

Chapter .

Understanding Populism:

Collective Narcissism and the Collapse of Democracy in Hungary

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Abstract

The last few years witnessed a worrying rise in populist and often demagogue political parties and movements. There are many different causes for the rise of populism, but a common feature is fundamental change in the mental representations of some voters about the political domain - how people think about politics. Explaining the causes and consequences of this mental re-orientation is an important task for applied social psychology. This chapter discusses the concept of collective narcissism, emphasizing positive group identity and advocating an illusory sense of national greatness as a potential explanation for the rise of anti-liberalism in a number of countries. These processes will be illustrated through the recent history of Hungary, which has emerged as a prime exponent of illiberalism in Europe. The paper will discuss some of pre-requisites for collective narcissism, such as historical adversity, and the absence of psychological values that emphasize individualism, independence and trust. Empirical survey data and linguistic analyses will be presented, illustrating psychological mechanisms that promote collective narcissism.

Introduction

“If you are a Hungarian, your basic state of mind is the feeling of betrayal.” (Viktor Orbán, Prime minister of Hungary, to an interviewer of the Austrian Kleine Zeitung, May 2019).

The last few decades saw the emergence of populist, anti-liberal political movements in a number of countries that have taken political scientists and psychologists by surprise (Gusterson, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Zakaria, 2016). The rejection of the liberal democratic model is puzzling and calls for an explanation, considering that by every objective criterion Western liberal democracies have produced previously unimaginable levels of freedom, justice, fairness, equality, prosperity, tolerance and decency (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013; Pinker, 2018; Rosling, 2019).

Given the indisputable superiority of the western liberal model to illiberal systems, why do we now see massive numbers of voters turning their backs on such a successful and well-trying formula? This turn to illiberal populism is occurring at the same time when millions of would-be migrants worldwide desperately seek to *leave* authoritarian, illiberal nations and try to join in the successful nations of Western *liberalism*. The recent rise of populism and illiberalism occurred in both highly developed Western countries (USA, Britain, France, Austria) and less developed nations (Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Russia). Applied social psychology may offer some explanations, and this is the objective of this chapter.

Applied social psychology and political behaviour.

We know at least since Plato’s seminal treatise on the ‘Republic’ that all political systems rise or fall depending on their goodness of fit to the mental requirements of their citizens. Could there be some underlying, common psychological mechanism that can help to explain the rise of a narcissistic and often dishonest candidate like Trump to the presidency of the United States, the surprising decision by British voters to leave the EU against their own manifest interests, or the

dramatic turning away from the liberal democratic model in such historically challenged countries like Russia, Poland, Turkey and Hungary?

This chapter will argue that there are some common psychological features to these events. In particular, collective narcissism may explain the growing receptivity of voters to misleading but highly effective populist propaganda not otherwise seen since the days of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin (Albright, 2018). Research suggests that collective narcissism—a belief that one’s own group is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, but that it is not sufficiently recognized by others—lies at the core of many populist beliefs (for a review, see Golec de Zavala, Dyduch-Hazar, & Lantos, 2019). Indeed, we will present evidence that collective narcissism predicts the endorsement of populist beliefs cross-culturally; including the support towards Trump’s presidency in the US (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018), the Brexit-campaign in the UK (Golec de Zavala, Guerra, & Simão, 2017), or the national conservative Law and Justice party in Poland (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2017). Recent studies suggest a similar trend in Hungary (Lantos, 2019). In particular, this discussion will focus on the case of Hungary, a country that has undergone perhaps the most dramatic collapse of democracy in the last ten years, under Viktor Orbán and his populist Fidesz government. The role of government propaganda in exploiting collective narcissism and feelings of national inferiority will receive special attention.

The link between mental representations and political behaviour.

There is a veritable tradition in social and political psychology of analyzing the mental representations of particular nations or cultures, reaching back to Wundt’s classic work on ‘*Voelkerpsychologie*’ (Borgida, Federico, & Sullivan, 2009; Forgas, 1980; Wundt, 1911). Humans have a strong tendency to believe in various shared fictional narratives about reality (Harari, 2014), and almost any symbolic narrative can be effective in influencing political behaviour (László, 2014).

Psychologists and historians have long recognized that in the course of history, nations form historical narratives that serve a number of integrative, psychological and identity functions (Hobsbawm, 1992). Human history offers countless examples for implausible and often bizarre yet enduring fictional belief systems defining entire historical periods and societies, despite the complete lack of evidence to support them (Harari, 2014; Koestler, 1959).

For example, for centuries many Meso-American cultures believed that ripping out the beating hearts of thousands of captives in a single day was absolutely essential to ensure a good harvest, and keep the sun-god happy. In the West, belief in witchcraft and the ritual burning of humans for the sake of their eternal souls was long considered essential to protect the community from evil influences. Barely distinguishable branches of Christianity fought a life or death struggle over hundreds of years, just as Sunni and Shiite Muslims continue to do today.

Many of the fundamental beliefs of our Christian civilisation are also entirely fictional and indeed, absurd (virgin birth, resurrection, biblical miracles, transubstantiation, etc). We should see collective narcissism in this light: believing in fictional narratives extolling the virtues of the ingroup is not at all unusual, but rather, a universal feature of human cognition (Rosling, 2019). These narratives often capitalise on narcissistic tendencies about the assumed superiority of the ingroup, and are capable of undermining even well designed democratic systems (Myers, 2019). Our objective of analysing collective narcissism as a feature of populism falls within this research tradition.

Collective narcissism

Collective narcissism can be defined as an enduring belief that our own group (the ingroup) is unfairly treated and insufficiently recognised, despite having exceptional qualities that should entitle it to privileged treatment. Collective narcissism is characterised by a deep sense of

resentment that the ingroup's unique qualities are not adequately appreciated (Golec de Zavala, 2018; Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Eidelson, & Jayawickreme, 2009).

Historically, the concept of narcissism has psychoanalytic origins. The possibility that entire groups, collectives and even nations can become narcissistic, marked by an exaggerated sense of self-importance was first articulated by social scientists inspired by psychoanalytic ideas, and associated with the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1997). For example, Fromm (1964/2010) understood narcissism as self-admiration and over-evaluation of one's own subjective perspective also marked by a "blindness" to objective reality.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Adorno (1997) thought that collective narcissism involves attributing to the ingroup the characteristics its members admire but lack in themselves. Both authors suggested that collective narcissism arises especially in situations that undermine self-worth and life-satisfaction and often results in intergroup hostility. However, it is important to distinguish between the classical psychoanalytic approach, which generally sees narcissism as a pathological manifestation of individual, repressed psychodynamic conflicts, and the contemporary understanding of collective narcissism that makes no such assumptions of intrapsychic origins (Cichocka, 2016).

Rather than understanding collective narcissism as a dynamic, unconscious and pathological state, we view collective narcissism as the empirical manifestation of an interrelated set of social psychological beliefs and ideas about the ingroup that mirrors the way individual narcissists also tend to think about themselves vis-à-vis others.

