

Public Perceptions of People-Centric Political Actions

A Qualitative Analysis of the Views of Hungarian Adults on Political Elite Measures

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People-centrism is one of the fundamental elements of populism. However, qualitative research that tries to interpret a specific part of the demand side of populism – the people's perceptions of people-centrist political actions – is scarce. In this paper, therefore, we analyse the perceptions of Hungarian adults of the people-centrist measures conducted by the domestic political elite, and scrutinise a large dataset of semi-structured interviews (n = 109) through thematic content analysis. Our results suggest that respondents deemed three important political actions by the Hungarian political elite to be 'people-centrist': family subsidies, immigration policies and tax reductions for younger citizens.

Keywords: populism, people-centrism, Hungary, thematic content analysis, semi-structured interviews, political perceptions

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Introduction

Populism and its fundamental element, *people-centrism*, have been in the scope of research fields such as psychology, political science, communication studies and philosophy (Bene et al., 2022; Canovan, 1984; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Laclau, 2005a; Lantos & Forgas, 2021). Researchers aim to understand the way in which political agents construct the imagined community (i.e. *the people*) that they appeal to in their discourses. Additionally, scholars have tried to reveal how people-centrism affects user engagement, elicits the support of populist parties and fosters in-group solidarity (Bobba & Roncarolo, 2018; Hameleers, 2021). Although such empirical research on people-centrism has delivered important insights into how populist logic, attitudes and communication prevail in a variety of contexts, only a few studies have focused on populist people-centrism from qualitative perspectives (Miglbauer, 2023; Theuwis, 2024; Versteegen, 2023). This paper aims to fill this research gap by scrutinising the perceptions of the domestic political elite among Hungarian citizens. Specifically, we have striven to determine whether Hungarian citizens deem any political action conducted by the political elite to be people-centrist. This research perspective can provide a nuanced understanding of people-centrism from the demand side of populism. In other words, we find it important to explore the perceptions of citizens qualitatively with regard to the political legislation, subsidies, petitions, etc., that they deem to have been *in the people's interest*. This analysis could pave the way towards understanding the manner in which populist logic trickles down to the experiences of citizens through perceptions of 'popular' measures initiated by the Hungarian political elite. Of course, this article does not suggest that every Hungarian is populist *per se*; however, a recent study found that Hungarian adults are more populist than not when scholars measured the level of populism on the scale developed by Akkerman et al. (2014) on a representative sample (Tóth & Lantos, 2024). In consequence, we argue that it is important to qualitatively analyse the perceptions Hungarian adults have of people-centrist measures. Finally, this qualitative study could pave the way for context-specific quantitative analyses in social sciences: for example, the findings might help scholars develop experiment stimuli in communication studies that can tap people-centrism in Hungary, which is the role model for many right-wing populist agents (AFP, 2025).

Hungary is a relevant case in point because populism has permeated this country in several ways. First, many researchers argue that the Hungarian Government and its leader, Viktor Orbán, are populist in terms of leadership and communication style (Bene & Boda, 2021; Weyland, 2024). Scholars have also highlighted that Hungary is interesting – and an outlier within the European Union – because elsewhere most populist forces are either in opposition or they are in power relatively briefly (Csigó & Merkovity, 2016). This is not the case in Hungary, however. The right-wing, conservative Fidesz-KDNP coalition has held four consecutive two-thirds majorities since 2010, giving it overwhelming power to which there was no serious oppositional political challenger until the spring of 2024. We must emphasise that in communication terms, populism suits not only the Hungarian Government but also almost all the opposition parties and their leaders (Tóth, 2020). Put differently, populism has become an essential, inextricable element in the Hungarian political sphere (Tóth et al., 2019). Researchers have also revealed that specific attitudes, such as *collective narcissism*,

predict the support of populist political forces among Hungarian voters (Lantos & Forgas, 2021). Another piece of research found that there is no significant difference between the level of anti-elitism in the attitudes of Hungarian pro- and anti-Trumpists (Zsolt et al., 2021). In turn, the above research concluded that the most significant differences between the attitudes of the two groups emerged at the level of in-group solidarity: pro-Trumpists emphasised the importance of in-group solidarity more than anti-Trumpists. This attitude also predicts a desire for higher levels of swift action and for the rejection of pluralism. Finally, extensive research has found that relative deprivation is a significant and positive predictor of populist attitudes among Hungarian adults: the more people feel that they do not get what they deserve while others thrive, the stronger their populist views are (Tóth & Lantos, 2024).

This paper has the following structure: 1. we outline the definition(s) of populism and its core element, people-centrism; 2. we briefly introduce the Hungarian political situation and its ties to people-centrism to contextualise this case study; 3. we introduce our data collection and analysis procedures; and, 4. having introduced the most important results, we interpret our findings in the discussion and conclusion. This study relies primarily on a qualitative technique and thematic content analysis at a semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyse semi-structured interviews (n = 109) with Hungarian adults. The main aim of this explorative study is the interpretation of interviewees' perceptions of political measures that they deem to have been people-centrist.

