

# Political tribalism, polarization, and motivated rejection of science: research from Hungary

## Summary

Conspiracy theories are often symptoms of a strongly polarized, tribal political landscape, as they are used as information weapons in the political information warfare (Forgas & Baumeister, 2019; Krekó, 2021). But at the same time, conspiracy theories can fuel political polarization further, resulting in a vicious circle of disinformation and "pernicious polarization" – that is followed by a high level of "democratic hypocrisy" – a double standard in the application of legal and ethical rules of the political game that is strongly destructive to democratic norms and institutions (Simonovits, McCoy, & Littvay, 2022). Not all the issues – and the conspiracy theories that are related to them - have the same polarizing effect though. Based on our representative survey research on a Hungarian sample, we can compare the political polarization around COVID-related conspiracy theories and about the war-related conspiracy theories. Early results suggest that the polarizing effect of the War in Ukraine was considerably higher in the Hungarian population - that is also reflected in the more polarized beliefs in the conspiracy theories related to the War. The polarizing effect of Covid- and vaccine issue was smaller, which was reflected in the conspiracy theories as well. These results are not self-evident in the sense that both issues were highly politicized in the public discourse – and the Hungarian government used both the vaccination rollout and the war in Ukraine to delegitimize the opposition (as anti-vaxxers and then as warmongers). The broader implications of these results are discussed in the context of the Hungarian informational autocracy and in an international comparison.

## Introduction

Hungary, to a certain extent, is a case study of tribalism- or, in other words, pernicious polarization, showing that how much polarizing narratives can deepen political divisions in a country (Krekó, 2021; Forgas, 2023 this volume). One of these typical forms of these polarizing narratives are conspiracy theories that are flooding the Hungarian information environment from the mainstream (Krekó, 2022).

In a chapter that I have written for the Sydney Symposium series two years ago (Krekó, 2021), I argued that populism is an ill-defined concept that cannot really capture the nature of the social psychological dynamics of our time. I argued that instead of talking about “populist attitudes” – a concept whose existence is very difficult to prove, especially in case of populist voters whose beloved party is in government – it is better to talk about “tribal attitudes”.

Based on the shortcomings of the concept of „populism” and argued, based on empirical research from Hungary and Poland from 2018 that “political tribalism” (similar to Jennifer McCoy’s term: “pernicious polarization”; see for example Somer, McCoy, Luke, 2021) is a more useful term in describing political tendencies in the Western World these days. While populism as a *rhetorical style* might be a useful strategy for opposition to overtake power, it manifests differently, especially on the level of attitudes, when the so-called “populists” succeed in securing power. From a psychological perspective, populists on government often lose their anti-elitist and people-centric appeal, as they themselves become part of the elite –

and it also means, quite evidently, that followers of populist parties in power (Republicans under Trump, Fidesz-voters under Orbán, PiS-voters under Kaczynski, or Progressive party voters under Vucic) are not manifesting the essential part of the so-called “populist attitude set”: anti-elitism.

In the definition we provided in this earlier chapter, we defined tribalism as the combination of the Manichean Worldview that divide the world into the “good” and “evil” tribe, and authoritarianism that empowers the leader of the tribe via unconditional trust. Tribalist leaders do not want to create a homogeneous „Populus”, as they often claim, importing this term from the rhetorical playbook of populists. Instead, they want to fuel antagonisms and hostility between political tribes and make group hostilities absolute. As I argued in this previous piece, tribalism can be especially dangerous in Central and Eastern Europe due to weak democratic norms and fragile institutions. Transgressions of democratic norms, such as seizing control of institutions and pumping money for cronies through corruptive means, are becoming the new normal as “tribal good” becomes more important than “public good” in the age of escalating tribal wars. In line with these observations, “affective polarization”, in many sense, took over the dominance of populism in the political science and political psychology literature (see for example: Reiljan & Ryan, 2021).

