

# Radical Right Populist Politics in Hungary: Reinventing the Magyars through Sport

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Gyozo Molnar & Stuart Whigham

## Abstract

Given the contemporary growth of ‘populist’ political parties and movements in a number of highly-developed democratic states in Europe and North America, there has been a resurgence in academic interest around the various causes for the groundswell of support for political populism. Given this broader political context, this paper explores the interconnection between sport and populist politics in Hungary, with a particular emphasis on the appropriation of sport by ‘right-wing’ populist political actors. In particular, this paper will examine the politics – sport interconnection by discussing Victor Orbán’s, Hungary’s Prime Minister, use of football, and sport more broadly, and the ways in which the Hungarian government have attempted to reinvent a strong nation and national identity through sport and related political populism. These attempts have been influenced by the interaction between forces of Westernisation and the country’s continuing post-communist transition, with the view to (re)inventing the Hungarian nation.

**Key Words:** Popular Politics, Hungary, Nationalism, Sport, Football

## Introduction

In light of the contemporary growth of ‘populist’ political parties and movements in a number of highly-developed democratic states in Europe and North America, there has been a resurgence in academic interest around the various causes for the groundswell of support for political populism (Brubaker 2019; Judis 2016; Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2012). A number of contemporary political developments in various international contexts have, thus, triggered a renewed emphasis on the importance of populist ideological positions. Such developments could include the election of President Donald Trump in the United States of America (Eiermann 2016; Kazin 2016; Kellner 2016), the success of the ‘Leave’ campaign in the British referendum on European Union membership (Clarke & Newman 2017; Freedman 2017; Gusterson 2017; Inglehart & Norris 2016) and the unexpected popularity of the Brexit Party in the 2019 UK European Elections, and the emergence of secessionist nationalism movements in ‘stateless’ nations such as Scotland and Catalonia (Carbonell 2018; Duerr 2015; Guibernau 2014; Keating 1996). The mounting of populist politics within the European context is evidenced by the growth of ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ populist parties that has increased in Spain, Greece, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Hungary, amongst others (Mols & Jetten 2016; Wodak 2015; Wodak, KhosraviNik & Mral 2013; Yilmaz 2012).

Whilst there are similarities as regards the reasons why populist political parties have come to the fore across Europe, there are also nation-based idiosyncrasies which need to be considered. For instance, Central and Eastern European countries have

experienced dissimilar political, economic and cultural development trajectories in comparison to Western European ones. Nevertheless, in all of these regions of Europe, the growing presence of populist political parties is observable (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-36130006>). Given this broader political context, in this paper we explore populist politics in Hungary, specifically the interconnection between sport and state, with a particular emphasis on the 'use' of sport by 'right-wing' populist political parties and key actors. Specifically, we will elaborate on Victor Orbán's, Hungary's Prime Minister, political manoeuvres with football, and sport, by analysing the ways in which the Hungarian government have attempted to reinvent a strong nation and national identity through sport and related political populism. Here we will argue that these attempts have been influenced by the interaction between forces of Westernisation and the country's continuing post-communist transition. Our analysis is informed by existing research and mass media based evidence around key political and economic transitions which influence and have influenced the interconnection between sport, political populism and national identity in the Hungarian context.

Whilst not executing a systematic review, we have conducted an extensive literature search similar to the procedures outlined in Dehghansai et al. (2017) to identify relevant academic sources by searching through the databases such as SportDiscus, PubMed and Google Scholar. After having received ethical approval, we used the following search terms to identify key sources: '*popular politics*', '*populism*', '*popular politics and sport*', '*popular politics and Hungary*', '*populism and Hungary*', and '*Hungary and national identity and sport*'. Based on the searches a large number of sources were identified, especially in the area of popular politics and populism. Consequently, we decided to only include sources that were written in English or in Hungarian, peer reviewed, and deemed key in relation to popular politics, Hungarian politics, and Hungarian sport and national identity. These sources construct the foundation of our analysis of popular politics, Hungary and sport.

