An insatiable hunger for charisma?
A follower-centric analysis of populism and charismatic leadership

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Abstract

While scholarship often assumes that strong leaders and charismatic leadership play an important role in the emergence of populist politics, research has missed a closer exploration of charisma attribution to populists. Addressing this charismatic leadership hypothesis requires populism and charisma to be analysed from the followers' perspective. This article takes a unique look at the social-psychological dynamics behind populism. Using quantitative survey data that was collected from Hungarian voters (N=1200), this article examines the relationship between populist attitudes as follower characteristics in modern politics and charisma attribution. To reveal how a populist worldview can affect the follower's expectations and perceptions, we break charisma attribution down into three phases: (1) the general hunger for charisma (the romance of leadership); (2) perceptions of charismatic behaviour of the top candidates in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary elections (i.e., Viktor Orbán and Péter Márki-Zay); and (3) emotional attachment to these leaders. Our findings show that populism makes people more hungry for charisma and more sensitive to recognising charismatic behaviour but does not necessarily create an emotional bond with specific leaders. This article also sheds light on some directions of future research to explore other distinctive characteristics of populist followers that can influence social constructions of charismatic leadership. The limitations and implications are also discussed.

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The impact of strong leadership in politics has recently been witnessed. After President Donald Trump lost his bid for re-election, his supporters assaulted the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. For similar reasons, two years later, almost on the same day, 8 January 2023, pro-Bolsonaro supporters stormed Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court, and the presidential palace. However, we can also find less blatant but very typical examples of this experience, such as Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue the UK Parliament. These events are hardly isolated local phenomena. The public demand for strong leaders "who do not have to bother with parliament or elections" is growing worldwide (Mounk, 2018: 108-109; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). These leaders are often labelled in public and academic discourse as charismatic and populist without considering their followers' perspectives. Our knowledge of how populism actually affects the strengthening demand for strong leadership, and the emergence of charismatic leaders is still limited.

A similar leader-centric perspective also determines populism scholarship. For example, many argue that populism is fuelled by strong and charismatic leaders (see: Barr, 2019; Pappas, 2019; Taggart, 2000; Weyland, 2001). Despite some sceptical and critical voices, the charismatic leadership hypothesis still dominates the literature to explain the success of populist (mostly radical right-wing) parties and politicians (Mudde, 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Research has referred to charismatic relationships as a core element of populist politics (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 7; see also: Canovan, 1999; Diehl, 2019; Laclau, 2005; Urbinati, 2019). Weyland (2017: 68) describes charisma in populism as a glue 'that can hold together a leader's direct relationship to a mass of followers, and that can give this connection a deeply personal character.' Moreover, populism has also been defined as 'a charismatic mode of linkages combined with a democratic discourse that emphasises the embodiment of a popular will' (Hawkins, 2003: 1140). Meanwhile, the dark side of charisma (Tourish, 2013, 2020) is recognised as the core problem in populism, especially in the image of the manipulative demagogue who is not bound by the institutional constraints or norms of liberal democracy (see: Mounk, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Only a few researchers have attempted to systematically analyse the charismatic relationship in populist politics from the followers' perspectives. However, even their results could not provide definitive evidence for or against the charismatic leadership hypothesis due to their conceptual limitations. For instance, a recent analysis has shown that leader evaluation is more important for the voters of populist radical right parties when compared to other parties and other ideological factors, such as left-right self-placement (Michel et al., 2020). These studies simplified populist leader-follower dynamics by narrowing populist followership to voting for certain (exclusively radical right-wing) parties and charisma to the party leader's popularity or approval (Donovan, 2020; Michel et al., 2020; van der Brug and Mughan, 2007). Another vein of populism research has focused on charisma attribution to certain leaders labelled as populist in advance (e.g. Hugo Chávez, Silvio Berlusconi, Christoph Blocher and Umberto Bossi) (Andrews-Lee, 2021; McDonnell, 2016; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011). These analyses stand alone in the field, returning to Max Weber's (1978) original charisma concept as follower-centric theory as suggested previously in leadership studies, and they did not aim to detect populism's effect on charisma attribution.

We need to dig even deeper if we wish to understand the charismatic relationship in populist politics. A new strand of research can help us in this task, which treated populism separately from charismatic leadership, described as a thin-centred ideology in which society is divided into two antagonistic and homogeneous groups (i.e., good people and the corrupt elites) (Mudde, 2004). Here, scholars examine whether populist messages are reflected in the citizens' political views and how these attitudes correlate with their voting behaviour. A series of empirical studies have shown that these attitudes strongly affect the voters' electoral behaviour (e.g. Akkerman et al., 2014; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018), even though populist attitudes are not always transformed to vote choice for populist parties. Empirical findings from Chile and Greece show that these worldviews may be prevalent but remain latent if politicians are not activated or mobilised (Hawkins et al., 2020).

In this article, we draw on follower-centric theories to reveal how populist attitudes as personal characteristics influence charisma attribution. Our approach sticks close to the charisma understanding that was originally proposed by Weber (1978), which describes it as an attributional phenomenon (Ito et al., 2020) in contrast to those studies that place emphasis on charismatic (verbal or non-verbal) signals (Antonakis et al., 2016; Bastardoz, 2020) and behaviours (Conger, 2020) provided by leaders to elicit reactions from followers. In this sense, our article suggests that followers and their characteristics play a vital role in charismatic leadership. In populist politics, people permanently lose faith in representative institutions and the political elite are found to be too incompetent or even ignorant to fulfil the people's true will, who constantly and desperately seek a redeemer or folk hero. In doing so, they observe and interpret the purported leader's behaviour and messages (Conger and Kanungo, 1987). However, they only construct and attribute charisma to those leaders who can meet their idealistic expectations (Meindl, 1995). As a result, followers may not just resonate with political (populist) messages but may also be committed to the populist's vision.

