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'Sympathy for the devil': The strategic use of the populist repertoire in Viktor Orbán's politics

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Abstract

Populist politicians such as Viktor Orbán are masters at harnessing intense and polarizing moral emotions: they stigmatize the enemies of the people, offer their community protection as self-proclaimed heroes, and at the same time, othering and moral transgressing trigger emotional overreactions from opponents. This article draws on a new analytical framework that incorporates theories of social labeling (moral panic and euphoria, moral entrepreneurship) and heroic/charismatic leadership to explore this multifaceted and antagonistic emotional relationship associated with populists. The theoretical reasoning suggests that these emotional dynamics define the moral cornerstones and boundaries of populist identity politics. Based on an analysis of four illustrative Hungarian cases – the migration crisis, anti-gender politics, the Authorisation Act during the coronavirus pandemic, and Fidesz's expulsion from the European People's Party – the article shows that populists can follow different paths to become charismatic heroes in the eyes of his supporters, while others still see them as folk devils due to their controversial moral entrepreneurship.

Keywords: populism; charismatic leadership; moral panic; moral euphoria; moral entrepreneurship; Viktor Orbán

> [T]he opposition must be constantly attacked, an image of the enemy must be built up, a threat must be formulated, a hoofed devil must be drawn on the horizon, and then this enemy [...] must be accused of the most absurd charges. (Viktor Orbán, 2006; cited by Herczeg, 2017)

1 Introduction

Whereas in 2006 Viktor Orbán criticized the left-wing government for fearmongering, by 2015, he was one of the right-wing populist leaders on the front page of *The Economist* accused of playing with people's fears. Today, the Hungarian prime minister's (PM) appeal to fear has become quite extreme: he wants to save the country from 'mixing races' (Orbán,

2022) or possible nuclear war (Orbán, 2024a), blaming these threats on his political opponents. Othering or scapegoating is one of the most visible elements of populism that stirs up fierce emotions in society. Populist negative communication only makes sense when accompanied by a strong commitment to the people or the nation that the leader wishes to protect. Orbán deliberately uses populism as a set of stylistic and strategic tools:

> [T]here is just one inescapable, non-negotiable, and immovable force, one power factor: the Hungarian people. As Lincoln said, 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. Today, of course, we must not say such things because that is populism. But when a party understands this, realises its opening, finds a way to serve not just a guiding ideology but people – the people, the nation – and is willing to act accordingly, that party will itself become an ineluctable force. That is us today. (Orbán, 2021a)

In this sense, populist politics is a radical redefinition of the friend-enemy dichotomy, in which other political actors are portrayed not merely as opponents but as enemies of the people. Therefore, populists deliberately repel their opponents. They transgress moral and democratic boundaries to provoke strong emotional reactions from those around them, while they can turn these attacks on the people. This self-victimization helps leaders to act as the sole defenders of the people, delegitimizing all criticism.

This theory-driven article examines these emotional dynamics and the populist strategies that generate them, defining two aims. The overall aim is to expand the discursive-performative approach to populism by linking it to theories of social labeling (moral panic and euphoria, moral entrepreneurship) and heroic/charismatic leadership. The populism literature has long argued that strong emotions feed populism, but scholars of the discursive-performative approach (Ostiguy et al., 2021) have gone further in conceptualizing these relational aspects, defining populism as a particular mode/logic/style of political action and communication. From this perspective, only those politicians who use a specific stylistic repertoire to establish and manage certain political relations can be considered populists (Brubaker, 2020; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, p. 387). Some researchers focus on specific elements of the populist toolbox (Brubaker, 2020; Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy, 2017), while others describe the different roles of populists (Casullo, 2019). While this approach accepts the thesis of the conscious and strategic deployment of populist appeals to gain political support (Ostiguy et al., 2021, pp. 3–4), it does not address how leaders use the populist repertoire to mobilize their followers, arouse emotions and become moral agents and entrepreneurs.

To fill this gap, I turn to moral panic theories, which explicitly describe precisely the populist emotional dynamic directed against the 'dangerous other' or the political elite. Early moral panic theorists recognized this conceptual relationship (Cohen, 2011, pp. xx, xxxi, xxxix; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, pp. 57–58), but two weaknesses are particularly striking in the literature. First, the role of moral agency/entrepreneur (Becker, 1963; Sunstein, 2000), which can polarize society by shaping norms and generating moral outrage that directs negative emotions towards 'folk devils,' remains undertheorized. Second, little is also said about how this moral agency becomes the focus of heightened expectations and positive emotions. Only one article recognizes the phenomenon of moral euphoria as a parallel dynamic of moral panics that culminate in the deification of 'folk heroes'

(Flinders & Wood, 2015). Research on the figure of the charismatic hero also emphasizes the emotional ties of followers to their leaders and their worthy opponents (Joosse, 2014, 2018b; Klapp, 1954). However, charisma researchers draw attention to another element: negative or counter-charisma (Tucker, 1968, p. 746; Willner, 1985, p. 7). Operating as a form of counter-demonization, some people recognize the special abilities of those embodied with charisma, but they are filled with fear and suspicion, attributing malicious intent to these leaders. After putting these theoretically loosely related concepts into an analytical framework, the article interprets the stylistic and strategic repertoire of populism through it.

