

BEYOND POPULISM: POLITICAL TRIBALISM IN POLAND AND HUNGARY

While researching populist attitudes within Hungarian and Polish societies, we found something much more dangerous and malevolent: the combination of Manichean, black and white narratives that divide the world into good and evil, and encourages authoritarianism that puts trust in a “strong” leader. We labelled it “tribalism”: a mentality which is based on rallying around the leader of the tribe and fighting against the other tribe with every tool possible. While it seems to be more of a zeitgeist than only a regional phenomenon, tribalism can be especially destructive for democratic institutions in Central and Eastern European countries where democratic norms are weaker. In this article, we approach Hungarian and Polish societies in the light of “tribalism”, and examine its respective effects.

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While one of the best thinkers of our time talks about a “populist zeitgeist” that has been going on for decades in Western political systems,¹ in our opinion, what we have been experiencing in many democracies (or ex-democracies) goes beyond populism. Populism more often seems like a strategy to overtake power from the opposition. This strategy changes dramatically when the so-called “populists” succeed in securing power. Ultimately some essential features of populism become lost, as in the case of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Kaczyński in Poland, Donald Trump in the United States, and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia. Therefore, the label of “populism” is often incorrect. There are three main reasons why this is:

Firstly, populists in governments lose their anti-elitist appeal, as they become the elites themselves. Populists only seem to refer to the “will of the people” as long as they remain popular. With time, people-centrism (a reference to the will of the people as the final source of legitimacy) diminishes and authoritarianism increases. While “populist” politicians in power usually keep their populist rhetoric, they do their best to make it extremely difficult for the people to raise their voice against their ruling. Silencing the media, hacking the elections, and causing distress in referendums (as it happened in 2016 during Hungary’s referendum on EU’s migrant quota initiative) are examples of practices that oppress the people.

Secondly, it seems as if populists in governance are making much more effort to satisfy the rich, rather than help the poor. In the United States, for example, the abolition of Obamacare and the tax reforms for the rich are only advantageous for high-income groups. Also, several “populist establishments” are giving way to endemic corruption — see, as an example, Transparency International’s data that indicates a significant decline in Hungary’s transparency ratings since Orbán’s return to power in 2010.² In a lot of cases, authoritarian populists find ways to legitimize corruption, claiming that this is the only way to keep resources away from the enemies of the nation.

Lastly, populism frequently becomes an understatement when we look at the rule of authoritarian politicians. Erdoğan, for example, has been often labeled as a “populist” — now, however, there is an emerging consent in the political science literature that he is turning Turkey into an electoral autocracy.³ The same goes for

¹ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No.4 (2004), pp. 541-63.

² Transparency International Corruption Perception Index, (2018), <https://transparency.hu/en/adatok-a-korrupciolorol/korrupcio-erzekelesi-index/hungary-bringing-up-the-rear-of-the-region-in-transparency-internationals-most-recent-world-corruption-ranking/>

³ Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance and the AKP* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

Putin. Populists usually do their best, with notable success, to destroy the institutions of democracies from above and retain power. In this respect, populism is more of an understatement, as it essentially subverts democratic systems.

“Populists usually do their best, with notable success, to destroy the institutions of democracies from above and retain power.”

We often refer to populists based on their self-definition — that they are the ones raising popular issues and defending the “people” from the “elites”. This is based on the naive notion that what they say is what they do. Authoritarian politicians usually talk populist, but in practice, act tribalist and authoritarian. Tribalism means the triumph of moral relativism and particularism over moral universalism; in other words, it adopts a “our tribe can do it, yours cannot” type of approach. Populism is no more than a rhetorical style that aims to legitimize the politics of the autocrats in an era in which democracy is the norm. But the real beast we are dealing with is political tribalism: an understanding of politics as a war where defeating the other tribe in any way possible becomes the most important goal. This mentality requires total loyalty towards the leader of the tribe, rejection of pluralism both within their own tribe and the other’s, and questioning the legitimacy of the other tribe’s actions — and sometimes even their mere existence.