In addition to academic articles, we have also used a range of publicly accessible online mass media sources. To locate relevant web pages, we used Google in English and origo.hu in Hungarian with the following key words: '*Hungarian sport and national identity*', '*Hungarian sport and popular politics*', '*Hungarian sport and regime change*', and '*Orbán and sport*'. As the results of our searches were again extensive, we operationalised the results through use of a specific cut-off point, which was after the first thirty links listed by the respective search engines. Out of the sources that met the first criterion, we only included those which were: a) directly relevant to the focus of the study; b) publicly accessible; and, c) from well-established, credible organisations (e.g. official web sites, government webpages, credible investigative reporting sites). The remaining sources we then put to a qualitative content analysis (see Bryman, 2015), specifically focusing on connections between politics, sport, football, Hungary and national identity. This content analysis, thus, provided the corpus of data and literature sources upon which we have based our discussion presented in the subsequent sections.

### **The era of 'populist' politics?**

The growth of 'populism' within politics has rapidly become a central consideration for contemporary political analysts, with significant attention devoted to it in political

sciences and broader public political debates. Whilst there is broad agreement around 'populism's recent significant upsurge, a number of debates have emerged regarding its specific nature and the causal factors leading to its growth (Bonikowski et al. 2018). Bonikowski et al. (2018: 1) argued that populism can take:

...many forms, spanning continents and cutting across left-right lines. It is often used to describe both parties of the right... that oppose immigration and seek to restore national sovereignty; and of the left... that pit the people against an exploitative economic elite.

Whilst Bonikowski et al. (2018) successfully expressed certain shared understandings of populism, there remains a disjuncture in their theorisations around both its causes and nature, indicating the need to consider country-specific socio-political idiosyncrasies reflective of the 'impure' nature of populism (Brubaker 2019).

In terms of the growth of populism, a number of arguments have emerged. There is agreement that the recent successes of populism is a by-product of the 2007-08 global financial crisis and a reaction to the subsequent socio-economic challenges triggered by global neoliberal economic policies and deregulations (Salmela & von Schave 2017; Gusterson 2017; Inglehart & Norris 2016). However, public reaction to the failures of this neoliberal system did not shift the electorate towards the established ideological 'left'. Instead, populist parties exploited public resentment of rising multiculturalism to blame the immigrant 'other' following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, rather than neoliberal economic policies which had preceded it (Bonikowski et al. 2018; Salmela & von Schave 2017; Gusterson 2017; Fernández-García & Luengo, 2018; Milačić & Vuković 2018; Roodujin 2015). In this regard, Salmela & von Schave (2017: 587) suggest that:

...individual-level emotional responses mediate between macro-level sociocultural and economic changes, such as globalization, modernization and economic deregulation, and the micro-level motivation to support right-wing populist parties... experienced in post-industrial societies can transmute through repressed shame into anger, resentment and hatred towards perceived 'enemies' of the self ...

Given growing public resentment to the immigrant 'other', many Western democracies have witnessed increased support for right-wing populism which is firmly aligned with 'ethnic nationalism' (Kohn 1944). Such right-wing conceptualisations of nationalism place emphasis on collective nationalist sentiments based on shared ethnic and cultural foundations. This resonates with 'primordialist' theorisations of the nation, stressing the cohesive importance of long-term historical roots linked to socio-biological factors such as ethnicity, bloodline and 'cultural givens' such as language, customs and 'home' territory (Geertz 1973; Lefebvre 1991, Van den Berghe 1995). Similar arguments regarding the primacy afforded to these 'ethnies' are offered by an 'ethnosymbolist' approach to nationalism (Smith, 1986, 2010). Here, the potential impact of the symbolic elements of nationalist cohesion are underpinned by the social, cultural, political and emotional attachment which emanates from identification with a particular 'ethnie' (Smith, 1986, 2010), thus, going beyond Kohn's dichotomy.

Another agreement regarding the nature of contemporary populist politics is the vilification of the elites (Bonikowski 2017; Bonikowski et al. 2018; Fernández-García & Luengo 2018; Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Rooduijn 2015). Bonikowski (2017: 184) argues the 'specific elites targeted by populists vary depending on the populists' ideological predilections', which, therefore, explains the multifarious forms of populist movements which have emerged across the 'left-right' ideological spectrum. However, specific to right-wing political populism, the 'elites' who are held to account for societal and economic problems tend to be those who have espoused pro-immigration, pro-globalisation and socially progressive policies, framing these policies as a pursuit of political self-interest at the expense of the general public. This vilification of moral elites acts as one element of the 'political style' of contemporary populism (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Moffitt & Tormey (2014: 387) argue that a focus on the performative elements of populist politics 'contextualises populism's position in the contemporary 'stylised' political landscape and brings representation to the forefront of discussions about populism', highlighting the self-presentation of populist politicians as an antidote to the over-stylised, established political actors.