To analyse the charismatic relationship in populist politics, we rely on an original survey focused on the incumbent, Viktor Orbán, and the challenger, Péter Márki-Zay, as two major running candidates for Prime Minister (PM) in Hungary in the 2022 parliamentary elections. The literature has generally underlined that charismatic leadership and populism play a central role in Hungarian politics, which provides an excellent case to analyse their relationships at the level of followers (Körösényi et al., 2020; see also: Pappas, 2019).

To see exactly how populist attitudes affect the charismatic relationship, we break down the charisma attribution process into three levels—from an abstract, impersonal need for strong leadership to a real emotional commitment to a specific leader—to reveal the exact role of the populist attitude. First, we look at charisma hunger, assuming that populist followers tend to overrate the importance of leadership in political, economic, and social processes compared to other institutional and environmental factors. Second, we focus on the perceptions of the charismatic behaviour of the two Hungarian leaders. Finally, the third level of charisma attribution includes the emotional aspects of the charismatic relationship and measures to what extent populist followers identify with their leaders in contrast to the same leader's non-populist supporters.

This article makes contributions to the two strands of the literature. First, applying charisma and influence attribution measurements may help political scientists explore the complex links between citizens and politicians, especially in populist and personalised politics.

Although the literature of political cognition has previously made attempts to involve the citizen's perspectives, underlining that the leader's personality traits play a crucial role in organising information and evaluating candidates, it lacks an adequate, coherent, and theoretically grounded conceptual and methodological framework (Metz, 2021). A follower-centric approach to leadership can fill this conceptual void. Second, we consider the follower's populist attitudes as individual characteristics that can reveal new aspects of the followers for leadership scholars. Previous research has suggested that the follower's specific individual characteristics and values (i.e. self-esteem, attitudes toward gender and communal values) can seriously affect the attribution of influence and charisma to political leaders (Carsten et al., 2019; Howell and Shamir, 2005). Therefore, the populist attitude condenses populism-related values and characteristics, such as people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichaean worldview.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT
An extreme case for charismatic leadership and populism: Hungary
In 2022, the Fidesz–Hungarian Civic Alliance and its satellite party, the KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party) won the fourth two-thirds majority in the legislature in a row. The direction of political changes and Viktor Orbán's controversial leadership style have attracted significant international attention and have raised questions about the state of democracy in Hungary. Political scientists often explain these developments through institutional power concentration and fading liberal norms. After 2010, the Hungarian political regime indeed changed significantly under Orbán's leadership (Körösényi et al., 2020): a new constitution was adopted, and governance took a radical turn in terms of content and impact. The reforms also affected every segment of society and politics, including the electoral system, the media market, the judicial systems, civil society, local governments and fundamental civil rights. Thus, Hungary is often classified as a populist or illiberal democracy (see: Pappas, 2019), which is neither a clearly democratic nor authoritarian regime. However, we cannot understand the Orbán regime through institutional and ideological changes alone.

The empirical results suggest that the Hungarian electorate has long served as a fertile ground for populism and charismatic leadership, even before the authoritarian turn. The emergence of the new regime was underpinned by the critical 2010 elections (Enyedi and Benoit, 2011), which reshuffled the Hungarian political landscape from the bottom to the top and gave Fidesz–KDNP a huge political mandate. The popular support for the ruling socialist-liberal coalition was eroded due to a four-year-long domestic political crisis that was caused by a leaked speech in which socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány admitted to lying during the electoral campaign, the cabinet's austerity measures, the recurrent corruption scandals, and the global financial crisis. After 2006, the Hungarian electorate showed not only a clear shift to the right but also an identity/partisanship-based polarisation (Patkós, 2022) and a solid need for strong leadership (Metz and Oross, 2020). The picture of the Hungarian electorate is also nuanced by recent findings: while the populist worldview is widespread in society (Krekó, 2021), direct political participation and civic engagement remain low (Kostadinova and Kmetty, 2019). As Tóka (2006) aptly formulated: Hungarian citizens are only passive admirers of leaders.

The governing party does not just resonate with these demands but also actively forms them with centralised and personalised leadership, populism, and top-down plebiscitary mobilisation (Körösényi et al., 2020; Metz and Várnagy, 2021). Relying on state resources, the

governing party has invested tremendous energy to dominate the public discourse and media agenda by focusing on core issues, such as migration, homosexuality and cultural, economic and social consequences of sanctions against Russia. The government's communication strategy has continuously labelled the enemies of the people (e.g., the European Commission, opposition, or George Soros) and the perceived threats to the people (i.e., migration or the Russo-Ukrainian War). Communication campaigns are usually combined with national consultations. Since 2010, the government has applied this innovative method to provide fake or ineffective opportunities for political participation and form public opinion. This suggestive, manipulative, and targeted questionnaire was sent to citizens with Orbán's letters that present current issues such as pensions; constitution-making; social, economic and ideological topics; and immigration and terrorism. Up to 2022, the government organised nine mass demonstrations called "Peace marches," which brought huge crowds to the streets to support the government's politics. The two referendums initiated by the government were another plebiscitary strategy. The first referendum was related to the European Union's migrant relocation plans in 2016, while the second referendum was focused on the anti-LGBTQ politics of the government and was held on the same day as the national elections in 2022. The government aimed solely at attracting its supporters, and therefore both referendums were invalid. Even if the referendums had been successful, they would not have had any political effect. The government only wanted to legitimise its own decisions and laws ex-post, keeping these issues on the agenda.

This is not to say that the Hungarian opposition is not characterised by populist rhetoric, mobilisation and the need for strong leaders. By 2022, the Hungarian opposition was forced to adapt, relying more on personalised leadership and populist rhetoric. For the first time, the left and right parties of the parliamentary opposition, as a coalition called United for Hungary, attempted to coordinate a joint electoral bid at a national level through primaries. As a result, the overwhelming majority of opposition voters chose Péter Márki-Zay as their candidate for PM, who became the most empowered opposition politician of the last 12 years. Although some opposition parties have previously used populist rhetoric (notably the radical right-wing Jobbik), it became prevalent before the elections. These attempts included Gergely Karácsony's (the Mayor of Budapest) discredited '99 movement', the anti-constitutionalist, anti-elitist and people-centrist campaign (see its' slogan: "Power to the people") and the opposition PM candidate's provocative style, which challenges the credibility of Fidesz–KDNP's conservative-right wing position and even assumes the homosexual orientation of some cabinet members and one of Orbán's close relatives.

