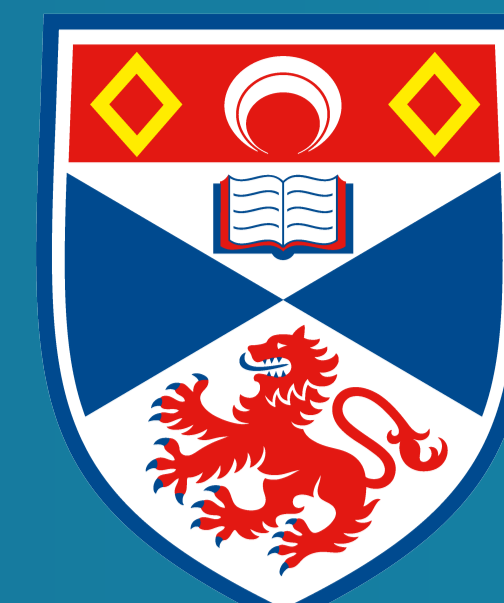


Heroes and villains; Orban, Soros and the performance of populism in contemporary Hungary.

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Summary

My research analyses contemporary Hungarian politics, most specifically the discourses surrounding billionaire philanthropist George Soros in the 2018 parliamentary elections. It conceptualises populism as a political style as opposed to the dominant approach that considers it an ideology. This means that populism is considered not as a set of interrelated political ideas but as a way of performing politics. Essentially, political styles are performed by political agents in order to generate certain responses from their target audiences, with the populist style typified by bad manners, a notion of crisis and the vilification of political elites vis-à-vis "the people". This definition of populism lends itself well to dramaturgical analysis- if populism is something that is performed, then the analytical tools and concepts used for theatre become relevant for the examination of political life. Therefore, my research utilises dramaturgical methodology to examine how George Soros was depicted as a "villain" in the populist political performance of Hungarian PM, Viktor Orban. It considers how the narratives employed in the latter's speeches depict Soros as the archetypal dramatic "villain", characterising him as an amoral plotter whose actions have created a crisis for the Hungarian people. It suggests that Orban strategically employs such narratives to present Soros as the ultimate "other" to the Hungarian nation and thus present himself as a "hero" to the electorate.