Collective narcissism and political beliefs.

Propaganda often exploits collective narcissism. For example, recent Hungarian state propaganda claims that Hungary (actually a secular country with low levels of church attendance) is actually a bastion defending Christian values against the twin onslaughts of Muslim migration, and

godless western decadence as exemplified by the EU (see also Figure 6). Martyrdom, suffering and lost battles (Hungary, Poland, Serbia) offer as fertile a ground for collective narcissism as do past victories and military might (Russia). Religious imagery can be especially powerful (Ginges, 2014). Both Poles and Hungarians (apparently unconcerned by these conflicting claims) firmly believe that the Holy Virgin has a special love and interest in them, and will intercede on their behalf should the need arise. Claims about exceptional national moral characteristics such as honesty, decency, fairness, kindness, or hospitality are also often employed to support collective narcissism (Žemojtel-Piotrowska et al., 2019). The distorted interpretation of national history in support of collective narcissism is a recurrent feature of most dictatorial state propaganda (Skarżyńska, Przybyła, & Wojcik, 2012).

Collective narcissism and ingroup favouritism.

Collective narcissism is closely related to Tajfel's original explanation for ingroup favouritism in the minimal group experiments (Tajfel & Forgas, 1981). According to this view, intergroup discrimination is driven by the universal need for positive self-worth, achieved through maximising positive ingroup distinctiveness. This argument is supported by findings that allocations that maximise ingroup / outgroup *differences* are often preferred to allocations that simply maximise ingroup *rewards* (Crocker & Park, 2004; Emmons, 1987; Tajfel & Forgas, 1981).

Collective narcissism is also closely related to well-known (and in our evolutionary past, highly adaptive) motivational tendencies for self-inflation, self-justification and self-serving distortions, which can be extended to how one feels about one's ingroup (Putnam, Ross, Soter, & Roediger, 2018; Zaromb, Liu, Páez, Hanke, Putnam, & Roediger III). As Golec de Zavala et al. (2019) conclude, "As much as people can demand special recognition and privilege for themselves (as individual narcissists do), they can claim the same for the groups they belong to (as collective narcissists do). ...the intergroup consequences of collective narcissism often parallel the

interpersonal consequences of individual narcissism: hostility, exaggerated reactions to negative feedback and criticism, or lack of empathy” (pp. 38).

The political consequences of collective narcissism show a clear parallel with the interpersonal consequences of individual narcissism. These include excessive hostility towards perceived detractors, unreasonable responses to criticism, and an absence of understanding or empathy for outgroups (Bibó, 1991; László, 2014; Myers, 2019). Collective narcissism has been a common feature of fascist ideologies: in the 1930’s Germans, Italians and Japanese all believed in their innate racial and cultural superiority and deservingness (Albright, 2018). Collective narcissism is also characteristic of various Jihadist movements, who see their sacred religion and culture as inherently superior to others (Ginges, 2014; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009).

The measurement of collective narcissism.

The construct of collective narcissism can be measured using tests such as the Collective Narcissism Scale, adapting psychological measures of individual narcissism to a group level. For example, items in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Emmons, 1987; Raskin & Terry, 1988) and narcissism-related items in the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory-III (Millon, 2006) were re-written to refer to group-related beliefs rather than the individual (e.g., “I insist upon getting the respect that is due to me” was transformed to “I insist upon my group getting the respect that is due to it”; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). People who score high on the Collective Narcissism Scale believe that their ingroup’s importance is not sufficiently recognized by others and that their ingroup deserves special treatment. They insist that they deserve, and must receive special recognition and due compensation of past collective traumas.

Collective narcissism and populism in the USA and Britain

Both the Trump campaign, and the 2016 Brexit referendum used slogans designed to mobilize those with collective narcissistic beliefs, emphasizing that the intrinsic value of the national

ingroup has been undermined, and that it is time to restore the ingroup's greatness. Collective narcissists compensate for their own low self-esteem by identifying with a high-status ingroup (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019b), they are hypersensitive to any threat to the group's image, and may resort to hostility in response to any perceived threat (Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013; Golec de Zavala, Peker, Guerra, & Baran, 2016).

Collective narcissism and Trump's election.

American citizens who felt that the social status of their reference group (white males especially), and the international status of their nation was challenged were easily persuaded by a rhetoric promising to prioritize "*America First*" and '*Make America great again*'. This prediction was supported in a national representative survey assessing the views of American adults before and after the elections. Those who scored high in collective narcissism had significantly more favorable views of Donald Trump, and were also more likely to vote for him during the elections (Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018). The study controlled for a number of demographic variables, including age, gender and education level, as well as other variables related to voting preference, such as national identification, authoritarianism and economic dissatisfaction. Although these factors were also linked to support for Trump, apart from partisanship, collective narcissism proved to be the strongest predictor out of all measured variables.

Another study conducted on a nationally representative sample of US adults, assessed both before and after the 2016 presidential elections, focused on the question of conspiracy theories (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018; van Prooijen, 2019). Collective narcissism has previously been related to a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, specifically about mysterious outgroups ("them") with malicious intent, aiming to undermine the ingroup ("us", Cichocka, Marchlewska, & Golec de Zavala, 2015; Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012; van Prooijen, 2019). The 2016 US elections were consistently surrounded by conspiratorial news about voter fraud and foreign

interventions (Samuelsohn, 2016). This national survey found that collective narcissism was significantly related to belief in conspiracy theories both before, and after the 2016 election (Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018). This was the case even when controlling for demographic and other related variables, including political knowledge and national identification.

Collective narcissism and the Brexit vote.

The outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum can also be interpreted through the mobilization of collective narcissists. Some British citizens felt that the EU Parliament was undermining the political status and autonomy of their country. To retaliate, they voted to leave the EU. The threat from outgroups was a key feature: The Trump campaign focused on building a protective wall on the border of Mexico, while the Brexit campaign made the uncontrolled settlement of EU citizens a core issue. This raises the question: is xenophobia related to populist votes?

Beyond demographic factors such as age, economic status, or education level (e.g., Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2016), fear of immigrants also played an important role in Brexit. A recent study examined the roles of collective narcissism, social dominance orientation, and right-wing authoritarianism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017), and found that all three of these constructs independently predicted xenophobia and the Brexit-vote, even when demographic factors are controlled. The study concluded that the endorsement of these three related concepts predict support for leaving the EU for different reasons. Collective narcissism, unlike social dominance orientation or right-wing authoritarianism, most directly relates to concerns over the image of the national group, its purity, grandiosity and uniqueness. The study further showed that it is the endorsement of collective narcissistic beliefs rather than national identification or national attachment that played a key role in support for Brexit, with only collective narcissism predicting the fear of immigrants.