The second aim is to differentiate populist strategies that may create a 'magnetic field' around leaders, with negative and positive poles. In the second half of the article, I present a typology that enables the differentiation of four strategies based on the leader's moral position and the direction of demonization. Hungarian politics offers numerous examples of populist strategies for generating emotions. Four well-known cases are chosen to differentiate and illustrate these strategies, namely witch-hunting (anti-gender politics), self-victimisation (the Authorisation Act during the coronavirus pandemic), barricading (migration crisis), and quarantining (Fidesz's expulsion from the European People's Party). These cases are magnified populist othering, the moralization of political conflicts, the formation of emotional communities, and, more importantly, the polarizing effect of emotional provocation and counter-demonization. The article does not intend to provide general explanations of Hungarian populist politics at the regime and ideological levels (see an overview in Körösényi et al., 2020) but to contribute to works that focus on populist polarisation (Enyedi, 2016; Palonen, 2009; 2018), communication (Csehi & Zgut, 2021; Lipiński & Szabo, 2023), governance. (Bartha et al., 2020), leaders and their followers (Metz & Plesz, 2023) as well as on moral panics (Barna & Koltai, 2019; Gerő & Sik, 2020) in Hungary.

Studying populism through the strategic use of repertoires suggests two useful implications. First, as Brubaker (2020, p. 80) underlined, 'the populist repertoire is chronically available in contemporary democratic contexts, it is not chronically deployed.' Traditional leaders use some elements of populism but apply them only occasionally or minimally in contrast to others' radical approaches. According to this perspective, populism is not a black-or-white category but a matter of degree; thus, analyzing the populist repertoire allows us to detect its elements anywhere in modern democracies. Second, the populist repertoire is flexible and adaptable to different ideological, cultural and social circumstances (Brubaker, 2020, p. 79). Although the present study deals with issues specific to right-wing politics, the emotion-generating populist repertoire is also applicable to left-wing populism (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, pp. 392–393). The conscious use of moral panics can be seen in the magnification of perceived/real (structural) inequalities (e.g., Occupy, #metoo, Black Lives Matter, and Just Stop Oil movements) and dangers (e.g., nuclear energy, capitalism, climate change, illiberalism/ authoritarianism) that are used to describe the moral state of society. However, it is irrelevant for scientific analysis whether these emotions behind the moral panic and euphoria are empirically and objectively justified. Researchers must let the case define the normative labels and categories to strengthen their explanatory power and versatility. This perspective helps to overcome the normative biases inherited from populism (Aslanidis, 2017) and moral panic studies (Cohen 2011, pp. xxxix–xliv).

2 Elite-engineered moral panic/euphoria and counter-demonization

The concept of moral panic refers to a volatile state or situation in which society reacts emotionally to a group or individuals perceived as a well-defined threat along ethnic, religious, or lifestyle lines. The term became popular due to Cohen's (2011) seminal book on how these social reactions have shaped social policy and perceptions of danger. The exaggerated emotional responses focus on deviant outsiders, or 'folk devils,' who are seen as a threat to the building blocks of society – social order and consensus around values and norms – which had previously seemed unassailable. Cohen (2011, p. 2) puts it bluntly: they are 'visual reminders of what we should not be.' This perceived deviance stimulates fear and triggers a process of attribution that we call 'demonization' (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). The literature mainly focuses on the content (demonization) or the subjects (folk devils) of moral panics, paying much less attention to the positive side of collective emotions and to the agency (the leader) that generates emotional waves in society.

Deviance researchers have acknowledged the positive emotions behind moral panic but failed to provide a deeper explanation. Cohen only used the 'folk hero' as a label once[1] while explicitly referring to Klapp (1954), who explored social categories such as the 'hero' and the 'villain' (see Cohen, 2011, p. 4). Elsewhere in the literature (Cohen, 2011, pp. 11–12; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 38), the stereotypical figure of the hero is only mentioned in relation to the moral struggle between good and evil in passing. Flinders and Wood (2015, p. 644) were the first to go further in developing mirror concepts:

– *Moral euphoria*: 'the momentarily intense, disproportionate, and dramatic manifestation of joy, relief, and hope within society concerning the presumed morally righteous behavior of "folk heroes."'
– *Folk hero*: 'the agent of social concern (group, community, individual) that is loved and held in awe by society due to the presumed moral fortitude of its behavior.'
– *Deification*: 'the process of symbolization, framing, and discursive commentary through which certain agents become associated with almost God-like qualities.'

Folk heroes embody aspirations and moral values but also personify everything people consider 'good.' They are 'ascribed certain qualities that are deemed so remarkable or exceptional that they immediately assume an almost superhuman or God-like status' (Flinders & Wood, 2015, p. 645). This formulation is very similar to Weber's (1978, p. 241) definition of charisma, although the authors carefully avoid this term. According to his main thesis, charismatic relationships and leadership are based on an attributional process in which followers bestow exceptional qualities on leaders (Willner, 1985, pp. 14–15). Similarly, Klapp (1954, p. 135) explicitly drew on Weber to explain the social role of the hero: 'defined as a person, real or imaginary, who evokes the appropriate attitudes and behavior' and thus 'the fame of a hero is a collective product.' In short, charisma is produced by people's belief in the heroism of the leader.

