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From democracy to hybrid regime. Democratic backsliding and populism in Hungary and Tunisia

Daniela Huber^a and Barbara Pisciotta^b

^aRoma Tre University, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy, Rome; ^bPolitical Science, Roma Tre University, Italy, Rome

ABSTRACT

Democratic backsliding has become a global reality which in the past decade has curiously occurred together with populism and the polarisation of societies. How do these phenomena interact? Through a comparative study of two iconic cases of democratisation and democratic backsliding from different world regions, Hungary and Tunisia, we find that polarisation – typically instrumentalized by populists along the socio-cultural axis – harms social trust, setting a context in which societies accept democratic backsliding. Based on a most-different-systems design, our findings confirm the causal link between populism and democratic backsliding and represent a starting point for further analysis focused on the effects of the socio-cultural dimension on institutional change.

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Introduction

From 2005 to 2020, the gap between the countries which have benefited from an improvement in democratic quality and those that, on the contrary, experienced a marked worsening, grew significantly in favour of the latter, reaching a peak in 2020. According to the latest Freedom House report, in 2021, about 75% of the world's population lives in a country that has suffered a deterioration in its political conditions.

Given these premises, the political science literature has focused on the causes and paths of this democratic backsliding, with particular attention to the modalities of institutional change. Few comparative works, however, have highlighted the correlation between the socio-cultural dynamics of democratic backsliding and the more strictly institutional ones.

Is it possible to identify a socio-cultural context favourable to democratic backsliding? How can socio-cultural dynamics influence a momentary process of moving away from the democratic threshold? This article aims to answer this research question through a comparative analysis which identifies such socio-cultural factors and explains the impact they can have on the modalities of institutional change, pushing some democracies into the 'grey zone' of hybrid regimes.

In particular, our theoretical model investigates the impact populism produces on processes of institutional change.

More specifically, we argue that the effects produced by populism have affected the socio-cultural context of the countries concerned by favouring polarization which fuels societal divisions on cultural grounds (for example in the area of gender equality or family politics, etc.); and that subsequently, the effects of populism thriving in and fostering a highly polarized context, have led to a progressive mistrust of established political parties and the political system at large, providing fertile ground for political actors to push for institutional change.

The ability of these rulers to exploit societal polarisation to their advantage is indeed the link between the evolution of democratic backsliding and the nature of the socio-cultural context of reference: even before changing the constitution, these leaders have insinuated into civil society the *need* and *urgency* for a change that would favour a safeguarding of security and national identity, as well as a more efficient economic management and a better distribution of wealth. In this context, leaders have tried to instrumentalize referenda as a means of directly involving public opinion in the decision-making process and ‘guiding’ it towards the objectives of the government.

To test our theoretical argument we proceed with a comparative case study of Hungary and Tunisia. Both are almost iconic cases of democratisation and democratic backsliding in their respective regions. They enable us to employ a most-different-systems design to assess two cases that – in the presence of different regional, political-institutional and socio-cultural contexts – both showed a strong growth of populism, accompanied by polarisation, the gradual loss of social trust, and consequent, progressive democratic backsliding. In the early 1990s and 2000s, in fact, Hungary was a model case of the third wave of democratisation in Europe, but since 2011 it has been a ‘pioneer’ of democratic backsliding. Tunisia, instead, is the only Arab uprising country which transited to democracy in 2011 and democratic consolidation in 2014, but has similarly entered into democratic backsliding since 2018 and 2021 in particular. Furthermore, in both countries scholars have also noted an increase of populism and a rather strong societal polarisation in single case studies (Brumberg, 2019; Vegetti, 2019). These are thus useful cases to study dynamics between democratic backsliding and populism comparatively across different contexts.

Regarding the regional context, the situation of Hungary and Tunisia could not be more different. Hungary is still part of the EU, despite the tensions between the current government and the European institutions, and it is surrounded by other democracies in a geographic area which had been at peace until the onset of the war in Ukraine.¹ Tunisia, on the other hand, has been the only North African country which has transited to democracy with the Arab uprisings, and therefore borders on non-democratic countries in a region in which conflict and border instability is frequent. Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates have been leading a revisionist response to the Arab uprisings. Moreover, the two countries show different forms of government: Hungary is a parliamentary system; Tunisia is semi-presidential. Finally, the political and socio-cultural contexts are characterised by the diffusion of different traditions, legacies, values and lifestyles: Hungary had a brief previous democratic experience after the First World War and is a country with a strong Catholic majority that has been reborn from the ashes of the Hapsburg Empire; Tunisia liberated itself from French colonialism in

1956, achieving full independence in 1963. Whilst the strong presidential system which was installed after independence did experience some openings in the early 1980s, the Muslim-majority country remained under secular autocratic rule until the Arab uprisings in 2011. In light of these differences, the two cases are relevant to test the impact produced by populism on institutional change.

Based on a most-different-systems design, our findings confirm the causal link between populism and democratic backsliding and represent a starting point for further analysis focused on the effects of the socio-cultural dimension on institutional change. To elaborate, test and discuss this argument, this article is presented in three parts: the first part illustrates the theoretical framework; the second highlights the effects of populism on institutional change in Hungary and Tunisia; and the third shows the outcome of the comparative analysis, highlighting the similarities of the two cases regarding the link between populism and democratic backsliding. The conclusions reflect on the durability of the democratic backsliding process in Hungary and Tunisia in light of our findings.

Populism, polarisation and democratic backsliding: a theoretical framework

The objective of this research is to explain the impact of populism on institutional change in Hungary and Tunisia, with our hypotheses focusing on the causal link between populism and democratic backsliding. Our decision to employ the concept of **democratic backsliding** is primarily motivated by its greater flexibility in grasping a series of concrete actions that institutional actors decide to undertake at a given moment and which, voluntarily or involuntarily, tend to produce a deterioration of the previous democratic order.

Unlike other terms used in the literature, this concept enables us to adequately explain what is both a radical and a gradual process of institutional change of a democratic regime without, however, predetermining its outcome. As Nancy Bermeo (2016) has pointed out, the concept of democratic backsliding indicates a weakening or disassembling of a given set of democratic institutions, which can occur with the intention of deepening rather than destroying democracy, or which can reflect democracy's slow progress instead of its demise.

On one hand, classic concepts such as 'democratic breakdown' (Linz & Stepan, 1978), 'overthrow' (Huntington, 1991), 'demise' (Schmitter, 1994), or 'failure' (Kapstein & Converse, 2008; Schwartzberg & Viehoff, 2020) denote the ending of a democracy in the context of another institutional category, while more specific concepts such as 'autocratization' (Cassani & Tomini, 2020) denote the explicit opposite to democratisation. On the other hand, terms such as 'regression' (Erdmann & Kneuer, 2011) or 'erosion' (Plattner, 2014) are closer to the meaning of backsliding, identifying a more or less discontinuous one-way trend which tends to lead into hybridity. The concept also embraces a process of institutional change *in the making*, an incremental within-regime change that involves a deterioration of democratic assets and a consequent decline in the quality of democracy as a whole through a discontinuous series of actions rather than a one-time *coup de grâce* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Waldner & Lust, 2018).

