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DISCUSSING POLITICAL ANTAGONISM AND EXCLUSIONARY APPEALS IN POPULIST DISCOURSE

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1. Introduction

One of the defining features of modern populist movements is their attempt to 'negatively constitute the people' through the identification of an enemy whose identity may vary according to given context (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1044). By discursively constructing 'the people' as an abstract, bounded community, positioned in an antagonistic relationship towards certain 'excluded' enemies, populist actors basically offer their political perception on issues such as distribution of resources within the polity (who gets what, based on who is what), political representation (whose voice should be heard and whose shouldn't), cultural and moral issues (what is 'alien' and what is 'traditional', 'bad'/'good') and others areas of public life. Such conceptualization evokes resemblance to the well-known Schmidtian (1932) understanding of politics as a normative differentiation, through which political distinction can be essentially reduced to a 'distinction between friend and enemy' due to the essential human diversity in identities and practices, beliefs and way of life, which will eventually lead to conflict between one another. By developing an antagonistic discourse, populist actors make the use of this friend/foe distinction by proclaiming that certain societal singularities (elites, ethnic groups, actors, international organisations) constitute an enemy of 'the people', precisely because of their different societal status, ideology, culture, lifestyle, or other attributes (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012).

When conceptualized as a specific type of discourse, political actors that engage in populism develop an antagonistic struggle in their narratives – one of ordinary, homogenous 'people' and their demands facing the backlash of an unresponsive hegemonic system which fails to meet the demands voiced by these 'people' (Laclau, 2005). In the populist worldview, the abstract 'will of the people' as a bounded community, representing certain culture, ethnicity, values, tastes, habits or way of life is presented as the ultimate policy-guiding principle in politics. Just as words such as *justice* cannot be conceptualised without a reference to *injustice*, 'the people' have to be defined in an opposition to the unresponsive system, which is in power, as this constitutes their primary, unifying trait that creates the *chain of equivalence* between their popular demands, united under a single political unit – 'the people' (Laclau, 2005). What unites 'the people' as a single political subject is precisely the inability of the incumbent system ('the establishment') to address and possibly resolve their demands – *we are all united in our struggle against the unresponsive system.*

I therefore argue that it becomes important for researchers to focus not only on who constitutes the 'the people' in populist discourse, but also who is defined as the enemy of 'the people', i.e., the other side of the antagonistic struggle. I address this issue by comparing several ground-breaking conceptualizations of populism throughout the lens of political antagonism and discursive exclusion. The output is a development of a coding frame based on Brubaker's (2017, 2019) conceptualization of populism as a *two*-dimensional discursive frame in an attempt to provide a methodological tool for future empirical analyses. I also support this methodological framework with examples of various

exclusionary narratives coded from public statements delivered by Slovak politicians, demonstrating that such antagonism can be based on various types of distinction, e.g., economic, cultural or social.

The main objective of this paper is thus to analyse the nature of such exclusionary, populist appeals which are employed to establish political antagonism between 'the people' and those who constitute the 'non-people' group. I operationalize exclusionary appeals as those antagonistic narratives that *exclude* certain actors and groups from the abstract, unified community of 'the people' which is seen as the only rightful sovereign of democratic power in the populist worldview, resulting in an antagonistic frontier being formed between 'the people' and their enemies.

So far, I have been using the word 'enemies' rather than 'the elites' or 'the establishment' to describe the other side of the moral battleground between 'the people' and their antagonists. The idea that politics should be perceived as a struggle between the 'homogenous people' and their demands on one side, and a vilified, corrupt 'elite' or 'establishment' on the other, has been defined as the core feature of populism by several scholar that have engaged with this topic (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, Kaltwasser, 2014). A semi-formal reading of some ground-breaking works on populism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau 2005; Brubaker, 2017, 2019) however reveals that the identity of the enemy may not always be limited to 'the elites' (political, prestige or economic) defined in a top-down, power-related sense but will in most cases span a wider range of actors who are positioned *vis a vis* 'the people' through diverse types of relations (both vertical and horizontal in their nature).

2. Exclusionary appeals and political antagonism in populist discourse

Probably the first scholarly debate that has attempted to challenge the former prevailing understanding of populism as something that should be seen as pathological, temporary or even dangerous has been initiated by an Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau. In Laclau's (2005) ground-breaking conceptualization of populism, the enemy of the people, i.e., the 'other' (the non-people) is occupied by the unresponsive system which exercises power but remains unresponsive to people's demands. 'The people' then emerge as a collective actor through a top-down driven populist mobilisation which discursively connects together various unsatisfied demands through an *equivalently chain*[1], thus creating a single political actor represented by an empty signifier ('the people', 'nation', 'humble citizens', 'all the good man', etc.). In this sense, a political project which seeks to replace those in power can encompass a wide variety of demands, which are originally distinct (*logic of difference*), because their solutions are addressed by different institutional channels, in order to prevent the creation of a

[1] Demands voiced by various societal groups are *unified* or rendered equal because of a shared trait: the opposition to the current system that renders them unaddressed/unsatisfied. As Laclau himself (1996, p. 40) writes, ' … in a climate of extreme repression any mobilization for a partial objective will be perceived not only as related to the concrete demand or objectives of that struggle, but also as an act of opposition against the system.'

single unified block that would demand a regime change (Laclau, 2005, p. 61). Demands such as higher wages present a macro-economic challenge which can be addressed only partially on the national level, while calls for a health-care reform present a challenge to bureaucratic organisation and requires roles of strong managers. These popular demands thus divert in the way they are addressed, resolved and generally administrated by the state and its apparatus. Under *the logic of difference* these popular demands will eventually transform to *democratic demands* if addressed as issues (educational reform, minimum wage adjustment, dual citizenship laws, etc.) by the incumbent hegemonic establishment (the national government, the EU as an 'international government', 'global community', etc.). By this, the regime is able to sustain its *hegemonic power*, which Laclau understands as the capacity of an actor to present his/her agenda–communitarian values, tastes, habits or the general *way of living* within a society–as embodying the public good, or we can say, the *status quo (*Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). It is not only a question of leadership, state ideology, or a mere alliance of forces, but rather 'the construction of a new meaning that is more than the sum of its parts' (Petitjean, 2014).