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[1] Cohen (2011, p. 120) described Dr. George Simpson, chairman of Margate magistrates during the trial of the 1964 Mods and Rockers' riots, as a folk hero who 'personalized the forces of good against which the forces of evil were massed.'

Moral panic and euphoria always occur in parallel, interacting with each other: the construction of the folk devil implies the emergence of the protective hero (Joosse, 2018a; Klapp, 1954). In other words, the role of the charismatic hero is crystallized by contrasting the out-group opponents. Joosse (2018a) translates the social construction of villains described by Klapp into the charismatic counter-role of colossal players who fit with the charismatic leaders' ambitions. These figures help to dramatize a situation that calls for and emphasizes the importance of heroism. As a result, these worthy opponents are endowed with 'negative charisma' or 'counter-charisma.' Smith (2000, p. 103) describes negative charisma in terms of the demonization that goes hand in hand with the deification of the charismatic leader: 'Love of the charismatic leader often seems to be predicated on hatred of the evil against which they fight, and, indeed, will be magnified as this perceived evil intensifies and is incarnated in a specific "folk devil."'

However, charismatic leaders can easily find themselves targets of counter-demonization, whereby they become folk devils for those who perceive them as a moral threat to society and democracy. As Tucker (1968, p. 746) accurately put it:

> [A] leader who evokes a 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.

Later, Willner (1985, p. 7) came to a similar conclusion, pointing out that while charismatic leaders may be treated as God-like or larger-than-life figures by their followers, those who are immune to their appeal are not neutral towards them either, describing them as 'diabolical.'

The literature has undertheorized the role of agency (the leader) that pushes the 'moral panic button' to generate emotional waves in society. While Cohen (2011) does not discuss the nature of moral agency in detail, he mentions the activity of right-thinking people (agents of social control) who stand on the moral barricade and determine who should be considered deviant in society. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009, p. 135) also identified an 'elite-engineered' mode of moral panic in situations where 'a small and powerful group [...] deliberately and consciously undertakes a campaign to generate and sustain fear, concern, and panic on the part of the public over an issue'. They argued that a moral panic is an effective tool for distraction in political leaders' hands, but others also show that it is crucial for legitimizing the latter's policy responses and decisions (Bonn, 2011). Cohen's seminal work also draws on Becker's (1963) theory of moral entrepreneurship, arguing that some individuals, groups, or organizations feel responsible for persuading people of the need to develop and enforce a particular set of norms and values. Moral entrepreneurs are crucial for attaching/removing positive/negative labels from/to certain individuals. In short, moral entrepreneurs can change the moral structure of society, shaping the boundaries of the normative system and defining who counts as an insider or an outsider. Charismatic leadership works in exactly this way: Leaders as emotional or moral agents can evoke, revoke, and reframe the emotional rules of how members of society should (not) feel about themselves, others, and events (Wasielewski, 1985).

Even traditional leaders often exploit moral panic and euphoria, as we have seen with George W. Bush, Tony Blair, and Barack Obama (Bonn, 2011; Flinders & Wood, 2015). However, these leaders lost their heroic status over time as the high expectations led to disappointment (through abuse of power, misleading the public, and stillborn reforms), culminating in counter-demonization directed at them. As a result, elites can indeed lose their monopoly on the moral barricade, opening the door to new moral entrepreneurs such as populist leaders. A striking difference emerges here: populist politicians, relying on their charismatic appeal, are able to manage and exploit these inverted moral panics. Some empirical analyses (Andrews-Lee, 2021) have shown that these leaders can enjoy a 'Teflon-like' protection that prevents followers from blaming them for poor performance or immoral action.

3 Populist politicians: folk heroes or folk devils?

Populist politicians consciously create and maintain a 'magnetic field' around themselves that attracts followers and alienates others. Three emotional dynamics determine this field: (1) a moral panic that serves to label the political elite and dangerous others; (2) a moral euphoria in which populists can appear as charismatic folk heroes; (3) a counter-demonization of anti-populists that populists incite towards themselves (Figure 1).
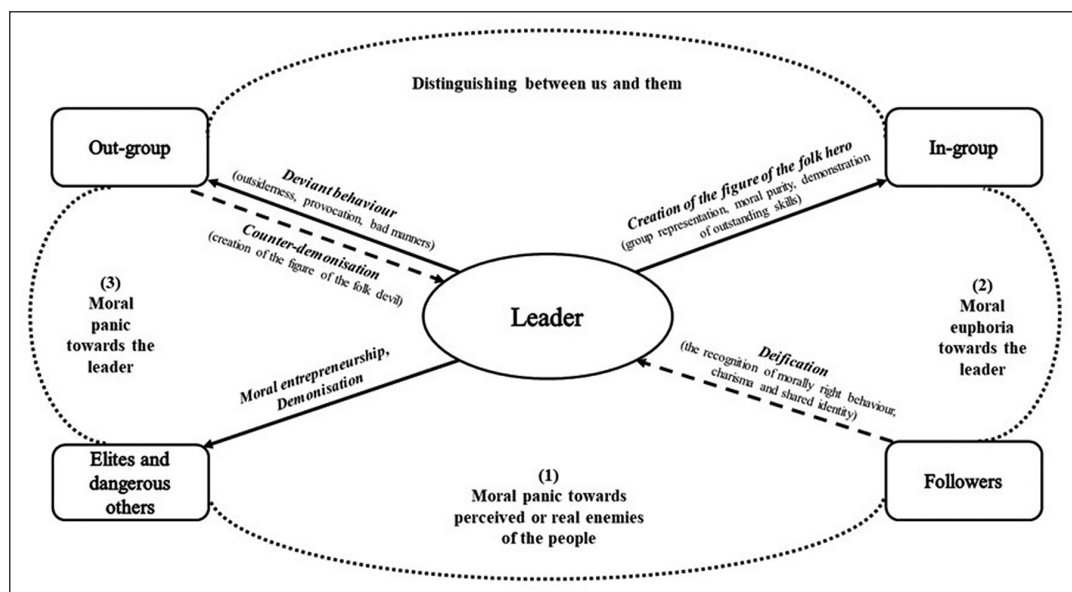