In sum, whilst 'populism' remains controversial within contemporary politics, a degree of agreement has emerged around it. Rooduijn (2015: 5-6) identifies four reasons for the electoral popularity of such parties in Western Europe: 1) nativist outlook; 2) tendency to be authoritarian; 3) less satisfied with politics; 4) Euroscepticism. However, before turning to whether these four reasons are equally applicable to the rise of PRR in Hungary, we outline some of the ways in which the interconnection between sport and populist politics have manifested themselves in numerous nations.

### **Populism, nationalism, right-wing politics and sport**

Hoberman (1984) argued in his seminal text on the interconnection between sport and political ideology that sport was frequently used by political leaders and heads of states across the ideological spectrum to harness and buttress support for their particular vision of their 'nation'. With specific reference to the Cold War era, in which Hoberman was writing, he noted that his work:

...interprets the political cultures of sport as proxy warriors in a larger ideological conflict which has pitted Marxist dogma, in its variety, against its two historical adversaries: first, fascism, and then the postwar non-Communist bloc, which runs the gamut from quasi-fascist (anti-Marxist) dictatorships to the (anti-Marxist) liberal democracies (Hoberman 1984: 6)

Whilst this conceptualisation of sportspeople as 'proxy warriors' clearly resonates with the ideological clash between 'East' and 'West' in sporting 'mega-events' such as the Olympic Games in the Cold War era (Grix 2013; Roche 2002; Peppard & Riordan 1993), it has also possessed explanatory value for analysing the nature of the interconnection between sport, politics and the 'nation' in various post-Cold-War geographic contexts (Bowes & Bairner 2018; Cashmore 2005; Jedlicka 2018; Merkel 2009). The ability of sport to evoke nationalist sentiments and support amongst a nation's population has, therefore, unsurprisingly not gone unnoticed by political leaders, autocratic or democratic alike.

Turning attention more towards the interconnection between 'right-wing' political populism and sporting matters, it can be argued that a number of common patterns have emerged with regard to the exploitation of sport by politicians on the right. Given that these political actors tend to espouse the nativist, nationalist and authoritarian principles identified in Roodujin's (2015) account, sporting competitions on the international stage provide an opportunity for nationalist political actors to express support (or otherwise) for their nation's sporting representatives, especially given the symbolic image they portray to the rest of the world (Allison, 2000; Bairner 2001, 2015). Unsurprisingly, the political exploitation of a nation's sporting success on the global stage by right-wing politics is the most frequent manifestation of the sport-politics interconnection, with the victories of the nation's athletes or teams framed as evidence of the superiority of that nation's people or political ideology (Hoberman 1986).

Oft-cited examples of the exploitation of sport by right-wing, fascist regimes include Hitler's use of the 1936 Berlin Olympics (Houlihan 1994; Mandell 1971) and the exploitation of football by Mussolini's fascist regime in Italy (Kassimeris 2011a; Scalia 2009). Similar tactics have also been adopted by more recent authoritarian and/or right-wing nationalist political leaders, ranging from those who champion sporting successes to foster nationalist sentiments such as the example of Tudjman in post-Yugoslav era Croatia (Brentin 2013, 2016; Sack & Suster 2000; Vrcan 2002) through to the public denouncement of sporting failures which are blamed on the impact of 'migrant players' by right-wing politicians, as has been seen in the French context in the actions of Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (Marks 1998; Kassimeris 2011b).

