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Populist Memory Politics and the Performance of Victimhood: Analysing the Political Exploitation of Historical Injustice in Central Europe

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Abstract

Right-wing populists often mobilize popular support by employing a people-versus-elite dichotomy in which they cast ‘the people’ as the underdog, or by ‘performing’ crisis to discredit the elite. Such ‘underdogism’, and the reliance on crisis more broadly, remains an effective strategy for as long as populists are in opposition. But what happens when populists gain power? One would expect that they would not be able to exploit their position as effectively and their appeal would weaken drastically. In certain cases, however, they still manage to sustain the underdog illusion. This article argues that memory politics are an important locus for populists to maintain their underdog rhetoric, and within that field the performance of victimhood is key. Building on theories about the performance of crisis and recent trends in research on memory politics in Central Europe, we propose a framework for understanding how governing right-wing populists justify vindictive policies and thus try to cement their power.

Keywords: populism; memory politics; victimhood; Central Europe

Starting from the argument that many democracies have, in recent years, experienced a so-called populist moment – or, perhaps more dramatically, the global rise of populism (Moffitt 2015) – this article takes as its topic the discursive strategies on which populists in power in Europe have relied to sustain their electoral success. These are essentially image-building strategies: methods of self-presentation that distinguish the populist party from other parties, appeal to voters’ dissatisfaction with the status quo and mobilize otherwise politically cynical and uninterested voters (Brubaker 2017). The discursive logic of populism consists of dividing society into two camps, the virtuous people and the evil elite, engaged in a struggle for power, with the populist as the incarnation of the oppressed people (Brubaker 2017; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; Moffitt 2015). Rather than a full ideology, populism is understood here as a flexible

discursive pattern loosely guided by a ‘thin’ ideology (Stanley 2008), meaning that populists can flexibly integrate right- and left-wing positions without risking inconsistencies. This has allowed populists to maximize their electoral gains from mainstream party failures and policy convergence among other parties (Grant and Tilley 2022; Grzymala-Busse 2019). In other words, as voters ‘reject both the left-wing social status quo (i.e. social progressivism, demographic change) and the right-wing economic status quo (i.e. neoliberalism)’ (Van Dyck 2021: 2), they have nowhere to turn but to populist parties, who then only need to emphasize their *difference* from all other parties, or their *exceptionality* (Brubaker 2017).

One of those differences is the status of the populist as the direct representative or incarnation of the underdog in society. This image-building strategy (or manner of discursive self-presentation) allows populists to appeal to ‘widespread popular discontent with mainstream political parties’ (Font et al. 2021: 163), mobilize those dissatisfied with demographic change and migration and those ‘left behind’ in the neoliberal economic system – in brief, those who feel they ‘lost out’ in the process of globalization. However, if populists come to power, they are, by anyone’s logic, no longer the underdogs. If populists then also fail to address the issues experienced by voters dissatisfied with mainstream parties and fail to deliver on their (usually unrealistic) promises, the illusion of ‘underdogism’ falls apart: the populists are then revealed to be just another part of the ‘elite’ that voters wanted to remove from power. This is where populism meets its ‘limits of enchantment’, or the end of people’s “faith” in the possibility of representing and speaking for “the people” (Brubaker 2017: 380). To expand those limits, or at the very least postpone the inevitable, populists deploy additional discursive strategies, with varying degrees of believability.

This article focuses on one of those strategies, which has, over the past years, become particularly salient in Central Europe: the use of memory politics and, more specifically, historicized victimhood in populist image-building. The strategy consists of projecting a specific interpretation (or revised version) of history, usually a period of injustice and crisis, into the present. In doing so, the populists copy-and-paste the victim–perpetrator relationship of the previous time onto contemporary entities, allowing the populist underdog illusion to be sustained even in times where the populist is evidently no longer the underdog. To maximize the potential for mobilization, this is usually coupled with the populist language of humiliation and revenge (Homolar and Löffmann 2021), turning the underdog’s victimhood into ‘an act of affective communication’ (Chouliaraki 2021: 10) and creative group-linking that can be used to blame specific groups (such as minorities) for working with the newly created enemy or perpetrator. Central Europe is fertile ground for such political strategies, since that region harbours an abundance of historical trauma related to military violence and totalitarianism that can be used to channel underdog statuses from the past into the present.

The political exploitation of historical injustice is, in itself, not a new development, and neither is the use of memory politics and victimhood in Central and Eastern Europe or in Poland and Hungary specifically (Baraniecka-Olszewska 2021; Judt 2005; Pető et al. 2020; Zubrzycki and Wozny 2020). However, the precise discursive interactions between memory politics and victimhood, and especially the leaps of logic that are completed to bring the past into the frame of the present and then to exploit victimhood for practical gain and link disparate groups together to

legitimize revenge by calling for justice, are new elements that have not been examined in detail, certainly not where they concern populists who have gained power. In this article, we address this issue in the following way: first, we argue that as populism matures in Europe, a more fine-grained understanding of populist discursive strategies is needed. We then introduce the term ‘victimhood populism’ to address this need and situate it in the broader literature on the study of populism, distinguishing it from the older strands of political rhetoric and ideologies that have relied on the trope of historical victimhood. A plethora of examples of such ‘victimhood populism’ can be found in the burgeoning empirical research on memory politics in Central Europe. We illustrate our claims with some examples from Poland and Hungary, arguing that the linking of history and injustice is a discursive strategy that, when used by right-wing populists in power, is a powerful tool to legitimize vindictive policies and positions, and serves to maintain power. Finally, relying on Benjamin Moffitt’s steps of crisis performance (2015), we propose a framework for the study of performed victimhood, highlighting six key steps.