Figure 1 Strategic Use of Moral Panic and Euphoria in Populist Politics

(1) Linking moral panic to populism is nothing new: populist rhetoric can easily catalyze a sudden surge of negative sentiment towards certain groups or individuals perceived as deviant. The sharp identity-based dichotomy between 'them and us' in populist politics is

an important element of this moral struggle. Several studies have examined this empirically: Trump's 2015–2016 presidential campaign (Joosse, 2018b), as well as the political responses to immigration in Hungary (Barna & Koltai, 2019; Gerő & Sik, 2020), Slovakia (Androvičová, 2017) and Poland (Krzyżanowski, 2020). This emotional dynamic is at the heart of the perpetual crisis narrative created and fuelled by populist politicians. Similar to what Moffitt (2016) highlighted about crisis performance, the generation of moral panics is an attempt to create an emotional and moral state of society as a favorable environment for political action and heroic leadership (see also Körösényi et al., 2016). The moralizing interpretation of the crisis by populist politicians often leads to moral panics. In other words, it is not the presence of the crisis that is important but the impression that a moral deficiency or immoral behavior of others is causing it. Researchers have called this labeling process a populist 'performing staging of a wrong.' (Ostiguy et al., 2021, p. 3), pointing to the exaggerated and constant moral struggle between good and evil in populist politics.

(2) Moral euphoria and folk heroes have received less attention. While positive expectations focused on populist leaders are often emphasized (e.g. Laclau, 2005; Moffit, 2016; Pappas, 2019) few studies have examined the attribution of charisma to populist politicians (Andrews-Lee, 2021; McDonnell, 2016; Metz & Plesz, 2023). Laclau's (2005) theory complements the Weberian theory of charisma, presenting the attribution-like process in populism. In his theory, the populist leader is an 'empty signifier': a blank page onto which people can project their specific meanings and desires, antagonistically creating 'the people.' But 'who would identify with an empty signifier?' Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) ask in their critical essay. They argue that the actual leaders as 'overflowing signifiers' are oversaturated with meanings. Leaders always offer something – their mediated identity, character and personality, bodily and rhetorical performance – which may meet the different expectations that people have in their minds about leaders. In short, the notion of 'leader' is never entirely empty or blank. Ostiguy and Moffitt extend the original theory with a relational aspect and an agency perspective, assuming leadership is co-created. Casullo (2019) condenses the different qualities into specific context-based roles, but the image of the populist is determined by particularities, as Ostiguy and Moffitt (2021) stressed. More precisely, their leadership status depends on how much they represent and embody the people's core characteristics, aspirations, values, and norms and become the 'champions of us' (Uysal et al., 2022). Intertwining the populist leader's personality with the social identity of the people protects them from external attacks and criticism (Andrews-Lee, 2021).

(3) By transgressing the moral boundaries of liberal democracy (Aiolfi, 2022), populist leaders also want to consciously and deliberately generate anti-populist sentiments (Stavrakakis et al., 2018) to stress their importance, resulting in counter-demonization. They act like 'polarisation entrepreneurs.' (Sunstein, 2000) who seek to build like-minded communities, strengthen political frontlines, and push the camps into more extreme positions. Recent empirical evidence (Harteveld et al., 2021) has shown that identity-based affective polarisation is greater among supporters of populist parties than other non-populist parties. Supporters of populist parties have an overt antipathy towards mainstream political forces and their supporters, but they elicit similar antipathy from their opponents. These findings are not surprising, as populists constantly provoke their opponents by transgressing moral boundaries and written/unwritten norms of liberal politics

(e.g., political correctness) to maintain polarized conflicts. This strategic use of transgression is a fundamental component of populism (Aiolfi, 2022) described as 'bad manners' (Moffitt, 2016). Ostiguy (2017) introduced the concept of 'flaunting of the low' to describe populist behavior that is culturally considered deviant, in contrast to high political norms. Similarly, Moffitt (2016, p. 60) also suggests that transgression helps to distance populists from other political actors. These conflicts and attacks help the populists portray the people as victims and themselves as defenders of the people.