Switching attention from the international to the domestic level of political operation, sport's mass appeal within a given nation also presents an opportunity for politicians to bolster their electoral support. In the European context, the primary vehicle for domestic political appropriation is football, with the pre-existence of strong fan cultures and identities for football clubs offering scope for political actors to align their political beliefs with those influential fan groups (Hadas 2000; Kassimeris 2011a; Scalia 2009; Thangaraj et al. 2018). For example, Scalia's (2009) analysis of the interconnection between football and politics in Italy contends that football clubs have been used by contemporary Italian politicians as a 'branch of their patronage machine' (p. 48), which for some clubs has led to an alignment with extreme right-wing political causes. More recently, the English context has also witnessed the rise of right-wing political movements such as the Democratic Football Lads Alliance which have spawned from football fan cultures (Thangaraj et al. 2018).

Therefore, whilst such interaction between sport and right-wing politics is present in a range of countries across Europe, we argue that the connection between those social institutions is both traditional and extensive, and recently rejuvenated in Hungary. Given this, we turn our attention to this country's recent history, i.e., post-communist transition, to foreground Victor Orbán's appropriation of sport.

### **Hungary's post-communist political transition**

Hungary, a country geographically located in the centre of Europe, has had a turbulent past (Lendvai, 2003), which still has bearing on its current socio-cultural,

economic and political development. Arguably one of the most significant recent changes has been the country getting rid of the Soviet yoke and returning to the fold of Western democracy. Soviet influence over Hungary began to decrease in the late 1980s, a precursor to the collapse of the 'Iron Curtain' in 1989. Åslund (1999) noted that the failing Soviet system left its annexed countries in multiple uncertainties which had to be remedied. However, the downfall of the Soviet Union also provided opportunities for global (re)integration (Földes & Inotai 2001; Mátyás 2002; Molnar 2006), which, in turn, helped new frameworks and reforms emerge (Molnar et al. 2011). As a result, Hungary experienced extensive society-wide changes, including the return of democratic elections and a multi-party political system.

The first post-communist democratic elections took place on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1990 with the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) securing dominance and forming a coalition government with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) and the Independent Smallholder's Party (FGKP). Whilst liberal voices, such as the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), were supported by some of the votes the majority of the people favoured conservative, nationalist parties. As financial instability continued in all areas of Hungary in the 1990s (Meusburger 2001), people began to lose faith in the new system and government, leading to the return of the reformed communist party (Hungarian Socialist Party – MSZP), which won the second elections on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1994 and formed a coalition government with the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ). These elections were a bitter disappointment for FIDESZ, which created an intra-party struggle, triggering a significant political shift away from liberal ideas towards conservative and nationalist sentiments. Whilst the Hungarian Socialist Party retained most of its popularity during its mandate, the 1998 elections saw the rise of the reformed, now more conservative, FIDESZ, which won the most seats in the Hungarian parliament and formed a coalition government with MDF and FGKP.

Despite three different governments between 1990 and 2002, economic instability remained significant in Hungary. According to a survey carried out in 2000 (cited in Molnar 2011), 82% of the respondents had had higher living standards during the communist era than in the new democracy. Economic instability began to create a politically-divided Hungary with MSZP and FIDESZ being the two dominant parties. This division was reflected in the outcome of the 2002 elections, in which FIDESZ could retain its majority in the House of Parliament, but MSZP managed to form government by establishing a coalition with SZDSZ. The MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government proven strong and retained its majority in the 2006 general elections when they became the first government to be re-elected in Hungary since the collapse of communism. However, the MSZP leader's, Ferenc Gyurcsány, confidential, post-election party congress speech was leaked to the public, triggering pronounced nation-wide controversy and protests. The infamous speech is referred to as the 'Őszöd Speech' and at that time grabbed both the domestic and international mass media's attention given the brutally direct political remarks made by Gyurcsány ([www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5359546.stm](http://www.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/5359546.stm)).

The Őszöd Speech was the beginning of the decline of the MSZP and, more importantly, the rise of FIDESZ. In addition to the scandal surrounding Prime Minister Gyurcsány, Hungary did not fare well economically in the second half of 2000s as that period experienced the economic crisis commencing in 2008 (Molnar and Doczi,

forthcoming). A combination of political outrage and economic instability led to the landslide 2010 general election victory for FIDESZ, which the party referred to as a 'revolution at the polls' (Palonen 2012: 931). This victory mandated for large-scale transformations in Hungary due to the two-thirds majority possessed by the governing coalition parties, sufficiently large for constitutional changes. The new constitution changed the official name of the country from the Hungarian Republic to Hungary, revealing an inclination to create a borderless nation of Hungarians, aiming for the inclusion of Hungarian minorities living in neighbouring countries (Palonen 2012). The FIDESZ government has maintained its efforts to strengthen the Magyar<sup>1</sup> nation inside and outside of Hungary's borders. Sport, especially football, became a dominant tool for Victor Orbán to flex his nationalist muscles and retain his popularity over three consecutive general elections.