Democratic backsliding is thus conceptualised as a process of incremental institutional change that progressively weakens democratic procedures and norms without

compromising their effectiveness definitively. Particularly, we rely on the democratic backsliding typology of Nancy Bermeo (2016) who drew attention to three common types of democratic backsliding: promissory coups, executive aggrandisement and strategic electoral manipulation. If the former is based on the removal of legitimately elected governments as a promise to act in defence of democratic legality and restore democracy as soon as possible, the second type occurs when elected executives weaken checks on executive power and deprive the opposition forces of means to challenge the government through legal channels (i.e. majoritarianism), while the third denotes a range of actions aimed to favour the electoral success of the incumbent.

These actions are principally expressed by a strengthening of executive power, a decrease in the competitiveness of the electoral process and a greater control by the government over the judiciary and the media. Although the cornerstones of democracy (such as elections) remain unchanged, and the distribution of powers among the various institutional bodies remains, both of these principles undergo a reduction to the advantage of the incumbent. Generally, the achievement of a large parliamentary majority by means of free, recurring, fair and competitive elections is the prelude to introducing institutional changes that progressively undermine pluralism and competition, while occurring within the constitutional framework: think of the role played by Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán in Hungary or Kais Saied in Tunisia.

Indeed, there is a clear tendency lately for such actions to be pursued by populist politicians. The concept of **populism**, as Cas Mudde has pointed out, is a thin ideology 'that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 562). In this sense, populism can be seen as both a rhetorical strategy and a cognitive schemata (Miller-Idriss, 2019, p. 19) which typically sees the world in Manichean terms.

Populism can be chosen as a political strategy by political entrepreneurs in the competition within a party system. This might happen in particular in a bipartisan/two-bloc system or one which has become rigid and unresponsive to existing or newly emerging grievances (for example in response to a crisis, such as migration governance, the economy or health). Alternatively, populism might also emerge as a strategy in a society/polity which is shaken by contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015) – mobilizations, strike waves, riots, revolutionary movements – likely similarly driven by grievances to which the political system has failed to respond. Political entrepreneurs might seek to benefit from such times of unrest for their political goals. As McCoy and Somer have pointed out, 'Grievances and latent cleavages exist, but they are most often activated, exploited, or distorted ... by political elites who choose the issue or grievance to highlight and create the divisive us-and-them perceptions' (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 263).

If Western liberal democracies are based on constitutionalism, conceived as a fundamental limit to the power of the majority and a guarantee of minority rights, populism, on the contrary, is based on values and behaviours that subvert the essence of political pluralism. In this perspective, one of the most dangerous challenges of populism to democracy is the attempt to systematically resort to brutal majoritarianism (Galston, 2018; Plattner, 2019). In short, if populism is an electoral strategy to define 'the people' as part of an ethnicity, culture, nation, religion, civilisation or race, majoritarianism is

the means to achieve it: the first contains a set of values antithetical to democratic pluralism that move the majority to stop political turnover and expand opportunities for rent-seeking (Vachudova, 2020); the second is the most efficient legal instrument to weaken the checks-and-balances system and marginalise the opposition forces. Alongside majoritarianism, another populist threat to democracy is personalism, understood as ‘the domination of the political realm by a single individual’ (Frantz et al., 2021, p. 94), even in the absence of a supporting party structure. In this case, as we will see, the main tool is often represented by the systematic recourse to law decrees.

Moreover, the antagonistic vision proposed by populism very often finds an ideal side in **polarisation**, understood above all as an increase of the ideological gap between political parties (Sartori, 1976). While there is a ‘broad consensus among political scientists that polarization is detrimental to democracy ... very few empirically investigate the links between political polarization and democratic erosion’ (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021, p. 285). With Haggard and Kaufmann, polarisation can be defined as a ‘process through which political elites and publics become increasingly divided over public policy and ideology’ (Haggard & Kaufman, 2021, pp. 29–30). Typically, this process politicises existing cleavages in society, be they socio-economic (class), geographic (centre-periphery), gender, age, cultural (religious, ethnic) or historic (particularly in transition cases in respect to former elites or excluded political forces). Polarisation is not necessarily harmful for democracy, as it might respond to existing grievances and a resilient democracy can accommodate strongly diverging preferences.

However – and here we turn to the **linkage between populism, polarisation and democratic backsliding** – polarisation can harm democracy once populism grows within it and pushes it into what Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer have referred to as ‘pernicious polarization’: a severe political and societal polarisation as ‘people’s identities and interests line up along a single divide, one in which people form into political groups that are seen in a competitive, ‘either-or’ relationship with each other, overshadowing people’s other, normally cross-cutting, identities’ (McCoy & Somer, 2019, p. 235). This pins people into an ‘us versus them’ logic, competitors in the political system become enemies and societies become increasingly divided. The transformation of the political opponent into an enemy is often accompanied by a decrease in social trust, both in the political system and in society at large, that represents one of the most important features of pernicious polarisation. Here social trust can be understood as ‘a cooperative attitude towards other people based on the optimistic expectation that others are likely to respect one’s own interests’ (Stollenwerk et al., 2021, p. 1224). Social trust within a political system is an indispensable context for democracy. As Larry Diamond has pointed out,

every major scholar of democracy has recognized the fundamental need in a democracy for competitors to: (1) accept the legitimacy of their political rivals, and their right to compete; (2) trust that their rivals will not seek to eliminate them if they come to power; and (3) accept the consequences of fairly administered elections. (Diamond, 2022, p. 170)

Once distrust prevails, the political other is no longer seen as legitimate, but as an enemy ‘to be eliminated from the political scene’ (Vegetti, 2019, p. 92). Electorates also become divided. Iyengar and Westwood have described this process for the American electorate where ‘hostile feelings for the opposing party’ became ingrained, and where ‘increased partisan affect provides an incentive for elites to engage in confrontation rather than

cooperation' (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015, p. 690). Thus, also on the societal level, generalised social trust might decline.

Furthermore, trust in the political system as the 'best game in town' is likely posed to decline. The system might not function effectively as policy discourse focuses on 'who' rather than 'what'. When polarisation happens along the cultural axis, it tends to collapse other grievances (socio-economic, gender) into the cultural axis. For example, the lack of a sufficient social welfare net or the rise of unemployment in a particular sector of the economy is not attributed to larger socio-economic policies, but to migrants or corrupt elites. Thus, rather than changing socio-economic policies, migration policies are changed, and roots of socio-economic grievances remain. Antagonistic visions are employed in political projects that identify ethnicity, nation, religion or race as the ordering principle of the new political system and, therefore, the common denominator to which the other divisions are aligned. Those who do not recognise the goodness and stability of the new system are responsible for the problems that have plagued and still plague the country: immigrants, corrupt elites, supranational organisations, feminists, religious versus secular, etc.