Charismatic leadership in populist politics
While the literature is built on the idea that populist politics and charismatic leadership can walk hand in hand, the discourse is far from a consensus. Scepticism stems from two serious critiques.

One of the loudest critiques is that populism does not require strong leaders, and therefore neither does it require charismatic leadership. Although Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) acknowledge the elective affinity between populism and strong leaders, they assume that the former could exist without the latter. As they argued, 'it would be erroneous to equate populism with charismatic or strong leadership' (2014: 376–377) because the former

can only facilitate the emergence of populism rather than being its definitive characteristic. The authors identify charismatic leadership with 'strong leaders' who have 'supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities', which oversimplifies Weber's concept (1978: 241). Indeed, this superior leader seems to be incompatible with the basic idea of a populist politician who aims to represent ordinary people. Interestingly, leader-centrism became a general criticism (Aslanidis, 2017; Rueda, 2020) of those researchers who have focused unilaterally on politicians (see: Barr, 2019; Pappas, 2019; Weyland, 2001), but this accusation is also valid in another way. The rejection of charismatic leadership stems from being identified with a strong leader's appearance, qualities, rhetorical skills, actions, and outcomes of the leadership process (i.e., radical change or control over followers or organisations). The problem with this perspective is that it downplays the constructive role that the followers play.

The other widespread critique claims the ambiguity and analytical usefulness of the concept (Moffitt, 2016: 62). As Mudde (2007: 262) puts it, 'the key problem with the variable 'charismatic leader' is the vagueness of the term.' Van der Brug and Mughan (2007: 44) reached a similar conclusion. While they recognise that charisma may manifest itself in populist politics, they emphasise this doubt: 'the problem is that as long as the notion of charisma is not explicitly defined, this explanation of support for populist parties is not open to empirical falsification, which in turn means that it is not useful for scientific explanation'. Naturally, similar definitional doubts and debates are also present in leadership studies beyond a general conceptual rejection (Burns, 1978: 241–243). For instance, charisma is often confused with transformational leadership, but it is also often defined by outcomes or even examined along ill-defined, overlapping, and theoretically implausible dimensions (Antonakis et al., 2016; van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Some scholars have attempted to put the concept on a new theoretical foundation by defining charisma as a leader-directed social influence on followers through an expression of emotions, values, and symbols. Although the theory of charismatic signalling offers a solution to the methodological problems (e.g., endogeneity and self-report biases), this approach remains one-sided, focusing solely on leaders (Antonakis et al., 2016; Bastardoz, 2020). However, if we are curious about how personal and contextual factors influence the charismatic relationship (and not the leader's charisma *per se*), then it is essential to study charisma attribution as a cognitive and emotional process relying on a well-defined and adequate theoretical and methodological frame (Antonakis et al., 2016; van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013: 14–15).

In populist literature, only a few studies have questioned the dominant leader-centric approach and returned to the conceptual roots of charisma (Andrews-Lee, 2021; McDonnell, 2016; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011). As Weber (1978: 242) stated: 'what is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his "followers" or "disciples"'. Willner (1985: 14–15) further clarified this definition: 'charisma is defined in terms of people's perceptions of and responses to a leader. It is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that counts in generating the charismatic relationship.' Charismatic leadership relies not on a leader with extraordinary abilities but on a special emotional relationship in which the leader is perceived as extraordinary by their followers (Willner, 1985: 8). In a similar vein, leadership scholars describe charismatic leadership as a result of social constructions in which followers attribute leadership qualities to the leaders and

authorise them to seize power and act on their behalf (Conger and Kanungo, 1987; Gardner and Avolio, 1998; Howell and Shamir, 2005; Meindl, 1995). As it is generally formulated: charismatic leadership lies in the eye of the beholder. In this sense, follower-centric models of leadership emphasise that followers are causal agents in the leadership process, in which their characteristics are the independent variables and play an essential role in attributing influence and charisma to leaders (Carsten et al., 2019; Howell and Shamir, 2005). Consequently, if we want apply this approach to analyse charismatic leadership in populist politics, we have to answer the question of what makes followers populist.

POPULIST FOLLOWERS
Populist attitudes as follower characteristics
In modern politics, the populist worldview has become a distinctive political characteristic of citizens. Populism, as a specific set of ideas, is distinct from classical ideologies (e.g., socialism or liberalism) because it has a limited programmatic scope (Mudde, 2004). Nevertheless, populism always appears to be attached to other ideological elements, which suggests that it can spread across the ideological spectrum by determining the actor's politics (in government or opposition) and the voter's preferences. Different scales of populist attitudes try to capture this ideology or worldview (see Castanho Silva et al., 2019). These measurements allow researchers to analyse to what extent these ideas respond to a broader demand on the mass level and are widespread and transform into voting behaviour.

The literature generally breaks populist attitudes down into three major content dimensions, which are theorised to represent necessary latent attitudes that constitute populism. First, anti-elitism depicts the elites as corrupt malicious, and irrespective of the interest and well-being of other members of the society. As Jungkunz et al. (2021) highlighted, measuring anti-elitism requires careful wording in constructing the survey items. In populism, anti-elitism is understood as a broader scepticism about the ruling class rather than a simple anti-establishment sentiment. Therefore, we cannot consider a thermostatic notion (Wlezien, 1995): when an anti-elitist candidate or party wins the election and occupies an executive office, then these anti-elitist attitudes of their voters do not evaporate into thin air but only shift their focus to a broader sense of elite, such as NGOs, liberal media or multinational companies. Second, the people-centrism dimension considers the people as homogenous and virtuous, and suppressed by the elites. The idea of the pure people embraces the socioeconomic underdog who requests more voice for themselves, promoting direct democratic solutions and more responsiveness at the expense of responsibility. Third, the so-called Manichaean worldview is also conceptualised to be a constitutive dimension of populism. This attitude shows that people are prone to understand politics as a struggle between good and evil, condemn shady compromises (considered as selling out principles) and question pluralism. This worldview indicates that there could be only one right choice in an election, and those who do not realise this are misled or vicious. The first two dimensions are closely interlinked because they condemn the corrupt elite and request more power for the people. The uniqueness of populism is that the distinction between the people and the elite is not simply based on class or interest, but is based on morals.