From Populism to Tribalism: Survey Results

In 2018, Political Capital started an empirical research on populist attitudes in Hungary and Poland. Even though the initial research was on populism, it revealed something more malevolent and dangerous: tribalism — an authoritarian and anti-pluralistic approach to politics that can turn violent. Tribalism strongly undermines democratic processes, since its only goal is to follow the leader of the tribe and defeat the other tribe. It also undermines political debates concerning nations’ key issues, making hard facts and reality trivial. While it seems to be more of a zeitgeist than only a regional phenomenon, tribalism can be especially destructive for democratic institutions in Central and Eastern European countries where democratic institutions are young and fragile, and democratic norms are weaker.

*What Do the Results Tell Us About Populism in Hungary and Poland?*⁴

Socio-demographic indicators predict receptivity to populism very poorly. Moreover, we see that party preference trumps all other factors. Contrary to common wisdom, right-wing populism is much more about the circus than about the bread.

There is an obvious difference between the perspective of populists in government and populists in opposition: the elites are perceived to be “elsewhere”. While populists in opposition are concerned with the national elite (and mainly the government), populists in government channel social discontent towards the international elite (and their domestic allies). For instance, pro-government voters in Poland and Hungary see the national parliament as trustworthy, but do not regard the European Parliament the same way.⁵

Populism in Poland and Hungary is all over the spectrum. Not only the supporters of populist parties are open to populist narratives, but left-wing and liberal parties with similarly strong views on politics are as well. People-centrism is weak among the supporters of parties claiming to be the sole representative of “the people” — especially among voters of Poland’s PiS (Law and Justice Party) and Hungary’s Fidesz (Civic Alliance Party).

Therefore, “tribalism” as a term can better describe the dangers, such as radicalization of public discourse, pernicious polarization,⁶ and demolition of democratic institutions, in Polish and Hungarian societies than “populism” can. Tribalism is the combination of Manichean and black and white narratives that divide the world into “good” and “evil”, and encourages authoritarianism that puts trust in a “strong” leader. Tribalists are more likely to support political violence as a tool, and to reject political pluralism.

The results of the survey reveal that a significant portion of the people in Hungary and Poland say that they would be willing to support a strong leader instead of elected politicians. This ratio is higher in Poland (35 percent) than in Hungary (26 percent). Paradoxically, this attitude is even stronger among the voters of PiS and Fidesz — of which the head of party’s also lead their respective countries. At the

⁴ In order to measure populist attitudes in a comparable way, we decided to conduct representative public opinion polls in both countries using almost identical methodologies. This was guaranteed by employing the same polling technique (computer-assisted personal interviews (CAPI) on representative samples of the adult population) and using a unified questionnaire. The poll was conducted by Kantar Hoffmann in Hungary and by Kantar TNS in Poland during December 2017.

⁵ For more detail please see European Social Survey data on Poland and Hungary.

⁶ Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, “Polarization and the global crisis of democracy: Common patterns, dynamics, and pernicious consequences for democratic polities,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2018), pp. 16-42.

same time, it reveals that these authoritarian voters will not accept if their beloved leader loses power via elections. Authoritarian populism leads to increasing tribalism in these societies. This phenomenon can be especially dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe where “populist establishments” can transform and re-write the whole socio-political setting.

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Background

Hungary and Poland share several similarities in historical narratives that can be the breeding grounds for populism:⁷

- The feeling of victimization throughout history and ill-treatment by superpowers, and the prevalence of a rich conspiracy culture as a consequence.
- The perception of being treated as second-class citizens in the European Union (while having a rather positive opinion of the community), which generates mistrust towards the EU from the right side of the political spectrum.
- The experience of the loss of sovereignty and, to an extent, the disappearance of the Polish/Hungarian statehood.