Violating norms is not the goal but the means to fuel the outrage and resentment of their opponents and trigger anti-populist counter-mobilization. Stavrakakis and his colleagues (2018) are among the few researchers who have emphasized that we cannot understand populism without understanding anti-populism. This is particularly true in our case: this counter-demonization is a definitive element of populism. Their study also argues that anti-populists demonize populist politicians, as do the latter the enemies of the people. For anti-populists, norm-breaking politics represents the moral state of society and the political system. But populist leaders also have something else: the competence and political skills to damage liberal democracy (counter-charisma). However, the picture is more complicated when populists reach governing positions. Then, the distinction between anti-populism and new populist appeal can disappear altogether, as we can see in Hungary.

4 Strategies for generating moral panic

Populist politicians can achieve the desired emotional impact differently (Table 1). Two key dimensions can be distinguished. The first relates to the nature of leadership. According to this dimension, political leaders may seek to create a moral panic by provoking opponents. At other times, leaders may find themselves in a ready-made situation, which they interpret reactively. The second dimension focuses on the purpose of the strategy. On the one hand, leaders may demonize certain groups or individuals; on the other, their aim may be to force increased counter-demonization, forming the role of victim in the moral struggle. In both cases, the leader emerges as a hero in the eyes of their followers, but as a result of different emotional dynamics. Four strategies are distinguished: witch-hunting, self-victimisation, barricading, and quarantining. The Hungarian examples provide illustrations of these strategies, but they can hardly be separated in their effects. Moreover, while populist/anti-populist strategies may be easy to map, their emotional impact is more difficult to measure, so in this case, we must infer from voters' behavior and attitudes.

Table 1 Populist repertoire for creating, forming and sustaining emotional relations

Nature of the leadership	The aim of the strategy	
	Demonization	Counter-demonization
Proactive	*Witch-hunting* **Objective:** launch an attack on the moral basis of the alleged deviance. **Direction of demonization:** the folk devil is revealed within society. **Nature of demonization:** proactively creating an image of the enemy. *Example: anti-gender politics in 2020–2021*	*Self-victimisation* **Objective:** present deviant behaviour to opponents, creating a defensive moral position in which criticisms and attacks seem underserved and undignified. **Direction of demonization:** demonization is primarily directed at populists. **Nature of demonization:** the desired consequence of a seemingly unjustified/ unintended proactive strategic decision. *Example: Authorisation Act in 2020*
Reactive	*Barricade-building* **Objective:** to protect the community on moral grounds against previously unknown deviant behaviours. **Direction of demonization:** the perceived threat stems from outside the community. **Nature of demonization:** reactively creating a moral barricade pointing to the people's enemies. *Example: anti-migration policy in 2015–2016*	*Quarantining* **Objective:** to describe moral quarantine as deliberate isolation from groups labelled as deviant. **Direction of demonization:** demonization is primarily directed at the populists. **Nature of demonization:** getting outside of moral barricades and becoming folk devils as an unintended consequence of their previous decisions and statements. *Example: Fidesz's 'voluntary' excommunication from the EPP*

4.1 Witch-hunting

Witch-hunting is a classic example of generating moral panic. Here, the demonization process is proactive, with leaders targeting a well-defined group identified as norm violators. This strategy can be detected in Fidesz's anti-gender politics in 2020–2021, which mobilized attitudes against sexual minorities (Takács & Swart, 2021). As a result, these groups became a central enemy in the ruling party's communication (Barát, 2022; Kováts, 2022). The proactive nature of the strategy is also indicated by the fact that the moral struggle was taken from a Western context, adopting the interpretative frameworks and deterrent examples that appeared there. This moral conflict, although periodically coming to the fore (especially during the counter-protests held in parallel with the annual Budapest Pride festival), never dominated the political agenda and public discourse to the extent that we have seen since the 2020s.

The moral panic was not triggered until 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, when sex reassignment therapy was banned, and adoption rules for homosexual couples

were tightened. The ninth constitutional amendment, passed on December 15, was a symbolic move that emphasized biological sex over gender, adding the following texts: 'The mother is a woman, the father a man' and 'Every child has the right to such protection and care as is necessary for its physical, mental and moral development.' The goal was to protect the right of children to identify themselves according to their sex at birth and provide an education based on the values of Hungary's constitutional identity and Christian culture. The Fundamental Law defines the moral boundaries of the community, and the PM also formulated the issue of deviance as a moral entrepreneur:

> [The] laws relating to homosexuality [...] are based on an extremely tolerant and patient approach. [...] So we can safely say that as regards homosexuality, Hungary is a patient, tolerant country. But there is a red line that must not be crossed, and this is how I would sum up my opinion: 'Leave our children alone.' (Orbán, 2020)

The demonization culminated in the anti-pedophile Child Protection Act, which treated the LGBTQ+ communities at the same levels as pedophiles and banned the promotion and display of homosexuality and gender reassignment to children under 18.

In support of the Act, the government launched a national consultation campaign with biased questionnaires. It later held a referendum on April 3, 2022, the same day as the general election, making the 'defense of normal life' against 'homosexual propaganda' a central issue in the campaign. These pseudo forms of participation allowed the government's supporters to engage in the moral struggle and experience the moral euphoria of the landslide electoral victory and the technically invalid but politically successful referendum. Since the law was passed long before the referendum, it had no political stakes and was used only for strategic purposes. But Orbán's role was indispensable to the moral euphoria: he wanted to defend the core values of the conservative Christian family model and way of life.