Another study investigated the attitudes towards the UK referendum seven weeks prior to the vote (Marchlewska et al., 2017). This research found that reading about the long-term economic

disadvantages that the EU caused for the UK led to an increase in endorsing collective narcissistic beliefs, compared to a control condition. Narcissism was not increased for participants who read about short-term economic disadvantages. These findings suggest that the typical messages disseminated by populist movements emphasising long-term threat and decline may be particularly effective in increasing the collective narcissistic beliefs of their citizens. Overall, the evidence suggests a significant link between collective narcissism and the tendency to support populist movements cross-culturally (Figure 1).

A very similar political climate has also been emerging in Poland, since the national-conservative Law and Justice party has been elected in 2015. Collective narcissism was a significant predictor of the support for the party in the parliamentary elections, as well as for voting for Jaroslaw Kaczynski in the presidential elections (Marchlewska et al., 2017). Collective narcissism has further been related to conservatism (Golec de Zavala & Mole, 2019) and to variables related to xenophobia, including anti-Semitism (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2012).

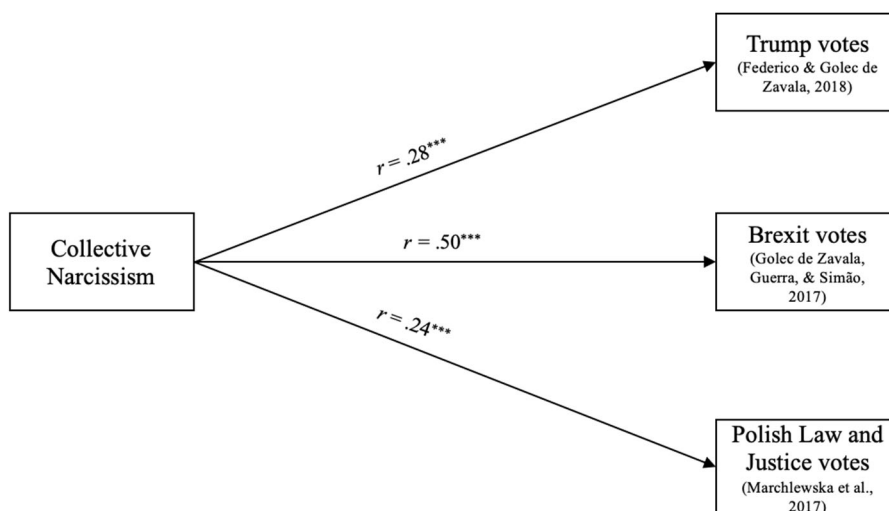


Figure 1. The link between collective narcissism and the tendency to support populist causes internationally. Note. *** $p < .001$.

The case of Hungary: Social and historical context

Hungary presents a particularly interesting case for understanding the role of collective narcissism in political behavior. Hungary today is no longer a democratic country, and is in the unique position of being the only EU member country classified as only partially free by Freedom House (2018). Since their election in 2010, the ruling autocrat, Viktor Orbán and his party have proceeded to systematically dismantle democratic institutions and eliminate the usual checks and balances that limit executive power. They framed a new constitution entrenching the power of the ruling party, instituted a new electoral law that practically guarantees perpetual power to them, made the prosecutorial system subject to party control, and brought most of the media under single party rule. In the last eight years, Hungary has fallen from the 23rd to the 87th place on the international list of press freedom – below Sierra Leone (Majtenyi & Miklosi, 2013; Scheppele, 2013; Toth, 2013).

In an extraordinary speech on July 26th, 2014, Mr. Orbán openly declared that Hungary is turning its back on liberal democracy. Praising autocratic Asian states such as Singapore, China, Turkey and Russia, he stated that “we have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing society, as well as the liberal way of looking at the world... because liberal values today incorporate corruption, sex and violence” (Orbán, 2014). The Hungarian Prime Minister often contrasts ‘decadent’ liberal democracies with the ‘vitality’ of Eastern dictatorships, preferring the “vitality of the work based economy of the healthy, Eastern peoples as against the tired, immoral, Western citizens subjugated by finance capitalism” (Tölgyessy, 2013, p.2). As the Washington Post claimed in its editorial on August 26, 2014, what Mr. Orbán offers “is little more than the same authoritarian nationalism practiced by thugs and charlatans throughout the 20th century – including Hungary’s pro-Nazi world War II regime.... Mr. Orbán has excluded himself from the democratic West; he and his government should be treated accordingly.”

Large scale corruption is a key feature of the system, fuelled by EU funds that are routinely stolen by cronies of Orbán. The barely literate childhood friend of the Prime Minister, a gas fitter by

trade, has become the richest man in Hungary. Orbán's son-in-law has been identified by Olaf, the European Union's anti-corruption agency as having engaged organised crime in stealing EU funds, but the Hungarian prosecutors did nothing. While the appearance of democracy is maintained, in reality institutions no longer functions as intended as loyal party apparatchiks are installed to run them. Criticism from the European Parliament, the Venice Commission, the European Commission and more recently, following the Sargentini report, the commencement of EU sanctions against Hungary under Section 7 of the EU constitution had no discernible effect.

The all-encompassing and unrelenting government propaganda appealing to narcissistic beliefs played a crucial role in this process (Albright, 2018; see also Figure 2). The carefully manipulated sense of nationalism, grievance and collective narcissism of Fidesz voters provides a crucial component necessary to understand how the subjective mental representations or 'life worlds' in Lewin's terms of citizens have been shaped. Narcissistic historical narratives played a critical role in this process, as we will argue below.

The role of historical traumas

For those unfamiliar with Hungarian history, recurring traumas provide fertile ground for collective narcissism, as this brief overview will suggest. Hungarian tribes settled in the Carpathian basin in 898, adopted Christianity and formed a unified state by AD 1000. In the middle ages, Hungary was a rich and important country, possessing some of the richest gold and silver mines of the continent (Lendvai, 2004). However, in 1526 the expanding Ottoman Turkish empire defeated Hungary, resulting in 150 years of Turkish occupation, followed by centuries of Habsburg dominance. Revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries failed, producing a national identity characterized by feelings of victimhood, betrayal and injustice.

Whereas in Western Europe the nation and the state evolved together, in countries like Hungary (as in Poland) the symbolic 'nation' was traditionally mobilized *against* states of

oppressive external occupation (Bibó, 1986). Thus, a romantic notion of sacred and inviolable nationalism has assumed an emotional significance unparalleled elsewhere (Lendvai, 2012). The dominant ideological hallmarks of the Enlightenment, such as individualism, liberalism, and the emergence of an autonomous and independent bourgeoisie were late to reach Hungary, and whatever bourgeoisie emerged was repeatedly decimated by wars and the holocaust (Bibó, 1986; Lendvai, 2011; 2012).

Hungarian language was a powerful cause of cultural isolation, but paradoxically, also a salient source of distinct cultural identity. After the defeated 1848 revolution, in 1876 a historic treaty with the Habsburgs created the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, producing unprecedented economic, political and cultural progress until the first world war. After the lost war, Hungary suffered probably its greatest national trauma, the loss of two-thirds of its historical territory in the Trianon peace treaty (Mihalyi, 2010). The interwar years saw a bloody but short-lived communist dictatorship, followed by an autocratic, nationalistic, right-wing regime under Horthy as Regent in the 1920s and 1930s. In pursuing territorial restitution, Hungary also finished the second world war on the losing side, and after the war it became a communist dictatorship for 45 years under Soviet military occupation.