The hegemonic project thus attempts to produce a moral, cultural and symbolic order within its domain. An unstable phenomenon, the relationship between hegemon and his subordinates is never complete and fulfilled in a binary sense. Hegemon's 'control' over its subordinates is always a matter of degree, as the incumbent establishment is always susceptible to challenge by other visions of how polity should be organised, who should be represented/who shouldn't and how resources should be redistributed in a society (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Each hegemony is always open to a challenge by another political project, which confronts the current 'way of doing things', presenting its own solutions for people's demands that have been connected together through their united opposition towards the unresponsive system. Under Laclau's understanding, politics becomes a struggle between competing hegemonic projects to establish their agenda as representing the general interest and eventually present it as 'the only game in town.'

According to Laclau (2005), the populist mobilisation thus always has to be constructed through an antagonistic relationship towards another subject, 'the hegemony', which may, theoretically, operate on the national level (the government with its oligarchs and crooks, controlling state owned businesses) or international one (foreign powers, organisations with pooled sovereignty, 'the international community', 'global capitalism', etc.).

Laclau thus conceptualises the relationship between 'the people' and the 'other' as dichotomous in its nature. Through his own words:

> Populism, it is argued, 'simplifies' the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise … all social singularities tend to group themselves around one or the other of the poles of the dichotomy (Laclau, 2005, p. 18).

Under such logic, everything that does not constitute the proposed political project, which is framed as the solution for people's unresolved demands, can be labelled as 'not belonging to the people' thus being a part of the old, unresponsive hegemonic structure which populism seeks to replace. In this sense, the antagonism is not expressed only towards elites, or the chief-representatives of the former hegemony, but also possibly towards lower-level social actors (in terms of power, wealth or prestige-related societal hierarchy) who are framed as benefiting from the incumbent hegemonic project and are thus portrayed as the enemies of the new, populist political project. The populist narrative here follows a simple logic; if you are not with us, you are against us.

Each populist political project thus proposes its hegemonic vision, encompassing populist politicians and 'the people' that they claim to represent, defined *vis a vis* othered 'corrupt' elites and excluded 'outgroups', who are privileged by the elites and are portrayed as being culturally or morally distinct, i.e., positioned at the margins. The identity of the people's enemy is therefore not limited to any concrete power group or a culturally different 'outgroup' but can rather be identified among any societal singularity that does not constitute the populist proposed hegemonic project, i.e., the solution for the chain of 'people's demands' that seeks to establish a status quo, replacing the old, unresponsive hegemony.

The core of Laclau's ideas has been adapted to the probably most well-known conceptualization of populism known as the *ideational approach* to populism (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Hawkins, 2009, 2010). Hawkins & Kaltwasser (among others) understand populism as a discursive frame employed by political actors in their narratives to express a set of unique ideas, one that politics should be viewed as a struggle between 'reified will of the people and a conspiring elite' (2018, p. 3) Similarly, Mudde (2004), defines populism as a 'thin-centred ideology' one that considers society to be divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (p. 543). In an attempt to arrive at a 'minimal' definition of populism (Brubaker, 2019), it seems as if scholars have abandoned some of the aspects of Laclauian understanding of populism as a 'mobilizational force' formed against an 'othered' unresponsive hegemony, with the latter comprised of not only 'power elites' or 'politicians', but also excluded actors which are more or less situated on the same, or lower 'power' level as 'the people', being portrayed as culturally distinct, positioned at the margins and thus deemed unworthy to be a part of the populist new hegemonic vision. In an edited volume on the ideational approach to populism, Grbeša & Šalaj (2018, p. 67) for example note that

… the simultaneous presence of people-centeredness and anti-elitism, is a necessary and sufficient condition for someone to be labelled "true" populist, while the presence of "dangerous" groups (other than political elites) is not considered central to populism but is quite common and may be useful in defining different subtypes of populism.

Following a similar logic, De Cleen (2017, p. 7) argues for populist antagonism to be limited to vertical, down/up axis that excludes certain segments of the society ('elites' in this case) based on power, wealth and status differences. Such logic has been proposed by several other scholars who argue that populism plays out as referencing frame only in a one-dimensional space: the down/up, vertical one (Dyrberg, 2003; Ostiguy, 2009), while the horizontal, in/out dimension should be reserved to xenophobic or openly chauvinist discursive frames such as nationalism or nativism[2] (De Cleen, 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis 2017). Similarly, Rooduijn et al. (2014, p. 564) refrain from including vertical exclusionism within the core definition of populism as this 'would a priori bias the definition towards right wing-populism.' Such limited understanding however overlooks that horizontal antagonism–the exclusion based on group *difference* rather than vertical *inequality*–does not have to be rooted in a reference to a distinct culture, ethnicity or even nationality (Brubaker, 2019, p. 11). 'The people' can still be horizontally constructed as a bounded and threatened 'moral community' (Wuthnow, 2018), with their shared values or way of life that are being threatened by outsider forces, with no need for a clear ethnic or national delineation. A 'left-wing exclusion' may also be construed, as Brubaker (2019, p. 11) notes, '… in economic or political terms, and the threatening ''outside'' may be identified with unfettered trade, unregulated globalisation … or (especially in Latin America) American imperialism.'