In this chapter, I am going to provide an update on the state of tribalism in Hungary. Based on three representative survey databases conducted in Hungary between 2021-2023, I will introduce a) the development of tribal attitudes in Hungary between 2018 and 2022 (both are election years). Our dataset also enables us to evaluate the everyday intrapersonal consequences of tribalism: how the intergroup conflict (different political opinions) lead to interpersonal conflict – in families, in friendly or even romantic relationships. then I will argue, in light of representative research in Hungary, that the war in Ukraine has led to a very strong polarization (as a result of a strong, aggressive campaign by the government before and after the elections, see for example,,: Krekó, 2023; Molnár, Surányi) – especially when it comes to the disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories related to the war. In the third part of the chapter, I will contrast the war in Ukraine with the attitudes towards the pandemic and trust in scientists. In the fourth, concluding chapter, I will draw some conclusions by arguing that tribalism (and affective polarization) is mainly a byproduct of polarizing political rhetoric, and even among increasing social divisions, we can only expect strong politically polarizing narratives in the topics where tribal narratives are successful and there is a clear division between the political positions that the parties represent – which, in Hungary, was true on the case of the Russian invasion, but much less in the issue of the pandemic, its treatments, and the vaccines (Molnár, Surányi, Krekó, 2023).

The differences between populism and tribalism are highlighted below (from Krekó, 2021).

**TABLE 13.3** Differences between populism vs. tribalism.

	<i>Populism</i>	<i>Tribalism</i>
Relationship to democracy	Democratic	Autocratic, un-democratic
Relationship to the leader	People-centric, egalitarian (the members of the group defines the ingroup)	Leader-centric, authoritarian (the leader defines the ingroup: tribe)
Direction of conflicts	Vertical (“people vs. elites”)	Horizontal (“us” vs. “them”)
Attitudes	High people-centrism, low anti-elitism	High anti-pluralism, absolutist black-and-white (Manichean) thinking, authoritarianism

## The development of political tribalism in Hungary between 2018 and 2022

When analyzing the tribal attitudes in Hungary and Poland (Krekó, 2021), we used three main components of populist political attitudes: people-centrism, anti-elitism, Manichean worldview (these three are the prototypical content of populist attitudes, according to Akkerman, Mudde, Zaslove (2014). We also measured pluralism and authoritarianism. The most important results we found were the following:

- In both Poland and Hungary, supporters of the populist parties in government displayed lower levels of disdain towards the elites compared to opposition voters. This trend in Hungary resembled the findings described by Todosijevic (2018) regarding Serbian voters of the ruling Fidesz party, who demonstrated the least anti-elitist sentiment among various voter groups. Notably, the supporters of the government parties exhibited significantly less anti-elitism than opposition voters, but this was specifically evident in their trust towards domestic institutions. Interestingly, both in Poland and Hungary, the government supporters expressed less trust in the symbol of international political elites, the European Parliament, which is the directly elected parliamentary assembly of the European Union, compared to opposition voters. At the same time, the supporters of PiS and Fidesz displayed higher trust in their respective national parliaments, which are predominantly controlled by the parties they support.
- Hungary exhibited lower levels of people-centrism among supporters of the government parties than among opposition voters.
- Both countries demonstrated that voters of populist parties in government exhibited higher levels of absolutist, moralizing Manichean attitudes. It is worth noting that some opposition voters also displayed elevated levels of such attitudes, likely due to the increasing polarization in both countries. Specifically, in Hungary, voters of the progressive-liberal Democratic Coalition (the party of ex-PM Ferenc Gyurcsány) and voters of the liberal Nowoczesna (which later merged into the center-right Civic Platform) in Poland demonstrated above-average levels of black-and-white Manichean thinking.

- In Hungary, Fidesz supporters were found to be the least pluralistic among all party supporter groups, and government supporters were significantly less pluralistic than opposition voters as a whole. However, in Poland, there was no distinct difference in pluralistic attitudes between the government and the opposition.
- A factor analysis of the 17 items encompassing all five scales of populism revealed a structure that deviated from the earlier conceptual approach and confirmed our conceptual approach on tribalism. The primary factor in both the Polish and Hungarian samples was an attitude dimension centered around an absolutist, moralizing Manichean worldview that viewed politics as warfare. The item with the highest correlation to this factor was: "You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics." This attitude dimension was combined with a strong rejection of pluralism, a lower inclination towards anti-establishment attitudes, and a reduced focus on people-centric perspectives. We labeled this attitude dimension as "political tribalism" since it characterized politics as a religious conflict between good and evil, justifying the suppression of dissent, rallying behind the leader of the one's own group, and support for violent solutions. Again, this attitude dimension was significantly more pronounced among government supporters in Hungary.
- This absolutist, intolerant Manichean attitude set, which included anti-pluralistic views and political tribalism, was found to be positively associated with authoritarianism and slightly increased the likelihood of endorsing violent solutions.