In this perspective, populism fosters pernicious polarisation, as it politicises cleavages not in terms of policy issues (i.e. the what), but in terms of establishing clear distinctions between self and other (i.e. the who). Politics thus becomes increasingly a struggle not between political competitors, but between political enemies.

As a result of these dynamics, societal groups may become less attached to democracy as a norm, and more inclined to accept or even support measures which erode the democratic polity. Such measures may include (1) shrinking media freedom and civic space, (2) manipulating the composition of the judiciary or limiting its power, (3) electoral process, for instance fraud or intimidation of opposition, and (4) gradual executive reinforcement (or in its most extreme form a coup d'état), limiting the power of the parliament. In sum, the spread of populism in party competition generates dividing lines that empty democratic competition and replace it with a simplified confrontation between a certain conception of the 'people' and its 'adversaries'. When these new dividing lines take on a dynamic of pernicious polarisation, political issues tend to be reduced to a single divide and create a fertile ground for political forces that exploit the social distrust against traditional intermediaries/established institutions. In this context, populist forces in power have worked to progressively delegitimize the opposition and reduce its spaces by manipulating the electoral process, limiting the freedom of the press and the rights of disadvantaged categories, and compromising the independence of judiciary.

Based on the reasoning developed, the first hypothesis of the research can be formulated as follows:

H1. The democratic backsliding process, understood as an institutional dependent variable, can occur in political contexts characterized by the presence of populism, understood as an independent socio-cultural variable.

The second hypothesis goes deeper into the links between populism and democratic backsliding, investigating the role of the intermediate variable of polarisation:

H2. In socio-cultural contexts where populism favours a "pernicious" polarization, the greater intensity of division lines and the increase of social distrust towards institutions can

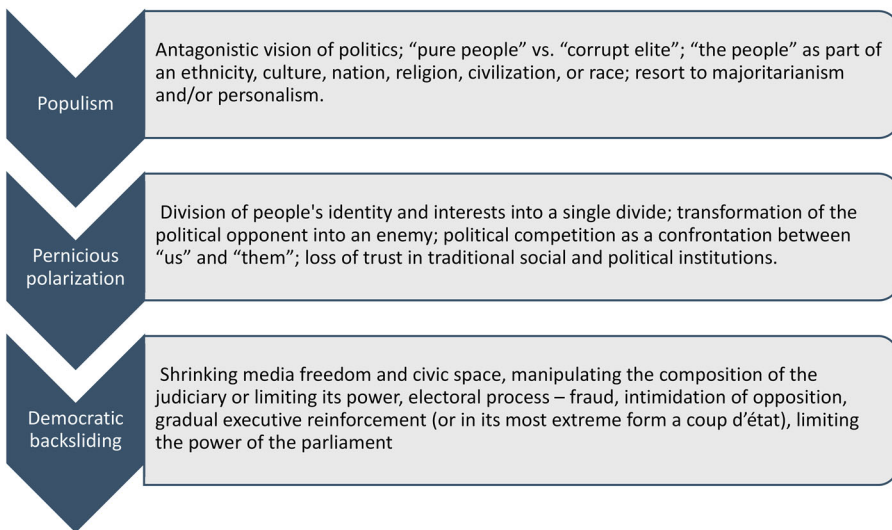


Figure 1. Analytical framework. Source: Own generation by authors.

concentrate a societal consensus which permits political actors to undermine political pluralism (Figure 1).

As we will see, this process has characterised the more or less gradual but equally intense institutional change in Hungary (within the EU) and in Tunisia (in the Arab world). The empirical part that follows will try to test the two hypotheses mentioned above – namely the impact of populism on democratic backsliding in general, and the central role of pernicious polarisation in conveying the effects of populism on institutional change – through an in-depth qualitative study of the corresponding socio-cultural and institutional contexts, followed by a comparative analysis of the two selected cases.

More specifically, the empirical analysis will take into consideration the polarised party dynamics which in Hungary and Tunisia set a context in which populism emerged and led to the progressive process of a pernicious polarisation of the socio-cultural landscapes, characterised by a stark loss of social trust, making societies accept measures against democracy. In this framework, the empirical part will analyse the overall context in which populism has emerged in both cases, and then focus on comparative data relating to the loss of trust in the main political and social institutions. Finally, the qualitative analysis will focus on the institutional changes that led Hungary and Tunisia from democracy to hybrid regime. The type of democratic backsliding expressed by the two countries will be reconstructed through an accurate analysis of the institutional tools to which Orbán and Saied resorted against opposition, judiciary and media: executive aggrandisement and electoral manipulation.

Democratic backsliding in Hungary: the impact of the socio-cultural variable on institutional change

Although scholars generally agree in attributing to Premier Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz the main responsibility for the gradual and systematic institutional change that

has brought Hungary below the democratic threshold, at the origin of the Hungarian democratic backsliding we find three events closely connected with the growth of populism and the consequent increase in polarisation of party competition: Hungary's accession to the EU, the economic crisis and the immigration question. These events were crucial to define the political-cultural framework within which the reform process was carried out.

From 1990 to 2010, the Hungarian party system showed a substantially bipolar competition characterised by turnover between the centre-left coalition, led by the Hungarian Socialist Party, and the centre-right coalition, at first led by the Democratic Forum and then by the Fidesz. Until the 2010 elections, the left-right division took a predominant – but not exclusive – socio-economic connotation, focused on alternative strategies of economic policy (social-democratic regulated capitalism vs. liberal-conservative intergovernmental deregulation).

After 2010 the nature of political competition changed radically: the disruptive electoral success of the Fidesz (and Jobbik), together with a marked shift to the political right, highlighted the presence of a new type of party competition. In this regard, we have to consider the strong impact of the three events cited above.

Following a chronological order, Hungary's entry into the EU in 2004, strongly supported by the Socialist Party, proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it represented an opportunity to cut ties with the past and consolidate the new democratic institutions on a domestic and international level; on the other, the economic policies introduced to adapt to European parameters have not achieved the desired benefits. Many Eastern European leaders, including Orbán, have claimed that the accession process and policy-making in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria aim to protect the economic interests of the larger states. Fear of being absorbed by the EU machine has fuelled the perception of feeling extraneous to the European project. The strengthening of new right-wing parties in both the East and the West has been a result of an increased perception of challenges that threaten the national community, such as immigration, foreign cultural influences, the tendency to fall into the dominant Anglo-Saxon model (in terms of language) and the influence of supranational organisations. In this perspective, the EU is seen as a threat to undermine state sovereignty and to slash the power of national governments (Pisciotta, 2016). Not surprisingly, Orbán's aversion to the EU had already manifested in 1998, during his first government, when he openly challenged Brussels, which demanded cuts in public spending, by proposing an economic programme to strengthen welfare, reduce the tax burden, grant subsidies to farmers and increase pensions.