Here, we can see how under the ideational approach, the significance of the horizontal exclusionary appeals gets downplayed, rather understood as a corollary, non-constituent feature of populism. Distancing myself from this type of conceptualization through which certain elements, such as anti-elitism, are seen as 'central', constituent feature of populist mobilisation while antagonism towards horizontal 'outgroups' is understood as a coronary element at best, or a feature of a different discursive frame that got merely 'mixed' with populism, I would argue that the replacement of 'other' to the populist 'people' by a less abstract singularity; 'the elite' or 'the establishment', naturally leads to the simplification and *reductionism* of the antagonist relationship that populism as a discursive frame constructs. Such understanding, however, falls short of addressing the horizontal dimension, that is, antagonism towards actors that do not constitute the people but are not part of the elite, i.e., those that do not exercise any kind of an 'abusive' power over 'the people.' When being more abstract, we can probably find arguments for the framing of the media and their representatives as 'elites', as they do have 'power' to shape public opinion and set the agenda for discussion. In some sense, even NGOs can be understood as 'elites' in a power-related sense when taken from the 'agenda-setting' and 'public-

[2] The argument developed by authors such as De Cleen or Stavrakakis follows the logic that horizontal antagonism towards excluded outgroups should not be considered a central feature of populism, but rather a result of mixing the nationalist and populist discursive elements by some populist right-wing actors. For more on issue of conceptually separating populism and nationalism, see De Cleen (2016); Brubaker (2019); De Cleen & Stavrakakis (2017).

attention shifting' perspective. However, reducing the antagonism that populist discourse constructs to 'anti-elitism' misses out a larger picture of how 'the people' are constituted as a bounded community– with their distinct culture, moral values, way of live–and the only rightful sovereign *vis a vis* both horizontal and vertical enemies (Brubaker, 2017, 2019).

The methodological implications of such 'minimal' definition of populism are pretty straightforward. Reducing the qualitative or quantitative operationalization of populist exclusionary appeals to mere vertical antagonism speeds up the coding process, as the codebook has to operate with fewer keywords and concepts. For example, in their analysis of populist elements in European party manifestos, Rooduijn & Pauwels (2011, p. 1280) code their textual corpus by identifying a 'reference to the people and whether the author of the text is negative towards elites.' Following a similar logic, an analysis of the 'mainstream' parties' programmatic reactions to the rise of populist parties by Rooduijn et al. (2014, p. 567) explicitly instructed coders to 'determine whether paragraphs contained indications of people-centrism and anti-elitism.' Both studies thus omit both horizontal antagonism towards outgroups and vertical antagonism towards those with 'below' status on which I will elaborate in later parts of this paper) as an intrinsic feature of populism.

3. Populism as a two-dimensional discursive frame

Contrary to approaches that define populism as a discursive frame operating through one-dimensional, 'people' vs 'elite' antagonism, a contribution by American sociologist Roger Brubaker offers a quite different understanding of populist exclusion and antagonism. Brubaker (2019, p. 8) defines the frame of reference for the populist discourse as being focused on: a) distribution of power, resources, opportunities and respect between 'the people' and the political, economic or cultural elite, b) between 'the people' and those who actually but illegitimately exercise power, c) between 'the people' and those who are constructed as outsiders or deemed unworthy of the privileges that 'the people' as a bounded community enjoy.

This type of conceptualization allows for the 'inclusion'[3] of several social singularities that may have been left out in the renowned 'people vs elite' distinction which is usually used in academia. When conceptualised as a discourse through which politicians delineate an abstract group of peoples as a 'bounded community', populism may be prone to also discursively exclude actors which are not generally framed as 'the elite' or the members of 'the establishment.' This offers us a wider scope of actors that can be possibly portrayed as antagonists to 'the people', quite similar in its range to the one developed in Laclau's conceptualization of populism. Brubaker's (2019, p. 13) understanding of

[3] In a sense of conceptual inclusion, not the populist discursive inclusion (as opposed to exclusion) of certain outgroups within the abstract identity of 'the people.'

populism as a *two*-dimensional discursive frame, employing both vertical *inequality* (economic, political and cultural) and horizontal *difference* (of culture, values and ways of life) is shown in Table 1. The categorizes listed under 'Insiders' column (red outline) represents 'the people' and the populist elites which claim to speak for them, while the blue outline represents 6 categories of potential enemies that may be situated on the other side of the antagonistic frontier.