Hunger for charisma: Idealisation of the leader's influence

Charisma hunger can be considered as a general idealisation of leadership waiting for those leaders who can meet these expectations. According to the thesis of romance of leadership (ROL), as formulated by Meindl (1995), people tend to over-attribute collective positive and negative outcomes to leadership, while de-emphasising other social or economic factors and overemphasising the leader's role. People often see a causal mechanism behind leadership, resulting in the over-idealisation of leadership. This thesis seeks to capture how people explain various organisational, social, and political events solely through the activities of leaders. This over-idealisation is a fundamental cognitive attributional error and a psychological need: leadership is an explanatory category that simplifies complex political and social processes.

Empirical studies have found that there is a positive correlation between the romance of leadership thesis and charisma attribution (Meindl, 1990; Shamir, 1992; cf. Bligh et al., 2005). Recent research (Carsten et al., 2019) has also shown that those who attributed more influence to leadership, in general, saw Trump as more charismatic and effective. Populists such as the former US president often raise their follower's expectations too high, with promises that they may not be able to deliver later on. Moreover, the anti-elitist mood can be interpreted as the frustration caused by excessive expectations of what leaders can achieve. Thus, our first hypothesis states:

> *Hypothesis 1 The follower's populist attitudes will be positively associated with their disposition to ascribe importance to the leadership.*

Recognising charismatic behaviours

Leadership studies use many questionnaires and scales to measure perceived charisma (see: Antonakis et al., 2016). These measurements often mix the behavioural and emotional aspects of charisma attribution, in which followers recognise unique charismatic abilities and create a tight emotional bond with these leaders (van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Although these dimensions are interrelated, they show two levels of charismatic relationships: perceiving someone's behaviour does not automatically result in followership, but the emotional level describes the willingness to follow. This separation also points to the fact that charismatic behaviour does not always generate positive commitments.

At first sight, wannabe leaders are judged by their rhetoric, actions and behaviour, as Conger and Kanungo's (1987) theory suggested. They differentiate general patterns of behaviour that facilitate the attributional process. According to this view, charisma attribution does not stem from the leader's prominent position in an organisation and society or their results but rather from perceived behaviours. The charismatic behaviour pattern includes increased sensitivity to the needs of followers, questioning the status quo, formulating ambitious visions and goals, making personal sacrifices and risks, and using innovative and unconventional tools to achieve collective goals. Followers are prone to interpret these behaviours as evidence of a leader's unique abilities and motivations, and as a result, charisma is constructed.

Many empirical findings have indirectly suggested that populist followers show strong sensitivity for recognising charismatic behaviour compared to other citizens. Generally, voters are more likely to evaluate a leader from their own political party as more charismatic, as leadership scholars have concluded (e.g. Williams et al., 2018). Going further from party affiliation, Shamir (1994) analysed the 1992 Israeli elections and demonstrated that the voter's ideological orientation strongly influenced which candidates they perceived as charismatic.

However, outsiderness and crisis perceptions, which populist politicians usually rely on, can also strengthen follower perceptions in this direction (Bligh et al., 2005). In addition, populism literature suggests that charisma attribution has two crucial consequences for populist politics. First, it slows down the erosion of the leader's support because their followers see leadership performance through rose-coloured glasses (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011). Second, charismatic attachments can also live on after the leaders disappear, sustaining populist movements (Andrews-Lee, 2021). By including populist attitudes, we can dig more deeply into analysing the charismatic relationship between populist followers and their leaders. Thus, our second hypothesis states:

> *Hypothesis 2 Those followers who hold stronger populist attitudes are prone to perceive their leader's behaviour as more charismatic than those with lower populist attitudes.*

Creating emotional bonds

Emotional attachment to the leader also lies at the heart of charismatic leadership (Sy et al., 2018). The constitutive components of charismatic leadership are the positive feelings of the followers (e.g., hope, trust, and admiration) and the negative emotions of the opponents (e.g., fear, hatred, and anger). Positive and negative charisma (or counter-charisma) attributions are parallel and mutually reinforcing processes. As Tucker (1968: 746) underlined:

> A leader who evokes positive charismatic response from some is likely to evoke a negative one […] from others. The same leader who is charismatic in the eyes of people in distress, for whom salvation lies in change, will be counter-charismatic in the eyes of those who see in change not salvation but ruination.

Similarly, Willner (1985: 7) recognised this polarising emotional dynamics:

> Treated as godlike by their followers, they [the charismatic leaders] have often been regarded as diabolic by many of those not susceptible to their appeal. Whatever underlay the kinds and intensity of emotion they have generated, even their opponents have recognised and feared them as far beyond the ordinary and even beyond the unusual in human experience.

The populist's divisive, offensive, and provocative rhetoric usually trigger even more polarised and fierce emotions in society. We may be aware of how populists consciously construct and demonise worthy adversaries who show strong leadership but have bad intentions or would produce undesired outcomes (Metz, 2023). In this respect, the perception of the dark side of charismatic leadership always depends on whether we are under the spell of certain leaders.

A recent analysis has backed this assumption, showing that populist political parties can even generate stronger identity-based and emotional polarisation than non-populists (Harteveld et al., 2021). Supporters of populist parties have blatant antipathy towards mainstream political forces and their supporters (but elicit similar antipathy from their opponents). Thus, populist politics may need not just a strong positive emotional commitment to the leaders but also an ultimate rejection of other political actors who can be interpreted as the enemies of the people. In this light, we formulated our last hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a The follower's populist attitudes will be positively associated with attributions of positive charisma to the supported leaders.