It was precisely the Hungarian economic situation that armed the populist 'bomb', which definitively detonated after the 2008 economic crisis: the Socialist premier Ferenc Gyurcsány, in his 2006 speech, admitted he had hidden the real economic situation from the citizens and won the elections by lying. The impact of these words was devastating for the Hungarian Socialist Party and paved the way for the Fidesz's electoral success. The four successive elections (2010–2022) confirmed a trend of strengthening of right-wing and far-right parties and a consequent increase in polarisation – from 0.48 in 2004 and 2009 to 0.55 in 2014 – and diverted the political competition from socio-economic issues to identity-based cleavage (Polk et al., 2017; Vegetti, 2019). The spread of a pernicious polarisation dynamic affected the party alignment, increasing a local/

cosmopolitan and/or a nationalist/internationalist issue, merged into the competition between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics, and shifted the Hungarian party system from the socio-economic to ethnic cleavage (Evans & Whitefield, 1993), based on a single divide.

Consequently, the trend of institutional trust in Hungary from 1998 to 2014 showed the lowest levels during the Gyurcsány government, with a significant association with the unemployment trend (Boda & Micsinai, 2016) [Table 1](#).²

In this climate of mistrust towards the previous elite, the Fidesz, strengthened by its extended and prolonged majority, fomented the feeling of national identity towards both internal ethnic minorities and external pressures, creating an exaggerated sense of threat and spreading xenophobia (Vachudova, 2020). The protection of state sovereignty is perceived in marked contrast to a supranational institution such as the European Union and, at the same time, to reception policies for immigrants and the quota system imposed by the EU. This double closing mechanism – towards internal minorities, such as Roma and Jews, and towards immigrants, especially Muslims – has been translated into a constitutional reform in force since 2012 that explicitly attributes to the Christian religion the role of preserving and maintaining the integrity of the Hungarian nation. The role of the family was also exalted, based on heterosexual marriage, children and the protection of foetal life. The vision of a new Hungarian ‘illiberal’ democracy, as Orbán himself defined it, has taken the physiognomy of a closed system, both internally and externally, culturally homogeneous, in which we can find more trust in the army or police than in political parties, the parliament or media (see [Figure 2](#)).

The institutional reforms proposed by the majority have therefore been carried out in this cultural framework. Moving from Nancy Bermeo’s typology, Hungary’s democratic backsliding path relied on two institutional tools: executive aggrandisement and strategic manipulation. The first was the result of a series of institutional changes that undercut institutions of accountability and weakened political pluralism and party competition (Kovács & Tóth, 2011). Restrictions on media freedom, judicial autonomy and academic freedom were the most direct expression of executive aggrandisement.

Media. From 2010 to the present day, Fidesz reforms progressively caged the media in two directions: restructuring a centralised media authority and tightening penalties against fake news. The rearranging of the country’s media structure was carried out by a set of media regulations to establish a pro-government centralised media empire. In December 2010 the Hungarian parliament adopted a new press and media law which established the National Media and Communication Authority and the Media Council, an independent body of the Authority.³ The Act, comprising 230 articles, gave the Authority the power to impose a heavy fine on non-aligned media or even suspend its activity

Table 1. Comparing trust in Hungarian governments (1998–2014).

Period	Government	Starting value	Ending value
1998–2002	Orbán (1st)	72	56
2002–2006	Medgyessy/Gyurcsány	69	53
2006–2010	Gyurcsány/Bainai	55	21
2010–2014	Orbán (2nd)	56	53

Source: Zsolt Boda and István Micsinai, ‘Popular Support and Policy Making: The Dynamics of Trust in Hungary 1995–2014,’ Institute for Political Science – Centre for Social Sciences of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2016. Data revised by the authors.

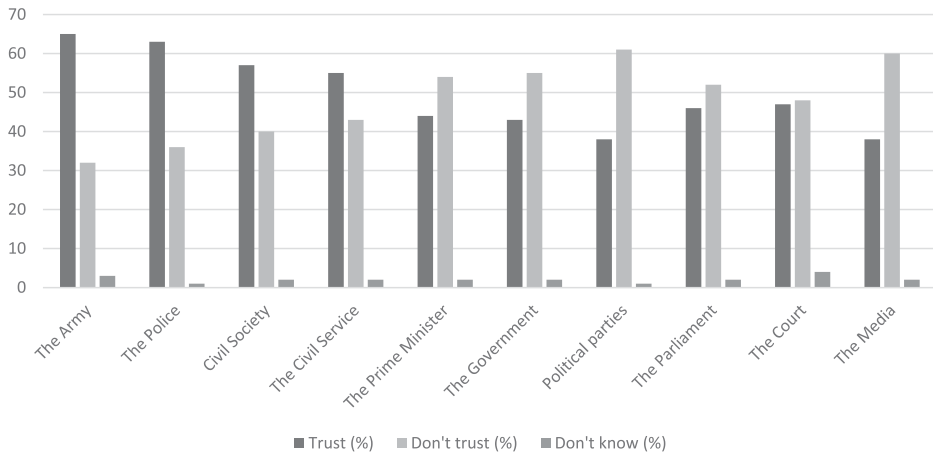


Figure 2. Social trust in Hungary (2017). Source: Center for Insights in Survey Research, November/December 2017. Data revised by the authors.

and oblige the media to reveal its sources. The Act also stipulated the establishment of the Public Service Foundation, controlled by the parliament of two-thirds majority, governing the radio, the two national channels and the news agency MTI. Taking advantage of the overwhelming majority of its second and third mandates, the government stepped up its control over the appointment and recruitment of journalists, and many presenters have been replaced by pro-government personnel (Biró-Nagy, 2017). In 2018 a new law recognised the Central European Press and Media Foundation, a gigantic conglomerate incorporating about 476 media outlets. In result, half of the Hungarian media was centrally orchestrated to facilitate the Fidesz's political goals⁴ while the opposition parties can only point to a very small number of their own, fragmented media publications. Moreover, in February 2021 the Hungarian National Media Council revoked the radio frequency of the opposition Klubrádió.⁵

Meanwhile in March 2020 the Hungarian Parliament voted to pass new legislation handing the Premier sweeping new powers to rule by decree and tighten his control over the country's media amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The new law criminalises the spreading of misinformation deemed to undermine the government's fight against the pandemic with fines and up to five years in prison. The Fidesz institutionalised control over the media through the fake news law.

Constitutional Court and judiciary. The new Hungarian Fundamental Law, entered into force in January 2012 without consultation with opposition parties and civil organisations, allowed for the Court's judgement to be bypassed by making it constitutional to enact laws that the Court deemed unconstitutional. Its jurisdiction was reduced to ruling on tax and budgetary matters, and the selection of judges was also changed by replacing retired judges with pro-Fidesz ones. The EU intervened in mandating the revision of the excess powers of the National Judicial Office, which would have had the power to reshuffle judges from their positions without the need for justification.⁶ The State Audit Office, the principal organ responsible for overseeing government spending, and the chief prosecutor are also controlled by the Fidesz. Moreover, the enacting of the Fundamental Law replaced the four ombudsmen's offices by a single commissioner for

fundamental rights (Bánkuti et al., 2021). In December 2021, however, the Hungarian Constitutional Court rejected Orbán's appeal against the EU for the management of migrant entry and reaffirmed the primacy of European law over national law.