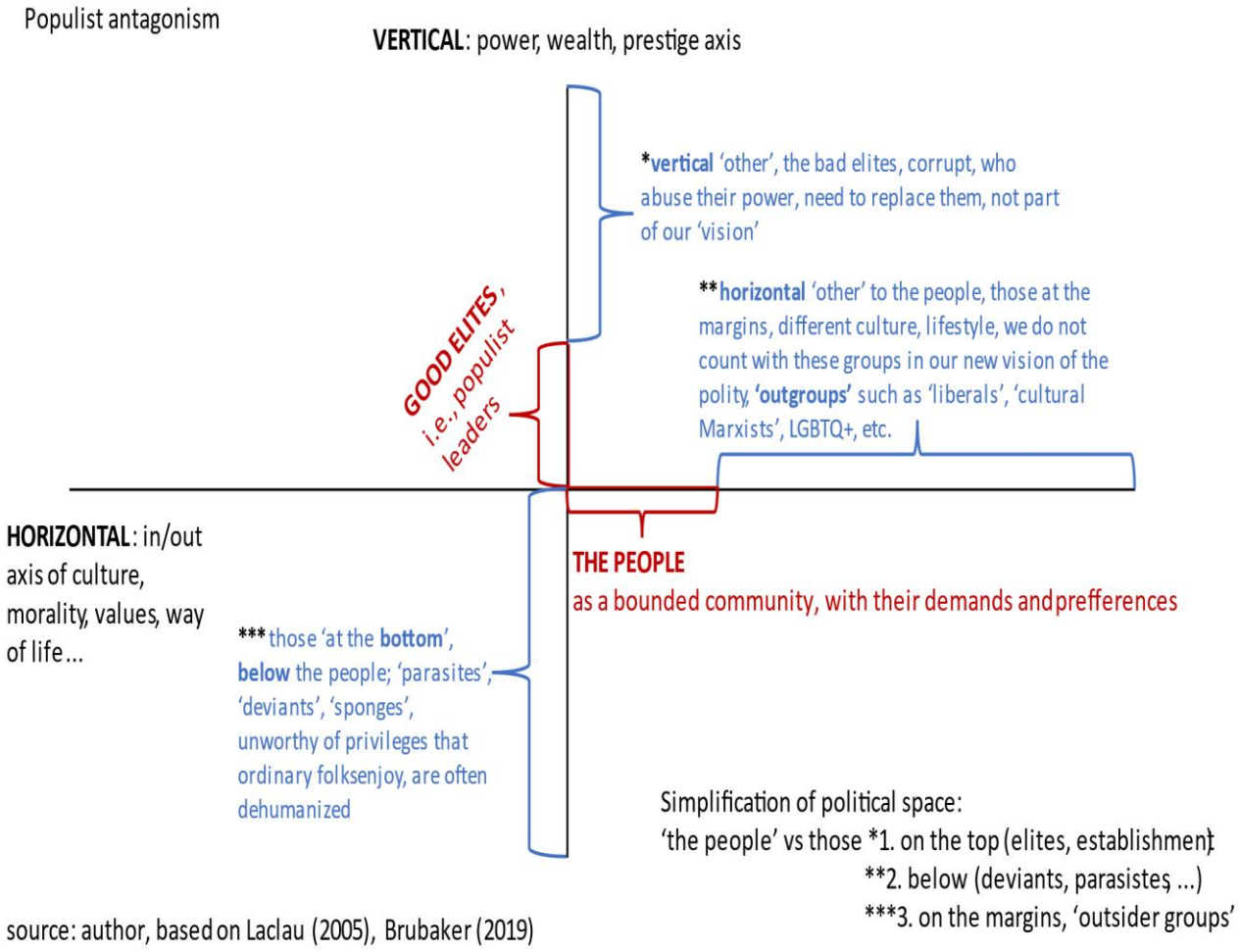
Table 1 Brubaker's understanding of populism as a two-dimensional space of reference

	Inside–outside dimension			
	Within the polity		Outside the polity	
	Insiders	Internal outsiders	External outsiders	
Power, wealth, education, institutionally consecrated prestige +	Leaders who are seen as belonging to the people and therefore legitimately speaking for the people	The elite	Global capital, cosmopolitan culture, powerful outside states or organizations	Outside cultural threats that are independent of power–wealth–prestige axis
	The people as plebs, demos and bounded community	Those at the margins (defined by culture, lifestyle or gender/sexual identity, not by wealth, power, etc.)		
—		Those on the bottom, represented also as different (ethnoracially, culturally or morally)	Potential low-status migrants and refugees, also represented as ethnoracially or ethnoculturally different	

source: Brubaker (2019, p. 13)

The above displayed table can be summarised into a multi-axis graphical interpretation (Figure 1) that presents populism as a two-dimensional discursive frame that may 'exclude' certain segments of the populations based on both vertical and horizontal antagonism.

Figure 1 Author's interpretation of exclusionary appeals and political antagonism in populist discourse



Based on the above displayed figures, I have developed a simple coding rubric which basically mirrors Brubaker's ideas regarding political antagonism in populist rhetoric. When we look at Brubaker's graphical interpretation in Figure 1, we can see that the 'Internal outsiders' and 'External outsiders' (blue outline) columns match my perception of 'exclusionary appeals' as defined in this paper. Based on Brubaker's conceptualization, I introduce a rubric where all 6 types of possible antagonistic actors listed under these two columns are operationalized for qualitative coding. The rubric can be seen in Table 2, filled in with various quotes by Slovak populist politicians (most of them gathered from 2020 Slovak parliamentary election debates[4]) in order to demonstrate the diversity of actors that can be framed as the 'enemies of the people' in populist rhetoric.

[4] This paper does not attempt to systematically analyse a certain textual corpus for the presence of populist exclusionary appeals and antagonism. The sample of included actors and their speech acts does not follow any rigid sampling logic. Representative quotes were selected from various timeframes and different sources (social

Table 2 Coding rubric for exclusionary appeals based on Brubaker's conceptualization of populism