We did a similar survey in 2022, to compare the trends in tribalism between these two elections<sup>1</sup>. We conducted the survey before the April 2022 elections in Hungary<sup>2</sup>.

The main findings were the following.

- 1) The ratio of tribalist voters (who manifested high levels of authoritarianism and Manichean thinking at the same time) has risen sharply: from 10 to 20 percent of the population. The most dramatic in the last four years was in the level of Manichean worldview. To illustrate it with some figures: currently, 39 percent of Hungarians (!)

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First research: 2017. december -2018 január, N=1107, Kantar TNS, CAPI  
 Second research: 2022. március, N=1000, Závecz Research, CAPI

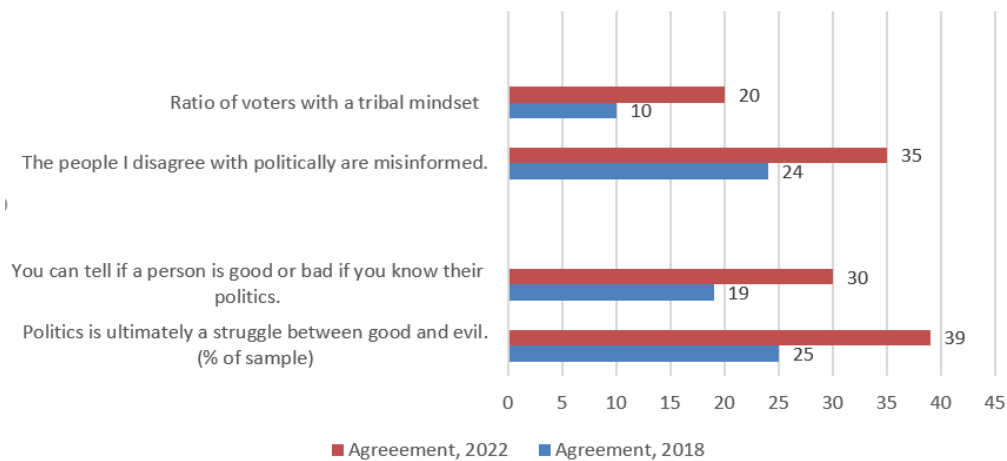
<sup>2</sup> The data collection for the joint research of Political Capital and CEU's Department of Public Policy Policy Lab was carried out by Závecz Research between February 22 and March 4, 2022, using the CAPI method, i.e. the questionnaire was programmed and personally interviewed by the research company's staff using laptops. The survey used a two-stage, proportionally stratified, randomly selected probability sample of 1,000 respondents. The composition of the sample corresponded to the composition of the total adult population by key socio-demographic indicators (gender, age groups, educational attainment, type of residence). The margin of error of the reported data for the total sample, depending on the distribution of responses, is up to ±3.1%.

The research was conducted by Péter Krekó and Csaba Molnár from Political Capital and Kristina Boiakova, Borbála Dombrovsky and Mayra Lea Dominguez, master's students from CEU Policy Lab. In addition to the items of the scales measuring the different dimensions of populism (Akkermann et al. and Littvay et al.) already used in our previous research, we also used items from studies focusing on political polarization (Oshri et al.: The importance of attachment to an ideological group in multi-party systems: Evidence from Israel (2021) and Banker et al.: Measuring Partisanship as a Social Identity in Multi-Party Systems (2017)). In addition, we created several questions of our own that better capture the domestic public sphere. In the present analysis, we have only addressed questions related to political polarization.

think that politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil (up from 25 percent in 2018). Similarly, currently 30 percent of the voters (up from 19 percent) agree that you can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics. The ratio of voters who think that the voters on the other side are just misinformed has also significantly increased, from 24 to 35 percent.