Academic institutions. In 2017 the conflict between the Central European University (CEU) and the Hungarian government acquired an international dimension and involved the US State Department, various bodies of the EU, and several international academic and political institutions against Orbán and the Fidesz. The introduction of the 'Lex CEU' established new criteria for foreign universities seeking to operate in Hungary. These criteria provided a new agreement between the foreign university and the Hungarian government, reduced academic independence to conduct educational activity, and restricted the possibility for non-European universities to enter into cooperation with Hungarian ones. By the end of 2018, Orbán had succeeded in pushing the CEU out of Budapest and placed 11 universities under the control of a pro-Fidesz public foundation (Enyedi, 2018). More recently, he is planning to open a Fudan University in Budapest, showing closer Sino-Hungarian relations (Knight, 2021).

Moving on electoral manipulation, understood as a second tool of the government, Hungarian democratic backsliding was perceived as an attempt to systematically alter party competition for the Fidesz's advantage. In this regard, we must emphasise that the manipulation is strategic in that international and domestic observers are less likely to catch the 'fraud' (Bermeo, 2016). In 2012, the new Hungarian Fundamental Law reduced the number of National Assembly members from 368 to 199; the share of parliamentary seats elected in single-member districts was increased in favour of a more disproportional system; and the boundaries of the electoral districts were gerrymandered to the Fidesz's advantage. Indirectly, the government has swayed voters through biased media coverage; directly, it has packed the National Election Commission by replacing members with pro-Fidesz individuals. Additionally, the Fidesz-led Commission has the power to rule on proposals for referendum, legitimising the government's ability to manipulate public opinion on tricky issues (Bugarič, 2014). In short, the party has been able to take root in civil society and occupy the state at the same time (Metz & Várnagy, 2021). The last parliamentary elections in April 2022 confirmed this trend, highlighting the inability of the opposition coalition to compete on an equal footing [Figure 3](#).

Democratic backsliding in Tunisia: the impact of the socio-cultural variable on institutional change

Whilst Tunisia's current democratic backsliding is typically associated with Kais Saied's agency, it should be noted that civic space had already begun to shrink in 2018. Furthermore, Saied – at least initially – has also operated with large support in Tunisian society. We, therefore, need to understand the context in which backsliding has been made possible. Similar to Hungary, Tunisia has been characterised by a party system which has been bipolar insofar as it is chiefly polarised around the secular-religious divide despite an ongoing economic crisis and major socio-economic/centre-periphery cleavages in the country. This has led to a loss of social trust, as a result of which a populist president was elected and suspended Tunisian democracy.

When Tunisia transformed into a democracy, the civil society and media space liberalised and new parties were authorised, among them Ennahda, a party of Political Islam,



Figure 3. Overview of findings of Hungary case study in light of theoretical model.

which had been previously banned. In October 2011, it immediately won the elections for the Constituent Assembly, entering into a coalition with two smaller leftist parties. With the entrance of Ennahda in the political system, the religious-secular divide began to dominate the public debate which focused in particular on Sharia law, the personal status code and the ‘complementarity’ versus ‘equality’ of women and men. As Grami has pointed out, ‘Tunisian women have been transformed into symbols of the tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, feminism and Islamism’ (Grami, 2018, p. 32). Thus, gender was collapsed into this identity-based polarisation on the cultural axis (a political move which actually sidelined the multiple marginalisation of rural and poor women and men in the peripheral interior regions of the country (Khalil, 2014)). Tunisia is no exception in the Arab region in terms of this polarisation. As Wegner and Cavatorta have pointed out, the most important cleavage in the region in political systems is not class – but identity-based, evolving around the Islamist-secular divide on the role of religion in politics and of women in society. They find that ‘there are virtually no differences in economic attitudes’ (Wegner & Cavatorta, 2019) between Islamist and secular parties when it comes to economic/development approaches, concerning both globalisation and democracy.

As polarisation accelerated on the identity front, in the political system Ennahda and the secular Nida Tounes party became dominant antipodes. 2013 was a decisive year where polarisation was evident in contentious street politics in both Egypt and Tunisia. In the July/August period, Egypt witnessed a military coup which removed President Mohammed Morsi (Muslim Brotherhood), the Rabaa massacre in which hundreds of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood were killed, and the re-installment of a fierce autocracy. In Tunisia, the same period oversaw a compromise between Ennahda and the ‘networks of so-called secularists and old regime elites’ in what Boubakeur has called a ‘bargained competition’ (Boubakeur, 2016) or Brumberg and Salem a ‘consensus-based power-

sharing system' (Brumberg & Salem, 2020). Facilitated by the Quartet,⁷ as well as international actors such as the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a technocratic caretaker government took over. In January 2014, the constitution was proclaimed and in the parliamentary elections in October of the same year, Nida Tounès won – and entered into a coalition government with Ennahda.

Whilst this helped to evade an Egyptian scenario in Tunisia, problems remained. First, whilst there clearly is more inter-elite trust thanks to trust-building platforms than in other cases such as Egypt (Hassan et al., 2020), this consensus-based power-sharing is still indicative of the fact that parties did not fully trust each other as in competitive democratic systems (Brumberg & Salem, 2020). Second, this particular political system did not represent the marginalised and their quest for socio-economic rights which had driven the uprisings in the first place. No structural reforms were pursued to tackle economic challenges, to create a real transitional justice process and to stop endemic corruption. As a result, the marginalised sectors of society – particularly also the young – were increasingly alienated from the political system. This can be seen in the table and figure below which evidence (similar to the case of Hungary) that trust is high only in the armed forces, whilst trust in the government, parliament and the legal system, as well as interpersonal trust, has been constantly falling. As for trust between parties in the political system, the Afrobarometer indicates that Tunisians perceive an increase in polarisation in the political party system. It shows that in particular in 2013 and again from 2020 onwards, about 60% of Tunisians responded with (strongly) agree to the statement that 'political parties create division and confusion; it is, therefore, unnecessary to have many political parties in Tunisia'.⁸ This division, as Wegner and Cavatorta (2019) have shown, evolves on the religious-secular axis [Figure 4 Table 2](#).

From 2016 onwards, the country has been shaken by contentious politics – waves of protests, sit-ins and strikes in the peripheral interior regions against unemployment, corruption and austerity measures. As Meddeb has pointed out, the number of protests climbed from 4,416 in 2015 to 8,713 in 2016 to 9,091 in 2019 (Meddeb, 2020).