However, the government's main goal was not to win an ideological conflict but to divert attention from certain policy failures (e.g., the establishment of the Chinese Fudan University campus in Budapest, the negative economic developments caused by the epidemic, the state of public education and health care) and scandals that called into question the government's effectiveness and moral credibility. On February 9, 2020, a scandal broke out when it was revealed that Gábor Kaleta, the government-appointed ambassador to Peru, had pornographic images of minors on his computer. The second scandal was even more troubling. József Szájer, the party's founder and a member of the European Parliament (MEP), was arrested on December 1 for violating epidemiological regulations, attending a gay orgy in Brussels and possessing drugs. He resigned following the incident.

The provocation of the opposition was blatant, as the government had touched on a taboo subject, but their reactions were less so. The attack on sexual minorities fed into anti-populist sentiments (e.g., fear of vulnerable groups and democratic norms), and the counter-demonization focused on the PM and the ruling party. The opposition and concerned groups described the Child Protection Bill as discriminatory and hateful. They organized a demonstration in front of the Parliament Building on June 14, 2022, but failed to garner wider social support. The law also provoked a serious international backlash and led to an infringement procedure in the European Union (EU). The opposition used these international reactions as political ammunition and proof of their moral superiority.

The right-wing politicians in the opposition coalition took a different tack. The populist right-wing Jobbik voted in favor of the law. Péter Márki-Zay, the opposition coalition's candidate for prime minister, also used a similar populist repertoire: he questioned the credibility of Fidesz's position in this conflict, assuming the homosexual orientation of some cabinet members and one of Orbán's close relatives. Moreover, the radical right-wing Our Homeland Movement not only supported the government's anti-gender politics but further fuelled the moral panic with a number of provocative actions. These norm violations were also strongly criticized in the opposition media.

4.2 Self-victimisation

Populists may not only name the enemies of the people directly, but they can also point to them by pitting them against the real representatives of the people. The purpose of self-victimization is not primarily to create an image of the enemy but to force the enemy to attack. This strategy works as a reverse witch-hunt or counter-demonization: populist politicians try to create a moral position in which attacks on them can be described as undeserved and undignified. The primary dynamic of demonization is directed at the populist leader, and the triggering decisions and policies are often mere provocations.

Since 2010, the Hungarian opposition has been driven by anti-populist fears that the country's liberal democracy is under threat. The government's reforms, such as the new Fundamental Law, constitutional amendments, and extensive reforms in various fields (culture, science, media, and justice), helped to concentrate political power and establish a new political regime in its own image (Körösényi et al., 2020), provoking outrage and anger among the opposition. These emotional reactions usually manifested themselves in unconventional parliamentary performances, rhapsodic waves of protest, and intellectual petitions. The opposition's reaction and strategy fit with the dynamics of voter attitudes, which are extremely polarized over the content and perception of democracy (Susánszky et al., 2021), but they lost their mobilizing power and newsworthiness over time.

In 2020, the first Authorisation Act triggered such a negative emotional dynamic. The Act empowered the government to govern by decree due to the need for managing the adverse effects of the pandemic. However, this was not a new development in the Orbán regime, as constant crisis leadership backed by exceptional constitutional powers had already existed since the migration crisis (Antal, 2023). Moreover, the government's intentions seemed pointless since the governing parties had a two-thirds majority, so there were no political constraints on lawmaking during the epidemic. Orbán's main aim was to provoke those around him. Although the opposition would have supported this kind of crisis leadership conditional on time limits and parliamentary control, critical voices also emerged, stressing the danger of the excessive concentration of power. However, the opposition's ability to counter-demonize was very limited due to the lack of concrete political and parliamentary means. The similar accusations and narratives lost their power because they had been part of the public discourse for years, and the pandemic situation made wider mobilization impossible. Nevertheless, this narrative emerged. For example, the president of the liberal party, Momentum, said that 'democracy cannot be quarantined'

(Fekete-Győr, 2020), while another prominent opposition politician has spoken of a 'constitutional coup' (Hadházy, 2020). In this narrative, Orbán once again 'proved' himself to be autocratic (folk devil).

Moreover, Orbán set a communication trap by which the opposition was seen as irresponsible, concerned only with its own power and ideological goals rather than with the welfare and health of the people. In his demonization narrative, the opposition was either power-hungry, malicious, interested only in their power, or anti-life and anti-vaccine, questioning the use of Chinese and Russian vaccines, or incompetent, unable to handle the crisis in their decision-making positions in local governments. At the same time, the stakes were raised, with wartime rhetoric stressing the critical epidemic situation and the need for cooperation (national consensus). Orbán presented himself as a hero, emphasizing his abilities, calmness, and determination to act alone with his majority in the face of provocation, discord, and irresponsibility. The more violent the attacks, the more the government could play the role of the moral victim, subjected to unethical attacks despite its good intentions and policies. The appearance of moral euphoria was strong even though, as a populist leader (in contrast to Bolsonaro and Trump), Orbán did not question the official version of details about the pandemic and enacted the standard measures to deal with it. He has managed to keep public confidence stable and even growing, showing signs of the rally-around-the-flag effect (Metz & Árpási, 2020) through the constant communication of successes, including a focus on military mobilization, procurement of vaccines and medical equipment (respirators), increasing vaccination coverage and periodic easing of epidemic measures. Overall, this strategy has been effective in diverting attention from the concentration of power and the failures of crisis management (e.g., high death rates and the purchase of unnecessary and expensive medical equipment).