Theoretical background

In the following subsections, we aim to introduce the most prominent scholarly interpretations and categorisations of populism. This part of the study is necessary because *populism* is a blurry term in social sciences due to its chameleonic nature (Kazin, 1995; Ostiguy, 2017; Taggart, 2000). We then go on to demonstrate how the Hungarian case fits into the logic of populism and what the political context in this country is. Introducing the Hungarian political context is sufficient to understand why populism has been so powerful both on the supply (e.g. the political elite) and demand sides (e.g. the citizenry) of this political phenomenon.

Populism

Cas Mudde's (2004) *ideational approach* is one of the most prominent, if not the most influential, research aspects in contemporary studies of populism. Mudde (2004) argues that populism is a thin-centred ideology that separates society into two antagonistic and homogenous groups: the *corrupt elite* and the *good people*. This ideational approach also highlights that populism revolves around the idea that the political elite has to follow the people's will unconditionally (Mudde, 2017). The above scholarly perspective outlines that the political elite disregards the majority's interests because it is detached from the people's demands, while supporting only hostile minorities (e.g. the establishment or

immigrants). The populist distinction between the people and the elite relies on morality: in the ideational approach, the former group is always glorified, while the latter is demonised as stealing from the hard-working masses, misleading the people, and risking their security and welfare (Hameleers, 2018). Mudde (2017) emphasises that everything in populism, including the elite, takes its meaning from the imagined glorified community, *the people*. This ideational approach allows political agents to be categorised as populist or non-populist, it bypasses regional and temporal constraints, and can analyse both top-down and bottom-up political phenomena.

Other scholars interpret populism as a political communication style. Jagers and Walgrave (2007) argue that without *people-centrism*, populism is unimaginable. People-centrism (also referred to as *empty populism*) can be achieved through anti-establishment and exclusionary messages. If all of the above elements appear together in the same coding unit, complete populism kicks in (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Other scholars argue that populist communication has implicit and explicit versions: the former style implies either people-centrism or antagonism alone, whereas the latter implies both within the same content analysis unit (Tóth et al., 2024). Extensive research has found that simple, emotional and negative (campaign) communications are important parts of the populist political communication style since politicians try to depict themselves as agents who are close to the people (Bene et al., 2022; Ernst et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2023). This is an essential element in the communication tactics of populists because they do not want people to feel they are being left behind, a recurring perception of the masses regarding their relation to mainstream politicians (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Finally, scholars also claim that many (non-) populist politicians utilise the above stylistic elements in a fractured way: they use people-centrism but avoid anti-elitism or vice versa in order to keep their communication simple, to cut across ideological differences between citizens, and to avoid being labelled as populist, which has negative rather than positive connotations (Engesser et al., 2017).

Weyland (2017) considers populism a strategy through which a charismatic leader, either in government or opposition, opportunistically establishes a direct relationship with the masses, bypassing party politics and formal policy programs. According to this approach, populism has no ideology or policy agendas because it is a distinct mode of gaining and maintaining power. The populist leader conveys the impression, through simplistic, emotionally charged and dichotomous political communication, that they speak directly to, for and *in the name of* the people, circumventing traditional intermediary mechanisms such as parliaments or the media, thereby setting the political agenda themselves. Populist leaders try not to depict themselves as distant representatives driven by self-interest but instead portray themselves as the sole embodiment of the *volonté générale* (Weyland, 2001). Frequently, such leaders exhibit charismatic personalities and employ emotionally charged and rhetorically polarising tactics to position themselves as protectors against internal or external adversaries. These leaders frequently disregard the constituents of pluralism, such as competing ideas and experts, because these are depicted as agents who oppose the will of the people.

Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b) argues that populism is a discursive logic by which politicians aim to unite the people through their unsatisfied demands. If there is a severe crisis and the authorities (e.g. governments) are unable to mitigate it, the desires of the masses

become demands, and the stability of the reigning political regime begins to erode. In such situations, the populist moment unfolds, and the people can be united via anti-elitism rather than developed societal or political programs. During a crisis, populist anti-elitism can pave the way to destabilising regimes in contrast to those periods and places when economic, societal, security and political issues are not so severe or in countries where institutions are trusted more (Mouffe, 2018). According to the logic of populism, there is no common ground between the *corrupt* political elite and the *good* people: if there were, then the distinction between these groups would not be radical enough.

Scholars also view populism as an attitude that revolves around the idea that ordinary citizens should make the most important decisions and elected officials should follow the general will, and that the political distance between the politicians and the *volk* is enormous (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Wettstein et al., 2020). Researchers analyse populist attitudes to understand the people's relationship (e.g. the extent of disappointment or trust in representative systems) to the elite or and how these attitudes connect to other psychological traits such as relative deprivation, tribalism, or collective narcissism (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021; Krekó, 2021; Lantos & Forgás, 2021).

All the above aspects suggest that people-centrism is an essential part of populism, while anti-elitism completes this thin concept to broaden the susceptible group of citizens as far as possible. People-centrism, moreover, appears in the discourse of almost every political agent because they try to maximise their support. Anti-elitism, however, tends to attach more to the parties on political fringes or non-incumbent agents (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Pytlas, 2022).