Hypothesis 3b The follower's populist attitudes will be positively associated with attributions of negative charisma to the opponents.

These emotional bonds have a far-reaching implication: populists tend to selectively assess the impact of leadership by explaining their leader's failures and rival's successes by external circumstances and not by the leader's personal abilities. Populism researchers have pointed out that populist politicians with charismatic appeals can enjoy a Teflon-like protection, preventing followers from blaming them for poor performance or immoral actions (Andrews-Lee, 2021; Merolla and Zechmeister, 2011). These charismatic visions and promised redemption inevitably raise followers' expectations while transferring all responsibility to others, blaming them for past and present failures. Their saviour-like and self-sacrificial image can encourage followers to resist holding them to account. As a result, populist followers may have high hopes and expectations of their leader's abilities and influence, perceiving their behaviour through rose-coloured glasses, but they may even close their eyes to their performance, following them blindly. Selective idealisation also works similarly in the other direction: populist followers may not acknowledge the achievements of other leaders and instead magnify their perceived mistakes. Leadership scholars such as Awamleh and Gardner (1999: 361) are also aware that the followers of leaders who are seen as charismatic are more likely to forgive them for their failures. Emotional bonds can resolve the cognitive contradiction between the politician's charismatic appeal and the outcomes of their actions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

Participants were voluntarily involved after they were fully informed about the goals and ethical considerations of the research. A total of 1200 respondents were recruited from the Hungarian Net-panel online survey platform (NRC). The online survey was conducted between 23 February and 4 March 2022, which was a month before the national election. The sample was representative of the Hungarian population with Internet access, aged between 18 and 65 years (M= 43.73, SD= 12.61), and in terms of gender, age, level of education and place of residence. The sample identified that 79.50% intended to vote in the national election. Among them, Fidesz voters (31.87%) were slightly ahead of the United for Hungary voters (29.14%), while 16.25% were undecided, and 13.42% were unwilling to reveal their partisan attachment. The remainder (9.32%) is distributed among small parties under the 5% parliamentarian threshold. In light of the electoral results[1], it is clear that our sample does not overlap the whole Hungarian electorate. However, this limitation does not affect our hypotheses because we analysed the attitudes and attributions within the partisan groups, and therefore the true popularity of each partisan group was irrespective of our measures.

In the first part of the survey, the respondents completed a short questionnaire about demographics, political interests, and political orientations. The respondents then rated the items of populism, ROL, and charisma scales on the same 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating stronger agreement.

Measures

Independent variables

Populist attitudes. Following Castanho Silva et al.'s (2019) work, we construct a populist scale to cover the three latent dimensions: anti-elitism, people-centric attitudes and a Manichean worldview. Given that measuring populist attitudes still lacks consensus on the exact content and dimensions of the available measuring scales and the literature still struggles with cross-national validity (Castanho Silva et al., 2020), we combined different scales of populism scholarship (Table 1). To avoid acquiescence bias, our measurement scales also contained both positive and negative statements, which we harmonised in coding. Items *Q1* and *Q12* resulted in reversed items. We attempted to filter out acquiescence bias by constructing negative questions, but our first question was an unfortunate attempt. Even the populist respondents did not admit that they consider people who have political disagreements as their enemies (in contrast to *Q6* and *Q7*). We believe that this was a regrettable item to reverse because it conforms to agreeing with it and makes it more difficult to confess hostility. The *Q12* item was also negative in factor 3, while it also had an acceptable positive loading for factor 1, which demonstrates an item's multidimensional loadings. To avoid ambiguity, we removed both items (*Q1, Q12*) from the populism scale because of the negative loadings.

Table 1: Measurements of populist attitudes (populist attitudes scale)

		Descriptive Statistics				Factors			Uniqueness (1-h^2)
		Mean	SD	Skew.	Kurt.	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	
~~Q1~~	~~I do not consider the people whom I disagree with my political enemies~~ **[Negative]**	2.564	1.620	0.863	2.972	**-0.869**	0.360	0.234	0.399
Q2	The top ten thousand do not really interested in what people like me think	5.829	1.484	-1.233	3.955	**0.752**	-0.012	0.215	0.329
Q3	We must not tolerate elected politicians selling out to international corporations.	5.681	1.436	-0.938	3.375	**0.730**	0.069	-0.057	0.432
Q4	Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.	5.276	1.498	-0.569	2.778	**0.529**	0.210	0.348	0.356
Q5	There is a silent majority who is too busy making an honest living to get involved in politics.	4.973	1.555	-0.427	2.746	**0.403**	0.242	0.255	0.565
Q6	Politics is a struggle between good and evil	3.962	1.909	0.003	2.084	-0.188	**0.836**	-0.388	0.329
Q7	What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.	4.060	1.69	-0.024	2.494	-0.053	**0.733**	-0.015	0.498
Q8	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	4.777	1.633	-0.330	2.471	0.112	**0.567**	0.292	0.458
Q9	The best politicians are those who come from the common people.	4.875	1.584	-0.479	2.738	0.287	**0.489**	-0.041	0.563
Q10	Leading politicians work for the welfare of the whole nation. **[Negative]**	4.422	2.004	-0.235	1.886	0.011	-0.164	**0.797**	0.377
Q11	The opinion of experts and politicians is worth more than that of ordinary people **[Negative]**	4.617	1.698	-0.179	2.241	0.034	-0.091	**0.584**	0.661
~~Q12~~	~~Hungary's survival depends on us making the right choice in the next election.~~	5.366	1.691	-0.813	2.863	0.420	0.326	**-0.434**	0.527

Note: Q1, Q3, Q5, Q9, Q11, Q12 adapted from (Castanho Silva et al., 2019); Q4, Q7, Q8 adapted from (Akkerman et al., 2014); Q6 (Hawkins et al., 2012) Q2 adapted from (Schulz et al., 2018); Q10 adapted from (American National Election Study – ANES)