Why victimhood?

The topic of victimhood has received quite a bit of attention in current work on populism, yet it is often only examined implicitly or seen as subordinate to the more general exploitation of sociopolitical difference. Since populism aims to reformulate who belongs to ‘the people’, and who does not, by providing clearly delineated definitions of ‘the people’ and then pitting that definition against ‘the elite’ (Hidalgo-Tenorio et al. 2019; Mudde 2007; Wodak 2015), difference is a fundamental part of the populist logic. That difference is articulated in a variety of ways across populist actors, yet socioeconomic divides, and specifically popular discontent with neoliberal policies enacted by the elite, are almost always a key part of populist discourse, whether right- or left-wing (Grant and Tilley 2022; Van Dyck 2021). In right-wing populist discourses as opposed to arguably more inclusive left-wing forms of populism (Font et al. 2021), this socioeconomic difference is supplemented with cultural grievances, particularly the idea that globalization and migration have caused demographic change and have eroded or supplanted local cultures with the help of socially progressive elites (Van Dyck 2021). This has made nativism, and particularly protecting ‘natives’ against ‘foreigners’, another central part of the right-wing populist logic (Mudde 2007).

Victimhood in populism studies is mostly implicit in researchers’ assumptions on socioeconomic and cultural grievances underlying voters’ dissatisfaction with the status quo, perhaps most notably in the notion of underdogism – that is, that the people are an oppressed underdog with the populist as their defender (Brubaker 2017). Populist invocations of victimhood have also been observed in the context of the discussion on the rise of illiberal ideas and anti-EU discourse (see e.g. Schlipphak and Treib 2017). The literature on populism in Central Europe has so far mostly focused on the processes of the populist creation of a national or ethnic identity (Breeze 2019). Appeals to victimhood have been mostly understood as an epiphenomenon or a reinforcing factor of these nationalisms. Centralizing victimhood in the study of populism is, however, important, particularly because the social construction of victimhood is not only a by-product of

socioeconomic difference – with the poor turning against the rich due to mainstream parties’ failures to address growing inequalities (Font et al. 2021; Grzymala-Busse 2019); victimhood can also function as a *cause* of socioeconomic difference, if victimhood is used as a justification for the oppression of minorities through claims that the majority is the ‘victim’ of the minority. In that sense, victimhood populism can lead to the socioeconomic marginalization of minorities and the entrenchment of injustice.

As populism matures and finds more diverse mobilization strategies and positions in the political hierarchy, new discourses emerge. Victimhood discourses that focus on the politics of history and memory now seem to be voiced from positions of power, not that of the underdog (or the loser, the victim, the vulnerable), but rather that of the most powerful entity in the country. Crucially, the difference between vulnerability and victimhood is that the former is a ‘social condition of openness to violence’ while the latter is ‘an act of affective communication that attaches the moral value accrued to the vulnerable to everyone who claims it’ (Chouliaraki 2021: 10) and which ‘mobilizes a distinct dynamics of solidarity’ (Chouliaraki 2021: 11). Indeed, victimhood populism in this sense is not just the strategic appropriation of vulnerability – the *pretence* of openness to violence – but also a means of activating an electorate that may identify itself with the position of the victim or the underdog in society: disenfranchised voters, workers in precarious positions or in sunset industries like coalmining, or nationalists who feel like their culture is under attack. Victimhood populism capitalizes on *real* vulnerability that its electorate may experience by turning it into a justification for (symbolic or real) revenge or restitution that would not necessarily resolve any of the actual systemic issues faced by voters and which mainstream parties have indeed failed to address (Grzymala-Busse 2019), but which the populist might not address either.

In that sense, if we follow Lilie Chouliaraki’s distinction between systemic (or *real*) and tactical (or *claimed*) suffering, it becomes clear that victimhood populism serves, paradoxically, as a way to perpetuate existing injustices and reinforce social hierarchies. In other words, victimhood populism is a performance of vulnerability that diverts attention away from actual (sources of) suffering, primarily by channeling people’s feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability away from the populists themselves (if in power) and projecting them onto other groups. This can be linked to a broader need in populism to find unifying symbols for its electorate to maintain a consistent degree of affective mobilization (Brubaker 2017). In sum, for populists, victimhood is often a linchpin of socioeconomic difference – a means of highlighting, or perhaps even fabricating, inequalities and injustices.

We now turn to Poland and Hungary, where victimhood itself has long been a popular trope in collective memory and where populist governments have in recent years appropriated and revised collective remembrance practices through victimhood for, we argue, political gain.