Enemies identified **WITHIN THE POLITY** (national level)	
Identity of the enemy	**Representative quotes**
DOMESTIC ELITES which are above ordinary people, and are not part of the populist hegemonic project, i.e., are not members of the populist party that delivers this discourse. The oligarchs, the establishment, shadowy elites or powerful tycoons. Entrepreneurs with political connections, corrupt judges, or prosecutors. You name it. Potentially anyone that exercises power within the national polity over 'the people.' This can also include NGOs and media, as these can shape public opinion. They therefore can be framed as having power over 'the people', because they, to some degree, influence what people think about certain issues. A common narrative here is that the media are 'biased' against the populist politicians and are conspiring with corrupt elites to shift the public opinion and overthrow the people's government.	'We are the only party which has no ties to **oligarchs** and **organised crime**…' (MK, 23.02.2020*). 'We will face a lot of criticism because **oligarchs** will not like it, because they will have to steal twice as much …' (MK, 19.01.2020). 'The **governing parties** are responsible for our state of judiciary, state of our healthcare, our impoverished retirees!' (MK 19.01.2020). '… to not allow **financial groups** to make profits at the expense of the ordinary people …' (IM, 26.02.2020). 'None of these **politicians** are interested in people's problems …' (IM, 26.01.2020).
Culturally different, but on the *SAME LEVEL* as people, positioned on the margins: *different* by culture, lifestyle, moral attributes, ideology (liberals, leftists, etc.), not by wealth or power. Horizontal distinction is emphasised. In the Slovak context, it is often presented as a moral distinction (good vs bad people, corrupt vs humble, etc.)	'… that after 30 years, finally, we will have the feeling that we are all equal and **the dodgers and cheaters will be scared**. Not the ordinary people …' (IM, 23.02.2020). '… let's change this, let's create a country where all honest people will like to live and where **bad people** will be afraid of being prosecuted and sentenced …' (IM, 26.02.2020). 'We have to evoke fear among **corrupt, dishonest people** and only then, ordinary, honest people in Slovakia can feel hope' (IM, 23.02.2020).
BELOW: Those on bottom may be represented as parasites, spongers, deviants, addicts. In Eastern European *contex*t, Roma, or generally any group that is deemed 'unworthy', or morally corrupt and is positioned below the people, framed as 'parasites' – they are 'below' because they do not deserve what 'the people' have, this distinction can also be based on identity and lifestyle	'We will certainly not give in to those groups of **drugged fanatics** which the liberal parties are sending to our meetings …' (MK, 02.02.2020). '… 150 million € will be used only for houses for **people from these gypsy settlements**, people who have done nothing for our nation, for our state budget, for our culture. On the contrary,

media, public debates, press conferences) in order to *demonstrate* the wide variety of actors that can possibly be framed as 'the enemies of the people.'

difference in discourses of far-right parties (LGBTQI+ referred to as 'perverts' and so on)[5].	they have decided to live their antisocial way of life and suck out our social system' (MM, 02.10.2016). 'We can **never grant** to the cohabitation of two people of the same sex **the rights** of a family. We cannot give them the same rights that two people, as man and a woman enjoy, for the purpose of creating children and bringing them up (MK, 17.9.2018). 'I even already said that openly, I have a serious problem with the idea that **homosexuals should adopt children**, I consider it a **perversion …' (**RF, 06.09.2019)
Enemies identified **OUTSIDE OF THE POLITY**	
Identity of the enemy	**Representative quotes**
GLOBAL ELITES, representatives of the cosmopolitan culture, foreign powers and their spheres of influence, Soros, international organisations (EU, NATO), NGOs and watchdog organizations (provided that their 'supranational' character is stressed out). All of these exercise power over 'us', but we do not like it and would welcome a change – take back pooled sovereignty and get rid of foreign influence. Our national polity is controlled by these 'others'; a) directly through institutional arrangements (international treaties), or b) indirectly through their 'shadowy', puppet control of our government and society. Our hands are tied, because we are bound by international commitments. We would like to give more to 'the people' but these external actors wont allows us!	'If we have enough money to pay protection rackets to the **European Union**, enough money to generously fund anti-national, anti-Slovak NGOs, we also have to find money for our retirees'(MK, 23.02.2020). 'We cannot give money to **Brussels** first, and only after that give what is left to the people' (MK, 23.02.2020). 'They (**United States**) have installed their puppet in Slovakia - few days ago they even admitted it in Forbes, that Čaputová organised a maidan in Slovakia' (ĽB, 27.01.2022).
ABSTRACT outside cultural threats, usually ideologies or worldviews (liberalism, Cultural Marxism, 'gender ideology' etc.) independent of power/wealth/prestige axis. Perceived as something 'alien' and external, which is in	'… let's all stop the **progressive evil** together…' (MK, 23.02.2022).

[5] An important aspect here is the discursive dehumanization, as it helps us distinguish the SAME LEVEL from BELOW categories of the 'within polity' dimension of populist antagonism. For example, members of sexual minorities can be referred to as 'our lost brothers', who are 'different' but need to be 'fixed' through proper discipline. There is no place for 'homosexuals' in our polity, but we can welcome them if they reduce their 'deviancy' to their private life. An example of vertical, more 'de-humanizing' antagonism towards the same group would brand such individuals as 'perverts' and 'deviants', who are 'corrupting the minds of our children', while lobbying for benefits which they, 'as deviants', do not deserve (adoptions, legal marriage). They do not deserve these benefits as they are assigned a 'sub-human' status. The identity of the actor is the same, but the type of antagonism demonstrated towards them differs.

contrast with our 'traditional' culture. It is the elites' adherence to these ideologies that make them favour certain groups over 'the people' (e.g., liberal elites favour migrants over 'ordinary' people because of their adherence to *liberalism*,).	'We criticize the EU for pushing in migrants inside our borders, for propagating **gender ideology**…' (MK, 02.02.2020). '… we are the only party which can protect Slovakia from the **liberal devastation** which we can see in Western Europe *... '* (MK, 02.02.2020). '… **liberals** perceive it superficially and their ideas can destroy our culture and our traditions' (BK, 01.12.2019)
BELOW status groups which are seen as external threats, and are reduced to a lower status, the ethno-cultural distinction is important, and low 'power' status – they deserve less because of who they are, in European context, usually foreign migrants or non-fully integrated minorities, which are still perceived as belonging to the 'outside' of the polity. 'a swarm of refugees' – dehumanizes the actor, puts him in lower position in relation to 'the people'	'**They (migrants)** increase the risk of terrorism and they fundamentally threaten our European way of life and the civilizational, cultural and religious roots of our continent' (RF, 18.10.2018). 'Today, we face our own problems. With our own citizens. We cannot take care of **foreigners** while we still have homeless people in Slovakia' (MM, 02.10.2016).