In this paper, we regard people-centrism as the combination of the Laclauian concept and attitudes. In other words, we argue that respondents can perceive that people-centrist measures are in the interest of the masses, thus they could be united into imagined communities (Anderson, 2006). These perceptions can be rooted in respondents' populist attitudes, that is, demanding the people's sovereignty and claiming that the political elite has to follow the general will unconditionally.

The Hungarian context

Hungary has experienced much economic turmoil since the collapse of the state socialist system: high unemployment rates, severe inflation, the great recession following the collapse of Lehmann Brothers and the Covid-19 pandemic, which also shocked the country's economy (Böröcz, 2012; Dövényi, 1994; Palonen, 2009, 2018). In 2006, the political situation changed after Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány 'admitted' on a leaked recording that his ruling coalition had deliberately lied to the Hungarians about the worsening economic condition of the country. Since then the socialist-liberal coalition has lost the majority of their voters' support. Meanwhile Fidesz-KDNP and its unambiguous leader, Viktor Orbán, has been ruling Hungary continuously since 2010. Between 2010 and 2019, the unemployment rate in Hungary decreased from 11.3% to 3.5%, and while it increased to 4.5% in 2024, it remains low in comparison to the 1990s or 2000s (KSH, 2020, 2025). This achievement may have paved the way for the right-wing conservative government to maintain its power.

Additionally, from the early 2010s, the Hungarian Government confronted the IMF, the European Union and foreign businesses such as George Soros (Scoggins, 2020). From 2015 onwards, Fidesz-KDNP placed its anti-immigrant stance on the political agenda when the refugee crisis surged due to military conflicts in Iraq, Syria and other territories (Bíró-Nagy, 2022). The Hungarian Government also levied excess profit ('windfall') taxes on banks to protect the budgets of Hungarian citizens while also launching a reduction in overheads by lowering fees on utility bills (Benczes, 2016; International Trade Administration, 2024). Fidesz-KDNP also initiated subsidies for many families: one key measure introduced in 2019 was the lifetime personal income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children (Albert, 2020). Under this policy, mothers who have given birth to and raised at least four children are permanently exempt from paying personal income tax, providing long-term financial relief (Dunai, 2024). Since 2022, young people under the age of 25 have been exempt from paying personal income tax, providing them with greater financial independence. This measure was intended to support young workers and encourage their early participation in the labour market. Another major initiative has been personal income tax exemption for young mothers, introduced in 2023, which allows mothers under the age of 30 with at least one child to be free from personal income tax until they turn 30, further supporting young families. From 2025, mothers with two or three children will no longer need to file tax returns, further simplifying the tax system for families.

The Hungarian Government has adjusted its policies to the populist logic when its legislation has been extremely unpopular: in 2014, the Hungarian Government proposed a so-called internet tax, which would have imposed a fee on internet usage based on data consumption; and in 2015 they introduced an act restricting Sunday trading for large stores. Both pieces of legislation were withdrawn following a public outcry.

Against this backdrop, our research question is:

RQ: *How do Hungarian citizens describe any perceptions they have of the domestic political elite's people-centrist measures?*

Methods and materials

We conducted a thematic content analysis at a semantic level to interpret the perceptions of Hungarian citizens of the people-centred measures conducted by the Hungarian political elite. The Hungarian political elite includes both members of parliament (MPs) and political parties because these agents could bring about or initiate changes at a national level that fit the populist logic that addresses the majority of the citizenry. In contrast, mayors are probably unable to have such influence because they operate at a local (municipal level), and so do not fit the populist logic that contrasts the majority of the population to hostile minorities, first and foremost, the political elite. Due to the characteristics of the thematic

content analysis technique, we inductively and manually coded interviewee answers to the following questions:

Were there any political decisions or actions taken by the Hungarian political elite (MPs or parties) in the people's interest?

If so, what were these decisions, and what do you think about them?

If the participants found the above questions too general or unclear, the interviewers added the following comments to help interviewees express their experiences:

If the above question is too general, let us focus on the last ten years of your experience. Any legislation, subsidy, demonstrations, petitions, consultations, referendums, etc., can be relevant.

The paper relies on the database for a larger project in which we scrutinised the political perceptions of Hungarian citizens on relative deprivation, political expectations and their assessment of the Hungarian political elite's responsiveness to popular demands. Our dataset contains 109 interviews. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics by age of participant. In four cases, data is missing because four participants did not share information on their ages. We were able to analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted with them, however, because they were willing to participate in the conversations. Since the average age of the Hungarian population was 45.1 on 1 January 2024 (KSH, 2024), our data mostly represents younger Hungarians (mean age = 36.45). However, one-quarter of the participants were over fifty years old and the age range extended from 18 to 81, which suggests the dataset we built is diverse. The highest median age ($Md = 53$) was observed among tenants in villages, whereas the lowest median age ($Md = 23$) was recorded among those residing in Budapest at the time the conversations took place. Settlement types are also indicative of diverse data with interviewees from villages (10.8%), county seats (19.6%), cities (33%) and the capital city (36.27%) participating in the research. Participants resided in thirteen of the nineteen Hungarian counties. Regarding gender, 52% of the interviewees identified themselves as female, while 48% identified themselves as male.

