right-wing force for right-wing elites and voters' (Fowler 2004: 102). It was a kind of polarization, Palonen (2009: 324) further explains, which did not exist so much through the articulation of differences between the two sides, but 'through the rejection of the other camp'.

Polarization paid off handsomely for Orbán and his party as, by the 2002 elections, with Fidesz in full dominance of the right, Hungary's politics had become a two-party system (Sitter 2011), with the two major parties running head-to-head and together polling 83.3 per cent of the total national vote. Already by 1999, the Independent Smallholders' Party, the second largest party in the government coalition, had completely disintegrated and the extreme right Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) also disappeared. Fidesz now stood alone to 'represent a major case of party identity change' (Fowler 2004: 82). As public opinion data show (cited in Enyadi 2005: 711), while in 1994 Fidesz was still the least authoritarian party in Hungary's party politics, by 2002 its electorate had moved to the authoritarian end of the scale.

Stage 3: The Development of Populist Democracies

When the populists in both Greece and Hungary came to power, the opposition parties were faced with a conundrum: would they stand by the principles of political liberalism or should they also stray into populism? As it turned out, so strong was the pull of populism that, despite attempts to resist it – most notably in Greece – the major opposition forces in both countries soon transformed from proponents of liberalism to populism enthusiasts. Here is a short review of how post-authoritarian Greece and post-communist Hungary turned into populist democracies through contagion.

Ever since Pasok rose to power in 1981, Greek politics has developed as an incessant struggle between liberalism and populism, with the latter always the winner. All in all, there have been three ventures to resuscitate political liberalism: The first was made by the New Democracy government (1990–3) that followed a decade of Pasok's populist rule; a second attempt was undertaken by Costas Simitis,

Andreas Papandreou's successor as Greece's prime minister and Pasok's leader; the last abortive attempt to substitute populism with some form of liberalism was made by George Papandreou in his double capacity as Pasok's leader (since 2004) and Greece's premier (2009–11). A closer analysis of this follows.

In 1990, after almost a decade of populism, New Democracy returned to office under the leadership of liberal professional politician Constantine Mitsotakis (see Featherstone 1994). In a full reversal of previous practices, the new government moved swiftly to reinvigorate Greece's economy, reinforce its political institutions and repair strained relations with its European and American allies. With respect to the economy, more particularly, the government established as its top priority the country's preparation for entry into the European single market and moved accordingly to cut public spending and reform the civil service. It was towards the same goal that the New Democracy government also placed privatization at the centre of its political agenda, given that 'the recent international developments and more specifically the European challenge that is embodied in the Single European Act makes it our duty, not only to put emphasis on the institutions of a free market economy, but to adopt with courage and the strong sense of duty to the future of our country the policy of privatization' (New Democracy 1987: 14). Besides its clearly pro-EU policy, the new government also became active in restoring ties with the US government and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Yet, in the face of strong populism from the opposition parties, the structural reforms and policy alternatives proposed proved unpopular and, in 1993, the New Democracy government collapsed, thus opening the way for a new comeback to power of the Papandreou-led populist Pasok.

When Andreas Papandreou died in 1996, Pasok's parliamentary group elected Costas Simitis as his successor in both the party leadership and the premiership. A moderate and methodical technocrat lacking charisma and out of touch with the masses, Simitis pursued a programme of modernization of Greece, focusing on extensive public investment for building infrastructure, as well as on economic and labour reforms to harmonize Greece's economy to European ones. Those attempts 'marked a shift from the socialist-populist period to one characterized by pragmatism, a managerial discourse and a technocratic approach, all packed in a project for the modernisation, rationalisation and Europeanisation of the

Greek society and economy' (Lyrintzis 2005: 205). On the basis of such a programme, Pasok under Simitis was able to win two consecutive electoral victories (in 1996 and 2000) and to lead the country into the eurozone. Despite his reformist efforts, though, the modernizing group under Simitis was 'forced to rule within the entrenched material boundaries drawn by the party's pro-popular policies in the 1980s' (Fouskas 1998: 138). In a very real sense, Pasok remained a party deeply permeated by populism, which fed cronyism, corruption and inefficiency, all of which became more pronounced during the party's second term in office, eventually causing its downfall in 2004.

The last, and more recent, attempt to liberalize Pasok was undertaken by George Papandreou, Andreas's son, first as party leader and, after his 2009 electoral victory over New Democracy, as prime minister as well. Not only was it an abortive attempt to reinstitute liberalism, it also clearly demonstrated how deeply populism had been entrenched throughout the political and party system, with dire consequences for the country's ability to face the economic and financial crisis that hit it in 2009. Defeated in his efforts to rout populism, Papandreou was eventually forced to resign as prime minister in November 2011.