source: author, based on Brubaker (2017, 2019) filled in by representative quotes, note: *initials of the politicians and date of speech act, BK – Boris Kollár, IM – Igor Matovič, MM – Milan Mazurek, MK – Marian Kotleba, RF – Robert Fico, LB – Ľuboš Blaha)

An important feature of Brubaker's (2019) conceptualization of populist antagonism is the intertwining of vertical and horizontal antagonism. Brubaker (2019) notes that certain 'outgroups' can simultaneously be presented as being vertically 'above/below' the ordinary folks, while also horizontally 'outside' of the 'bounded cultural and moral community' that 'the people' represent with their 'values, tastes, habits or way of life' (p. 14). The 'intertwining of vertical and horizontal oppositions' occurs when particular people's enemies are at the same time framed as being both vertically and horizontally distinct from 'the people' as a bounded community (Brubaker, 2019, p. 14). As an example, Brubaker gives us the Central European notion of Roma minority which can be framed as a culturally distinct entity, being 'outside' of the constituent people, while at the same time deemed 'below' due to their lifestyle and economic situation, not being 'ordinary' in the populist sense (Brubaker, 2019, p. 14). To use an empirical example from the above provided coding rubric, I may cite the Slovak far-right MP, Milan Mazurek, who, during a radio interview on 02.10.2016 noted that:

… 150 million € will be used only for houses for people from these [sic] gypsy settlements. For people who have done nothing for our nation, for our state budget, for our culture. On the contrary, they have decided to live their antisocial way of life and suck out our social system.

Here, the antagonism towards the Roma minority operates clearly in vertical dimension, as it positions this whole ethnicity into the role of those who are benefiting from the system at the expense of the ordinary people. The 'below' status of the former is rooted in their 'antisocial' living standards and their decision to 'suck out' benefits of the social system which are seen as a privilege and should be enjoyed only by those that constitute 'the people.' More interestingly however, the Roma are simultaneously excluded on the basis of a cultural difference, which clearly plays out in the horizontal dimension. The Roma are othered because they have different culture and values from 'the people', but also because they live a deviant lifestyle, unworthy of the welfare benefits that ordinary citizens should enjoy.

In a very much similar manner, EU can be framed as an actor which has considerable vertical control over country's domestic policies (due to pooled sovereignty) while simultaneously understood as a project of 'global neoliberalism', being framed as something culturally distinct and dangerous to the national polity and its 'traditional culture.' The ideals that the EU represents as an entity are horizontally distinct (cosmopolitanism, universalism, freedom etc.) while the 'abuse of power' by Brussel bureaucrats plays out in the vertical dimension. A combination of vertical and horizontal antagonism can also be demonstrated, for example, towards domestic elites who are framed as being 'above' the people due to their power and wealth while at the same time framed as being horizontally 'outside' of the polity due to their cosmopolitan nature, adherence to liberal values and ownership of luxurious foreign properties. Such actors are 'excluded' because they are perceived as serving the foreign interest, moving between identities (European x national), seen as a culturally distinct 5th column in the country (Brubaker, 2019, p. 14). A good, recent example is the narrative developed by Slovak MP Ľuboš Blaha who has been known to attack the incumbent Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová for her supposed ties to the U.S. government. In his 27.01.2022 social media status, Blaha notes, 'They (the United States) have installed their puppet in Slovakia – few days ago they even admitted in Forbes that Čaputová organised a maidan in Slovakia.' In another instance, a 09.2.2022 status, Blaha ironically makes a call, 'Do not insult Zuzana Čaputová for committing country treason! She would never betray her American country!'[6], implying that the Slovak president is aligned with a foreign power rather than her own country. The way in which horizontal and vertical antagonism can intertwine in the populist discursive frame would be problematic to capture if one would accept the axiom that populism should be limited to antagonism towards only those positioned on the top; 'the elites' or 'the establishment.'

The identity of the enemy therefore becomes crucial in the process of discursively defining 'the people' and should not be overlooked in the academic research on populism and related phenomena. It is precisely as Laclau (2005) notes, the idea that connects the individual demands through the chain of equivalence, the idea of a *common* struggle, that is, the antagonism towards the unresponsive hegemonic

[6] In original language: 'Neurážajte Čaputovú, že je vlastizradkyňa! Ona svoju vlasť Ameriku nikdy nezradí.' (LB, 09.02.2022)