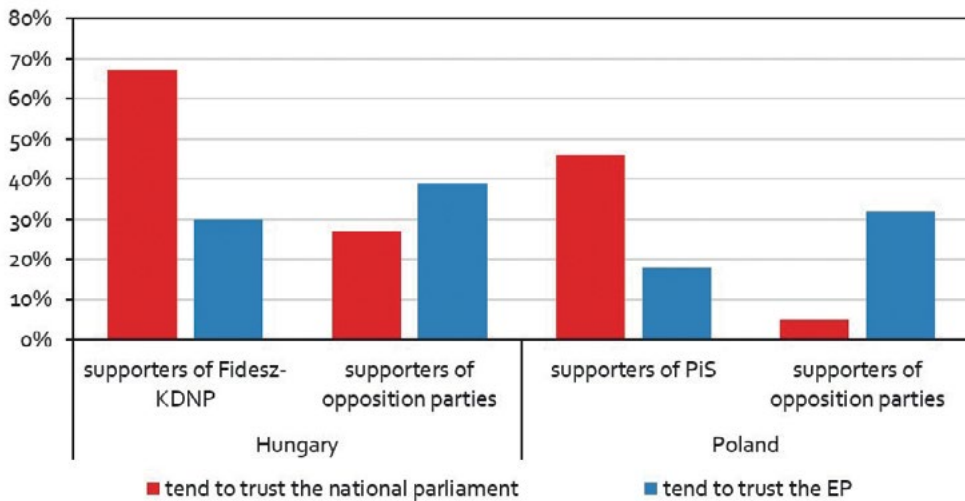
There are also several similarities in both countries when it comes to the current manifestations of right-wing populism. The discursive strategies of populist political actors on migration are built on securitization and the fear of cultural loss. Human rights and procedural norms, arguably the foundations of liberal democracies, can be relegated to secondary importance in the name of the government’s responsibility to act, referring to some sort of “special state”. Therefore, certain political forces use the issue of migration consciously to transform the political system, even replacing

⁷ For example, see: Adam Balcer, “Beneath the surface of illiberalism: The recurring temptation of ‘national democracy’ in Poland and Hungary – with lessons for Europe,” *Heinrich Boll Stiftung*, 7 February 2017, <https://pl.boell.org/en/2017/02/07/beneath-surface-illiberalism-recurring-temptation-national-democracy-poland-and-hungary>; Vit Dostal and Lorant Gyori et al., “Political Capital: Illiberalism in the V4: Pressure points and bright spots,” *Political Capital*, May 2018, http://www.politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2258

liberal democracy with an autocracy. At the same time, politicians keep referring to democracy — only, however, as the will of the people, and not as the separation of powers.

There are two important social factors that help authoritarian populism in both countries: high political polarization⁸ and low interpersonal and institutional trust. Similar to Hungary, Poland ranks as one of the lowest among European countries in terms of interpersonal and institutional trust.⁹ Both countries are mostly ethnically homogeneous, which creates grounds for politicians to exploit “platonic xenophobia” — an anti-immigration sentiment. 45 percent of the Poles and 56 percent of the Hungarians believe that immigration is the most important problem the EU is facing at the moment, while this rate is 29 percent amongst the Brits.¹⁰

Figure 1: Level of Trust Towards the National Governments and the EP Among Supporters of Governmental Parties and the Opposition Parties¹¹



Furthermore, populist politicians in Poland and Hungary maintain their anti-elite stance, however, they channel it towards the international elite instead of the national. As Figure 1 indicates, supporters of governmental parties in both countries trust

⁸ For example, see: Veronika Patkós, “Causes and effects of partisan polarisation in European democracies,” *ECPR*, 11 September 2016, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/a56c10a4-d857-40bd-8a9b-a6b143078b55.pdf>