Measuring populism as a multidimensional concept is also problematic because survey items may not capture one dimension (Castanho Silva et al., 2019; Schulz et al., 2018) but tap into two or three dimensions simultaneously (Akkerman et al., 2014). To test whether the latent dimensions can be treated separately, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (Table 1), while relying on the guidance of Watkins (2018). The descriptive statistics for the imputed data set and factors loadings were only accepted if they reached the commonly accepted thresholds (e.g., $\alpha \geq 0.70$). Factor 1 resulted in being a reliable ($\alpha = 0.75$) subscale of populism, while factor 2 as a subscale of populism resulted in the ($\alpha = 0.63$) questionable spectrum of scale reliability, and factor 3 was unreliable ($\alpha = 0.42$). Moreover, the question items did not load into the a priori theorised dimensions of populism and the inter-factor investigation found that the factors were correlated (factor 1 and 2: $r(1200) = 0.45$, $p = 0.000$; factor 1 and 3: $r(1200) = 0.21$, $p = 0.000$; factor 2 and 3: $r(1200) = 0.16$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, we restrained ourselves from analysing the dimensions of populism individually and loaded all our items into one populism scale ($\alpha = 0.74$) that we could further analyse concerning other political concepts.

Dependent variables

Romance of leadership. The tendency to over-attribute causal strength to leadership was measured using a shorter version of the Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS) (Schyns et al., 2007). We adapted items to the political world, following Shamir (1994), who tested his version of RLS in the context of the 1992 Israeli election. Given that populism relies on the criticism of the political elite, we also added an original question focusing on bad leadership. We loaded our five (4+1 negative) questions into one factor ($\alpha = 0.72$). A sample item of the scale is: 'The country's fate is determined primarily by the actions of its political leaders.'

Perceived charismatic behaviour. Drawing from the literature (Conger and Kanungo, 1994; Shamir, 1994), the behavioural charisma block preceded any partisan identification question and asked the respondents, 'regardless of whether you would vote for Viktor Orbán/Márki-Zay Péter, how typically do you think the following statements are of him?' Our one-dimensional behavioural charisma scale focuses on specific behavioural traits, such as inspiration, vision, innovation, non-conventional behaviour, self-sacrifice, sensitivity to the needs of followers, environmental sensitivity and extraordinary abilities (item/behaviour). For instance, they were asked to evaluate eight items, such as 'It is more important for him to achieve his goals than to follow the rules.' The perceived charismatic behaviour scale included eight survey items, from which we created a charisma index for each respondent using simple mean. The reliability coefficients for perceived charismatic behaviour scales were $\alpha = 0.88$ and $\alpha = 0.92$.

Construction of charismatic bond. The emotional charisma scale followed the block where the respondents revealed their partisan attachments. We then asked them to evaluate their bond with these leaders, first with their chosen leader and then with the opposite leader. To minimise the possible semantic overlap (Arnulf et al., 2014; van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013), we focused exclusively on the emotional commitment of individuals relying on Shamir's (1994) work in selecting the scale items (e.g., He makes me willing to sacrifice for my community and my country). The perceived emotional charismatic bond scale also included eight survey items from which we created an emotional charisma index for each respondent using a simple mean. This block shows the strongest internal validity ($\alpha = 0.99$).

Control variables

To test our hypothesis, we control our models with core demographic variables (i.e., age, gender, place of residence, and education) and basic political characteristics (i.e., political interest, political news consumption, and left-right self-placement) that are assumed to influence political preferences.

RESULTS

The quantitative analysis was carried out in Stata 16.1 software. Beginning with descriptive statistics, we found that populist attitudes were widespread among the Hungarian electorate (M= 4.70, SD= 0.80). The socio-demographic variables do not affect populist attitudes (age: β= 0.01, SE= 0.00, p= 0.000, gender: β= 0.08, SE= 0.05, p= 0.099; education: β= 0.00, SE= 0.03, p= 0.923; type of residence: β= -0.02, SE= 0.03, p= 0.576). Among the political behaviour factors, political news consumption (β= -0.02, SE= 0.02, p= 0.492), the left-right scale (β= 0.06, SE= 0.02, p= 0.003) and satisfaction with life (β= 0.01, SE= 0.02, p= 0.729) had no effect, while political interest (β= 0.11, SE= 0.04, p= 0.003) and the economic (dis)satisfaction (β= -0.15, SE= 0.02, p= 0.000) had weak effects.

The charisma hunger is even more potent than the populist mindset (M= 5.00, SD= 0.90). The charisma scales revealed that citizens perceive Orbán as being more charismatic (M= 4.48, SD= 1.45) and form a stronger emotional bond with him (M= 3.21, SD= 2.10), while his challenger Márki-Zay's behaviour (M= 3.68, SD= 1.61) was considered to be less charismatic, just like his emotional bond with voters (M= 2.84, SD= 1.95). The emotional rejection of the rival leader is equally salient among both government and opposition voters (Orbán: M= 1.47, SD= 1.06; Márki-Zay: M= 1.53, SD= 1.21).