Populism as political style

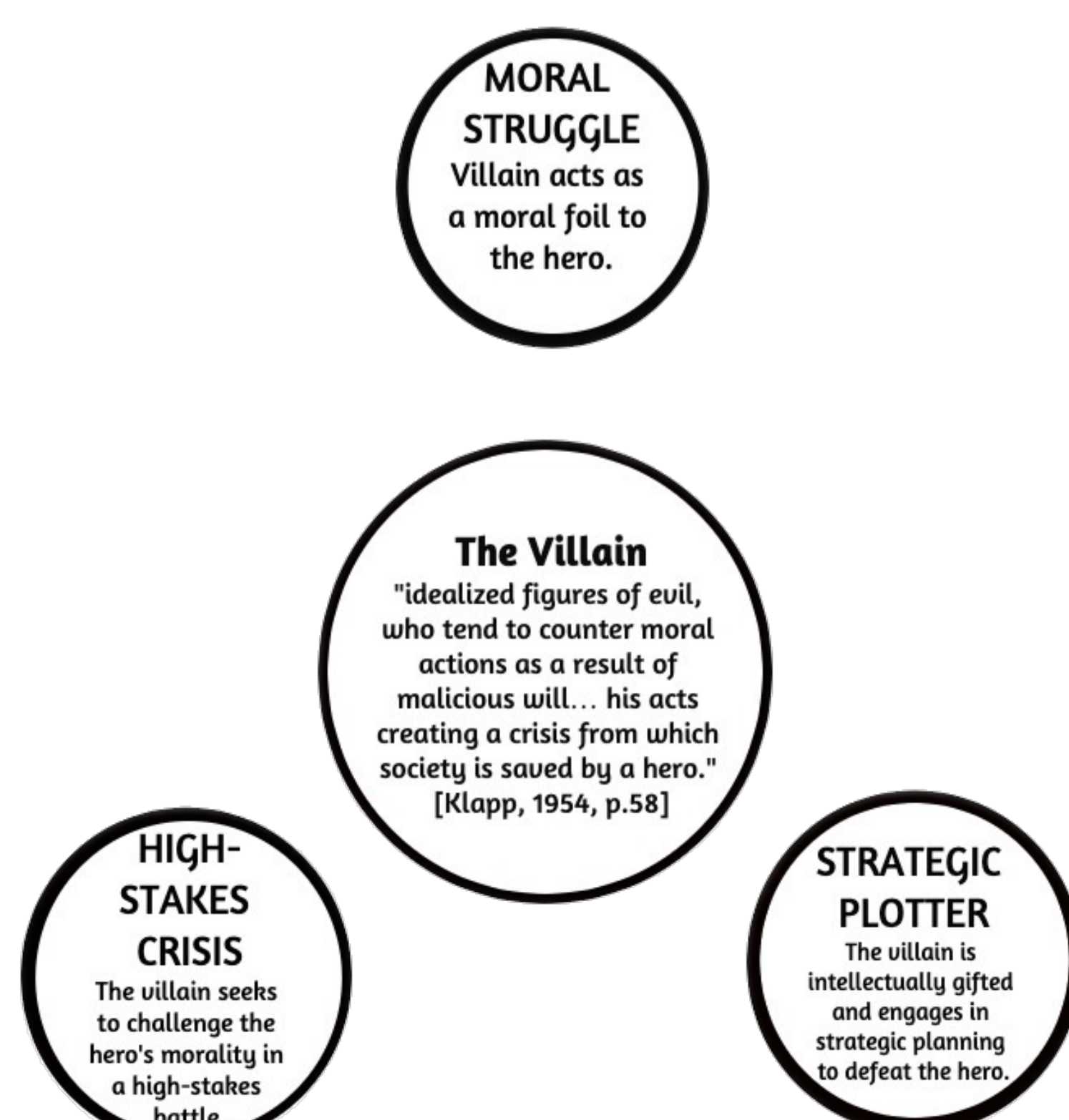
Despite being one of the most used terms in modern political discussion, populism remains an essentially-contested concept. It is most commonly defined as a "thin-centred ideology" that emphasises the battle between people" and "elite" and manifests itself with other "thick" ideologies (such as nationalism or socialism)[Mudde, 2004, p.544]. My research challenges this definition by instead conceptualising populism as a political style. Defined by Moffitt as "the repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance made to audiences that are used to create and navigate the fields of power that comprise the political, stretching from the domain of government through to everyday life" [2016, pp.28-29], political styles are adopted by actors in the political sphere to engage with audiences and give meaning to ideas, fusing "matter and manner, message and package, argument and ritual" [Pels, 2003, p.45]. The populist style is strategically performed by political leaders so as to generate support for their cause and can be identified by the use of "bad manners" (the rejection of the rules and norms of modern democratic politics), the creation of a sense of crisis and the assertion that the "people" are fundamentally at odds with a corrupt "elite" [Moffitt, 2016].

Case study: Orban and Soros

Viktor Orban and his FIDESZ party have governed Hungary since 2010, overseeing a process of democratic backsliding that has involved increasing control of state media, challenging the constitutional courts and rewriting the Hungarian constitution without opposition support. Orban's rule has also been a prominent example of the populist political style in action, with him regularly utilising "bad manners", referencing societal crisis and challenging elite actors to mobilise public support. Throughout 2017 and into the election campaign of 2018, FIDESZ and Orban made increased efforts to challenge billionaire émigré George Soros, employing their extensive media resources to critique his influence on Hungarian politics and society. The campaign highlighted Soros' alleged links with opposition parties and the migration crisis of 2015, most notably through visual propaganda such as posters and billboards but also through the speeches and interviews of government politicians. FIDESZ subsequently claimed victory in the election and enacted anti-Soros legislation in the form of the Stop Soros law which challenged foreign-funded NGOs and the closure of the Soros-funded Central European University.