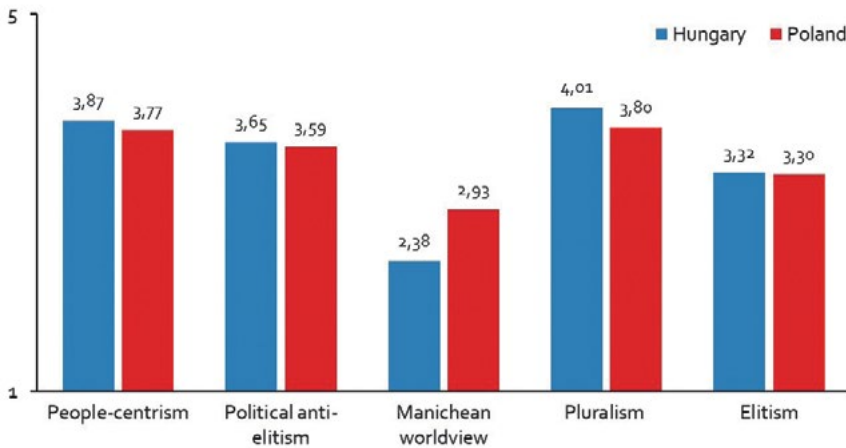
⁹ Péter Krekó et al., “Trust Within Europe,” *Vienna Policy Conference*, (2015), <https://www.viennapolicyconference.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/trust-within-europe-vienna-policy-con-20151030.pdf>

¹⁰ Standard Eurobarometer 89 - Spring 2018, *European Union*.

¹¹ Calculations are based on European Social Survey Round data (Edition 2). Fieldwork period: Hungary (May 2017-September 2017), Poland (November 2016 – February 2017).

the national parliament much more than the European Parliament (EP), while in the case of opposition voters, it is the exact opposite.

Figure 2: Scores of the Five Populism Scales Among Hungarians and Poles (Mean of Answers on a 1-5 Scale Where Higher Number Represents Higher Agreement with the Statements)



As seen in Figure 2, political anti-elitist, elitist, and people-centrist attitudes are equally prevalent among Hungarians and Poles. Support for political pluralism also seems to be strong in both countries, though Hungarians tend to be more pluralist than the Poles. In Figures 3 and 4 below, it can be observed that the Manichaeian attitude is much more prevalent among Poles than Hungarians — which reveals even deeper divisions within Polish society. Nevertheless, we found that in both countries aspects of populist thinking are rather widespread on all sides of the political spectrum. This is clearly visible considering the above-average support scores of populist governing parties. Additionally, supporters of the governing parties are less people-centric and less anti-elitist (!) than average.¹² To be exact, their anti-elitism rather targets international political elites instead of national ones (as the latter is the government itself).

¹² We found similar results in the CSES database, similar to Bojan Todosevic: Voters of the governmental party in Hungary for example showed less anti-elitist and populist attitudes.

Figure 3: Manichaeian Way of Thinking Among Supporters of Hungarian Political Parties as Percentages
 (Level of Agreement with the Statement: “You Can Tell If a Person is Good or Bad If You Know Their Politics.”)