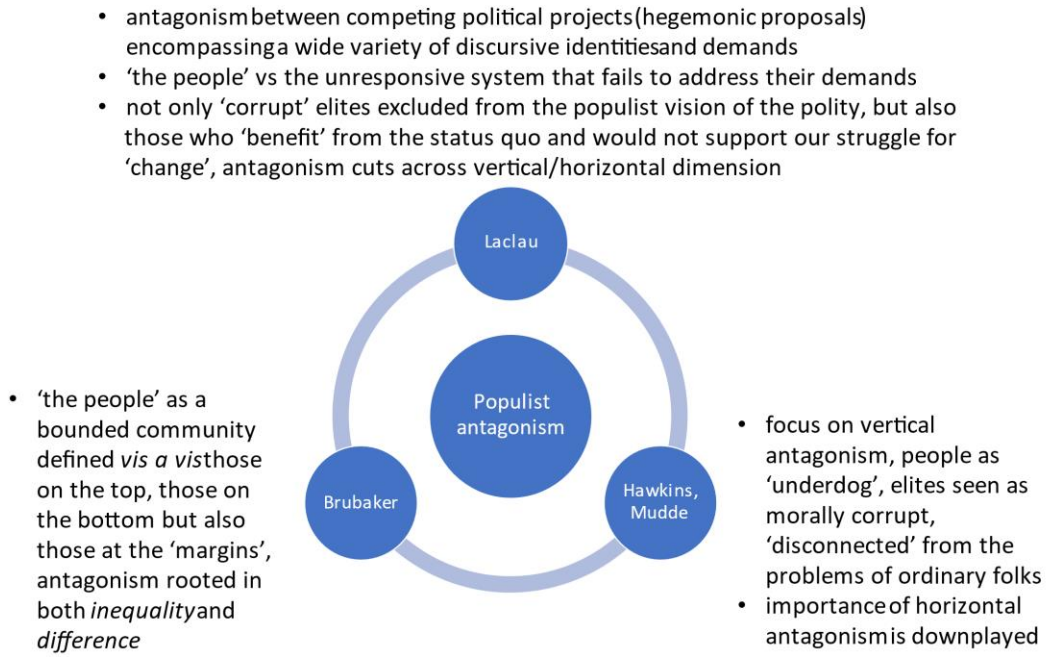
system which allows for the creation of a unified political block. If we want to understand why certain demands are articulated as the 'will of the people', we cannot overlook the actors that render them unsatisfiable, i.e., those affiliated with the incumbent hegemonic project, which can operate on both national and international level. Such hegemonic vision, or political projects, can be represented by an actor with concrete identity, such as the incumbent government in the national arena[7], or can also be elevated to actors such as the European Union or NATO in the international forum. Finally, the enemy can also be identified in abstract concepts such as 'Cultural Marxism', 'global capitalism', or 'New World Order', often framed as some kind of an overpassing 'ideology' which is 'infecting' countries all over the world and challenging their culture.

4. Towards a more useful conceptualization?

With all this in mind, I argue for a wider range of social singularities to be acknowledged as potential 'enemies of the people' in populist rhetoric than those that are 'othered' within sheer anti-elitist or anti-establishment rhetoric. In line with Laclau's and Brubaker's work in this field, I follow the logic that the 'populist picture' remains incomplete without the inclusion of both horizontal antagonism against those positioned at the margins and vertical antagonism against those positioned below 'the people' (Brubaker, 2019; Meyer, 2021). By expanding on the range of actors that can be potentially framed as the enemies of the people in populist discourse, scholars will be able to categorise such movements based on the character of their exclusionary appeals, mainly by focusing on the distinctions (cultural, economic, moral, etc.) which are articulated in their narratives as essentially separating 'the people' from the 'the non-people' (elites, outgroups, etc.). Figure 3 briefly summarises the nuanced understanding of political antagonism defined by different scholars who have engaged with this topic. Here the resemblance between Laclau's and Brubaker's understanding becomes apparent, as the identity of 'the people's enemy' potentially cuts across both vertical and horizontal dimension in both cases.

[7] In this sense, it has been claimed that populist actors may struggle to retain their anti-establishment discourse once they form a government and enter the executive, as they themselves become part of the establishment once electorally successful. Numerous case studies however demonstrate that populist prime ministers or presidents will find their way to remain anti-elitist even while in office. The first often observed method is the claim that the 'real' power lies in the hands of 'shadowy groups' or a 'deep state' which often comprises of economic elites or courts and prosecutor's office representative who are allegedly conspiring to overthrow the 'people's government' represented by populist (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 13). Another method is the externalization of the 'eliteness' to another level, the international one. Here, the most widely abused target will be the EU, which is perceived as a super state which, after successfully pooling sovereignty in some areas from its members states, propagates its liberal, capitalist vision of the world order and thus reinforces its cultural hegemony by supporting ideas which can be 'alien' to the traditional culture of the nation state. Enemies can be identified in foreign powers (Trump on China), security alliances (NATO) or abstract ideologies such as 'world capitalism', 'Cultural Marxism', 'gender ideology').

Figure 2 Summary of three lines of research in conceptualizing populist antagonism



source: author, based on Laclau (2005), Hawkins (2009, 2010), Mudde (2004, 2007) and Brubaker (2019)

In connection with this kind of a 'conceptual extension', it is important to note that such antagonist framing towards 'excluded' actors becomes populist only through a direct reference to 'the people.' It is not enough that a politician expresses antagonism towards a specific ethnic or cultural group, or any 'outgroup' framed as horizontally 'diverse'. It has to be stressed out that 'the people', as a bounded community are overlooked because the establishment takes care of those actors that such chauvinist or xenophobic referencing frame others. The populist logic here applies the *zero-sum* understanding to the issue of resource redistribution within a polity; what is given to 'others' has to be taken from 'the people' and vice-versa. Actors who are framed as elites either within or outside of the polity have to be 'accused' of giving preference to certain members of the society while 'neglecting the problems and predicaments of 'ordinary people' (Brubaker, 2019, s. 12). In this sense, anti-Semitism as such should not be considered populist, but when politicians claim that the 'rigged' system benefits people of Judaist belief or that elites are preferring Jews in their policies over 'ordinary people', the former becomes 'othered' as a reference point to the discursive constitution of 'the people.' Similarly, anti-EU narratives become populist when politicians frame Brussels as favouring certain outgroups in their agenda, while overlooking 'the people' represented by populist politicians. We can think of many aspects that the EU as an institution demonstrates which could potentially be criticised and such criticism would have nothing to do with anti-elitism or general distrust towards the establishment as such. The European Union project can be criticised as an 'economic disaster' or for having little or no voice in the international arena–issues that do not directly stem from its 'top-down' position over the national states on the vertical axis. Antagonism towards the EU as such should therefore not be considered populist. It

becomes populist only when EU is framed as an 'elite' driven project that fails to address the issues of the ordinary people, rather being concerned with refugees, sexual minorities and other 'unimportant' agenda.