Populist victimhood and memory politics in Poland and Hungary

To give empirical support to our framework, we argue in this section that the recent proliferation of research on memory politics in Central Europe indicates that the invocation of the past is a crucial political strategy in the region that needs to be

considered when studying populists in power. As nationalist politics and regimes have made their mark on practices of collective remembrance throughout Central Europe, research on memory politics in the region has intensified over the past years (see e.g. Dujisin 2021; Miklóssy and Kangaspuro 2021; Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019). In many of these studies, one can observe a trend: ‘the memories of the dictatorial past – and the attribution of guilt (by association) to contemporary political actors – are pivotal for domestic political antagonism and cleavages’ (Couperus et al. 2022: 5).

Of course, victimhood as a trope, whether used for strategic purposes or simply as part of a process of national self-identification, has a long and storied history that spans the entirety of Europe (see e.g. Judt 2005). In the same vein, discursive reformulations of history by political actors, based on ‘collective and individual memories, on hegemonic and common sense narratives, and on myths which are proposed as constitutive for national identification’ (Wodak 2010: 57), have enjoyed considerable scholarly attention, in particular where they navigate and process collective trauma – which inevitably entails a sense of victimhood and often also results in conflicting interpretations of historical guilt (Sandner and Manoschek 2008). History and trauma can both be interpreted as discursive processes, and historical victimhood, whether invoked by populists or not, is therefore not at all unique to our times. Neither is, moreover, the use of discourse to mythologize national pasts and to create and reshape national identities (Bottici and Challand 2013; De Cillia et al. 1999; Della Sala 2010). The same goes for the tendency towards historical revisionism displayed by far-right, populist or fascist actors, in particular through discourse (Levi and Rothberg 2018; Wodak 2021; Wodak and Rheindorf 2022). Even the critically understudied mobilization of the past in right-wing populist discourses – and especially the use of memory and heritage to exclude minorities, though not necessarily through victimhood – is now receiving scholarly attention (De Cesari and Kaya 2021; Kotwas and Kubik 2022).

Nonetheless, while the political use of the past is certainly nothing new, our point is that the seemingly unstoppable increase of attention on the topic, especially within Central European political discourse (as shown below), may imply that the strategic political affordances of historical victimhood in Central Europe are rising. While victimhood has always been discursively constructed, has been a tool of ideological thinking within nationalist politics, and functioned as a key part of historical processes of national self-identification and transformation, and has been instrumental in far-right historical revisionism, it has now also become a powerful tool for right-wing populists to retain power. They do so to extend the underdog illusion. In other words, the stakes of victimhood have risen as it has become closely linked to sustaining the electoral success of right-wing populists.

Indeed, in Poland and Hungary, where populist politicians have cemented their position in government over the past years, victimhood has become an ever-more prominent theme for political mobilization. Crucially, in these contexts, victimhood is blended with a specific revision of history to achieve a political goal: time and again the populist performance of victimhood relies on memory politics, and the political organization of collective remembrance has led to the frequent use of history for political ends. More broadly, researchers have identified a growing number of ‘political actors seeking to recenter identity, memory, and political power around

the nation', with 'right-wing populist and neofascist movements' currently 'working diligently at repatriating collective memory and policing its borders' (Zubrzycki and Wozny 2020: 177). It therefore stands to reason that the uptick in nationalist sentiment across Central and Eastern Europe, and of course in Poland and Hungary, likewise implies a growing research interest in memory politics. Within that growing interest, scholars have shown that right-wing populists use historical victim-perpetrator relationships to mobilize voters, often exploiting trauma to attack minorities and to cement their own position through democratic backsliding (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

In Poland, practices of collective remembrance have long been intertwined with victimhood. History-writing about (and in) Poland has often produced a 'national martyrology', as Brian Porter-Szücs (2014: 4) has called it, 'an elevation of the entire collectivity to the status of sanctified victim'. Indeed, collective victimhood has been a powerful trope in Polish public discourse for decades since World War II (Judt 2005). We argue, however, that the strategic use of victimhood to achieve political goals by right-wing populist government actors deserves more detailed scrutiny, since its precise workings – the mechanisms victimhood populists use to achieve their political goals, and particularly the vindictive policies they legitimize – are not yet fully described and understood. The post-World War II Soviet narrative of the nation being exploited by fascists and then 'liberated by the victorious Red Army' pushed the Holocaust to the background of a central 'longstanding Polish narrative of martyrdom' (Zubrzycki and Wozny 2020: 182, citing Zubrzycki 2006), to the extent that 'Poles' own wartime suffering diluted local attention to the Jewish Holocaust and was in some measure competitive with it', which 'would poison Polish-Jewish relations for many decades' (Judt 2005: 822–823).

The collapse of communism and the growth of research on Polish history generated significant shifts in Polish national identity (Zubrzycki 2006). Polish memory politics should be understood against the background of, on the one end of the spectrum, that unidimensional victimhood narrative against, on the other end, a more complex account of national responsibility, with the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party strongly pushing back against the latter. The right-wing populist understanding of history only allows for a victimhood account that legitimizes reactionary discourse and laws, leading to voter mobilization through uncritical retellings of historical trauma and crude nostalgia (Baraniecka-Olszewska 2021; Kotwas and Kubik 2022). While previous debates about Polish national identity allowed some room for discussing both victimhood and perpetratorship, and therefore both the suffering *and* guilt of Polish people, the current state-sponsored approach argues that only victimhood captures the essence of Polish national history, and that such national victimhood excludes the possibility of perpetratorship and guilt. In the early 1980s dissident intellectual Jan Józef Lipski (1981) could still call for a 'critical patriotism' (*patriotyzm krytyczny*), an approach that welcomed both national pride and 'critical inquiry into the darkest chapters of Polish xenophobia' (Kończal 2022: 250). Such a critical attitude, which was part of the public debate in the 1990s, has now been equalled to national betrayal, and the official interpretation of national history is a squarely anti-pluralist one, 'rooted in the dogmatic assumption that Poland must "get up off its knees"' (Kończal 2022: 250).