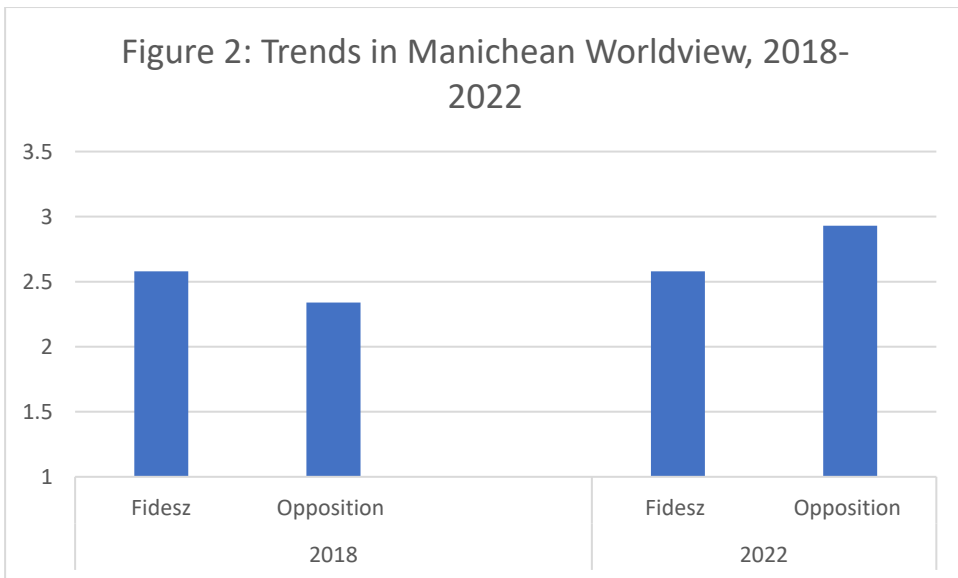
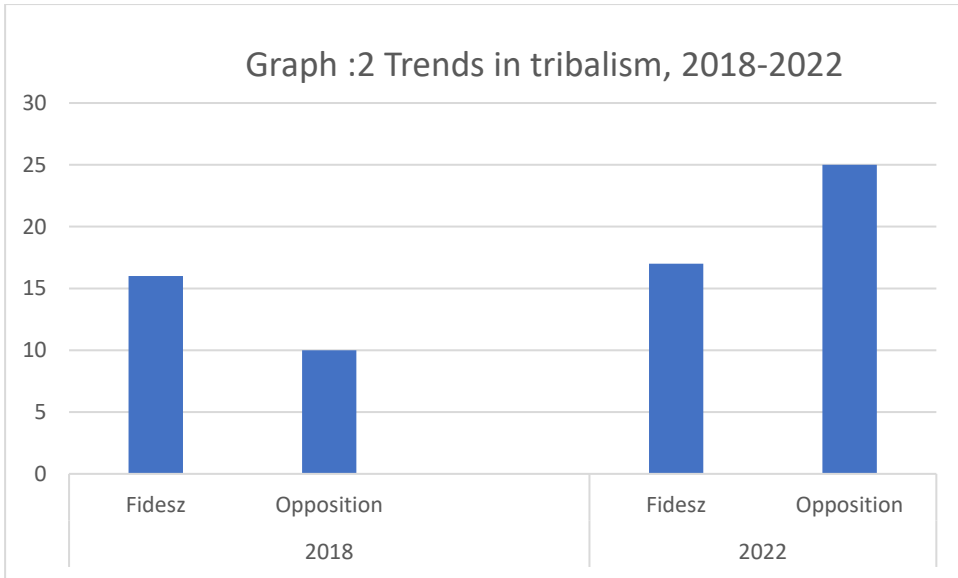
- 2) The rise of tribal mindset was asymmetric between 2018 and 2022: The ratio of tribalist voters (who can be characterized by high level of manichean worldview and authoritarianism simultaneously) has been stagnating among governmental voters in Hungary: 17% in 2022 (while 16% in 2018). At the same time, the ratio of opposition voters with tribal attitudes have been increasing dramatically: from 10 to 25% (!) (see the graph below, and figure 2).
- 3) Authoritarianism has also been on the rise in Hungary – but, again, more on the opposition than on the governmental side (see the figures below ).
- 4)