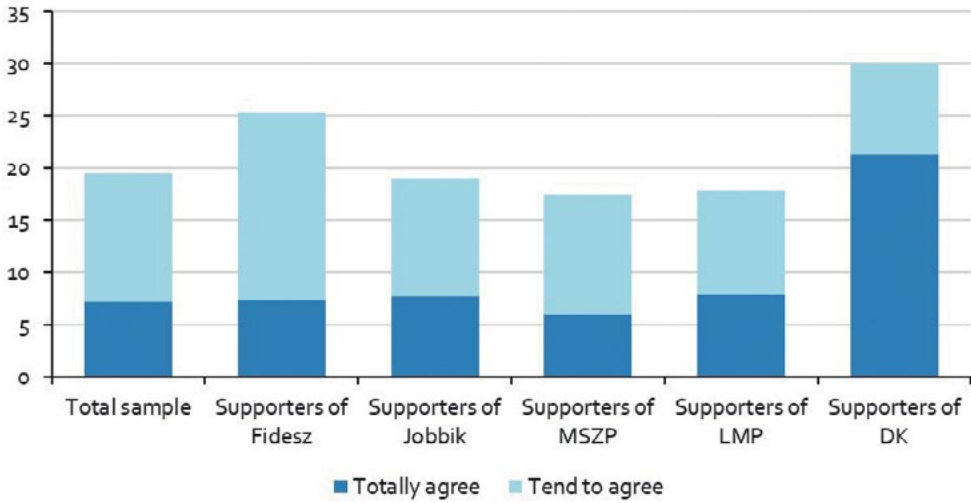


Figure 4: Manichaeian Way of Thinking Among Supporters of Polish Political Parties as Percentages
 (Level of Agreement with the Statement: “You Can Tell If a Person is Good or Bad If You Know Their Politics.”)

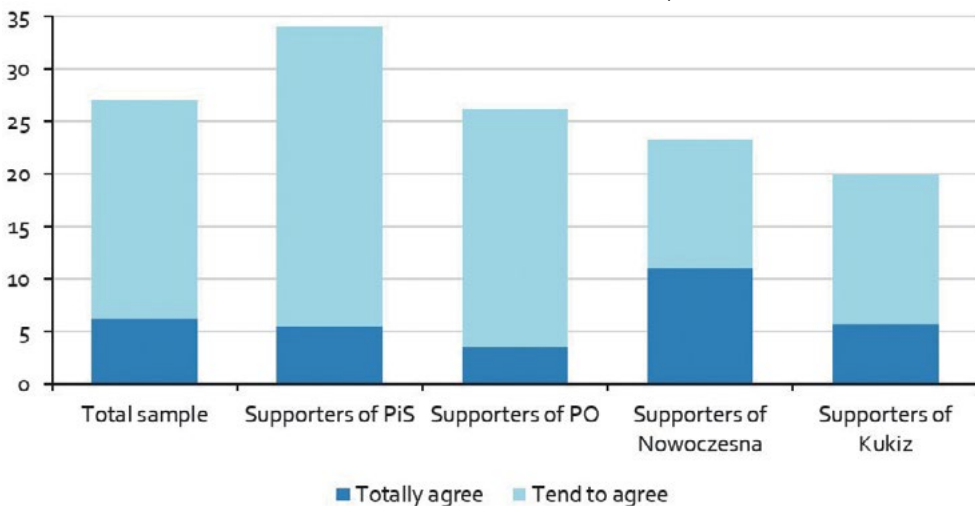
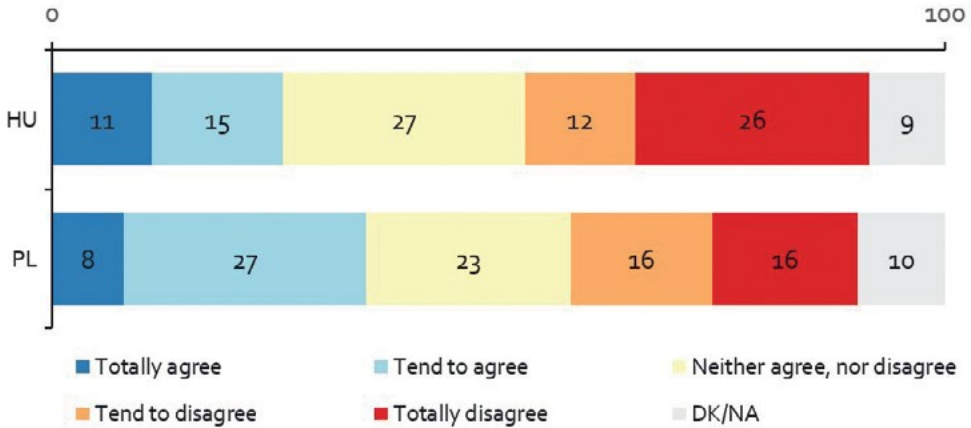