In this study, university students conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants in exchange for extra points between September 2023 and November 2023. Each student conducted interviews with two Hungarian adults (one female and one male), who consented to participate in the conversations. The students were asked to find adults among their friends or family members who were open to discussing their economic, political and cultural perceptions. The students were asked not to conduct interviews with each other or their classmates.

Every student was trained prior to the interviews: the author conducted semi-structured interviews with a few non-student adults to demonstrate the strengths and pitfalls of the method. The interview questions were accepted by the university's Department for Science Strategy. The questions were shared with the students two weeks before they started data collection. The interviews were saved as voice recordings, and the students provided anonymous transcripts for each conversation. The participants were informed that they could contact the author via their institutional e-mail address if they had any comments or

Table 1:
Descriptive statistics on participants’ age and settlement types

	Age			
	Village	Capital City	County Seat	City
Valid	11	37	20	34
Missing	0	0	0	0
Median	53.000	23.000	44.000	36.500
Mean	50.818	28.838	37.200	39.029
Std. Error of Mean	3.984	2.180	3.010	3.076
95% CI Mean Upper	59.694	33.259	43.500	45.287
95% CI Mean Lower	41.942	24.416	30.900	32.772
Std. Deviation	13.212	13.261	13.462	17.933
Variance	174.564	175.862	181.221	321.605
Range	50.000	61.000	36.000	62.000
Minimum	19.000	20.000	18.000	19.000
Maximum	69.000	81.000	54.000	81.000
25 th percentile	46.500	21.000	21.750	22.000
50 th percentile	53.000	23.000	44.000	36.500
75 th percentile	58.000	28.000	47.000	51.750

Note: Seven rows were excluded from the analysis that correspond to the missing values of the split-by variable settlement type.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

complaints regarding the interviews or the topics. For a week after the conversations had been completed, the interviewees were offered the option of requesting the erasure of the entire interview. The participants could also ask interviewers to delete specific sections of their responses if they did not want to release their opinions about particular questions. None of the interviewees contacted the author to erase the full interview or to address any complaints. If participants did not want to share their views on specific questions, the interviewers either did not transcribe or deleted those parts of the conversations. The interviewers were asked to delete the semi-structured voice recording after the transcription had been sent to the author to protect the anonymity of the participants. One interview is missing due to data loss issues but the rest (n = 109) of the transcripts were saved to a protected, cloud-based drive and a protected hard drive. Every student received the plus points for this assignment.

We manually conducted the thematic content analysis in MAXQDA Analytics Pro software that helps researchers analyse mostly, but not exclusively, qualitative data. The coding units were participants’ responses to the questions outlined at the beginning of this subchapter. We also used MaxMaps in MAXQDA to visualise the connections of themes (codes) on people-centrist measures (see Figure 1). Although our main analytical approach is qualitative, we argue that providing a visual depiction of the connections between the people-centrist themes paves the way for future quantitative studies. ‘Connection’ means in this sense that if there is an edge between two themes, both codes appear within the same answer of the participant that describes their perceptions on people-centrist measures

initiated by the Hungarian political elite. For example, the response of participant 96 (Age 18; gender: male; settlement type: county seat; considered himself religious) included two themes regarding the people-centrist measures of the Hungarian political elite:

I think that was the migration policy. Especially if you look at the consequences in other countries of the European Union. Migration brings about serious social and economic changes, which do not lead to good consequences. Another is the support for various multinationals. Lately, a lot of factories or plants have been built, which creates extra jobs. Thus, the economy continues to grow.

In the above excerpt, we coded two themes: Migration Policies and Creating Jobs. In this situation, the connection between the two themes is one. If there were another participant who considered these categories people-centrist measures, the connection between the themes would rise to two.

Finally, excerpts from the interviews were translated with the free version of DeepL.

Results

We identified thematic sub codes ($n = 35$, total frequencies = 162) inductively to characterise citizens' perceptions of the political elite's people-centrist measures (Table 2). One striking result is that subsidies supporting families and immigration policies have the largest frequencies, followed by tax cuts. This means that approximately one-quarter of the respondents deem the Hungarian political elite's legislation on family subsidies to be people-centrist, while almost one in five claimed that the restrictive policy on immigration had been launched in the interest of the people. However, when we take a closer look at the answers, the situation is more complex.