Reflecting this trend towards an official construction of collective victimhood memory, recent years have also seen an increase in research interest in Polish memory politics (see, e.g. Baraniecka-Olszewska 2021; Drozdowski and Matusz 2021; Grabarczyk 2020; Kończal 2020, 2022; Millard 2021; Sindbæk Andersen and Törnquist-Plewa 2016; Stanczyk 2013; Stryjek et al. 2021).

In Hungary, too, victimhood has a longer history at the heart of the nation's collective memory. Viktor Orbán capitalizes on that collective sentiment of injustice by presenting himself as seeking justice for grievances from centuries past – from the Habsburgs to the post-World War I Treaty of Trianon – while denying, for instance, any involvement with the Nazi regime or complicity in the Holocaust (Buckley and Byrne 2018; Traub 2015). In this case, too, we see an uncritical embrace of one type of historical memory and condemnations of more pluralist historical accounts. Research on memory politics and historical revisionism in Hungary has, much like in Poland, seen a surge in interest in recent years, with scholars positing a 'conservative turn in memory politics' in Hungary (Petö 2022: 160) or even plainly 'illiberal memory politics' instrumentalizing history for strategic purposes – which should therefore be taken as opportunistic rewriting of history, especially of the Holocaust remembrance paradigm (Petö et al. 2020: 386).

Scholars also argue that 'the current wave of memory politics became the engine of new forms of nationalism in Hungary', while politicians 'seek to control collective memories' (Feischmidt 2020: 130) and try to conceal 'how far [their states] were historically involved with the Soviet system to posit themselves as mere victims' and establishing revisionist Holocaust monuments and museums 'that are whitewashing the past' (Petö 2022: 171). Hungarian memory politics have not seen a national awakening that was as abrupt, clearly delineated, and groundbreaking as Polish collective remembrance has experienced in the post-communist period. Key themes within the scholarship on Hungarian memory politics are Holocaust remembrance, the Soviet regime, Nazi occupation and the Treaty of Trianon. Research shows that many of the practices commemorating these events, especially under Orbán's illiberal rule, represent Hungary as an innocent victim of historical circumstances (see e.g. Dujisin 2021; Feischmidt 2020; Harlov-Csörtán 2018; Kovács and Mindler-Steiner 2016; Molnár 2017; Petö 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2020, 2022; Rév 2018).

In this case, too, the ever-stronger connection between (specifically populist) victimhood and memory politics is illustrated by the sheer growth of academic research in case studies of political mobilizations that, directly or indirectly, have relied on both victimhood and history. A number of these memory-political studies take an ethnographic approach by examining the public resonance of monuments and memory practices in significant depth, counter-hegemonic monumentalization that contests the top-down, ideological narratives and falsified histories imposed by government actors, such as with the Living Memorial on Budapest's Liberty Square (see e.g. Krzyżanowska 2022), the meaning of the Monument to the Revolutionary Act in the Polish town of Rzeszów (Perez-Reyes 2022) or the virtual-reality exhibit about the Warsaw Uprising in the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk (Kazlauskaitė 2022). While such approaches are valuable, and we would like to examine the public resonance of victimhood populism in future studies, our interest

here lies not so much with identifying the specific historical symbols and collective memories that have been or are being rewritten (or contested) but is rather concentrated on the strategic potential of memory politics for populist actors in power. Our concern is therefore not necessarily populist commemorative practices as such, but rather the strategic advantages of populist victimhood. In other words, our aim is mainly conceptual: it is to show why it is important to give attention to the discursive exploitation of historical injustice when studying populism.

Nevertheless, some specific empirical examples from Poland and Hungary may help to illustrate our claims. We can point to the way in which certain policy choices (and defences thereof) are framed in a language of national victimhood. In 2018, for example, Polish politicians from the ranks of the governing PiS relied explicitly on victimhood in their response to the controversy surrounding the ‘anti-defamation law’ (Dempsey 2018). International critics argued that the law, which was introduced by PiS politicians and targets ‘whoever claims, publicly and contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes’, poses a danger to free speech and academic debate. However, the Polish government responded that this criticism itself was an all-too-familiar attack on Poland: ‘Over the past 25 years’, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki stated, Poland has become the international community’s ‘convenient whipping boy’ (Polish Press Agency 2018). PiS politicians frequently frame opponents as ‘anti-Polish’ (Ilkowski 2021) and present the EU as an ‘unlawful entity’ (*Rzeczpospolita* 2021) or as part of a wider system, governed by Germany, that threatens Poland and its youth (Pech et al. 2021), not least through LGBTQ+ rights (Ambroziak 2020).