After the collapse of communism in 1989, more traumas followed the transition to a free-market democracy (Andorka, Kolosi, Rose, & Vukovich, 1999; Kolosi & Tóth, 2008; Lendvai, 2012; Mihalyi, 2010). In the absence of domestic capital, many firms ended up in the hands of a small elite, while large sections of the population experienced absolute, or relative impoverishment. Parties typically pursued short-term, opportunistic agendas, crucial economic, education, health service and administrative reforms have been neglected, and the national debt reached unmanageable levels (Andorka et al., 1999; Inotai, 2007; Tölgyessy, 2013). Since 2008, Hungary has fallen further behind the more developed Western European nations (Inotai, 2007; Lendvai,

2012; Mihalyi, 2010). Strikingly, many older voters now report nostalgia for the former dictatorial, but certainly more egalitarian communist regime (Figure 2).

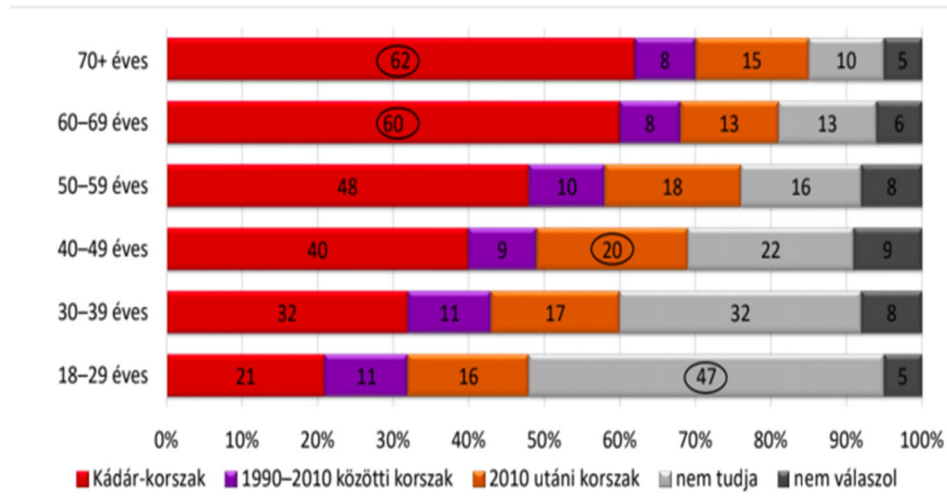


Figure 2. Nostalgia for the communist regime (in red) by age group in a recent national survey (after Szabó & Gerő, 2019).

This traumatic history over the last 500 years left an indelible mark on the Hungarian national psyche, producing a deep sense of grievance and a narcissistic sense of national identity. Many Hungarian voters can still be characterized as living in a pre-modern age, comfortable with authoritarianism and strong leaders, and holding on to an archaic sense of romantic, nationalistic and ethnocentric sense of identity (Kelemen, 2014; Lendvai, 2004). In a recent survey, 67% of upper-middle class Hungarians were satisfied with the current autocratic regime, and the majority also evaluated positively the earlier dictatorial communist regime (Figure 2).

In summary then, Hungary had an uncommonly traumatic and to this day, poorly comprehended history. Recurring traumatic experiences call for a narrative explanation, and frequently these narcissistic narratives were constructed around concepts of injustice, betrayal, powerlessness and victimhood (Bibó, 1946; László & Ehmann, 2013; László & Fülöp, 2010).

Hungarian national identity: Attitudes, values and romantic nationalism

In contrast with most Western democracies, Hungarians live in a mental world that is characterized by pessimism, grievance and a close-minded cognitive style (Keller, 2000), supported by a poorly elaborated understanding of the causal forces that shaped their nation's history (László, 2014). For example, Csepeli (2018) recently examined how Hungarians, as distinct from neighbouring countries, view themselves and their aspirations in the texts of their respective national anthems (see Table 1). While neighboring countries have national anthems that strongly emphasize positive, optimistic and dynamic characteristics, the dominant phrases in the Hungarian national anthem are predominantly negative, emphasizing victimhood, despair, misfortune and injustice.

| NEIGHBOUR COUNTRIES | HUNGARY |
|---|---|
| Pleasure, Joy, Health, Glory, Life, Lightning, Dawn, Freedom, Love, Luck, Pleasure, Faith, Trust, Wealth, Pride, Solidarity, Victory, Competition, Happiness, Ability, Strength, Heart, Faith, | Sin, Atonement, Defeat, Yoke, Slavery, Strife, Ill fate, Suffering, Grave, Anger, Thundering clouds, Corpses, Funeral urn, Freedom, Fugitive, Sword, Sadness, Despair, Blood, Ocean of flames, Heap of stones, Groans of death, |

Table 1. Comparison of imagery in national anthems ((After Csepeli, 2018, TedX talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up9ry4AHbdY>)

The same preoccupation with loss, failure and defeat is also reflected in Hungarian national holidays, which with few exceptions celebrate traumatic rather than glorious historical events (Victims of Communism Day, Victims of Holocaust Day, Anniversary of the defeated 1848 revolution, Trianon Memorial Day, etc. cf. Csepeli, 2018).

Data from the World Value Survey also confirms that Hungarians are more close-minded, insecure, and less trusting than Western nations (Keller, 2010). Unlike most Western countries that over-justify their political systems (Jost & Banaji, 1994), Hungarians displayed pessimism and negativity in a large-scale representative national survey conducted by Kelemen (2010; N=1000, and N=100 lawyers; Table 2). Strikingly, despite this pessimism, almost 80% agree that Hungary is the nicest place in the world (question 8), consistent with the kind of romantic, fictional nationalism identified by Bibó (1991), László (2014), and Lendvai (2004). The narcissistic belief that Hungary is an ideal place seems especially common in the older age-groups (Figure 3).