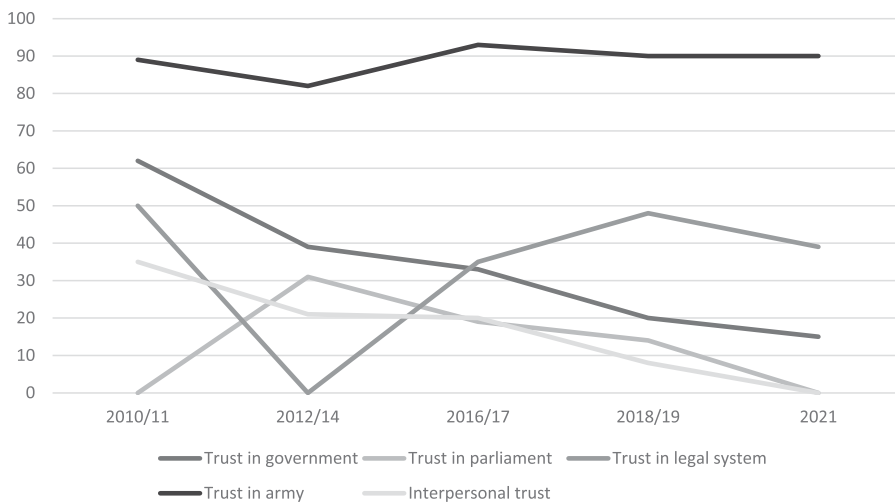


Figure 4. Social trust in Tunisia. Source: Arab Barometer Wave II-VI⁹.

Table 2. Comparing trust in Tunisian governments (2010–2021).

Period	Governments (Prime Minister(s) / President)	Value
2010/11	Essebsi / Mebazaa	62
2012/14	Jebali, Laarayedh / Marzouki	39
2016/17	Chahed / Essebsi	33
2018/19	Chahed / Essebsi	20
2021	Mechichi, Bouden / Saied	15

Source: Arab Barometer Wave II-VI.

Populism began to thrive in the municipal elections in 2018 and the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2019. As Brumberg and Salem have highlighted, ‘Dissatisfaction has created openings for antisystem leaders and parties. Drinking from the well of disillusionment, in 2019 these rising leaders offered Tunisian-style variations of populism’ (Brumberg & Salem, 2020, p. 119). In the last election campaign, as an International Crisis Group report has pointed out, national sovereignty has been a ‘leitmotif’ that has responded to real grievances such as the mingling of Gulf states (Qatar versus the UAE) in the political system or pressures by the EU and the IMF to adopt austerity measures. Gender, again, played a key role in this as government measures promoting gender equality were denounced

as an attempt by the political class – in concert with the West, notably France and the EU – to alter Tunisians’ lifestyle, and in particular to destroy the family unit, the last space of social solidarity from which to confront increasingly difficult living conditions. (International Crisis Group, 2020)

The 2019 elections indeed revealed a ‘Tunisian sociocultural map that was more polarized and fragmented than ever’ (Brumberg, 2019), including right-wing religious populist parties such as al-Karama which entered the parliament with 21 seats. Kais Saied – an outsider not associated with the old or new political elites – won on a populist election campaign for the presidency, in which he used the corrupt elite/pure people distinction, evident in the slogan ‘the people want’.

This rise in populism and loss of social trust appeared together with democratic backsliding in Tunisia from 2018/19 onwards. Since 2011, Tunisia has transited into a liberal form of democracy, but from the very beginning some key challenges remained, particularly in terms of the independence of the judiciary, continuing endemic corruption, deficiencies in socio-economic rights and the representation of minorities (gender, LGBTQI). With the establishment of the constitution in 2014, Tunisian democracy entered into a consolidation phase which was, however, rather short-lived.

From 2018/19 onwards, the civic space – a highly vibrant stronghold of Tunisian democracy since the Jasmine revolution – experienced attempts to shrink it. In response to the popular mobilisation across the country, security forces increasingly and violently cracked down, including through mass arrests. The intimidation of journalists, particularly by security forces, increased. Furthermore, a bill was introduced to parliament which proposed making online defamation a criminal offense. Parliament also passed a new law establishing the National Registry of Institutions for civil society organisations, obliging them to register and to provide extensive information on their activities.

The institutional onslaught on democracy was performed, however, by President Kais Saied in the context of an ongoing economic crisis which was sharpened and reinforced

by the COVID-19 emergency to which state authorities largely failed to respond. As COVID cases skyrocketed and demonstrations against the government swelled, the president suspended parliament and sacked the prime minister without prior consultation of the latter or the head of parliament as provided by the Constitution. In September, he announced his intention to rule by decree; in December he extended the suspension of parliament until new elections (postponed to December 2022); in February 2022, he dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council. In March 2022, the parliament convened online to repeal presidential decrees, in reaction to which Saied has dissolved the parliament. Thus, the president moved extremely rapidly in *strengthening the executive against parliament and the judiciary*. Due to the different political system (semi-presidential, not parliamentary as in Hungary), Kais Saied pursues these moves not through a strong party as Victor Orbán does; Saied has no such backing and moves by decrees.

Beyond executive strengthening, Kais Saied is also engaging in *electoral manipulation*. Whilst parliamentary elections have been postponed to December 2022 against the position of the parliament which is urging to hold them in July in line with constitutional provisions, the president argues that he is seeking to promote direct democracy. In early 2022 he held a national consultation, in which, however, only 10% of citizens participated, and in July 2022 he presented a referendum on constitutional reforms as a landslide victory even though less than one-third of the voters participated. Furthermore, the president has also begun to change the composition of the electoral commission.

Coming to *civil society, academic freedom and the media*, Saied has not (yet) moved in the same concerted manner as in the case of parliament and the judiciary. Indeed, academics and civil society – including the powerful trade union UGGT – have been debating the president's moves rather freely, whilst protests against the de-facto coup have happened in the public space, including by various opposition parties from Ennahda to the Free Destourian Party. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the pressure on opposition parties, media and civil society is constantly augmenting and not boding well. Waves of arrest since the coup included high-profile politicians such as former minister of justice Nourredine Bhiri, arrested in January 2021. Shortly after the de-facto coup, Al Jazeera was evicted from its Tunisia office and the director of the national TV channel was replaced by Saied, but other Tunisian private radio and TV stations continue their work. However, the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists has noted 'a heightened arrest campaign of journalists and activists, most of whom oppose President Kais Saied' (Ltifi, 2021). Furthermore, in March 2022, the head of the National Bar Association, Abderrazak Kilani, was also briefly detained by a military court [Figure 5](#).

Comparing Hungary and Tunisia: different contexts, similar paths?