More implicitly, the victimhood theme has been part of the Polish government’s narrative about several policy initiatives in education and social welfare reform. In May 2021, for example, the Polish minister of education, Przemysław Czarnek, announced that education reform would include teaching pupils that the EU is an ‘unlawful entity’ (*twór niepraworządny*; *Rzeczpospolita* 2021). His proposal was to be understood in the context of the government’s resistance against the accusations against Poland put forward by the European Commission and the European Court of Justice. By bringing Poland’s legal conflict with the EU onto a familiar cultural and historical terrain of international antagonism (and making the Polish ‘counterattack’ against the EU part and parcel of the agenda of nationalist history education), Czarnek tried to depict the EU as a component of a wider political and cultural threat endangering the Polish nation and its members, and in this case, its youth (Pech et al. 2021). In October 2020, the minister of education had already claimed that there was a need to fight the ‘dictatorship of left-liberal views’ that ‘have dominated higher education’ and have begun to ‘penetrate schools’ (Tilles 2020).

While PiS politicians have not always formed a unified front in what they see as culture wars, PiS-friendly media outlets have certainly not shied away from reinforcing the us-against-them rhetoric in this domain. They have portrayed EU institutions and their supposed allies – as well as a whole range of other groups (such as LGBTQ+ people; Ambroziak 2020) who are alleged to be protected by powerful international institutions – as real dangers to Polish civic values and thereby, ultimately, to the Polish people. The alleged enemies in these situations are specific

countries and groups – ethnic and national minorities, defenders of LGBTQ+ rights, refugees and even communists – but they can also be ideas and whole ideologies that are framed as ‘anti-Polish’ (Ilkowski 2021). For example, in an electoral campaign speech held in Nysa in September 2022, Jarosław Kaczyński, the chairman of the PiS, declared that the upcoming elections would present the electorate with a choice between his party, which he asserted was ‘Polish’, and the opposition, which he referred to as ‘German’. To support his argument, Kaczyński harked back to the period between the 16th and 18th centuries when Poland’s monarchy was chosen by ballot, and factions would often form around foreign candidates (Tilles 2022).

In Hungary, where the Orbán regime holds an even larger governing majority than the PiS does in Poland (Fidesz-KDNP has since 2010 formed a supermajority in parliament), comparable cues about the eternal victimhood of the nation have been present in a wide array of policy plans. Over recent years, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has frequently invoked the suffering of the Hungarians under communism to legitimize his own neoliberal approach (Fabry 2019). In his State of the Nation Address of 2016, he described post-Soviet Hungary as ‘weakened, bled dry, uncompetitive and starved of capital after forty-five years of communism’ (Orbán 2016). Orbán has also portrayed his government’s fiscal policies as a necessary national pushback against the victimizing of Hungarians by the EU (Fabry 2019: 165). As in the Polish case, the victimhood trope implicit in these policy frames is meant to buttress, and simultaneously draw strength from, a larger historical contextualization.

Historical injustice and crisis performance

Recent literature thus shows that research on memory politics has seen a remarkable uptick in Poland and Hungary, places where populist actors are now in power. It seems that the populist exploitation of history does indeed motivate researchers to dissect the use of history and to debunk fabricated claims. Furthermore, the historical injustices suffered by countries in Eastern and Central Europe are a useful symbolic repertoire for populists to construct their required underdog position. But how, exactly, does that construction happen? This section aims to answer that question by drawing parallels between the populist exploitation of crisis – a typical feature of populism – and the exploitation of historical injustice. Moffitt has identified crisis, and specifically the performance of crisis, as a fundamental part of populist discourse (Moffitt 2015). Populists have a complex relationship with crisis that largely depends on national or subnational contexts (Kriesi and Pappas 2015), yet many cases have shown that populists frequently attempt to exploit moments of crisis – irrespective of whether that exploitation is a success. Moffitt argues that populists do not just exploit pre-existing crises but also stir up, fabricate and, if already present, exaggerate a general sense of crisis in society. They do so in six steps (Moffitt 2015: 168):

1. Identify failure,
2. Link those failures to a broader systemic crisis,
3. Frame the people versus the elites responsible for the crisis,

4. Use the media to propagate performance,
5. Propose simplistic solutions and strong leadership, and
6. Continue to propagate crisis.

This process of crisis performance can, of course, blend with other key tropes in populist discourse, such as underdogism; a populist can, for instance, refer to the people as humiliated underdogs neglected by the elite in a situation of crisis. Within this context, the oxymoron of a ‘permanent crisis’ is worth considering: since crisis is by definition an event demarcated in time, populists seemingly have to depend on a continuous stream of exogenous events to exploit it productively. By performing crisis, they can avoid some of that dependence, but not *all*. Continuously performing crisis to sustain that sense of crisis among the population is not a simple task: when the salience of a particular crisis in the public debate dissipates over time, voters may turn their attention elsewhere, making the crisis lose its potential for political mobilization. However, populists can extend the ‘shelf-life’ of a crisis by expanding the scope of the crisis or by shifting it from one type of crisis to another (Moffitt 2015). For instance, while the COVID-19 crisis is a public health crisis, a populist party may turn it into a crisis of governance by blaming governmental complexity for a lack of decisiveness, as happened in Belgium (see Meijen 2021). The process of ‘performance’ is therefore akin to ‘stretching’ a situation, both in time and scope, and thereby also extends the benefits that that situation affords.