Table 2. Hungarian attitudes: Disenchantment and pessimism (after Kelemen, 2010)

| | Representative | Lawyers (N=100) |
|--|----------------|-----------------|
| Democracy will not work as it should in Hungary for several decades. | | |
| disagree | 21% | 29% |
| Agree | 79% | 71% |
| People lived better before the change in the political system. | | |
| disagree | 24% | 40% |
| Agree | 76% | 60% |
| I think Hungarian society is honest. | | |
| Disagree | 70% | 49% |
| Agree | 30% | 51% |
| Political parties do not have the interests of the country in mind. | | |
| disagree | 18% | 29% |
| Agree | 82% | 71% |
| A strong political leader should be in control to solve the problems of the country. | | |
| disagree | 16% | 19% |
| Agree | 84% | 81% |
| In Hungary, everybody has an equal chance to be wealthy and happy. | | |
| Disagree | 76% | 69% |
| Agree | 24% | 31% |
| Social conditions get worse year by year. | | |

| | | |
|---|-----|-----|
| disagree | 14% | 22% |
| agree | 86% | 78% |
| For me, Hungary is the nicest place in the world. | | |
| disagree | 22% | 18% |
| agree | 78% | 82% |

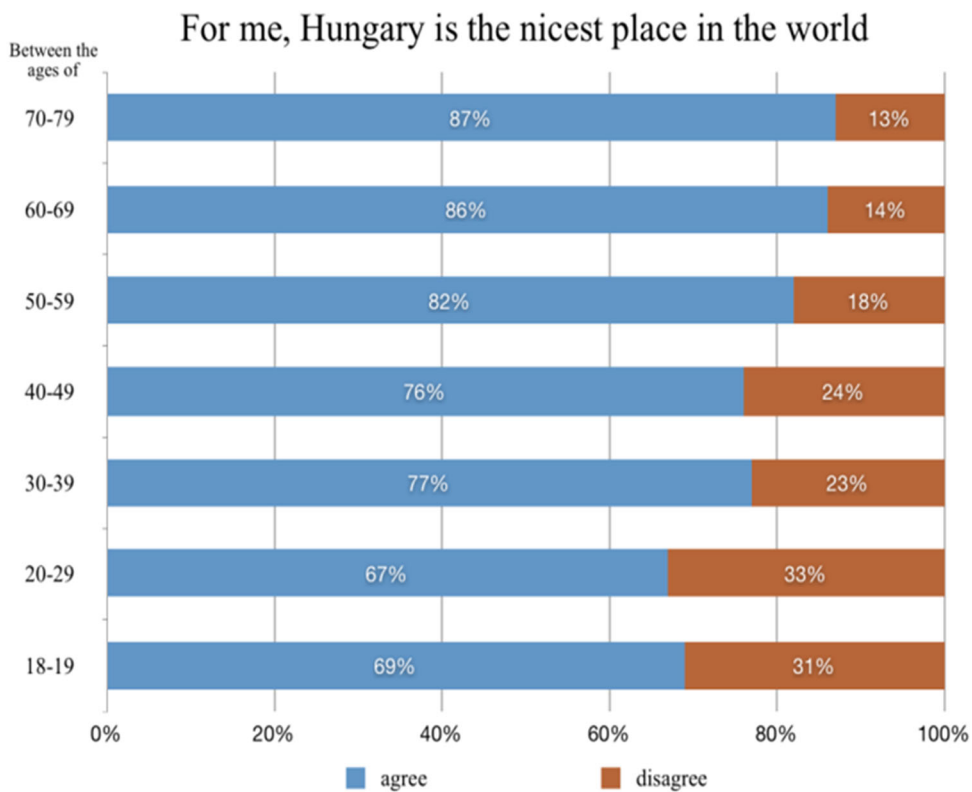


Figure 3. Endorsement that Hungary is the nicest place in the world by age group (after Kelemen, 2010)

Hungarians (and also Poles) score lower on just world beliefs than do citizens of Western nations (Sallay & Krotos, 2004; Dolinski, 1996), and report lower perceived justice and trust in the establishment (Kelemen, 2010). A ‘system derogation’ bias indicating a stable psychological tendency to perceive socio-political systems as inherently bad, unfair, unjust and illegitimate may

also serve important defensive psychological objectives. If the system is fundamentally unfair, then individual failures can be safely attributed to a bad system (Dolinski, 1996).

In previous work based on a national representative sample we also carried out a multiple regression analysis using political party preference, left-right political orientation, age, gender, residence, educational level, income and economic situation to predict system derogation. Those with a right-wing party preference ($b = -.101$, $SE = .024$, $\beta = -.200$, $p < .001$), lower income ($b = .057$, $SE = .014$, $\beta = .186$, $p < .001$) and in a worse economic situation ($b = -.097$, $SE = .030$, $\beta = -.140$, $p = .001$) showed the strongest system derogation compared to voters of left-wing parties and those with higher income ($R^2 = .105$, $F(8, 579) = 8.53$, $p < .001$) (Forgas, Kelemen, & László, 2014). A pervasive tendency for system derogation can have corrosive political consequences, undermining people's trust in, and commitment to a democratic system, and increasing the willingness to abandon democracy in favour of autocratic alternatives. The apparent acceptance of endemic corruption may be another consequence of system scepticism. These results indicate that Hungarians have low expectations and take a highly sceptical and derogatory view of their socio-political system and see the world as a fundamentally unjust and unfair place. Paradoxically, these attitudes coexist with an exaggerated sense of their nation's value, a pattern consistent with a narcissistic view of the ingroup (Bibó, 1986; Tölgyessy, 2013). Analyzing the narrative language used when describing historical events offers an empirical method for analyzing such narcissistic beliefs in 'folk psychology', as the next sections will show (Allport, 1924).

The language of narcissism

Recent textual analyses of school books, literary works and everyday conversations by László (2014) and his colleagues offer an illuminating empirical insight into how Hungarians think of themselves, documenting a recurrent pattern of victimhood, distrust of foreigners, and

romanticised ideas of an exaggerated sense of national identity and destiny (László, 2005; 2013; 2014). Using a computerized content analytic method (László, 2013), a series of studies analyzed Hungarian texts in history textbooks, historical novels, newspaper texts and everyday spoken narratives by respondents from a stratified sample of 500 participants.

For example, the words used to describe historical events can be revealing about perceptions of **agency**, or the opposite of it, victimhood (László, 2013; László, Szalai, & Ferenczhalmy, 2010). When analysing the language used in describing Hungarian historical events in school books, and folk narratives, there is an overwhelming tendency for Hungarians to describe themselves as passive and outgroups as agentic and dominant in producing historical events (Figure 4), indicating a victim mentality and the inadequate cognitive elaboration of historical traumas.