In a similar sense, abstract ideologies such as liberalism or 'cultural Marxism' will be framed as being against the interest of 'the people', as the moral and political attributes of such ideologies may 'favour' one section of population over another. For example, due to its cosmopolitan nature, elites' adherence to liberalism may be understood as a cause for the favouritism of migrants over 'the ordinary people.' In the populist mind map, the presence of external liberalism as an abstract trait within the polity may thus be seen as dangerous and impeding to the interest of 'the people.' The Laclauian competing hegemonies would, in theory, differ in which sections of population they address and which ideologies they adhere to (left vs right on the national level, capitalism vs communism on the global). The politics as such therefore becomes a competition between political projects, each addressing different portions of the population, while 'othering' others.

In a Laclauian sense, the relationship becomes dichotomous because elites are perceived as exploiting their power to benefit themselves and give preference to certain 'outgroups' while overlooking the demands of the ordinary people. In a similar manner, Brubaker (2017, 2019) defines populism as a discursive frame that divides the political space along an antagonistic frontier, with one camp formed by 'the people' and their populist representatives and the other occupied by corrupt elites, the 'alien' ideologies they adhere to, and the 'outgroups' which are favoured by them. Future researchers should therefore not reduce populist antagonism to mere 'anti-elitism' or 'anti-establishment' rhetoric in their operationalization of this heavily debated concept. Once again, I am not declaring that any antagonism towards specific ethnic groups or international organisations should be immediately considered populist. However, antagonism towards any actor that does not have the 'elite' status or is not a member of 'the establishment' has to be rooted in an (in)direct, reference to 'the people' as a bounded community which is being ignored by those in power, because of the antagonized actor (Brubaker, 2019). In line with this logic, a 'successful' populist mobilisation will most likely identify some kind of a 'unholy alliance' between 'the elite' and 'the non- people' (those positioned 'at the margins', but also 'below'), who are conspiring to benefit themselves at the expense of 'the people.' Hence, the vertical antagonism against the power block gets complemented with a horizontal exclusion of certain societal groups (migrants, 'liberals', 'leftists') who are supposedly plotting together with the political establishment against 'the people' (Abts et al. 2018, p. 342).

Empirical research on populist antagonism should therefore not be limited to the study of discursive attacks directed towards political, economic or cultural elites, which often comprise accusations of power abuse or corrupt behaviour, with such behaviour resulting in the detrimental situation of 'the people.' The discursive formation of an antagonistic frontier separating 'the people' from power will

indeed mirror itself in anti-elitist rhetoric but should not be limited to bottom/up antagonism. An actor who employs populist discourse may also proceed to identify and attack certain outgroups within the polity which are the subjects of 'preference' by the incumbent elites or may connect the latter to external abstract and cultural threats (ideologies, worldviews, religions) which are seen as 'endangering' certain segments of the population and are independent of the vertical (power-based) axis. Additionally, as discussed in the previous sections, the intertwining of vertical and horizontal oppositions may lead to the 'other' being discursively framed both as being 'outside' of the bounded community that 'the people' represent, as well as above/below 'the people' in terms of power hierarchy (Brubaker, 2019). I argue that the combination of horizontal and vertical antagonism should therefore be considered an essential aspect of populist political logic and should not be overlooked in studies that are attempting to capture populist communication in the public sphere.

Conclusion

Research on populist movements throughout the whole globe has shown us that the discourse of such actors can demonstrate significant flexibility when it comes to the appropriation of blame for the detrimental status of those constituted as 'the people'. This paper has attempted to assess and compare several theoretical understandings of populist antagonism and thus demonstrate that a wide range of diverse social singularities can potentially be framed as the 'enemies of the people' in the discourse of populist actors.

Most importantly however, a thorough examination of the academic literature on this contested topic shows us that populist exclusionary appeals should not always be limited to discursive attacks against those defined as 'the elites' but may also single out other social actors and groups with diverse political, economic or cultural status. Acknowledging that even the most precisely formed theoretical framework cannot possibly fully capture the scope of empirical reality, I recommend the use of the coding rubric provided in this paper to capture possible discrepancies in the *two-dimensional* conceptualization of populism. By focusing the attention on the horizontal and vertical dimensions of populist exclusionary appeals, one can obtain contributive theoretical and empirical insight into populism and related phenomena, as we can proceed to testify hypotheses that could categorise various 'sub-fields' of populism based on the type of antagonism they produce. Is horizontal opposition towards 'outgroups' a specific domain of right-wing populists? Are left-wing populists more prone to attack international institutions than their centrist or right-wing counterparts? Do populist parties in opposition rely more on appeals that stress out vertical opposition towards domestic elites due to their 'underdog status'? Do populist parties in power shift their antagonism towards international actors once they establish their 'hegemony' in the national arena?

Overall, we should focus our attention on which actors get framed as the 'enemies of the people' in the narratives of populist actors and whether the identity of the enemy changes over time. This may allow

us to understand that such selective antagonism may not always be rooted in solid ideological foundations or party tradition but may rather present an opportunistic political move to temporarily rally constituents against a common enemy and thus gain political capital within the national polity.

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