In the meantime, after its rather dismal spell of power in the early 1990s, the story of New Democracy over the last two decades has been one in which it has tried to regain power under three successive leaders, each of whom has forced the party away from liberalism and towards a distinctly populist direction. Miltiades Evert, first, not only rebranded New Democracy as a 'people's party', but also tried in the 1996 electoral contest to outbid Pasok's already extravagant promises. In the aftermath of electoral defeat, Evert stepped down and was replaced as party leader by Costas Karamanlis, a nephew of New Democracy's founder. And still, populism did not cease growing stronger within New Democracy. The new leader promptly expelled from the party the most prominent proponents of political liberalism and adopted a discourse that was more reminiscent of Andreas Papandreou than that of his namesake uncle and mentor. Under this leadership, New Democracy returned to power in 2004 but immediately gave in to the accumulated clientelistic demands of its organized base. While in opposition, the current New Democracy leader, Antonis Samaras, having in the past distinguished himself as a nationalist populist, followed a populist agenda despite the great financial and economic crisis that had meanwhile befallen Greece.

In summing up the Greek case, so powerful became the allure of populism during Pasok's rule in the 1980s that, gradually, it was adopted by the other major force in Greece's party system, New Democracy, which was thus transformed from a liberal to a populist party. As Pasok and New Democracy alternated regularly in office, Greece became in effect a populist democracy. Only when New Democracy managed to win the 2012 national elections, albeit by a thin margin, and Samaras became premier, heading a rather precarious right–left coalition under the auspices of Greece's international creditors, did the new leader decide to dispense with outright populism in favour of (timid) political liberalism.

Unlike in Greece, where liberalism initially showed some resistance to the ascendancy of populism, in Hungary populism spread with no particular difficulties since, once Fidesz had come to power and intensified polarization, the Hungarian Socialist Party found it politically more convenient to pay back using the same coin. It therefore also adopted a two-pronged strategy to polarize its opponents: the complete rejection of Fidesz on purely ideological grounds; and an emphasis on overpromising rather than promoting a policy agenda for macroeconomic stability and growth. And when in 2002 the Hungarian Socialist Party returned to office, it far from disengaged from Fidesz's previous policy of overspending. Thus, in promises made during the electoral campaign, pensioners were offered an extra lump sum of money, families received an extra month's worth of childcare benefit, civil servants' salaries rose by 50 per cent and workers on minimum wages became tax exempt. And, on the majoritarian principle, the new government also began to create a new clientele around itself by, for instance, replacing all state secretaries, as well as the heads of development projects throughout the country's regions (Illonszki and Kurtán 2003: 974). At the same time, the national question became a preferred terrain for political confrontation as both major parties chose to politicize the notions of nation and 'the people' (Hanley et al. 2008: 428).

Polarization remained the staple of Hungarian politics and was quite visible in the 2006 electoral campaign, during which 'negative campaigning centered around arguments that one side was nationalist and the other opposed to the nation. Similarly, both sides argued that the other focused only on accumulating wealth in the hands of a certain elite, while they fought the corrupt

establishment as the other side using anti-elite rhetoric' (Palonen 2009: 325). As in Greece, the establishment of a populist democracy in Hungary helped solidify the division of society into two antagonistic camps vying for political hegemony.[11]

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In a seminal article published a few years ago in this journal, it was argued that contemporary Western democracies had been over-whelmed by a powerful populist *zeitgeist*, which was seen as a reaction of mainstream politicians to opposition populist parties. That was, however, believed to be a temporary, or 'episodic', phenomenon that was expected to 'dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over its top' (Mudde 2004: 563). The present article has presented a different, and certainly more menacing, reality in which the populist challenger has in fact not only risen to power, but has also contaminated formerly liberal political and party systems with persisting populism.

This analysis, therefore, has made the case for a novel political phenomenon – populist democracy – and has examined it by empirically comparing post-authoritarian Greece and post-communist Hungary. It has been shown that populist democracies, although pluralistic, are inimical to political liberalism; they also tend to produce an unusual party system that combines a typical two-party format with the mechanics of polarized pluralism. Although still a rare phenomenon, populist democracies may in the future emerge in several places in the world (as, for instance, in Romania, Slovakia or even Poland), where liberalism is already receding but the pretence of democracy still remains in place. The article has moreover analysed the particular stages through which populist democracies may emerge, and it has explained the mechanisms involved throughout the process.

Because of the polarizing party politics they produce, however, populist democracies are highly unstable systems and cannot enjoy long lives. Although this should be the subject of future research, the current political developments in Greece and Hungary are full of insights with important political and theoretical implications. Let us therefore have one last look at our cases.