### **Sport in post-communist Hungarian politics: FIDESZ's growing influence**

The relationship between politics and sport in the early years of the post-communist era was random and sporadic. It has been argued that sport probably lost most of its political significance as the general public became aware of its political appropriation by the communist regime which made politicians of the 1990s cautious (Molnar 2007). A trend regarding politicians publicly expressing a disinterest in sport was also observed to demarcate themselves from communist political agendas (Molnar 2007). Interestingly, FIDESZ departed from this attitude and during its first coalition government (1998-2002) showed active involvement in sport, specifically football development. In many ways, FIDESZ's strategic use of sport for political ends therefore simply mirrored the wider trend within this period in other developed and developing nations in Europe outlined above (Brentin 2013, 2016; Kassimeris 2011a, 2011b; Marks 1998; Sack & Suster 2000; Vrcan 2002). For instance, a professional football league was launched in the 1999-2000 season, a state-funded football grassroots development was created, a football Stadia Reconstruction Programme initiated (Molnar et al. 2011), and the Minister of Youth and Sport at that time, Tamás Deutsch, actively interfered with the internal affairs of the Hungarian Football Association (Hoffer & Thaly 2000). To what extent FIDESZ's strong connection to sport helped or impaired the party's political position and progress in the 1990s and early 2000s is moot; nonetheless, their first administration is a clear indication of their political approach to deploying sport for their purposes and also is a harbinger of the post-2010 interconnections between sport and politics in Hungary.

FIDESZ regained political power in 2010 and has held onto it ever since. During this period several radical reforms across the country were introduced, showing intent to centralise and control strategic areas, such as energy industry, education and media. The new regime, named the System of National Cooperation, developed a scheme to work together against the challenges posed by globalisation, Westernisation and the ongoing economic crisis (Molnar & Dóczy, forthcoming). The reactionary nature of these protectionist strategic reforms can be argued to resonate with broader arguments regarding the pre-cursors of populist political ideologies in European politics (Salmela & von Schave 2017; Gusterson 2017; Inglehart & Norris 2016). The Orbán era of Hungarian politics echoes the sceptical arguments of many other

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<sup>1</sup> Although Hungarian and Magyar often used interchangeable, here we use the term 'Magyar', especially 'Magyars' to refer to Hungarians inside and outside of the geographic are of Hungary.

parties on the 'right' of European politics regarding the threat to Hungarian sovereignty and economic development from the liberal policies of the European Union in relation to trade and immigration. It, therefore, appears that within that broader ideological approach, sport was identified as a key strategic sector to reinforce a distinctive sense of Hungarian identity as FIDESZ resumed its previous attempts to centralise and incorporate it into their politics. This meant that sport, football specifically, became a distinctive aspect of right-wing popular politics in Hungary and, in turn, the recipient of significant central investment (Ligeti & Mucsi 2016).

Arguably, there are two chief reasons as to why football has regained its political significance in the FIDESZ era: the personal and the political. On a personal level, the leader of FIDESZ and Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, is and has been a passionate football fan and player. He even continued to play semi-professional football in Felcsút for a fourth-division team during his first reign as Prime Minister. As was the case for Italy's ex-Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi through his past ownership of one of Italy's leading football clubs, A.C. Milan (Kassimeris 2011a; Scalia 2009), Orbán's pre-existing association with football can, therefore, be argued to have offered him a unique opportunity to present himself to the Hungarian electorate as a politician with the 'common touch'. This positioning of football as an important element of Hungarian popular culture is a valuable attribute for the effective populist political actor who wishes to distance their public persona from the political, intellectual and institutional elites, against which populist political parties often rail (Bonikowski 2017; Bonikowski et al. 2018; Fernández-García & Luengo 2018; Moffitt & Tormey 2014; Roodujin 2015). Orbán's frequent Eurosceptic, anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism rhetoric is evidence of right wing populist political tendencies (Harris, 2017).