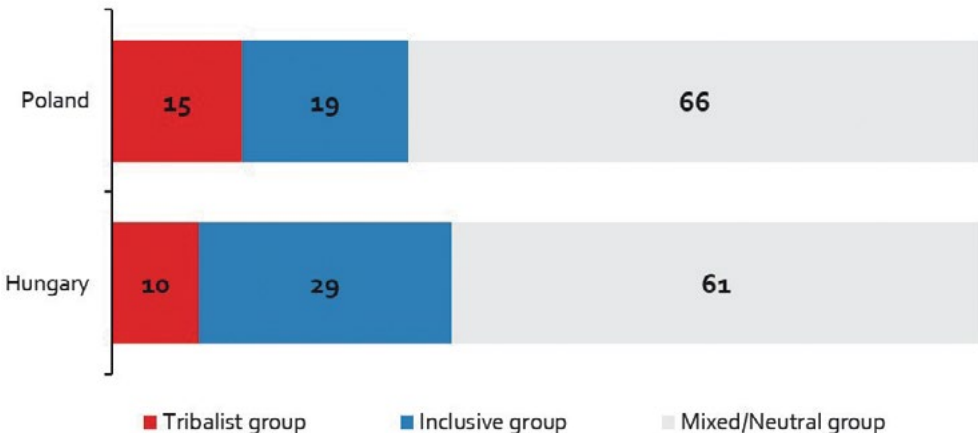
Figure 5: Attitudes of Hungarians and Poles Toward Authoritarianism as Percentages

(Level of Agreement with the Statement: “Our Country Would Be Governed Better If Important Decisions Were Left Up to a Strong Leader Instead of Elected Politicians.”)



When it comes to authoritarianism, a significant portion of the two societies prefer having a strong leader instead of elected politicians. This ratio is higher in Poland (35 percent) than in Hungary (26 percent). Stronger Manichaean worldview, greater elitism, and weaker pluralism are explanatory variables of the desire for a strong leader in both countries.

Figure 6: Share of the Tribalist, the Inclusive, and the Mixed/Neutral Groups in Hungary and Poland as Percentages



Finally, as seen in Figure 6, the proportion of tribalists in Poland is higher (15 percent) than it is in Hungary (10 percent). However, supporters of the governing parties are more likely to be tribalist in both countries compared to the supporters of opposition parties.

In order to see who the tribalists are in both countries and what their share is within society, we decided to categorize respondents based on their answers on two selected questions: one is the item on authoritarianism and the other is the strongest statement from the Manichean worldview scale.¹³ Those who agreed (tend to or totally agree) with both statements are classified as *tribalist*, while those who have the opposite view (i.e., tend to or totally disagree) are called *inclusive*. The third group incorporates all other respondents who either agreed with one and disagreed with the other statement, or responded neutrally (i.e., neither agree nor disagree). It is concluded that the proportion of tribalists in Hungary is 10 percent, while the share of inclusives is 29 percent. The rest of society has a rather mixed or neutral opinion on these issues.

To sum up, while we found very similar patterns in both countries, political cleavages, authoritarianism, and tribalism seem to be an even bigger danger in Poland than in Hungary.

Beyond Populism: Tribalism in Hungary and Poland

Tribalism does not seem to be associated with the minimal criteria for populism. On the one hand, tribalists are the least people-centric compared to the other two groups. Their score on the political anti-elitism scale is close to the average of the total sample. On the other hand, they are the least pluralist and the most elitist. Tribalists accept the use of violence more so to achieve important political goals.

Tribalists are overrepresented on the governmental side: 59 percent of tribalists would vote for Fidesz. We observed similar proportions within the inclusive and the mixed/neutral groups, 33 and 34 percent, respectively. Voters of the Democratic Coalition (DK) are also overrepresented among tribalists, while none of them would vote for Politics Can Be Different (LMP). Tribalists' willingness to participate in elections is above-average, however, they are not as active as the inclusives.