Although many respondents think that measures such as the Family Housing Allowance, the personal income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children, and tax benefits for young people all fit the people-centrist category, they also express rational criticisms. These arguments highlight their uncertainty regarding the ambiguous, long-term effects of these policies on demographic challenges. On the other hand, they acknowledge that tax and loan benefits for families were intended to increase the rapidly shrinking Hungarian population, which is decreasing by approximately 32,000 annually (BBC, 2019). Respondents also emphasised that some subsidies, such as the Family Housing Allowance, caused real estate prices to soar. Respondents also outline that these measures are generally perceived as substantial efforts to improve the material well-being of families:

[...] I would like to highlight the family policy. [...] I find it difficult to imagine reversing demographic trends because that would require a great many things, primarily education, but I support family policy measures, and it would be good if they were better, more forward-looking, and therefore, I consider them a little ad hoc. It would be good if the consequences of these measures were assessed in advance, and to say that some people do not really take advantage of

these measures, but abuse them and that these measures have had results such as a jump in house prices, which could have been eliminated if they had been thought through more carefully. (Respondent 41; Age: 70; gender: male; settlement type: village; considered himself a lower-middle class citizen; 'used to be active in politics'.)

Interestingly, participants do not talk about these subsidies merely at a local but at a regional level. One of the respondents contrasted the Hungarian family support system with legislation in other countries. In general, her experience was that the Hungarian family support, which many experts consider to be very generous, fascinated international partners. Therefore, Hungarian subsidies on family support brought the attention of experts from other nations. This aligns with the perception of people-centrist measures: families cover much, but not 99% of the population, which is a recurring theoretical problem in studies on populism. Scholars struggle to find measures in favour of the overwhelming majority (everyone minus the elite) that opposes the elite simultaneously:

[...] there were round-table discussions to learn about family support measures in one country and another, and how work and private life are reconciled. And when the Hungarian expert explained how many family support measures we have, the Austrians' jaws dropped. [...] when we left the event and were standing in the canteen, there were an extraordinary number of people who came up to us and said, 'Hey, listen, what's going on in your country?' So, I think these measures are extremely good.

(Respondent 106; Age: 39; gender: female; settlement type: county seat; considered herself religious, conservative intellectual.)

Another notable theme emerging from the responses is the notion that these family support policies operate independently of political affiliation, implying that their benefits extend to many citizens regardless of their ideological stances. This perspective reinforces the idea that the approach of the political elite to family policy is not solely driven by partisan considerations but rather aims to serve the people's interests. However, this view is counterbalanced by the argument that these policies, while presented as measures to support families, might disrupt the Hungarian economy:

[...] it's a nice plan, and it's really in the interests of the people, so to speak, and the government did it, and it was very good for us, but in the long term, for example, I don't think it was economically worth it. So, I think that the disastrous Hungarian economy will still suffer much greater losses, and I'm not saying that we shouldn't have it, because I'm personally happy about it.

(Respondent 64; Age: 20; gender: female; settlement type: town; did not categorise herself into social groups.)

Table 2:
Descriptive statistics for people-centrist themes in the participants' responses

Specific people-centrist measures	Segments	Percentage
Family support	37	22.84
Migration policies	29	17.9
Tax issues	11	6.79
Price caps	7	4.32
Sure, but no example	6	3.7
I don't know / None	6	3.7
Economic policies	6	3.7
Reduction of overhead costs	6	3.7
Staying away from war	5	3.09
Pandemic	5	3.09
Joining the EU	4	2.47
Pension	4	2.47
If people resist, they let it go	3	1.85
Organising international sports events	3	1.85
Loan facilitation	3	1.85
Consultation	3	1.85
Public transport ticket	3	1.85
Restoration of the past	2	1.23
Conflict within the EU	2	1.23
The opposition's primary	2	1.23
No Sunday trading	1	0.62
Real estate construction	1	0.62
Anti-LMBTQ	1	0.62
Strong foreign policy	1	0.62
Two-Tailed Dog Party	1	0.62
Improving the countryside	1	0.62
Supporting tourism	1	0.62
Governing during the pandemic	1	0.62
Solar panels	1	0.62
Restoration of the past	1	0.62
Healthcare reform	1	0.62
Education reform	1	0.62
National politics	1	0.62
Support for Hungarian business	1	0.62
Joining NATO	1	0.62
Total	162	100

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Similarly to the family support policies, respondents articulated their perceptions on (anti-) immigration policies in a nuanced way. Interestingly, while interviewers used extra questions to explore participants' opinions in detail, many respondents addressed the issue of immigration extremely briefly: they either used the expression 'migration policies' or stated that 'the government handled immigration well'. Although many respondents suggest that strict immigration policies were in the majority's interests, some criticisms still arose from respondents:

The policy of isolation in the migrant situation was basically a good initiative, but unfortunately, in hindsight, it was hypocritical because we were showing something to the outside world, but in reality, this was not the case, for example, we allowed people with criminal records to enter and pass through because it was in our interests. The idea was good, the execution was not. (Respondent 2; Age: 23; gender: male; settlement type: capital city; considered himself Hungarian but not nationalist.)

The only measure I agree with is the one on migration. Although there are mismatches here, the fact that they are trying to save what can be saved at the border is a good thing. Of course, there is the opposite of this, when they bring in Filipino workers to work in the factories. (Respondent 15; Age: 44; gender: female; settlement type: county seat; considered herself a feminist and a conservative.)

Including stopping migration at the protective border and building the border fence. This was a very expensive thing, very costly, costing 100 billion euros, since the Hungarian government has been doing a lot of work on this. I think that people still think that, overall, this is in their interest, and they accept it and, despite the fact that it has cost a lot of money, they support it. (Respondent 105; Age: 41; gender: male; settlement type: provincial town; considered himself mainly conservative but also liberal to some extent.)