We propose a similar framework to increase our understanding of the ways in which populists in power use victimhood. They do not just exploit victimhood but rather perform it. The performance of victimhood allows victimhood to be ‘stretched’ and therefore allows its benefits – particularly underdogism – to be extended. Hence, the performance of victimhood allows populists to maintain the illusion that they are, or at least represent, the underdog, making performance a key part of ‘sustaining’ victimhood. Building on the framework for crisis performance developed by Moffitt (2015), we break down the performance of victimhood into the following steps:

1. Identify a historical situation of victimhood as moral groundwork,
2. Link historical victimhood to a contemporary situation,
3. Frame the people versus the elites (and their accomplices) responsible for the victimization,
4. Invoke a discourse based on justice,
5. Propose vindictive policies as simplistic solutions, and
6. Continue to propagate victimhood.

Step 1: Identify a historical situation of victimhood as moral groundwork

As shown in our examples of Polish and Hungarian populist victimhood, Central European populists have used memory politics to imbue current events and policy debates with a moral dimension that can only be seen if considered from a specific (and often revised) historical perspective. The moral groundwork for the entire operation, the purpose of which is to sustain victimhood and therefore

underdogism, is laid through history. To project a historical situation onto a contemporary one, populists have identified a historical situation of (perceived or real) victimhood as a basis for their political action.

Step 2: Link historical victimhood to a contemporary situation

In the performance of victimhood, history, or more precisely memory politics, is used as a way of projecting the victim–perpetrator relationship of the past (e.g. the evil Nazis versus the Polish people) onto the present (e.g. the ‘evil’ German-led EU versus the Polish people). This form of discursive historicization of the present implies that the moral groundwork of the past, with an obviously virtuous ‘us’ oppressed by an evil ‘them’, is active in the present. This moral groundwork based on history acts as a starting point for additional claims in later steps – that is, linking minorities and other innocent groups to an evil elite, and invoking a discourse based on justice to legitimize policies that ‘right’ the historical ‘wrong’.

Step 3: Frame the people versus the elites (and their accomplices) responsible for the victimization

The next step in the performance of victimhood typically consists of framing a specific understanding of the people – often the nation, with historical continuity – against the elites responsible for the victimization in the past. At the same time, populists also tend to bring additional groups into the process and link them to the elites and therefore to the historical victimization. The groups can be existing or totally invented, and populists ascribe a certain symbolic power to these groups that is entirely disconnected from the real power positions present in society. The symbolic nature of this power is essential, as the offending groups are most commonly targeted for what might be called ‘symbolic power’, which would be the (perceived) power to influence others in terms of religious conviction, political ideology, values, sexual orientation, views on racism and culture – in other words, the groups invoked and targeted in the performance of victimhood are either the (usually ‘globalist’) establishment elite, minorities, or based on or associated with a wide range of (what they see as) identity-political communities such as anti-racism movements, the LGBTQ+ community, atheists, progressive movements, pro-immigration movements, globalist elites and so on.

Right-wing populists in power, as in Central Europe, may use these groups as targets because they cannot believably exploit existing repertoires of class struggle, structural discrimination or socioeconomic inequality (which is where material power imbalances can be observed, rather than symbolic ones), because the populist actor itself is already clearly part of ‘the elite’ in society. This is what Chouliaraki might call the distinction between ‘systemic’ and ‘tactical suffering’ (2021: 10): since the systemic vulnerability of populists and their electorate is no longer a useful means of affective mobilization due to a discrepancy between the populists’ power and the systemic vulnerability of its constituents, tactical (or fabricated) claims of vulnerability are essential. The symbolic basis of group organization is a prerequisite for the efficient working of the performance of victimhood.

In framing the people versus the elite (and its supposed collaborators), populists also ‘reify’ groups: they are ‘conceived as entities and cast as actors’ (Brubaker 2006: 3), turned into immutable, monolithic, neatly bounded wholes that have a collective conscious, will and goal – usually described as hostile to the people or the state. This oversimplification obfuscates the wide range of identities, desires and goals present within these communities. In the process, any group can suddenly become a threatening Other, even marginalized minorities such as the Roma, refugees, homeless people or the LGBTQ+ community. This was the case in Poland, where ‘LGBT-free zones’ were presented as the only way to stop the ‘satanic’ ‘LGBT ideology’ from ‘destroying the family’ (Tilles 2019). Moreover, the compression of various groups with diverse experiences of real systemic suffering into one reified group diverts attention away from the actual causes of those separate grievances in favour of one singular enemy, pitted against one singular form of tactical victimhood. As such, this step serves primarily as a means of bundling diverse experiences and causes of suffering into one singular experience with one singular cause to maximize the affective potential of victimhood claims.