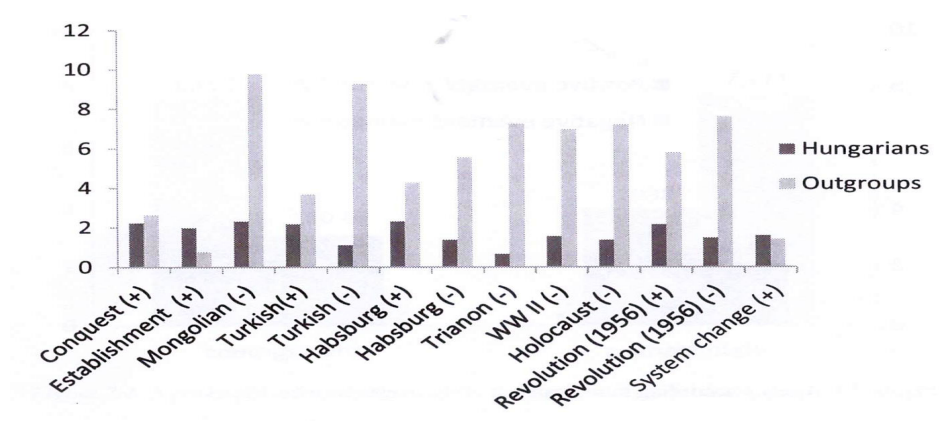


Figure 7.1 Agency in school books

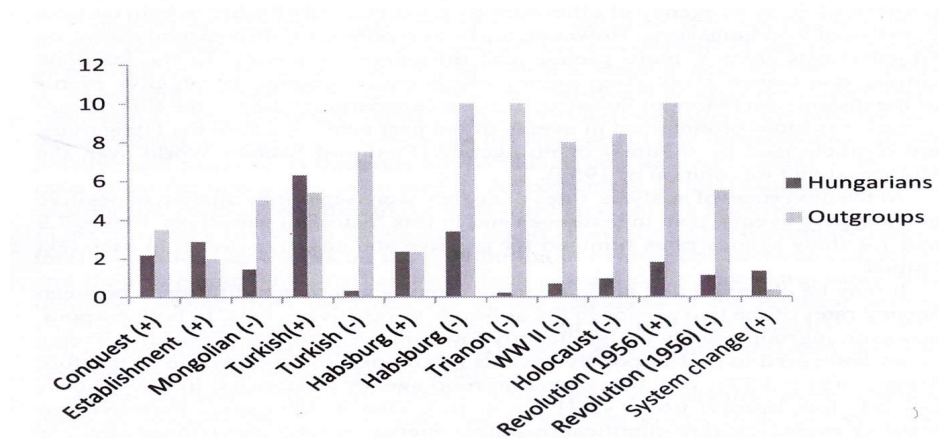


Figure 7.2 Agency in folk history

Figure 4. The use of narrative words indicating agency for 13 key historical events in (1) schoolbooks (top) and (2) in folk narratives.

When positive and negative historical events are considered separately, it becomes even more noticeable that Hungarian historical narratives both in school books and folk narratives emphasize victimhood and lack of agency, and frame outsiders as far more agentic and influential than Hungarians (Figure 5).

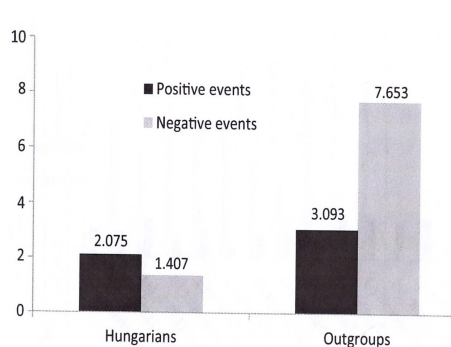


Figure 7.3 Agency according to the valence of the events in school books

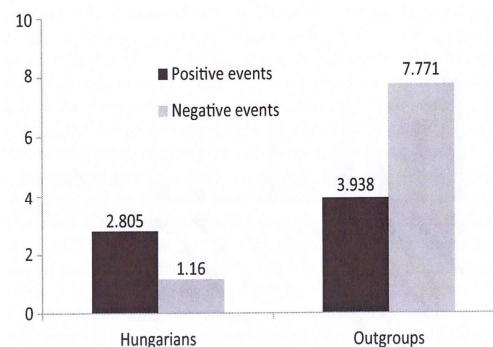


Figure 7.4 Agency according to the valence of the events in folk history

Figure 5. Use of narrative words indicating agency to describe positive and negative historical events in (1) school books (left) and (2) folk narratives.

The **emotional reactions** expressed in historical narratives are also a critical aspect of ‘folk psychology’ (Allport, 1924; László & Fülöp, 2010). Analyses of the descriptions of historical events used in textbooks, literary works and personal narratives by László (2014) identified 57 emotion types with 918 occurrences. *Sadness* and *hope* were the two emotions that most distinguished Hungarians from other nations. When comparing the pattern of the major emotions categories (sadness, disappointment, fear, hope and enthusiasm) between Hungarians and outgroups, László and Ehmann (2013) concluded that “the results portray a vulnerable Hungarian national identity and a long-term adoption of the collective victim role... The emotional and cognitive organization of the Hungarian national identity as it is expressed in historical narratives shows a deep attachment to the glorious past and a relatively low level of cognitive and emotional elaboration of the twentieth

century and earlier traumas... suggesting that this historical trajectory is not the most favorable ground to build an emotionally stable identity” (pp. 216-217). This kind of affective predisposition is broadly consistent with the concept of collective narcissism.

Despite the perceived lack of agency, but consistent with the mindset of collective narcissism, Hungarian **self-evaluations** were consistently higher for the ingroup versus outgroups. Hungarians evaluated themselves positively for desirable events but were not held responsible for negative events in folk stories and textbooks. Such inflated self-evaluations are particularly striking, absolving Hungarians of blame even for events where they were clearly the aggressors and perpetrators (such as the holocaust, lost wars, etc.). The dominant historical narratives promoted by the current regime clearly exploit this tendency (e.g., the Germans as solely responsible for the holocaust), thereby absolving Hungarians of all responsibility. This pattern is consistent with what Bar-Tal (2000) described as the identity state of collective victimhood. Experiences of traumas, losses, repressions and failures make it problematic to maintain beliefs in the group as competent, strong and capable, and so threaten its integrity and survival. Collective victimhood (as does narcissism) function as protective psychological devices, maintaining positive group-identity by emphasizing moral superiority, refusing responsibility, avoiding criticism and evoking sympathy from other groups (László, 2014).

Based on his extensive empirical linguistic research, László (2014) concludes that “The emotional and cognitive organisation of Hungarian national identity is profoundly tied to... a distant glorious past and a subsequent series of defeats and losses... the characteristic emotions of the Hungarian national identity are fear, sadness, disappointment, enthusiasm and hope... Hungarian’s sense of agency is very low (p. 95). Further, Hungarians’ emotional landscape also “includes inflated self-evaluations accompanied by the degradation of outgroups” (p. 96), a pattern indicating collective narcissism and collective victimhood (Bar-Tal, 2000). This narcissistic narrative

“provides moral justification... and ensures a sense of moral superiority,... legitimizing aggression” (p. 96). Such an emotional disposition, as a direct result of historical traumas, also produces an incapacity to empathize with the suffering of another group. It is analogous to narcissism of self-centeredness (Laszlo, 2014). These psychological processes were earlier also recognized by Bibó (1991), who suggested that recurring historical traumas distort the perception of reality, producing political illusions and generating a pathological state that he termed ‘political hysteria’.

Collective narcissism and political preferences in Hungary.

Finding external enemies and scapegoats is an essential aspect of collective narcissism. As was the case in the UK prior to Brexit, there has been an increasingly shrill anti-EU propaganda campaign in Hungary. This included billboards plastered across the country advertising the need to “*send messages to Brussels*”, including requesting more respect to Hungarians (see Figure 6). The objective of Hungarian state propaganda was to exploit the sense of victimhood and narcissism and turn it into political capital to support the legitimacy for the ruling party. In particular, the shameless promotion of misleading conspiracy theories (e.g., depicting George Soros, a philanthropist, as the manipulator of anti-Hungarian EU policies, and Juncker as his puppet) is unprecedented in an EU country (Figure 6).