Methodology

My research employs a dramaturgical methodological approach which involves utilising theatrical concepts to analyse real-world phenomena. This approach is built on the work of Erving Goffman, who considers all social life as a performance by actors to elicit certain responses from audiences [1974]. By considering politicians as actors looking to win the support of audiences (the electorate), the vocabulary and analytical tools associated with the theatre become relevant for political research. Such is the centrality of conflict in all drama, my research focuses on two theatrical elements in particular; the symbolic and mutually constitutive relationship between "hero" and "villain". Through analysis of 14 of Viktor Orban's speeches in the 2018 election campaign, it demonstrates how Orban constructed Soros as a "villain" and subsequently presents himself as a "hero". It identifies three key elements to the "villain", detailed below.



Populism as political style

Empirical analysis of selected primary sources highlights how Orban's rhetoric saw him construct Soros as the "villain" and position himself as a "hero" to oppose him.

Moral struggle- Orban's speeches depict Soros as fundamentally immoral. He is considered to "evil"- his actions are not seen as misguided altruism but as actively rejecting the values of the Hungarian people. He is repeatedly referred to primarily as a "financial speculator", suggesting that he desires material gain at the expense of the people of Hungary. He is also depicted as anti-nationalist and in desire of creating a new breed of humanity in his own image, with Orban using the term "homo sorosensus" to demonstrate such a notion.

High-stakes crisis- Orban emphasises a "battle" with Soros and suggests that the election is a historical turning point for the future of Hungary. Soros' actions are shrouded in the terminology of national security and Orban implores Hungarians to vote for him in a bid to save the nation from external enemies, this narrative elevating the election to a life and death struggle for Hungarian Christendom. Continued linkages between Soros and the migration crisis sees him depicted as an agent of chaos and social unrest, whose plans for continued migration would serve to decimate the Hungarian national cause.

Strategic plotter- Orban's repeated references to the "Soros plan" and "Soros network" suggests that his "villain" is not only evil and determined to bring about crisis but is clever and strategic in his efforts to do so. Orban suggests that Soros has power not only over opposition parties but over EU leaders as well, with references to a "Soros empire" portraying Soros as not only malicious but extremely powerful also. Anti-Semitic undertones are evident here, with the implication of Orban's rhetoric playing on the classic trope of "powerful Jew" with unnatural levels of economic and diplomatic control.

Orban's populism

Primary source analysis demonstrates that the conscious creation of a dramatic "villain" by Orban. If the populist style is not only about referencing "the people" but about bringing them into existence via social performance [Laclau, 2005, pp.97-103], then Orban's rhetoric towards Soros can be viewed as a fundamental element of his populist style. The performance of "the people" always assumes a limit [Butler, 2015, p.149] and therefore populism naturally rejects elites and associated out-groups. In a bid to construct "the people" as an "imagined community" [Anderson, 2016], Orban utilized Soros as a malignant and villainous "other", who works in consort with external migrants to destroy Hungary. As such, his dramatic performance of crisis and danger creates the notion of a "Hungarian people" living under threat.

Furthermore, Orban's rhetoric suggests that only his nationalist party can save the Hungarian people from Soros and migration, which therefore positions him as a "hero" in this narrative. Ultimately, the deployment of the populist political style is a strategic endeavour; by generating a sense of togetherness amongst the Hungarian "people" through the Soros threat and performing the role of hero, Orban and FIDESZ are able to win political support from their audience, as demonstrated by their landslide victory.

Conclusion and future research

My research has sought to add to the existing debate on populism as a political style by utilizing dramaturgical analysis on a contemporary case study. It demonstrated that, in his construction of George Soros as a "villain" in Hungarian politics, Viktor Orban seeks to generate a collective notion of the Hungarian "people" and present himself as a "hero" to them. Thus, it proposes that "hero" and "villain" can be utilized in future research on populism as political style. Such research may seek to demonstrate what role the "villain" plays in other populist states and how the use of Soros as a "villain" differs between states worldwide. Furthermore, the link between dramaturgical methodology and populism could be greater explored, with analysis on how scripting, staging and acting as theatrical concepts relate to the performance of populism in the contemporary context.

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