It is difficult to work out who the 'people with criminal records' were in the above response (Respondent 2); however, it is possible that the respondent was reflecting on the so-called residency bond program, which was in force between 2013 and 2017: this legislation granted nearly 20,000 permanent residence permits to investors and their families, primarily from China, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa (Erdélyi et al., 2018). This program allowed individuals to obtain Hungarian residency – and thereby access to the European Union – by investing €250,000 to €300,000 in special government bonds (Erdélyi et al., 2018). Investigations suggest that some beneficiaries posed security risks. Thus, the program faced criticism for its opaque processes as investments were handled through intermediary companies with unclear ownership, selected without public tenders (Erdélyi et al., 2018). Despite concerns, authorities have resisted disclosing the identities of bond purchasers, citing privacy reasons. The program was suspended in 2017 (Parlament.hu).

Considering the Hungarian political elite's immigration policies, interviewees think that this policy was to protect the 'borders' of Hungary. However, the above answers suggest that the Hungarian political elite could have been stricter or spent too much money on this policy. Interestingly, although many participants emphasised that 'protecting the borders' is

people-centrist legislation, none of them said explicitly that immigrants threaten the safety of Hungarian citizens. Specifically, one of the recurring arguments is not to let ‘everybody’ into Hungary because immigration might create major *cultural* changes:

But I would still say that if we look at the whole thing, the management really did look after the interests of the Hungarians. And the reason is that who knows who we are letting into our country. You know [...] lives in Italy. There are a lot of immigrants there, and the problem is that they simply don’t adapt. They bring a certain culture and try to impose that culture here in Hungary or in the country they are going to. I know that this would just be a transit country. But who knows?

(Respondent 37; Age: 57; gender: female; settlement type: village; considered herself a middle-class, liberal citizen.)

The above answer relies on the distinction between the *in-group* (inhabitants) and *outsiders*, with immigrants depicted as culturally incompatible and unwilling to assimilate. This answer aligns with nativist populism, which often emphasises the preservation of national identity against perceived foreign influence. Additionally, the excerpt implies that Hungarian decision-makers were aiming to protect the interests of the people, which were under threat and had to be defended against potentially harmful policies. The invocation of uncertainty and the risk posed by migration contribute to a narrative in which safeguarding the people necessitates exclusionary measures. The main underlying idea above this reflection is conservatism: maintaining the current order of society, preserving traditions, resisting globalisation and keeping other cultural customs out of the in-group are embedded in this answer.

While many respondents claim that the restrictive immigration policy was a people-centrist measure, some argue that Hungary would possibly not be the final resort but a transitional country for immigrants. Some respondents conspicuously avoided mentioning that restriction on immigration was important to them, concealing their positions on this issue, with the exception of those opposed to immigration.

The third most prominent people-centrist theme we explored in scrutinising the interviews was ‘tax issues’. Most of these responses suggest that ending personal income tax for those under the age of 25 was a people-centrist legislation by the government:

The exemption from income tax is the only example that concerns me personally, and I am glad that it does, because it is very difficult to manage housing as a young person, for example, and many people are still studying under 25, so they cannot work full-time. And for such people, it makes a big difference whether they receive a net or a gross salary.

(Respondent 90; Age: 22; gender: female; settlement type: capital city; considered herself open-minded, and close to green ideology.)

It is noteworthy that most of the respondents who deemed this legislation to be people-centrist were under 25. Obviously, citizens under 25 do not form 99% or even the majority of the Hungarian population, but in-group solidarity might be an important element of this perception: young people under 25 might see this legislation as people-centrist, because their in-group is youth. On the other hand, this measure might have mitigated some