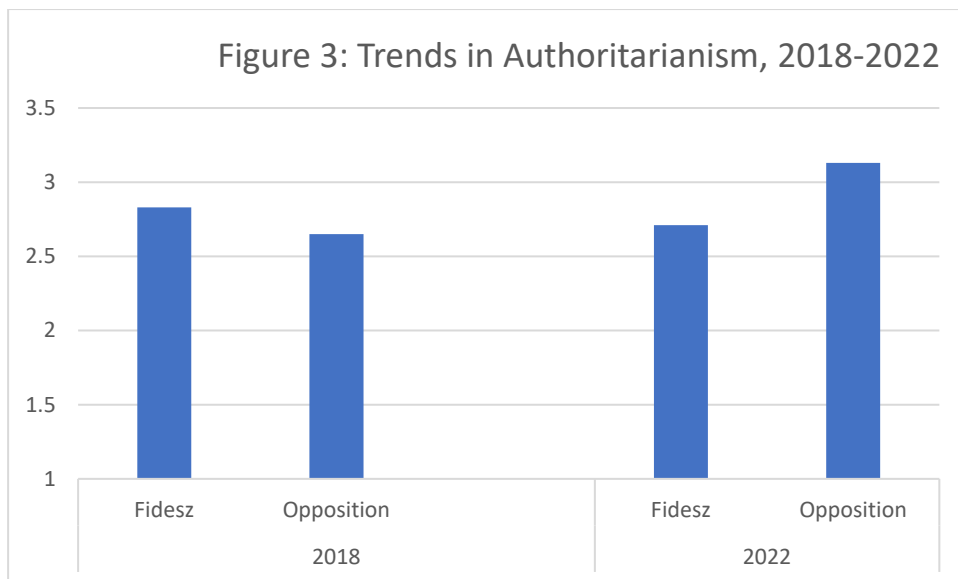
Manichean Worldview and tribalism in HU, 2018-2022



As a result of all of these changes, the government, and the opposition have traded places in Hungary: While governmental voters clearly showed higher levels of tribalism (and its components: authoritarianism and Manichean worldview) in 2018, by 2022 the opposition voters have become more tribal, increasing both the embrace of a black-and-white worldview and the rally around an authoritarian leader. The trends in the level of political tolerance (which is not a composite of the tribal attitude set) fit into this trend: while in 2018, governmental voters were significantly less tolerant towards the different views than their own than opposition voters, the difference between the two camps totally disappeared by 2022.







The possible explanations for the rising trends might be the following:

- Possible reasons for asymmetric polarization: frustration, and the increasing need for a radical change as a result of spending 12 years in opposition.
- + A tribal leader with a similar post-truth approach? Péter Márki-Zay
- This is clearly indicating a dangerous shift in Hungary: the opposition's increasingly hostile rejection of the governmental side.

At the same time, not all the research data suggest an increasingly dangerous hostility. For example, the ratio of supporters of political violence as a tool for achieving important political goals did not rise: it was 11 percent in 2018, and 10 percent in 2022.

Overall, the results show that while polarization, sectarian logic, and tribalism are present in a large part of society, and both Fidesz and opposition voters have a very negative image of the other side - they are seen as closed-minded, limited, and driven by false beliefs. The two camps' perceptions of each other show little difference. The majority view is that they are closed-minded, extremist, and susceptible to disinformation.

However, to avoid overly apocalyptic and alarmist assessments, we also have to mention that these antagonisms are less manifesting in everyday relationships, than on an abstract level – contrary, for example, to what some studies found for the case of Turkey (Aydin Düzgit, 2019) about the penetration of political divides in the everyday social life. We found it, for example, using a scale similar to the Bogardus social distance scale, that government supporters and opposition voters found no real problem in working in the same workplace, or even congratulate each other on a marriage. There is a small group of people in both camps, between 20 and 30 per cent, who would be uncomfortable in such situations. The vast majority of neither government supporters nor opposition politicians would have a problem with such social relationships. The most uncomfortable for both camps would be if their boss was a voter of the other party alliance (35% mentioning that this situation would be uncomfortable). In other words, the subordinate relationship is the most likely to be a conflict arising from political differences. Here we also found that opposition supporters would be slightly more