Figure 1. The distribution of populist attitudes and the overestimation of leadership (RLS)
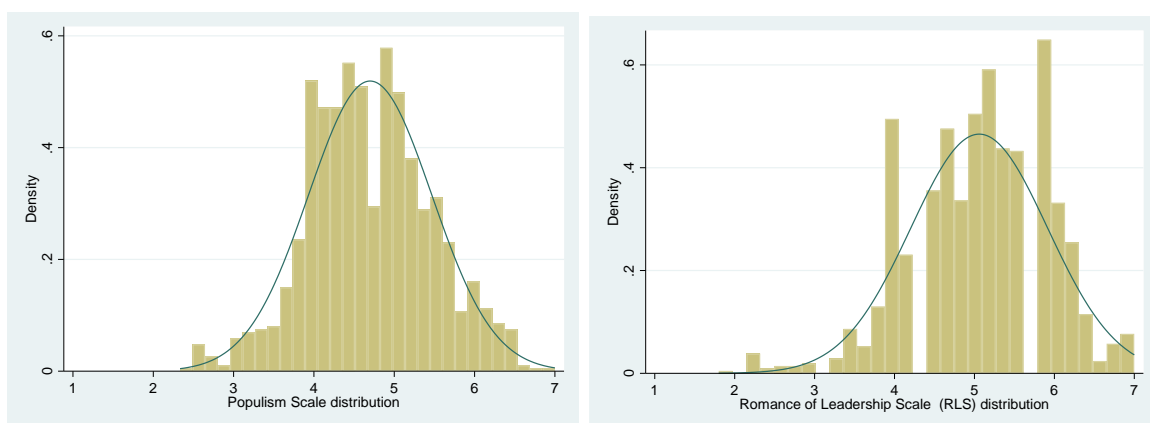
After the descriptive analysis, we will explore our hypotheses. We conducted ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regression analysis to test the direct effects of populism on the RLS, and on the behavioural and emotional charisma scales (Tables 2 and 3).

Model 1 estimates the effect of populist attitudes on the over-attribution of collective positive and negative outcomes to leadership (RLS) with control variables. Voters with more populist attitudes attach more significance to leadership (β= 0.45, SE= 0.04, p= 0.000) than their less populist counterparts. This result is in line with the general conclusions about

populism and provides empirical evidence of the created demand for strong leaders among voters with more populist attitudes. Thus, we can accept *H1*.

Table 2. Populist Attitudes and Charisma Hunger and Behavioural Charisma

	Model 1 charisma hunger		Model 2 Orbán charismatic behaviour		Model 3 Márki-Zay charismatic behaviour	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Populism	0.448***	(0.036)	0.151**	(0.069)	0.203*	(0.113)
Controls						
Political interest	0.187***	(0.037)	0.230**	(0.098)	0.352*	(0.192)
Political news consumption	-0.008	(0.032)	-0.002	(0.071)	0.151	(0.104)
Left-Right	0.068***	(0.017)	0.218***	(0.049)	-0.081	(0.074)
Gender	-0.130**	(0.051)	-0.090	(0.114)	0.046	(0.195)
Age	0.008***	(0.002)	0.006	(0.006)	-0.010	(0.008)
Education	0.032*	(0.019)	-0.042	(0.038)	0.025	(0.083)
Type of residence	-0.005	(0.024)	-0.046	(0.049)	0.010	(0.089)
_cons	1.688***		3.363***		2.884***	
SE	(0.239)		(0.596)		(1.068)	
Observations	1200		304		278	
R-squared	0.317		0.267		0.117	

OLS multivariate regression estimating RLS and behavioural charisma scale evaluations. Model 1 investigates the full sample (N=1200). Model 2 looks at attitudes among Fidesz-KDNP voters (N=304), Model 3 explores them among the United for Hungary voters (N=278). Entries are regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

To answer H2, we analysed the relationship between populist attitudes and evaluations of the charismatic behaviour of the voter's chosen leader. Table 1 shows the results among the Fidesz–KDNP voters (Model 2) and the United for Hungary voters (Model 3). All of the coefficients are positive and significant, although the significance level of the results in Model 3 is lower (p<0.1). Populist followers perceive their chosen leader's behaviour as more charismatic than their non-populist counterparts do. For instance, a more populist Fidesz–KDNP voter perceives Viktor Orbán as more charismatic than a less populist Fidesz–KDNP voter. The difference between the two leaders can be explained by the fact that the opposition coalition is politically fractured—the candidate presents himself as a right-wing Christian politician in a predominantly left-wing environment and has spent far less time in politics than his rival. Therefore, H2 is accepted.

Table 2 contains the results of comparing populist attitudes with the emotional charismatic bond scales. The former shows the attributed positive charisma when voters evaluate their emotional bond to their leader, while the latter contains the negative charisma estimations when voters consider their emotional connection to the opposite leader. Models 4 and 6 describe the attitudes of Fidesz–KDNP voters, while Models 5 and 7 are conducted among the United for Hungary voters.

Table 3. Positive and Negative Emotional Attachment/Rejection

	Model 4 Orbán's positive charisma	Model 5 Márki-Zay's positive charisma	Model 6 Orbán' negative charisma	Model 7 Márki-Zay negative charisma

	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Populism scale	-0.098	(0.090)	0.152	(0.114)	-0.079	(0.159)	-0.013	(0.124)
Controls								(0.150)
Political interest	0.177	(0.116)	0.270*	(0.159)	0.099	(0.135)	0.300*	(0.166)
Political news consumption	0.031	(0.094)	0.318***	(0.107)	0.000	(0.091)	-0.236	(0.154)
Left-Right scale	0.339***	(0.075)	-0.220***	(0.072)	-0.066	(0.093)	-0.043	(0.050)
Gender	-0.010	(0.149)	0.041	(0.188)	0.069	(0.184)	0.042	(0.157)
Age	0.001	(0.009)	-0.001	(0.007)	-0.013	(0.009)	-0.015**	(0.007)
Education	-0.103	(0.052)	-0.058	(0.082)	-0.005	(0.073)	-0.081	(0.070)
Type of residence	0.037	(0.061)	0.019	(0.085)	-0.087	(0.082)	-0.155	(0.103)
_cons	4.029***		3.460***		2.627***		3.013***	
SE	(0.753826)		(1.008)		(0.948)		(0,988)	
Observations	304		278		278		304	
R-squared	0.226		0.166		0.044		0.090	

OLS multivariate regression estimating emotional charisma scale evaluations. Model 4 and 7 investigate Fidesz-KDNP voters (N=304), Model 5 and 6 investigate the United for Hungary voters (N=278). Entries are regression coefficients; standard errors are in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

The analysis showed no significant results for H3a (models 4 and 5) and H3b (models 6 and 7).The populist voter's emotional attachment to their chosen leader is similar to their non-populist counterparts. The rejection of the opposite leader had no result for populism, which means that populist and non-populist voters reject the opposite leader similarly. In other words, the emotional relationship toward leaders does not seem to be not mediated by populist attitudes. Thus, we rejected H3a and H3b.