The democratic backsliding in Hungary and Tunisia, which we have qualitatively discussed in this article, is also quantitatively captured by key international democracy indexes. The reports of Freedom House, International IDEA and the Economist have found a clear and progressive deterioration of the quality of democracy in Hungary, leading in 2019 to its entry into the hybrid zone. This deterioration of the Hungarian democratic rating involves the electoral process and pluralism, political rights and civil liberties, government function, political participation and political culture. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) notes a decrease in the Hungarian score from 7.53 in 2006 to 6.5

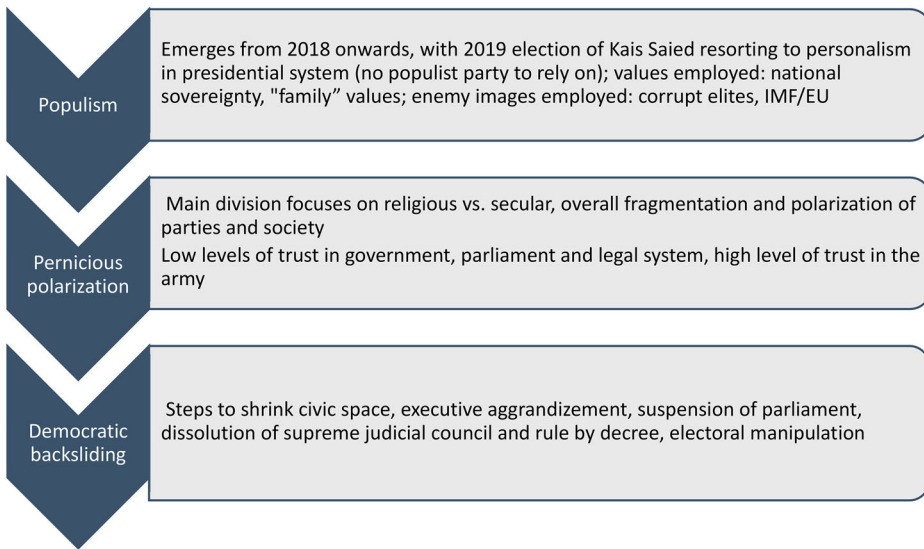


Figure 5. Overview of findings of Tunisia case study in light of theoretical model.

in 2021. Tunisia has shown progressive democratic backsliding since 2018, first in the civic space and, since 2021, in an ongoing assault against key institutions of democracy, including the 2014 constitution, parliament and the judiciary. The EIU notes a decrease in the Tunisian score from 6.31 in 2014 to 5.9 in 2021 [Figures 6 and 7](#).

Regarding our research hypotheses, it emerges clearly in both case studies that the deterioration of democratic institutions occurs in the presence of a political context dominated by populist forces and characterised by a pernicious polarisation and a climate of increasing distrust toward political institutions. Whilst the factors of territorial

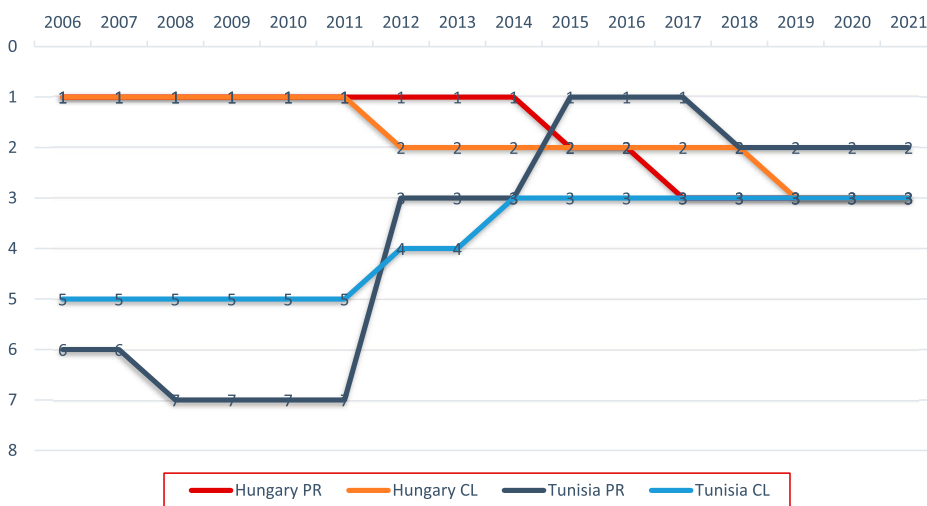


Figure 6. Freedom House Index for Hungary and Tunisia for political rights (PR) and civil liberties (CL). Source: Freedom House (2022).

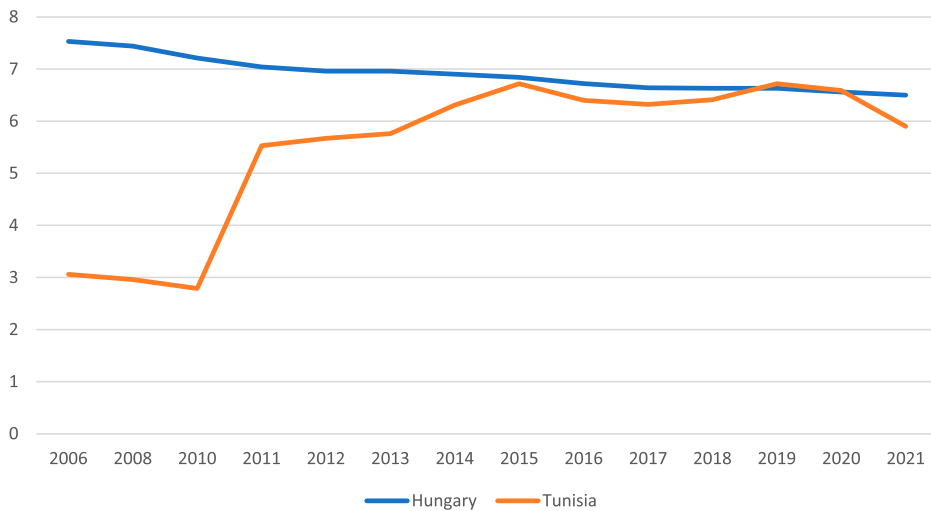


Figure 7. Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index. Source: Economist Intelligence Unit (2022).

consolidation and ethnic homogeneity are held constant, the comparative analysis evidences the presence of similar trends – populism, pernicious polarisation and democratic

Table 3. Most-different-case-studies design of Hungary and Tunisia.

Variables	Hungary	Tunisia
Held constant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Territorial consolidation Stable borders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Territorially consolidated with some areas of limited statehood at the borders
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethnic homogeneity Strong Magyar majority with small Roma, Jewish and German minorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arab majority population with small Amazigh, Jewish and Christian minorities
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional context Democracies European Union Stable border areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autocracies Revisionism of Gulf States Conflicts in neighbouring countries/ unstable border areas
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural context Western influences Catholic majority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arab influences Islamic majority
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political context Form of government and party system Parliamentary system with strong populist party (Fidesz) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Postcolonial context Semi-presidential system with absence of a strong populist party
Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Populism Resort to majoritarianism Traditional values: Catholicism, sovereignty, nationalism, heterosexual marriage Enemy images employed: previous elite, immigrants, EU, LGBTQI community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resort to personalism Values employed: national sovereignty, 'family' values Enemy images employed: corrupt elites, IMF/EU
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pernicious polarisation Europeanism vs. nationalism Low levels of trust in political parties, government, parliament, judiciary and media High level of trust in the army and police 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Religious vs. secular Low levels of trust in government, parliament and legal system High level of trust in the army
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democratic backsliding Delegitimization of opposition Executive aggrandisement Electoral manipulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Steps to shrink civic space Executive aggrandisement Electoral manipulation

Source: Own generation by authors.

backsliding – in very different regional, cultural, political and institutional contexts [Table 3](#).