4.3 Barricade-building

Since the traditional political elite has lost its monopoly on the moral barricades, populist leaders, as 'the moral conscience of the people,' have erected new barricades in society, separating those who may be full members of the community from those who may not. In contrast to witch-hunts, the aim here is not simply to find an enemy from within but to ward off a threat from without. In such cases, leaders are often faced with a fait accompli.

The migration crisis in Central European states between 2015 and 2016 is a striking example of this strategy (Androvičová, 2017; Gerő & Sik, 2020; Krzyżanowski, 2020). Migration was an unknown problem for these states. From the beginning of 2015, the Orbán government saw an opportunity to address the issue. His strategy had two important elements: dramatizing and moralizing the issue. In the first half of the crisis, the emphasis was on portraying refugees negatively. The government allowed mass spectacles to develop at public transport hubs as a deterrent. A temporary camp was set up at Budapest's Keleti railway station, from where a mass convoy set off for Austria on September 3, 2015. This culminated in the clash between refugees and police at the southern border fence on September 16, which became known as the 'Battle of Röszke.' The situation was further dramatized by images of various terrorist attacks in Europe, and these events became a visual reminder of migrants as folk devils.

The government deliberately created a so-called 'securitizing' interpretation of events in which the refugee wave threatened the existential and economic security of the population. The centrality of this interpretation was underlined by the way political actors and the media framed the phenomenon and the people involved (migrant vs. refugee), which supported the demonization process itself. For Orbán, however, demonization did not stop there. The PM also painted a picture of a sinister coalition of people smugglers, human rights activists, Brussels bureaucrats, and the domestic opposition, backed by George Soros. This narrative dominated the public debate, thanks to the national consultation on the issue, six consecutive billboard campaigns, and the anti-quota referendum. Although the government's crisis management (closing the southern border, tightening the law) received cross-party support and the level of xenophobia increased during this period (Barna & Koltai, 2019; Gerő & Sik, 2020), the referendum on October 2, 2016, was invalid. However, the referendum still served its political purpose of thematizing political discourse and engaging supporters in this moral struggle. The moral euphoria was manifested in the experience, the demonstration of a strong common Christian European and national identity, and the economic prosperity that Orbán pledged to defend.

Although fear of intolerant rhetoric was present in the public discourse, the opposition's response was divided and limited. Jobbik took a similar position on the issue, criticizing the effectiveness and intention of the measures taken. However, the party found it difficult to deal with Fidesz's encroachment and capture of its interpretive frames. In contrast, the parties on the left framed the crisis in humanitarian terms. Orbán's policies seemed to deviate from this perspective: he used demagogy, incited xenophobia, and excluded people in need with wire fences. However, such an interpretation was not entirely clear at the level of the political elite, as in 2015, some opposition parties began to refer to security threats. Moreover, the opposition seemed to adapt to the popularity of the government's policies over time, accepting (or simply not attacking) certain measures (e.g., border closures). The counter-demonstration, therefore, had its limits, mobilizing the solidarity of intellectuals, which was dwarfed by the overwhelming support for the government's policies. In this way, the left-wing opposition watered down its humanitarian stance over time, but the government's communication on the issue continued to emphasize pro-migration positions to its detriment.

4.4 Quarantining

Rising populist forces often hit the moral barricade of political quarantine, which isolates them from the parties, the government, and the public. This scenario can also happen to establishment politicians after a scandal, radical turn, or statement. Even in this situation, populists seek to demonstrate and maintain their moral superiority by interpreting these attacks as a moral struggle in which they are forced to defend themselves.

Since 2011, the transformation of the Hungarian political system and corruption scandals have gradually sharpened Orbán's Eurosceptic populist rhetoric (Csehi & Zgut, 2021), involving demonizing the idea of the United States of Europe and the left-liberal bureaucrats in Brussels. At the same time, he offered a vision of Europe of sovereign nations that resonated in Hungarian society, whose pro-European and Eurosceptic attitudes form

a strange mixture (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). The vagueness and ambiguity of European values gave Orbán the opportunity to fight with the EU to define what it means to be a 'good European' (Mos, 2020). In this moral struggle, Orbán can present himself as a folk hero, the 'defender of Europe' who can 'make Europe great again' (Orbán, 2024b).