Hard hit by financial and economic crises, which in both countries made it necessary to call international creditors to the

rescue, Greece and Hungary are currently experiencing the collapse of the two-party systems their populist democracies gave rise to. At the same time, both countries seem to be drifting further away from liberal democracy and moving towards unknown, but perilous, directions. After the 2010 elections in Hungary, Fidesz has arisen as the predominant party able to command the absolute majority of seats in parliament.[12] Since then, under the leadership of charismatic Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the government has begun a systematic attack on liberal institutions in such sensitive areas as the judiciary, the central bank, the media and human rights, thus further diverging from the Western liberal norm. As for Greece, the collapse of two-party politics after 31 years and the emergence of both left and right (including fascist) extremist forces at the flanks of the system pose serious obstacles to the good functioning of democracy, let alone to a return to political liberalism. Almost certainly, Greece's populist democracy is not in a position to cope with the explosive crisis the country is faced with. In that case, the capacity of liberal institutions to withstand a new assault of polarized politics amidst economic crisis and continued political instability will be anybody's guess.

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NOTES

[1] That democracy is Janus-faced is not a novel idea. Besides Riker (1982), Robert Dahl (1956) has also distinguished between a 'Madisonian' and a 'populistic', or Rousseauistic, democracy. And Margaret Canovan (1999), drawing on the work of British philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1996), claims that democracy has two faces, which she has termed the 'pragmatic' and the 'redemptive', respectively.

[2] Note that the criteria for liberal democracy used in this analysis – that is, multidimensionality of cleavage, consensus seeking and constitutionalism – coincide to a large extent with John Gray's (2000) three features of liberalism, namely, plural values, liberal toleration and rival freedoms.

[3] Consider, for instance, the fact that even in a book with the title *Illiberal Politics in Neoliberal Times* (Berezin 2009), no definition is given for what this term means.

No less careless is the use of the term 'illiberal democracy' by Fareed Zakaria (2003: 99), who, again without offering any definition, considers that 'illiberal democracy runs along a spectrum, from modest offenders like Argentina to near tyrannies such as Kazakhstan, with countries such as Ukraine and Venezuela in between'.

[4] Depending on the relative significance, or intensity, of these characteristics, one may of course allow for different degrees of populism, therefore distinguishing between 'hard' and 'softer' forms of the same phenomenon. Yet, the imposition of a single cleavage that divides society into 'the people' and some 'establishment' yields a unidimensional, rather than multidimensional, electoral competition space, which in turn feeds back to both adversarial politics and majoritarianism.

[5] Populist democracies, however, bear some resemblance to O'Donnell's (1994) notion of 'delegative democracy', whose combined features of strong illiberalism and pronounced majoritarianism enable the individual leader who wins an election 'to govern the country as he sees fit'.

[6] Greece's and Hungary's contemporary political systems present important similarities. Both have been characterized as 'party democracies' (Bozóki 2008; Pappas 1999) for the central role parties play in their respective (unicameral) parliaments and in society; in both, the president is elected by parliament and has mostly ceremonial functions, while prime ministers are powerful and appoint cabinet members directly; in both countries, finally, electoral law provides for a mix of multi- and single-seat constituencies in which voters may select candidates of their choice from party lists.

[7] As Stathis Kalyvas (1997: 89) has straightforwardly put the matter, party system polarization in Greece 'is inextricably linked to the rise of PASOK. The 1981 elections were fought in a climate of great polarization, reflected in the collapse of the traditional centrist parties.'

[8] After Debrecen, the more liberal wing of Fidesz gradually departed from the party, led by ultra-liberal Gábor Fodor, who eventually joined the Alliance of Free Democrats.

[9] This logic is corroborated by strong empirical evidence. As Seferiades (1986: 83) has shown, the distance between the perceived mean position of Pasok and the Communist Party on the left–right scale was smaller than the distance between Pasok and New Democracy. A similar situation has been noted in Hungary, where, by 1998, the distance between Fidesz and the Hungarian Socialist Party was much greater than the distance of each of them from the parties on the extremes of the political spectrum (Enyadi 2005: 706).

[10] The rise of polarization in Greece during the 1980s is well documented in numerous accounts, including, for instance Mavrogordatos (1984), Seferiades (1986) and Papadopoulos (1989).

[11] This situation is well depicted in the following account by George Schöpflin (2007, original emphasis), a political scientist and Fidesz member of the European Parliament: 'Hungarian society [has become] deeply divided – in fact, it is in a state of ''cold civil war.'' The extraordinarily deep cleavage, unparalleled in Europe after 1945, is far more than a political phenomenon. It can be described as ontological, and is about qualitatively different and *mutually exclusive* visions of justice, of good and evil, of the country's past, and ultimately, of the ''good life''.'

[12] Interestingly, while support for the Hungarian Socialist Party has plummeted, the rise of Jobbik, a radical nationalist party located on the far right, represents the new challenge to political liberalism.

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