This step in the performance of victimhood also defines in what sense ‘the people’ have been victimized and who is guilty of hurting them. In doing so, populists present their political opposition – or often anyone whose ideas run counter to their own – as the perpetrators of (often historical) crimes. This reification allows populists to ascribe a degree of agency or ‘actorness’ to communities that are generally unorganized, structurally discriminated and politically underrepresented. Such agency allows victimhood populists to accuse these groups of colluding, forming alliances and being systematically supported by more powerful enemies: they are accused of deliberately working with ‘the elite’ against ‘the people’. This strategic blaming of perpetrators for the victimization of the people occurs through guilt by association. Populists take a powerful group, which may or may not have effectively victimized ‘the people’ in the past, and claim that this powerful perpetrator is helping, sponsoring or is somehow allied with other groups. This process can be vertical, where a group is blamed for something that its powerful predecessors or ancestors did, even though the groups are not really the same, assigning guilt through (real or false) historical continuity. The process can also be horizontal, reifying weaker groups, often minorities, linking them to more powerful actors, and assigning guilt through collusion or conspiracy.

These strategies make the performance of victimhood remarkably flexible in finding guilty agents. The performance often employs a form of victim–perpetrator inversion, implying that ‘migrants are presented as powerful and aggressive, even as “invaders”, while the majority population is presented as powerless and weak’ (Wodak 2020: 2). This leap of logic is challenging: how can the weak succeed in oppressing the people if the people are truly superior and the only entity worthy of governing? This is where the performance of victimhood and the concept of justice become a powerful tandem: they can be used to reverse the roles of oppressed and oppressor, blaming weak groups such as immigrants for the actions of more powerful ones, such as EU politicians.

Step 4: Invoke a discourse based on justice

The performance of victimhood's historicized morality seemingly inevitably leads to the strategic use of a discourse centred on justice. It generates a pattern of self-victimization, subsequent calls for justice to be done, and demands (or provides justifications) for vindictive policies that 'strike back' against the offenders. In essence, this form of 'justice talk', which uses the concept of justice to legitimize authority, builds on the groundwork established in earlier steps of the performance of victimhood. The performance of victimhood also allows populists to construct their own subject position as that of an 'ideal victim', a term coined by criminologist Nils Christie, which is 'a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim' (1986: 18). The status of the ideal victim cannot be scrutinized and is therefore incontestable since it is 'a sort of public status of the same type and level of abstraction as that for example of a "hero" or a "traitor"' (Christie 1986: 18). Following Christie's logic, we can argue that populists turn the people they claim to represent into the humiliated victim, and the populist leader or party into the hero who protects or avenges that victim, while elites are turned into traitors. Since the populist and the people are cast in the role of ideal victims, the call for justice is even more resonant.

Step 5: Propose vindictive policies as simplistic solutions

The penultimate step in the performance of victimhood consists of proposing (often vague) policies or general policy directions, which are supposed to rectify the injustices posited in the previous steps. The 'justice talk' in Step 4, or the sense of injustice created based on the historical moral groundwork, is leveraged into justifications for political action. As in Moffitt's (2015) idea of the performance of crisis, these policies are often simplistic and vague, implying more of an abstract 'sense' of policy than actual policy itself. Most often, these calls for vindictive policies are primarily a form of image-building for populists. They allow them to mobilize voters against their usual enemies such as the European Union.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán uses the victimization of Hungary by European powers in the Treaty of Trianon and the allegedly unfair migration policies imposed upon the country by the modern-day European Union as a reason to defy the policies and values of the European Union. In his 2015 State of the Nation Address, he first argues that Hungarians 'must abandon this mentality as no longer being worthy of a country seeking to become Central Europe's front runner' and that Hungary will become 'a country in which others may increasingly see the unfolding success of brave and independent economic policy' (Orbán 2015). He sees the economic course of Hungary as a means of turning away from the EU and its migration policy, claiming that Hungarians 'should not be afraid to fight for the justice of our cause' (Orbán 2015). This just cause apparently consists of Hungarians 'taking back control' from the EU and refusing to accept 'that their lives will be decided for them' (Orbán 2015). In his 2020 State of the Nation Address, Orbán claimed that 'in Europe the rights of violent criminals have taken precedence over those of law-abiding people' and that this 'mockery of justice' tends to 'defend perpetrators instead of victims' (Orbán 2020). Orbán uses these claims to justify his policies, such as his push to corrupt Hungary's judiciary (Krekó and Enyedi 2018).

In the performance of victimhood of Central European populists, the EU is often cast in the role of culpable agent, and the discourse takes a form of backlash politics against European integration (Kriesi 2020). The EU is depicted as an actor that has treated the new member states unfairly through overly strict accession conditions. In the context of these constraints, victimhood ideas could re-emerge as a convenient fulcrum for a politics of moral resistance against power loss (Fox and Vermeersch 2010).

Step 6: Continue to propagate victimhood

Having gone through the steps in the performance of victimhood, a key feature in maximizing its effectiveness is the continuation of the performance. Repeating the narrative created in the performance amplifies the sense of victimhood and injustice, and therefore the desire for vindication, just as repeating the performance of crisis perpetuates the sense of crisis it creates (Moffitt 2015). Linking historical victimhood to contemporary situations generates a permanent, ‘eternalized’ sense of victimhood (like a ‘permanent crisis’) that needs to be rectified again and again. The revenge demanded by the performance of victimhood is thus permanent and perpetually unfulfilled. The people who vote for populists may feel genuinely victimized (and in some sense may be genuine victims), but they are invited by populists *not* to overcome their victimhood, and they are not encouraged to accept strategies for repair. Instead, victimhood populism hopes to extend a past, real form of victimhood into present-day revenge, but there is never any indication of what amount of revenge might be enough to settle the score – precisely because the victimhood populist is not concerned with actual redemption. The performance of victimhood is merely used as a tool to justify policy decisions, preferably indefinitely. This means that the populist performance of victimhood has several characteristics that make it a particularly effective tool for political mobilization and policy legitimization, but it has very little to do with *actual* victimhood.