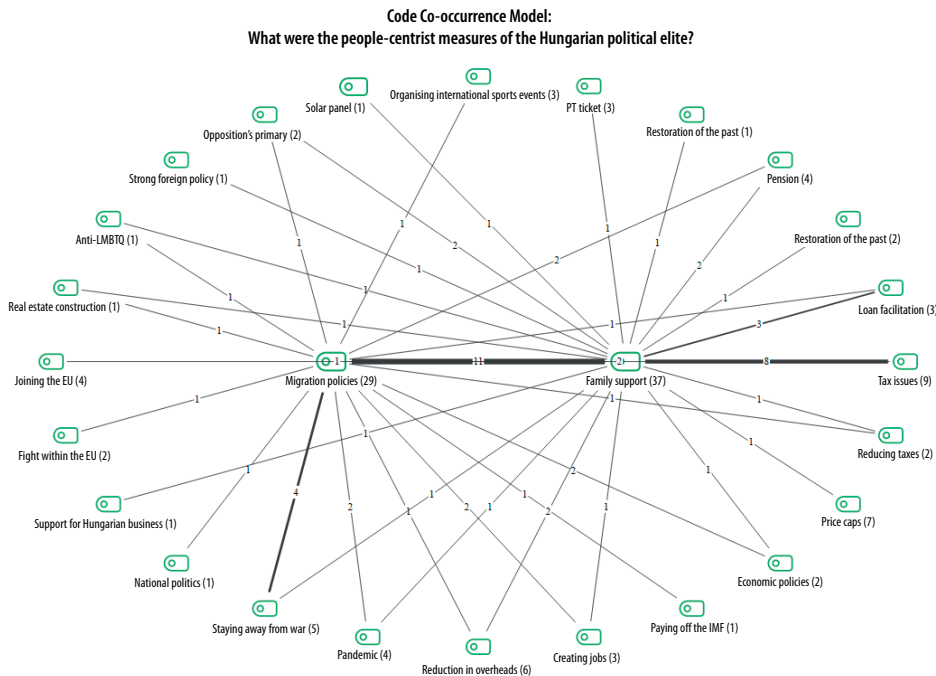


Figure 1:

Interconnections between themes in the answers reflecting on people-centrist measures

Note: The numbers in parentheses show how many interviewees addressed the theme. Edges between themes show 'connections' between themes. The thicker an edge is, the more the two themes appear in the same coding unit. Numbers on the edges show how frequently the themes co-occur.

Source: Compiled by the authors.

financial constraints for their families, which already completes their in-group with their family members. In that sense, exemption from income tax for under-25s touches not just the youth but indirectly their relatives by mitigating their financial burdens to some extent.

Finally, Figure 1 suggests that there is a notable connection between themes that revolve around family support, immigration policies and tax cuts. We would like to emphasise that this graph does not prove a significant statistical correlation in attitudes but suggests possible connections between citizens' perceptions. Therefore, these assumed connections might pave the way for quantitative studies, first and foremost, representative panel surveys and experiments. The co-occurrence of themes suggests that policies (tax cuts and family subsidies) and nativist communication can be deemed by the respondents to be political actions that are in the interests of the majority to mitigate cost-of-living crises and preserve cultural identities.

Discussion and conclusion

People-centrism is one of the essential, if not the most important, constituents of populism. Consequently, ample research has been aimed at understanding the way political agents construct an imagined community via communication, how people-centrism relates to disillusionment with the mainstream political elites, the effect that has on votes and what citizens think about the situation of their in-group (Pytlas, 2022; Theuwis, 2024). Hungary is a relevant case study because populism has surged there in terms of leadership style, communication and citizens' attitudes (Bene & Boda, 2021; Krekó, 2021; Lantos & Forgas, 2021). This paper is exploratively intended to fill an important gap in the literature by exploring citizens' perceptions of the political elite's people-centrist measures via semi-structured interviews. The results of the study highlight that legislation that mitigates the populist moment and improves the financial opportunities for larger groups – but not the entire population – can be considered by the respondents to be measures that were created in the people's interests. Many respondents' perceptions relied on the assumption that family subsidies were people-centrist. Even though these financial aids and tax cuts (in some cases, taxes were eliminated, for example, for mothers who raise four or more children) might have been installed to stop the Hungarian population from shrinking, they hardly cover 99% of the population, a criterion for the strictest populist logic. Nevertheless, respondents perceived that family support in Hungary, considered 'generous' at an international level (Dunai, 2024), is approximately 5% of the annual GDP. In this sense, the Hungarian Government could make many citizens susceptible to people-centrism. On the other hand, some respondents argued that some types of family subsidies, such as the Family Housing Allowance, have backfired because they have triggered hikes in real estate prices.

The other important theme in people-centrism touched the issue of immigration policies. Interestingly, respondents either answered this question briefly, not wanting to go into detail, or they expressed that they feared cultural shifts if the Hungarian Government were to be more indulgent on immigration. This is an important aspect to consider because people-centrism is not perceived from an anti-elitist perspective, but from a socio-cultural position (Ostiguy, 2017). In other words, respondents' perceptions suggest that the people are *united* in terms of cultural and traditional perspectives which resonates with in-group solidarity based on conservative values such as resistance to major change to the social order and the maintenance of society as it is (Everett, 2013; Jost et al., 2007; Zsolt et al., 2021). This finding is also supported by the 11th European Social Survey's results from 2023: public opinion in Hungary is significantly skewed toward viewing immigration as a threat rather than a benefit to cultural life (ESS ERIC, 2024). Additionally, the same survey's findings suggest that the majority of Hungarian respondents believe that immigrants make the country a worse place to live (ESS ERIC, 2024). Although many participants emphasised the importance of protecting borders, which resonates with the Hungarian Government's core agenda from 2015 (Tóth et al., 2019), they did not explicitly outline that the security of Hungarians was under severe threat. This could be due to their perceptions of the Hungarian Government having been 'successful' in resisting (illegal) immigration, or they may be acknowledging that Hungary is not the primary goal for immigrants to settle in, as it is probably a *transition* zone for them. Another explanation for the extremely short answers

regarding concerns about immigration could be social desirability bias, which emerges ‘in situations in which political attitudes or behaviours are perceived to conflict with social norms’ (Maier et al., 2023, p. 597). Some respondents may have adjusted their answers based on perceived social expectations, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as immigration. The fact that some interviewees seemed to avoid explicitly stating their views on restrictive immigration policies suggests that social norms or political considerations may have influenced their responses.