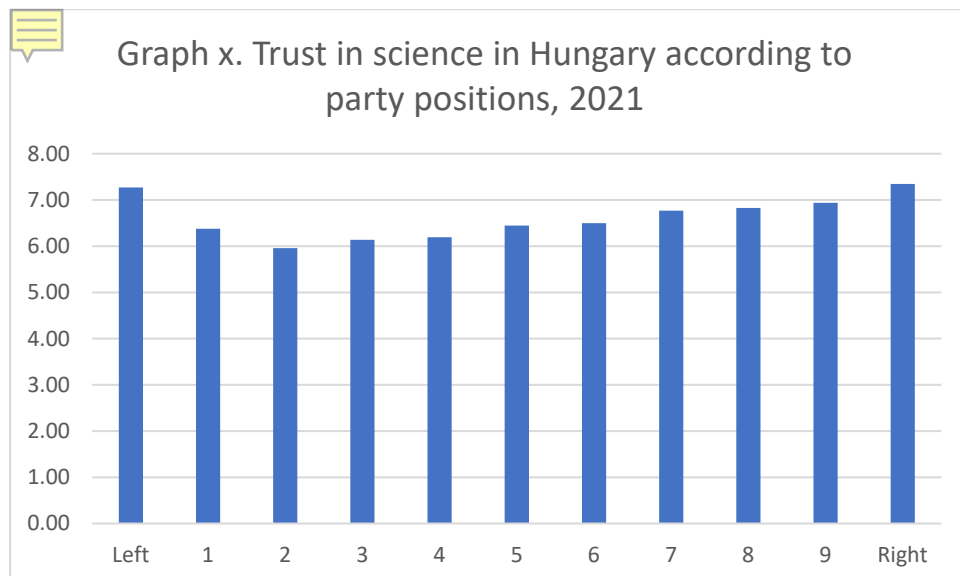
uncomfortable if they found out that their co-worker, boss or new family member was a government party voter than the other way around (Political Capital, 2022).

## Polarization around Covid and science: lack of motivated rejection of science in Hungary?

Political polarization very often leads to the politicization of science as well- when party positions decide the person's position of issues such as vaccines, evolutionary theory, or climate science. This phenomenon is related to the term motivated rejection of science (see for example: Lewandowsky and Oberauer, 2016). people tend to selectively interpret evidence to reinforce their preconceived notions (Hornsey et al., 2020). Many studies agree that conspiracy theorists based on dogmatic distrust (Lewandowsky et al., 2013) can also predispose one to adopt science-denying views - even if they have no logical connection with each other. Moreover, if one is inclined to explain the world in terms of conspiracy theories, then even logically contradictory claims may tend to be given credence simply because they contradict the 'official' position (Wood et al., 2012).

The research on politically motivated science denial is mainly conducted within the United States, and most of the studies use American models and political definitions. This is partly due to the fact that in the United States, only two political parties have dominated public life for almost 200 years, so the polarisation between the two camps is much easier to observe than in other Western countries with multiple political poles. As a consequence, the focus of US research is also on the Republican-Democratic/Conservative-Liberal axis, and attitudes to science are also examined along these lines. Data from the 1970s suggest that Republicans showed greater trust in scientists than Democrats, but this trend reversed by the early 2000s, with the gap widening between 2016 and 2018 (Krause and Mitsai, 2019; and by the 2020s the gap had become alarming (Stein et al., 2021).

I was curious how much this polarization is prevalent in Hungarian public opinion when it comes to science.

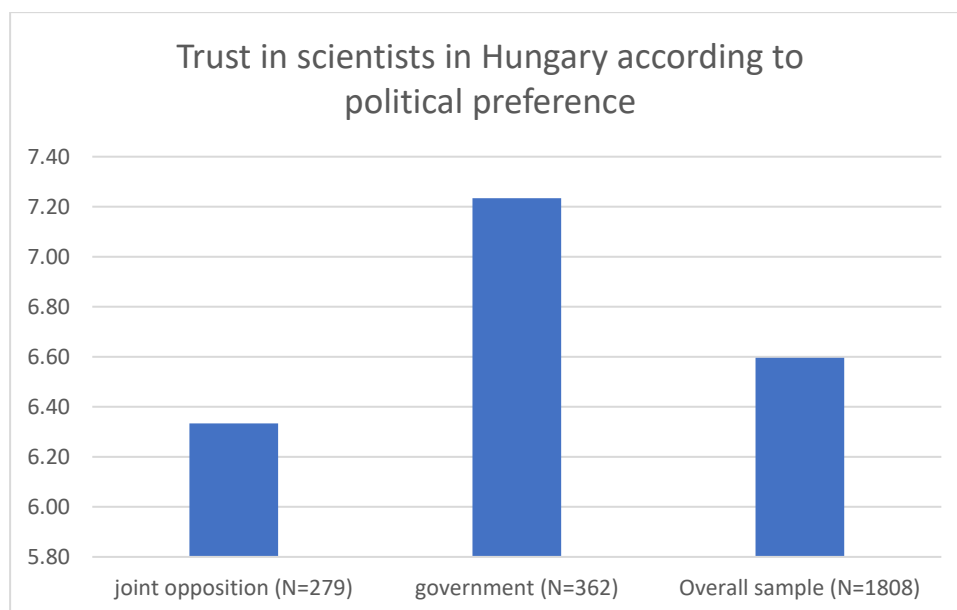




(Source: European Social Survey, Round 10)