The ways in which Orbán and Saied led their countries towards a hybrid regime took place in the presence of similar competitive dynamics. Starting with Hungary, we observed that a bipolar competitive party system was unresponsive to socio-economic grievances, resulting in the rise of populism which has used polarisation along the cultural axis as a political strategy. In a context of declining social trust, the government could proceed with measures against liberal democracy in a gradual but constant way. In Tunisia, the rise of populism and polarisation along the cultural axis emerged together with a new polarised political party system which acted based on consensus to prevent sliding into conflict. As a result it was unresponsive to socio-economic grievances and led to the emergence of populism which polarised the socio-cultural landscape alongside identity parameters. Once a populist president was in power, in a context of declining social trust, he proceeded with measures against liberal democracy.

Thus, in both countries, the assertion to power of populist forces appeared in conjunction with a polarised party competition. Enemy images have been employed in a process in which societies became increasingly polarised along the socio-cultural axis, leading to increasing social distrust of established democratic institutions which set the context that enabled democratic backsliding. Populists have been crucial in both cases to instrumentalize polarisation along the socio-cultural axis and to pursue measures against democracy in a context of declining social trust.

Thus, one of our major additions to the literature on populism and democratic backsliding is to introduce the intermediate factor of pernicious polarization to explain the connection between the loss of social trust in traditional political forces and the consequent alteration of political competition in a single divide that aggregates consensus on new actors who propose a radical change and a strong government rather than democratic pluralism.

The trends of majoritarianism and personalism, which marked the respective strategies of Orbán and Saied, paved the way for hybrid regimes.

Conclusions

This article has proposed a comparative analysis of two different systems to explain the impact of populism in democratic backsliding, underlining the importance of polarisation and the loss of social trust in enabling this process. Comparing the cases of Hungary and Tunisia, we can see that populism, pernicious polarisation and democratic backsliding in both countries have taken similar pathways despite the differences in the regional, political, institutional and cultural context. Informed by our findings, we conclude this article with observations about the durability of the democratic backsliding in both Hungary and Tunisia.

Orbán's paternalist approach to protect the Hungarian people and the nation's interest moves from the idea that citizens should participate actively in political life through a top-down process in which decision-making is placed in the hands of a strong government and social participation is issued (see referendum) and controlled by the leadership to gain formal legitimacy for its actions (Oross & Tap, 2021). Although referenda were used as a tool to legitimize the interests of the dominant party, public opinion did not react as Orbán expected: in October 2016 the referendum against the migrant quota

system established by the EU did not reach the quorum; as neither did the April 2022 referendum prohibiting the presentation of any content on homosexuality to minors. Orbán's recent electoral success, which won a two-thirds majority for the fourth consecutive time, however, highlights the difficulty opposition forces are having in overcoming the obstacles posed by electoral reform and the control of media, political and cultural space. The 'majority populism' that prevails in the Hungarian decision-making process seems to reinforce the hybrid nature of the regime and only a significant change in electoral orientation can defeat it. This is a problem that Orbán himself has sensed, choosing to divert the attention of the electorate to security and his policy of non-intervention in Ukraine. Probably, in the short and medium term this strategy could work, but cracks are already glimpsed with the referendum defeats, the escalation of conflict with the EU and the economic recession, which could act as a detonator.

Unlike Orbán, Saïd does not have the parliamentary power to pursue practices as the ruling Hungarian party could and thus has achieved his measures by presidential decree. Furthermore, Tunisia, democratised in a period when the global regression of democracy had already begun, was the only Arab state which transitioned to democracy with the Arab uprising and which consolidated its democracy despite the counter-revolutionary agenda being driven forward by key regional powers – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In 2021, Saïd still seemed to enjoy rather broad public support: according to surveys at the end of 2021, he had the support of 77% of the electorate (Fasanotti, 2022). However, 2022 evidenced low interest on the part of the population in the online national consultation for a new constitution and the referendum which Saïd has paternalistically tried to employ. Furthermore, demonstrations against the president are frequent and growing, particularly as a deteriorating economic situation might also become a detonator in Tunisia. The price of wheat had already increased by 80% in 2021, with a further 44% rise since the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Meddeb, 2022). Unlike Orbán, Saïd does not have a populist party which supports him, nor has he been able to 'institutionalize' a hybrid regime to the same extent. As a result, he remains much more dependent on institutions such as the army than Orbán does.

Indeed, the response to the Ukrainian crisis highlights how populism and the attenuation/continuation of a pernicious polarisation could prove to be a decisive factor for or against democracy. Regarding Hungary, its position has been recently condemned by the European Parliament as 'deliberate and systematic efforts of the Hungarian government against the EU values', so much so that Hungary has been officially defined as a 'hybrid regime of electoral autocracy'. Reacting to this, the resilience of the Hungarian regime could find a strong motivation for its perpetuation in sovereignty and a nationalist 'rally round the flag'. In Tunisia, instead, amid rising inflation, the president has concluded a deal with the IMF, despite his own populist rhetoric of 'getting rid of traitors' who deal with 'foreigners'. Protests and mobilisation against Kais Saïd are on the rise, testing the resilience of his hybrid regime.

Notes

1. The effects of the Ukrainian crisis do not affect the country's borders.
2. Hungarian Comparative Agendas Project (2019), <http://cap.tk.mta.hu>.

3. Hungary's new media regulation, accessed February 24, 2022, https://nmhh.hu/dokumentum/2791/1321457199hungary_new_media_regulation_eng_web.pdf.
4. Orbán has a regular interview spot on Kossuth Rádió on Friday mornings.
5. Euractiv, "Hungarian Media Law", February 24, 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/topics/hungarian-media-law/>.
6. Council of Europe, Venice Commission, "Hungary: Independence of the Judiciary", accessed February 24, 2022, https://www.venice.coe.int/Newsletter/NEWSLETTER_2012_02/1_HUN_EN.html.
7. The Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT); the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts (UTICA); the Tunisian Order of Lawyers; and the Tunisian Human Rights League.
8. Afrobarometer, "Tunisia", 2022, <https://afrobarometer.org/countries/tunisia-0>.
9. Arab Barometer, 2022, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Daniela Huber is Assistant Professor at Roma Tre University, Scientific Advisor for the Istituto Affari Internazionali, and Editor of *The International Spectator*.

Barbara Pisciotta is Associate Professor of Political Science at the Roma Tre University, where she teaches International Politics, Democratization Processes and Democracy and Digitization.

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