Regarding the socio-demographic profile of tribalists in Hungary, they are more

¹³ "You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics" (In Hungarian: *Meg lehet mondani egy emberről, hogy jó vagy rossz, pusztán az alapján, ha tudjuk, politikailag hol áll*); The Pearson correlation coefficient between these two items is +0.384.

likely to be female,¹⁴ have primary level education, and live in smaller towns in the eastern countryside. Within this group of respondents, males who have secondary level education, and who live in large cities or villages in the western countryside are underrepresented. Inclusives, on the other hand, have different socio-demographic attributes. The gender ratio among them is close to the average, with a slight bias towards women. They tend to be older, have secondary level education, and live in villages. They are underrepresented in Budapest. Inclusives seem to be the most active, regarding their willingness to vote.

The proportion of tribalists in Poland is 15 percent (higher than in Hungary) while the share of inclusives is 19 percent (lower than in Hungary). The absolute majority (66 percent) is in between. Similarly, in Hungary, tribalists were found to be the least people-centric; they are the least pluralist and the most elitist.

One-fifth of tribalists accept the use of violence to achieve important goals. This rate is substantially higher than that of the inclusive (7 percent), and it is also above the result of the mixed/neutral group (15 percent). Tribalists are much less active compared to inclusives when it comes to willingness to vote. 57 percent of them would vote if an election was held, while this ratio is 75 percent among inclusives. In this regard, tribalists are similar to those with mixed/neutral views as their activity rate is quite the same.

Support for PiS is equal within tribalists and inclusives (23 percent), slightly higher than among the mixed/neutral group (18 percent). However, taking into account that the activity rate is much lower among tribalists than among inclusives, active voters of the governmental party are overrepresented within active tribalists.

¹⁴ The reason behind this outcome is because female respondents agree more with the Manichean statement. Regarding the statement on authoritarianism, there is no statistically significant difference between the answers of men and women. Furthermore, correlation between the Manichean and the authoritarian statements is stronger among women respondents than among men. As a result, women tend to agree more with both statements.

Table 1: Ratio of Different Groups in Poland and Their Party Preferences

Parties	Tribalists	Inclusives	Mixed/Neutral
PiS	23%	23%	18%
PO	7%	9%	7%
Nowoczesna	4%	7%	4%
Kukiz	1%	6%	5%
All other parties	6%	6%	5%
Do not have a preferred party (but would vote)	12%	25%	14%
Not applicable (would not vote)	47%	25%	47%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

Regarding the socio-demographic profile of tribalists in Poland, there are no significant statistical differences in age and gender compared to the other groups. Tribalists are overrepresented in medium-sized cities (in populations between 20,000-100,000) and in the largest urban areas (with at least 500,000 citizens) in the central and western regions of Poland. Their share is the lowest in the southern region. Regarding the level of education, those with only elementary or basic vocational education tend to express mixed/neutral views on these issues. As a consequence, the proportions of both tribalists and inclusives are below the average in these educational groups, contrary to those who have at least a Bachelor of Arts degree, among which one can find more tribalists and inclusives. Similar to the Hungarian results, inclusives are more likely to live in villages, and are underrepresented in the capital.

Concluding Remarks

Tribalism, fueled from above, is a zeitgeist and the new norm. It is connected to a new political strategy that does not want to target the center with moderate messages, but win elections relying on the votes of the loud minorities — who claim themselves to be the silent majorities. Our suggestion would be, based on the analysis above, that the term “populism” should be abandoned, as the term “tribalism” describes the political tendencies we are facing today more accurately.

In that sense, Poland and Hungary are good examples of these tendencies. In both countries, leaders of the tribes want to fuel tribal views instead of reducing them, as

they have a lot to benefit from increasing polarization.

While populism is a zeitgeist, it can be especially dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, “tribalist establishments” have the power to transform and rewrite the socio-political setting in these regions. Transgressions of democratic norms, such as seizing control of institutions and pumping money for cronies through corruptive means, are becoming the new normal as “tribal good” becomes more important than “public good” in the age of escalating tribal wars.