Finally, mostly respondents under 25 perceived tax cuts for younger people as people-centrist. These findings raise questions about the role of in-group solidarity in perceptions of people-centrism. While such a tax exemption undeniably alleviates financial burdens for young workers, its impact on the general population is limited, given that young people under 25 do not constitute a demographic majority. This highlights the subjective nature of people-centrism and in-group solidarity, which can be contingent on one’s social positioning, age, exposure to financial crisis and immediate economic interests.

Interestingly, the reduction in overhead costs, which is the legislation closest to the populist logic since it affects 99% of the population and is *against the elite* (e.g. large energy companies), was not among the top three themes (six respondents considered this legislation people-centrist) viewed as people-centrist legislation. However, some respondents emphasise in the first person that people could have felt that capping energy prices was ‘undoubtedly’ a people-centrist measure:

One of the very emblematic measures here in Hungary is the reduction of overhead costs. [...] I think that this issue is beyond debate, that people here also thought that, yes, this is something that is happening for us, as if some kind of large-scale stand and a series of large-scale decisions were being taken, which started in politics and were not initiated from below.

(Respondent 105, Age: 41, gender: male, settlement type: town in the countryside, considered himself mainly conservative but also liberal to some extent.)

The possible reasons for the rare emergence of the reduction in overheads can only be a matter of conjecture. One explanation could be that many respondents barely saved any money, while some paid considerably less for utility bills due to the reduction in overheads. Therefore, it would have been difficult for those respondents who saved small amounts to interpret this measure as ‘people-centrist’. These savings might have been small for many respondents, while family subsidies were more spectacular (e.g. these funds could have been used for real estate purchase or renovation, for instance), thus the significance of reduction in overheads seemed to decrease.

Our analysis underscores that the people-centrism in Hungarian political measures is not a monolithic concept but rather a dynamic and contested perception. While many respondents acknowledged the material and symbolic benefits of policies related to family support, tax reductions and immigration, they also highlighted contradictions, unintended consequences and political motivations, such as vote maximisation they saw behind these measures. This complexity suggests that people-centrism functions both as a descriptive category – denoting policies perceived as beneficial for the majority – and as a practical-discursive strategy employed by political elites to legitimise and maintain their governance. In theoretical terms,

our findings also suggest some interesting connections between respondents' perceptions and populism in the sense of the populist logic. Despite overhead cost reduction fitting the populist logic best, it was hardly mentioned by the respondents. However, family support, immigration and tax reductions were among the most frequent categories that were deemed 'people-centrist' by the interviewees. These categories can simultaneously be embedded into a narrative by which financial and cultural 'crises are prevented' (e.g. it mitigates the populist moment), while they *seem* to fulfil popular demands at the same time: mitigating housing crises, protecting cultural identity and reducing taxes for certain groups can be sufficient to redress some tensions within certain groups (Laclau, 2005a; Ostiguy, 2017). Given that popular demands can vary considerably (de Nadal, 2020), while people-centrist demands are time- and money-consuming and, in the case of education or health care, are not as attractive as constructing new homes, our conclusion is the following: while popular demands can be manifold and subjective, they are unlikely to cover 99% of the people, which is a requirement of the populist logic in the strictest sense. Therefore, popular demands and people-centrism are different concepts but may overlap in theory. In reality, when these concepts do overlap, as in the case of overhead costs reduction, they might remain unnoticed because they affect people to very different extents.

Limitations and future research directions

Although we analysed over one hundred semi-structured interviews, our study has several limitations. First, our sample is not representative, thus we cannot draw general conclusions based on the above scrutiny. Second, although thematic coding helped us interpret perceptions more deeply, it is impossible to avoid some degree of subjectivity. We also acknowledge that longitudinal data would support a more comprehensive analysis of citizens' perceptions. Additionally, some respondents may have pre-existing political attitudes that have shaped their perceptions of policies. Supporters of the political elite may have been more likely to describe policies as people-centrist, whereas critics may have been more inclined to highlight their flaws. In this case, we were unable to control for ideological predispositions that might have influenced perceptions. Finally, professional interviewers could have formulated questions in a way that respondents could have expressed their opinions more in detail.

It is important to note that when the interviews took place in November 2023, the political agenda was set primarily by Fidesz, with the strongest opposition party, the Democratic Coalition (DK), accounting for only around 10% among adults eligible to vote. However, in 2024, Hungary saw the rise of the largest oppositional force since the mid-2000s, the Tisza Party, led by Péter Magyar, which has already gained 42% support against Fidesz who have 36% among certain party voters according to an opinion poll published by the Publicus Research Institute in December 2024 (Vas, 2024). This means that the political landscape has evolved deeply since the interviews were taken, which might have shifted the interviewees' political opinions as well. A possible future research direction could analyse how this rising opposition party has shaped Hungarian voters' preferences, especially given that Tisza is right-wing party with an ideology on social and political issues similar to that of Fidesz.

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