Rewriting history is also a hallmark of Hungary’s autocratic regime. Numerous new ‘historical institutes’ were financed by taxpayer funds, spreading propaganda absolving Hungarians of all responsibility for lost wars and the holocaust. Another propaganda strategy is the creation of absurd stories about ancient virtues and glories. For example, Magyar Hirlap, the Fidesz daily, often publishes articles by ‘historians’ suggesting that Hungarian civilisation preceeded the Egyptian, Hungarians invented writing and much else besides, and these ‘facts’ are not sufficiently recognized because of a conspiracy of enemies and detractors. Rather than inviting well deserved ridicule, such

theories find fertile ground. For example, many Hungarian localities now proudly display locality names in runic writing (claimed to be an ancient Hungarian invention), as a visible affirmation of national superiority (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Examples of Hungarian government propaganda: Top left: ‘Our message to Brussels: we demand respect for Hungarians! Top right: ‘Let’s not allow Soros to have the last laugh!’ Bottom left: ‘Let’s not give in to blackmail: Defend Hungary’ Bottom right: ‘You have a right to know what Brussels is planning for you’. Below: Runic writing of locality names.

By all accounts, this systematic exploitation of a wounded sense of national identity and collective narcissism has been highly effective. A recent study investigating two convenience samples of Hungarian adults ($N_1 = 274$; $N_2 = 285$) recruited through social media confirmed that collective narcissism was significantly related to support for the populist Fidesz party and to support for Viktor Orbán (Lantos, 2019). Specifically, participants scoring higher on collective narcissism were more likely to vote for Fidesz and Orbán in the 2014 and 2018 national elections. Higher narcissists also held more conservative views, had more favourable views about Hungary, and more negative views about the EU (Figure 7).

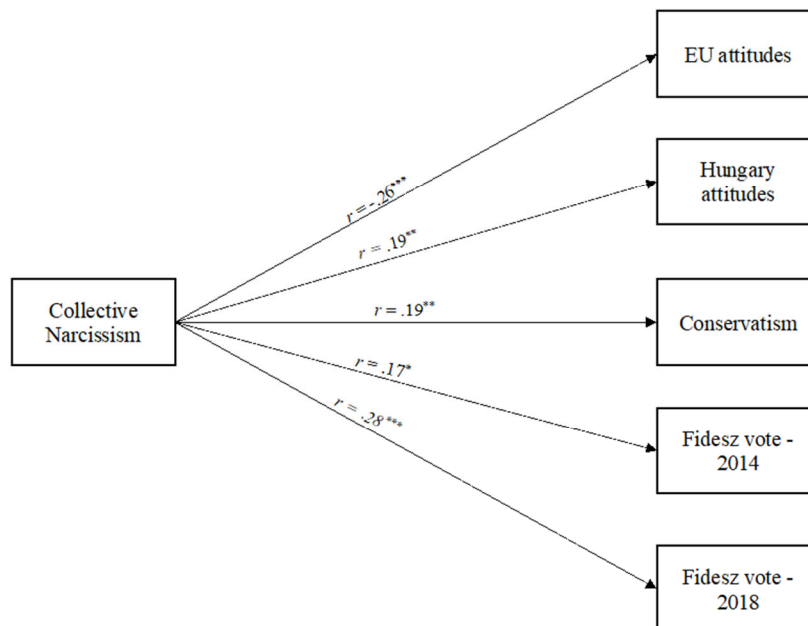


Figure 7. The relationship between collective narcissism and populist beliefs in Hungary in 2016.

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Further data, collected just before the 2018 Hungarian national elections, replicated these results (Lantos, 2019, Study 2, see Figure 8). Collective narcissism was again associated with conservatism, support for Orbán and Fidesz during the last, 2014 national elections, and the intention to vote for Orbán and Fidesz in the 2018 national elections. This study also measured relative deprivation, the perception of having lost out economically compared to others during the last five years. Those scoring higher on the collective narcissism scale also reported greater relative deprivation (Figure 82).

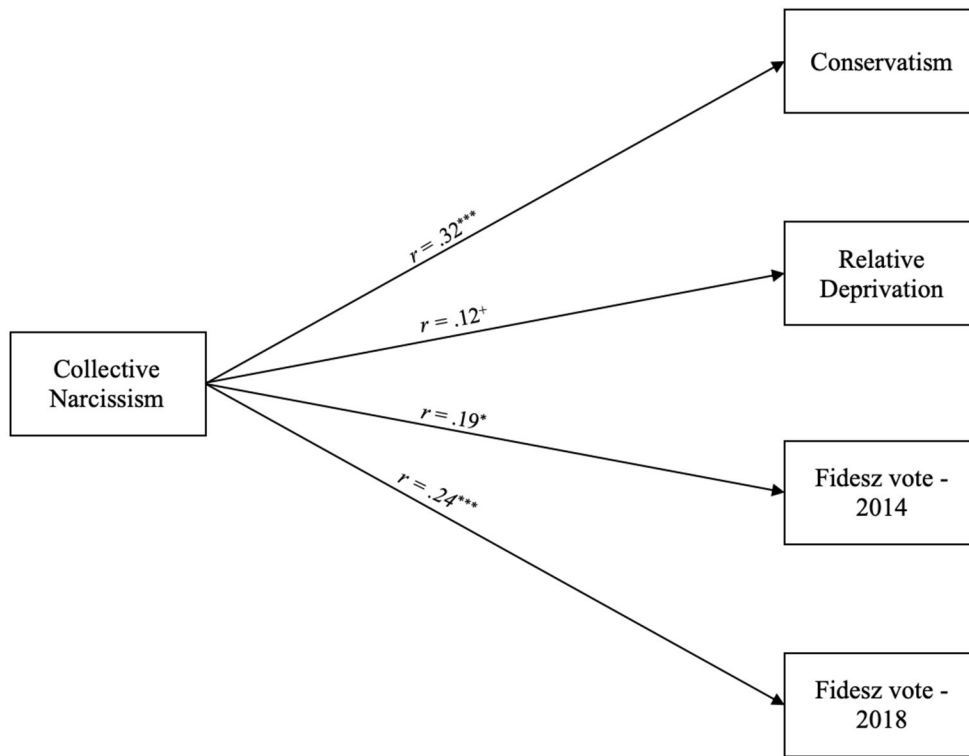


Figure 8. The relationship between collective narcissism and predictors of populism in Hungary in 2018. Note. $^+p = .057$. $^*p < .05$. $^{***}p < .001$.