We found that while ideological self-positioning has a significant impact on trust in scientists<sup>3</sup>. But the data is important for at least two reasons: First, we found that the trust is stronger on the extreme left and the extreme right, while built lower at the centre. Second, we found that contrary to the findings in the Anglo-Saxon data, trust in scientists is significantly (even if not drastically) higher on the left side of the spectrum than on the right side of the spectrum.

We were curious if these results manifest for party preference as well. We differentiated between two groups: the governmental voters (Fidesz and KDNP) vs. opposition voters who ran on the same list in 2022 (MSZP, DK, Jobbik, LMP, P). We found that governmental voters were significantly, but again, not drastically more trustful in scientists than voters of the joint opposition<sup>4</sup>. The difference between the two groups was small: 0.9 point on an 11-point scale.



Still, the higher trust among opposition voters is an interesting finding in light of the fact that voters of right-wing populist parties are, typically, less trustful towards science and its institutions, as populism is traditionally anti-elitist and mistrustful towards science as an elitist exercise (see for example: Eslén-Ziyya, 2022). The reason for this not-trivial result might be twofold. First, opposition voters in Hungary, after being in opposition for already more than a decade when the survey was conducted, could have developed a general mistrust towards institutions that have any connection to officialdom. In light of these arguments, endemic and paranoiac mistrust in institutions, a so-called Conspiracy Mentality, have been found to be stronger among Hungarian opposition than governmental voters in one data set of an earlier research (Imhoff et al., 2022). The second explanation is more time- and context-specific. During the pandemic (when the survey was conducted) the Hungarian government ran a rather aggressive pro-vaccination campaign and blamed the parliamentary opposition

<sup>3</sup> df=10; F=4,346; p=0,000

<sup>4</sup> df=3; F=1,716; p=0,000

for being “anti-vaxxer” (mostly unjustly), using the typical manichean tribal rhetorical split between the Good (us) and the Evil (them). in governmental billboards, well-known doctors (e.g. the rector of the main health science higher education institution, Semmelweis University and the spokesperson of the Ambulance in Hungary) were calling the Hungarian population for following the lockdown rules and vaccinate themselves (Krekó, 2022/b). This push might have reduced the trust in science in the opposition camp - as conspiracy theories about scientists were also found to be stronger among the opposition camp in the same study.

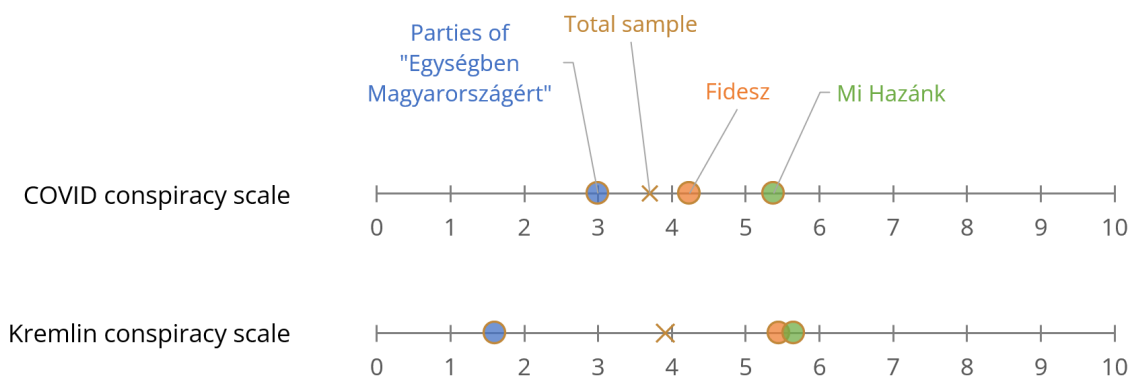
But overall, the issue of science (even in the middle of the pandemic) seems not to be a highly divided, partisan issue in the public opinion. Maybe one reason for that is that there was no real COVID-skepticism in the political mainstream in Hungary - compared to, for example, the United States, where it clearly have become one of the most distinctive factor between Democrats and Republicans (see for example: Pennycook et al; 2022).