Perhaps most importantly, it is not very much concerned with the fate of the victims but primarily with a permanently repeating right to revenge – a continuous propagation of victimhood. For this very reason, the performance of victimhood’s moral groundwork and inevitably vindictive logic, akin to punitive justice, serves as a legitimization for anger towards offenders and proposes ‘rightful’ punishments directed at them. It seeks to equate victimhood with a punitive impulse, and thereby aims to sustain victimhood and the victim’s right to revenge. In other words, the fact that populists cultivate the perspective and position of ‘the victim’ does not entail that they care for citizens who are victims of societal, political or historical injustice. Just as criminal justice has traditionally oriented its interest towards the offender (and not those who suffer the direct consequences of crime), populists are primarily interested in finding culpable agents and in seeking a scapegoat, preferably someone belonging to a group that can be labelled elitist or, if generally powerless, linked to elitist groups. Populists do not seem to be concerned with the real fate and lives of victims, nor with the complex psychology underlying personal experiences of being victimized. Instead, they seek to reformulate past crises and alleged wrongdoing into a simplistic victim–perpetrator relationship and use this to justify policies that they present as the only path towards justice or redemption, and this preferably in a continuous cycle.

Conclusion

Building on the argument that populists instrumentalize history (Zubrzycki and Wozny 2020) and that they perform crisis (Moffitt 2015), we have used examples from Central Europe to show how populists ‘perform’ victimhood to bring in a historicized moral framework, link that historical situation to a contemporary situation, frame the people versus the elite and connect that elite to other groups as accomplices responsible for the victimization, invoke the concept of justice, propose vindictive policies as simplistic solutions, and then repeat the performance. This performance of victimhood, operationalized through a discourse based on justice, can be used to justify ‘punching down’ at weaker groups while avoiding paradoxes with the populist logic. The performance of victimhood manages to reframe its claims as minority claims, and thereby appropriates complaints of victimhood from those who previously voiced them.

Just as the performance of victimhood is not concerned with victims themselves, it is not concerned with real historical trauma. Although it abundantly refers to such traumas, populism’s effort to make traumas part of the fabric of collective remembrance is remarkably ahistorical: victimhood populism is not interested in the complex facts of history, only in its own simplified appropriation and retelling of it. If populism finds culpable agents, it can use them to perform victimhood and legitimize policies that hurt or neglect real underdogs while continuing to claim that *they* are the underdog and that they have the right to enforce such policies in the name of justice. Since populism depends on an underdog position to remain appealing to voters, it makes sense that a populist actor that has come to power would perform victimhood to maintain the underdog illusion. Crucially, the performance is an appropriation of suffering – not systemic or actual suffering, but *tactical* suffering (Chouliaraki 2021): a tool for voter mobilization and policy leverage.

Populism’s electoral appeal may weaken over time as policy recipes turn out to be ‘more of the same’ after all and fail to usher in the promised true representation of the people in government (Brubaker 2017). To counteract this diminishing potency, the performance of victimhood offers a way out. It allows attention to be diverted from the social hierarchies that populists promised to overturn but ended up reinforcing. It bundles and equates various forms of real systemic suffering and blames those grievances on an imagined enemy. It allows the populists’ own failures to be attributed to a more powerful enemy, allowing them to continue their underdog façade. Finally, it allows for the introduction of an airtight historicized moral framework in which the populist and the people are unambiguously ‘good’, providing a justification for policy decisions that are a form of revenge against the ‘evil other’ – a powerful means of continuing the affective mobilization of the populist electorate.

This article also has theoretical implications for the study of populism. First, it expands upon Moffitt’s (2015) interpretation of populism as a performance, arguing that the performative nature of populism also applies to populism’s moral overtones and its appeal to the underdog. Second, it affirms Rogers Brubaker’s (2017) claim that populism has significant internal limitations, yet the article also builds upon that argument by showing how the paradoxes of populism, especially salient if in power, can be circumvented through victimhood and memory politics. Third,

the study underscores the usefulness of Chouliaraki's (2021) distinction between systemic and tactical suffering.

The article also shows that victimhood populism differs from discursive practices of history-reformulation and trauma processing, not just in its implications for political power – the stakes are higher – but also in its very nature. While victimhood populism is part of a broader repertoire of historical discursive revisionism, it is unique in the sense that it can extend or revive a faltering underdog illusion. This implies, too, however, that the framework we propose is limited in its analytical flexibility: it can quite likely be used to examine the discursive strategies of populist actors beyond Poland and Hungary, but it seems to serve best when its focus is on understanding right-wing populists that are in power. It seems less useful in the study of left-wing populism or parties that are less inclined to attack and demonize migrants and minorities. Our analytical lens may nonetheless be useful for research on victimhood discourses in certain dictatorships (see, e.g. Lim 2014). In sum, we hope that our approach invites other researchers to examine the processes through which populists in power seek to justify their exclusion of others.

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