The driving force behind the counter-demonization was the European Parliament (EP). The first significant emotional-moral reactions were summarised in the 'Tavares Report' in 2013, which criticized the state of fundamental rights and democracy in Hungary. In 2018, accepting the 'Sargentini Report,' the EP launched an Article 7 procedure against the country for systematic violations of the EU's fundamental values. For a long time, however, no progress was made. The various political actors in the EU did not act as moral entrepreneurs. Thus, the Commission was only able to activate the Rule of Law Conditionality mechanism of budgetary restrictions against Hungary and Poland in 2022. In the same year, MEPs adopted another report stating that Hungary was no longer a full democracy but a 'hybrid regime of electoral autocracy.' Although these reports were limited in their political impact, they unleashed strong emotions as MEPs gave them a standing ovation, creating the illusion of victory over the folk devils.

The moral panic seems insoluble without neutralizing the folk devil. In 2024, after the necessary reforms and the change of government, the mechanism was suspended for Poland. At the same time, Hungary has been able to access some EU funds, but there are still strong conflicts around Orbán. Most recently, the European Parliament issued a condemnation of the Protection of National Sovereignty Act, but the idea of a next step in the Article 7 procedure has also been raised, which would withdraw Hungary's voting rights in the Council in 2024.

The EPP also had difficulty acting as a moral agent in relation to triggering and sustaining the counter-demonization in motion within its political community. The conflict gradually led to a split. While the EPP still supported Orbán during the vote on the Tavares Report and Jean-Claude Junker, then President of the Commission, jokingly welcomed him saying 'Hello, Dictator!' in 2015, a sizeable number of party families voted for the Sargentini Report in 2018. A few months later, Donald Tusk, then President of the EPP, constructed the figure of the folk devil who could not belong to their community, without openly naming Orbán:

> If you are against the rule of law and independent judiciary [...] If you don't like the free press and NGOs, if you tolerate xenophobia, homophobia, nationalism and anti-Semitism [...]. If you place the state and the nation against, or above, the freedom and dignity of the individual [...]. If you support Putin and attack Ukraine, if you are in favour of the aggressor and against the victim [...]. If you want to replace the Western model of liberal democracy with an Eastern model of 'authoritarian democracy', you are not a Christian Democrat. (Tusk, 2018)

By 2019, the government's Eurosceptic campaign had turned against the EPP elite. In that year, the government's campaign put the Commission President on a poster with George Soros, suggesting that the latter was the one really pulling the strings in the EU from behind the scenes. This campaign provoked strong protests in the EPP, which led to the suspension of Fidesz's membership. However, the appointment of the 'three wise men' (Herman Van Rompuy, Wolfgang Schlüssel, and Hans-Gert Pöttering) and Manfred Weber's compromise-oriented approach did not result in moral agency.

The conflict escalated in late 2020 when Hungarian MEP Tamás Deutsch compared Weber to the Gestapo and Hungary's communist secret police. Fidesz did not wait to be expelled; it quit the EPP on March 3, 2021 (while a representative of the small governing party, the Hungarian Christian Democratic People's Party, remained in the alliance). Orbán interpreted this as a moral decision:

> It is widely known that we Hungarians wanted to return the EPP – which is in continuous retreat, jettisoning its political values, as if from a sinking airship – to its former position as Europe's leading intellectual and political force. We wanted to return it to being a large, strong, democratic formation of the right, which could bring together centrist, conservative and traditional Christian democratic parties and their voters into a great shared political home. Yesterday this opportunity was lost. The EPP has finally become an annex of the European left. On the issues of migration, family values, and national sovereignty […] there is no longer any difference between the EPP and the European left. (Orbán, 2021b)

As Tusk and Orbán stressed, the moral conflict at this level is not about what it means to be a good European but who counts as a true Christian democrat. Although political quarantine is becoming increasingly evident at the EU level, it has been most visibly manifested in the excommunication from the EPP.

5 Conclusion

The populists' approach to emotional politics is like throwing pebbles into still water, whose waves, both large and small, they try to ride and control. The current article was intended to explain and illustrate these 'generated' emotional relationships. We argue that populist politicians as moral agents (charismatic leaders and moral entrepreneurs) create an emotional magnetic field around themselves, generating and maintaining moral panic and euphoria: they label the dangerous others from which the people should be protected, while for anti-populists, their transgressive politics are just as deviant as violating norms of liberal democracy. It is important to stress that while the social problems or political threats at the heart of the moral panic, or the political achievements and successes behind the moral euphoria that populists used to exploit, may be real, the socio-emotional responses are certainly exaggerated. As the Hungarian case studies showed, populists may employ various strategies – witch-hunting, self-victimisation, barricade-building, and quarantining – to achieve the desired emotional response from their environments.

The emotional waves that are generated have serious consequences. Moral panics and euphoria justify leaders' actions and decisions, diverting the public's and opponents' attention from real issues or problems and focusing it in different directions. Heightened emotions can also distort citizens' judgment of policies and political actors, as shown by in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice. In this way, populist leaders can create their anti-populist or even new populist challenges and polarize voters by defining the boundaries of political camps. Moreover, the emotions surrounding populist politicians can motivate action. For some, moral panics inspire supportive or even extreme behavior, as when Trump supporters attacked the United States Capitol in 2021, claiming that the presidential election was a fraud. At the same time, for others, Trump was the 'real' devil of the

people, leading them to counter-mobilize or resist, declaring 'he's not my president' in 2016. Populist and anti-populist/counter-populist emotional clashes can determine party competition but can also sustain populist governance.

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