### Polarization of the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the Hungarian public opinion

At the same time, we could see much stronger polarization around another issue, the Russian invasion against Ukraine, when the Hungarian government and the pro-governmental media was instrumental in spreading pro-Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories (see for example: Krekó, 2022). According to polls, the relationship towards Russia, Ukraine, and Western intervention in the war have become one of the most important division lines between the opposition and the government in the run-up to the elections (Tóth, 2022), with governmental voters cultivating much stronger pro-Russian, and anti-Western, Ukraine-critical views than opposition voters.

In a survey that we conducted in May 2022 (a few months after the invasion against Russia began) we had the chance to compare how divisive the conspiracy theories towards COVID (e.g. COVID is a tool of superpowers for mass extinction) and towards the war (there are secret American biolabs in Ukraine creating bioweapons) were in the public opinion (see the graph below).

Graph x: The acceptance of COVID- and war-related conspiracy theories in Hungary, according to party preferences



Looking at the graph it is already visible that the distance between the opposition and the governmental voter groups is significantly smaller in the case of COVID-related conspiracy

theories (1,2 point difference between the groups on a 10-points scale), while in the case of COVID, it was considerably, and significantly higher (3,9 point difference on a 10-points scale).

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Fidesz	Mean	<b>4,2381</b>	<b>5,4515</b>
	N	404	379
	Std. Deviation	2,88628	2,40725
Összefogás pártjai	Mean	<b>3,0008</b>	<b>1,6030</b>
	N	194	180
	Std. Deviation	2,77551	1,84452

## Conclusions

This study tried to provide a modest overview of the state of tribalism and polarization in contemporary Hungary- a country where the authoritarian populist right Fidesz party is on power for 13 years already.

The chapter provided three novel findings that needs further investigation.

First, tribal mindset (the combination of mainchean worldview and authoritarianism) has clearly been on the rise between 2018 and 2022 (two election years) in Hungary, and this change is predominantly caused by the increasing tribalism on the opposition side – which results in a situation where the opposition voters, unlike in 2018, have become more tribal than the governmental voters. This result is a bit in line with Bernstein’s (2023) findings, who found in a (non peer-reviewed) paper that *“In general, we found that bias was somewhat higher among Democrats than Republicans across most of our tests, though there was plenty of bias from each side.”* We found similar results in Hungary, with polarization dominating the political spectrum, but with a more visible rise among the opponents of Orbán’s rule than his fans. The big difference, of course, is that while the “left” is totally and systemically excluded from power since 2010, the democrats hold important power positions: the president and the Senate.

Second, we can see that not every topic are equally divisive among the Hungarian electorate. Motivated rejection of science, for example – a prototypical typical symptom of polarization – is not present in the Hungarian electorate. Furthermore, voters of the populist right Fidesz party seem to be *more* trustful of scientists than opposition voters. Further research has to decide if this result is only temporary (in the context of the pro-vaccination campaign of the government, putting scientists in the forefront) or systemic (science, as a mostly public enterprise, is perceived as a form of officialdom).

Third, we found that the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine played a much more divisive role around the April 2022 elections than the role of COVID. We attribute this difference to the deliberate role of The government to make the “war-peace” difference as the major split in Hungarian elections- that clearly contributed to winning one more constitutional majority with a landslide victory in April 2022. This example seems to suggest that in the context of an informational autocracy in Hungary (Krekó, 2022) we can only expect strong divisions and polarization only in issues where it seems that the government’s tactical interest is to polarize the society through conspiracy theories. In the case of COVID, spreading conspiracy theories that undermine vaccination among governmental voters would have clearly gone against Fidesz’s interests- as we could see in the United States, where doublespeak and ambivalent statements of Republican politicians clearly helped to undermine the willingness of some Republican voters to wear masks and vaccinate themselves- resulting in higher death rates among them than Democratic voters. Spreading pro-Russian conspiracy theories to mobilize the electorate for “peace”, though, had no similar dangers for a country that was not involved in the war – furthermore, it secured its lead in the polls before the elections.

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