These results are not surprising in light of the anti-EU atmosphere propagated by the government. In a similar vein to the Brexit and Trump campaigns, the Hungarian government also emphasises the threat of immigrants for Hungarian culture and identity, a message used to generate negative attitudes to the EU. The inability of the EU to convincingly neutralize concern about the problem of uncontrolled migration has clearly played into Orbán's hands. As a result, the real or perceived threat of migrants has remained the centrepiece of xenophobic government propaganda for the last few years, creating an atmosphere of fear and hate, and turning Hungary into one of the most xenophobic countries in Europe. Research has confirmed an increase in hate speech and hate crime following the 2016 campaigns of Trump in the US (Levin, Nolan, & Reitzel, 2018), Brexit in the UK (Agerholm, 2016), the Fidesz party in Hungary (Wallen, 2018), and also following the election of the ultra-conservative Law and Justice party in Poland (Flückiger, 2017).

There is thus a clear pattern showing that there is a strong relationship between collective narcissism and the support for populism across several nations, as summarised in Table 3. We also conducted a meta-analysis to review these results presented here using Meta-Essentials (see Table 4, Suurmond, van Rhee, & Hak, 2017). The analysis suggests that as expected, there is a clear and significant relationship between collective narcissism and populism across all studies reported, with a moderate positive overall correlation of .30.

Table 3. Summary of findings regarding the relationship between collective narcissism measured on the Collective Narcissism Scale (CNS) and support for populist political causes in the USA, Britain, Poland and Hungary

| | Source | Study | N | Country | CN measure | α | Populism me |
|-----|--|--------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. | Federico & Golec de Zavala, 2018 | - | 1730 | USA | 5-item CNS | .83 | Trump vote |
| 2. | Golec de Zavala, Guerra, & Simão, 2017 | 1 | 280 | UK | 5-item CNS | .87 | Brexit vote |
| 3. | Golec de Zavala, Guerra, & Simão, 2017 | 2 | 226 | UK | 5-item CNS | .88 | Brexit vote |
| 4. | Lantos, 2019 | 1 | 183 | Hungary | 5-item CNS | .83 | Orbán vote in |
| 5. | Lantos, 2019 | 1 | 225 | Hungary | 5-item CNS | .83 | Orbán vote in |
| 6. | Lantos, 2019 | 2 | 160 | Hungary | 5-item CNS | .75 | Fidesz vote in |
| 7. | Lantos, 2019 | 2 | 214 | Hungary | 5-item CNS | .78 | Fidesz vote in |
| 8. | Marchlewska et al., 2017 | 1 | 1007 | Poland | 5-item CNS | .87 | Law and Justi |
| 9. | Marchlewska et al., 2017 | 1 | 1007 | Poland | 5-item CNS | .87 | Jaroslaw Kacz |
| 10. | Marchlewska et al., 2017 | 2 | 497 | UK | 9-item CNS | .91 | Brexit support |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|-----|-----|------------|-----|---------------|
| 11. | Marchlewska et al., 2017 | 3 | 403 | USA | 5-item CNS | .88 | Trump support |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|-----|-----|------------|-----|---------------|

Note. * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Meta-analytical summary of the relationship between collective narcissism and support for populist movements across the 10 studies summarized in Table 3.

| N | k | r | T | Q | I^2 |
|------|-----|-----|-----|----------|-------|
| 5929 | 11 | .30 | .10 | 62.97*** | 84% |

Note. N = average sample size per study $\times k$. k = number of studies. r = summary correlation coefficient. T = an estimate of the standard deviation of the distribution of true effect sizes, under the assumption that these true effect sizes are normally distributed. Q = heterogeneity. I^2 = proportion of unexplained variance.

Conclusions

In this chapter we explored the links between psychological representations and political behavior, and more specifically, the role of collective narcissism in the rise of populism across a number of nations. We focused especially on the case of Hungary, a country that has progressed perhaps furthest in actively embracing a populist, nationalist and illiberal political agenda. In order to gain a deeper understanding of these developments, we considered some of the historical, psychological and cognitive factors that may explain why democracy seems such a fragile institution in some newly democratic countries, such as Hungary.

The cultivation of a collective sense of national grievance and victimhood paired with a narcissistic over-evaluation of the ingroup has been a recurring strategy used by populist leaders to generate political legitimacy (Albright, 2018; Golec de Zavala et al., 2013; 2016). Understanding this sense of vulnerable national identity goes some way towards explaining why populist and

nationalist propaganda has been so effective in places like Hungary. Claiming that Hungary is fighting a life-and-death struggle for recognition, defending Christianity and resisting colonization by the EU and international conspirators may seem absurd, but such claims do resonate with significant portions of the Hungarian electorate. This is only possible because their understanding of history has been coloured by historical narratives and metaphors that emphasize victimhood, exploitation, and conspiracy against a small but valiant people (see also Landau & Keefer, 2014; van Prooijen, 2019).

For democracy to flourish, it is important that individual citizens have a trust in the ‘system’, and think and act in an independent, autonomous, confident, individualistic and assertive manner as citizens. Countries such as Hungary suffered from a traumatic past that provides few reasons for citizens to derive genuine positive identity and distinctiveness from their flawed history. Centuries of oppression produced a pessimistic victim mentality, and the ideology and mental habits of robust individualism have not had a chance to establish themselves. Representative national samples showed that Hungarians are characterized by a high degree of system scepticism and system derogation, and general beliefs in an unjust world (Kelemen, 2010; Kelemen et al., 2014; Mészáros, Szabó, Forgas, & László, 2019). Linguistic analyses of historical narratives confirmed that these attitudes are rooted in historical experiences, demonstrating a lack of agency and victimhood, a lack of ability to take responsibility for historical traumas, paired with a defensive, unrealistically positive and poorly elaborated evaluation of the ingroup and nation (Keller, 2010; Kelemen, 2010; László, 2014).

These data are consistent with what we may call a ‘narcissistic mindset’. We also presented direct empirical evidence showing that higher scores on the collective narcissism scale significantly correlate with right-wing ideology and a preference for the ruling authoritarian party. Government propaganda that now dominates both the public broadcaster as well as most of the printed and

electronic media consistently emphasizes narcissistic themes, such as the demand for recognition, heroic virtues and historical greatness. It seems that it is the combination of unresolved historical traumas, a vulnerable sense of national identity and an absence of autonomous individualism that are most likely to make a society vulnerable to simplistic government messages exploiting collective narcissism and emphasizing external enemies and victimhood.

As Plato noted more than 2000 years ago, one of the greatest dangers for democracy is that ordinary people are all too easily swayed by the emotional and deceptive rhetoric of ambitious politicians. Evolutionary psychological research on the fundamental characteristics of human cognition now confirms that humans are indeed highly predisposed to embrace fictitious symbolic belief systems as a means of enhancing group cohesion and coordination (Harari, 2014; von Hippel, 2018). Populism is designed to exploit these tendencies. If democracy is to flourish and collective narcissism is to be controlled, it is essential for nations to face their historical traumas, develop a realistic sense of national identity and reaffirm the Enlightenment values of autonomous individualism. Unfortunately, this difficult process now appears to have been set back, possibly by decades, in countries like Hungary.

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Figure 2. Populist political propaganda appealing to a sense of national grievance - Fidesz street stall, Budapest, 2014: 'Hungary will not give in!'