DISCUSSIONS

Hungary became a laboratory of populism, where the populist worldview became the dominant force in both government and opposition sides. Although populism measurements usually slightly overestimate populism (Jungkunz et al., 2021), our analysis showed that the need for populist politics and strong, charismatic leadership is widespread in Hungarian society. As Carsten et al. (2019) underlined: post-truth politics ushered us into a new era in which the follower's emotions, beliefs, and personal characteristics took centre stage. Tapping into this belief, our findings show a strong link between the populist worldview and the need for strong leadership. Maybe this relationship seems to be a contradiction in light of the central promise of populism, which is real self-government. However, anti-elitism can be interpreted as exaggerated expectations that the political elite has been unable to meet. In parallel, populist followers look for someone who will authentically represent and serve the people. Our research also provides evidence that populism only influences the recognition of charismatic behaviours while leaving the emotional connection to a specific politician intact. Consequently, the populist and non-populist voters connect to their leader in a similar way. In other words, populism is only a lens that magnifies the political leaders' roles and impact but does not explain why we follow certain leaders. Even though our findings do not challenge the charismatic leadership hypothesis that was developed in the populism literature, they point to shortcomings in its elaboration.

Our article indicates that the follower's group membership (partisanship) overrides the populist worldview at some point. Previous empirical results show that charismatic emotional

engagement and attachment depend on the extent to which they represent and embody their group's core characteristics, aspirations, values and norms (Steffens et al., 2014). In other words, it is not enough for leaders to articulate populist messages, they should embody the people authentically (Uysal et al., 2022). Populist attitude scales fail to capture this dimension, even though the identity-related socio-psychological dynamics (e.g., in-group favouritism and demonisation toward the out-group) deeply determine populist mobilisation (Aslanidis, 2020; Harteveld et al., 2021). The negative emotional charisma hypothesis requires a little more elaboration because rejecting hypothesis does not mean that the respondents have not ascribed negative charisma to the rival leader. Rather, it means that populist and non-populist voters equally and fiercely reject the rival leader, and this seems to be an essential condition to partisan group membership. Populist voters favour charismatic leaders but populism does not explain which charismatic leader.

This article also showed that not all leaders are similarly successful in triggering populist attitudes and satisfying the hunger for charisma. In the Hungarian case, the difference can easily be traced back to the dominance of the pro-government media, which paints a polarised picture of the leaders. Nevertheless, the left-wing opposition elite and media have also been critical and sceptical of the conservative, right-wing outsider Márki-Zay's politics. The difference between the two candidates lies not only in their mediatised representation but also in their behavioural patterns, from which their followers could infer different leadership skills. For instance, during the election campaign, the opposition candidate made several divisive statements about his allies, certain policies, and the Russian-Ukrainian war, which were difficult to defend. So, while our research is limited to analysis of one side of the charismatic relationship, future research should also integrate systematic analysis of leaders. To get a complete picture of the role of the charismatic relationship in populist politics, we need to focus more closely on how they present themselves in mediatised and personalised politics conveying group-specific behavioural patterns (Haslam et al., 2022) and signalling charisma (Antonakis et al., 2016).

Another limitation of this study is that the data collection was conducted in a single period, which seems particularly important because the results could have been affected by the economic crisis that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian War in the neighbourhood at the time of the data collection. Crisis situations favour the spread of populist politics (Moffitt, 2016) and may reinforce the need for charismatic leadership (Bligh et al., 2004). In one sense, this is a limitation, but at the same time, it may also be a special case for an extremely supportive environment for populist politics. Our findings for the emotional hypothesis are even more striking—in a highly polarised, amplified emotional condition, populist voters do not differ from non-populist voters in that regard. Therefore, future research should attempt to collect data in different time periods to filter out environmental effects. We should also be aware of several other relevant individual characteristics that could impact attributions of charisma, such as crisis perceptions (Carsten et al., 2019), identity-based self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2021), and authoritarian/narcissistic personality (Williams et al., 2018). Exploring these aspects of populist followership should also be incorporated in the future.

We cannot ignore the methodological limitations of this article. Beyond the different socio-cognitive biases in the self-report measures, the populist attitude scales are determined by conceptual and methodological uncertainties. Concluding the results of the populism scale test, individually, the measurement of the latent dimensions of populism was unreliable to

analyse. Nonetheless, because these are closely interrelated, the overall populism scale, which collects that more profound worldview, resulted in a reliably measured concept that we could analyse concerning other political concepts. Scholarship overcame the difficulty of measuring an abstract notion such as populism. However, further dismantling populism into deeper concepts and constructing a more reliable scale is still challenging. Nevertheless, our factor analysis also points to the shortcomings of the measurements of populism and highlights the importance of careful wording of the survey items.

Our findings hold an essential implication not only for researchers of populism and leadership but also for those who have witnessed the rise of populist politics in the last few decades. Studying populist followers brings us closer to understanding the negative externalities of charismatic leadership in politics, which are usually credited to the leader's controversial behaviour and rhetoric. This study suggests that populism explains the emerging support of strong and unchecked leaders as a charisma hunger. These latent attitudes determine collective actions and behaviour. The mobilisation of populist followers is realised in this relation and it does not stop at passive obedience or subordination but often manifests itself in proactive and radical collective action (Haslam et al., 2022), such as physical atrocities during oppositions demonstrations, questioning the results of elections, sharing conspiracy theories or fighting in online debates. Their behaviour is based on assumptions and speculations about what the group and leader would expect of them. Thus, both leaders and followers hold equal responsibility for the consequences of populist politics.

END NOTES

[1] In the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election, Fidesz–KDNP has received 54.1 % of the votes, while the main oppositional challenger United for Hungary only received 34.4 %. The far-right populist Our Home Movement surprisingly passed the entry threshold with 5.9%.

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