Orbán's personal connection to Felcsút saw the small town receiving an economic boost in the form of a football stadium, the Pancho Arena. This development is part of Orbán's aspiration to improve the quality of Hungarian football and restore the golden days of the Magic Magyars (Goldblatt & Nolan 2018). This 3812-capacity, luxury-grade stadium cost around €12.2m and is located near a town with a population of approximately 1.800 – an unorthodox location for a football arena of this scale at twice the capacity of its host town. Given this, Ligeti & Mucsi (2016) argue that football stadia construction is one of the main ways in which public money unaccountably disappears in Orbán-era Hungary. The Felcsút football club is the point in case as it received €30 million central funding between 2011 and 2014 out of a €240 million budget that was to be shared across more than 1100 clubs (Ligeti & Mucsi 2016). In addition to centrally-funded football development, Orbán also regularly comments on the sport and related results in state-sponsored mass media and perceives Hungarians to be a *football-smart nation*. Another example of football-politics connection is the celebratory government voices which were present when, after a 30-year gap in international football achievements, the Hungarian national team qualified for the 2016 European Championship (Molnar & Dóczy forthcoming). Such explicit attempts to associate the successes of Hungary's footballing representatives with the nation's political leadership, thus, continues a long-established pattern from political leaders who wish to gain political capital from sport (Hoberman 1984; Allison 2000; Bairner 2001, 2015; Houlihan 1994, Hadas 2000).



As a consequence of being identified as a key strategic political sector, sport, and football specifically, was granted unprecedented state support. Ligeti & Mucsi (2016: 117) list the number and volume of football stadia investments by the Hungarian government since 2010. The FIDESZ government have spent over €100 million on such investments. The need for this level of investment is particularly questionable as, despite new stadia, the Nemzeti Sport [National Sport] (2014) newspaper reported that match attendance numbers were dwindling. Other sport facilities have also been (re)constructed, which coincides with the government's aim to stage sporting mega-events and major international events, such as World Aquatics Championships, Football European Championships, World Championships in Athletics, and Summer Olympic Games (Molnar & Dóczy forthcoming). Moreover, in 2015 a state funded television channel was launched dedicated to broadcasting sports, specifically covering events where Hungarian athletes participate. These are all examples of continuously increasing state influence of and interference with sport, especially football (See Goldblatt & Nolan 2018). Based on the above examples, it is safe to say that the current government, and Orbán leading it, have been redistributing public funds as they see fit, with sport acting as a medium for achieving specific political goals with limited public outcry given the popular (and populist) nature of sport in Hungarian culture.

### **'Defender of the Homeland': Reinventing the Magyars through Football in Orbán's Hungary**

Perhaps due to the above described events and political actions, Harris (2017) observes that in Central Europe Hungary has the lowest democratic score and remarks it appropriate that Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, greeted the Hungarian prime minister in Riga in May 2015 by saying 'Hello, dictator'. Whilst it may initially appear harsh to call Orbán a dictator, US Senator, John McCain, had referred to him as such a year earlier (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-hungary-usa-idUSKCN0JH1EW20141203>), and on closer inspection some of the actions of his administration may qualify for that title. Broadly speaking, Orbán views immigration and liberal/multicultural EU policies as threats to the Hungarian nation, and has, therefore, implemented a range of actions to 'protect' the Magyars, including changing the Hungarian constitution multiple times, catering for the needs of the Hungarian oligarchs, declaring his aims to build an 'illiberal state', and, perhaps most importantly, portraying himself as the 'defender' of Hungary.

Interestingly and importantly, the self-proclaimed 'defender of the Homeland' rhetoric expressed by Orbán and his political entourage does not exclusively refer to the Hungarian nation within its existing borders, but to the greater, pre-Trianon (1920) Kingdom of Hungary. The Hungarian Spectrum (2018) notes that post-communist governments 'pledged Hungary's acceptance of the present borders, but Viktor Orbán is retreating from that position.' In other words, Orbán envisions the Hungarian nation in its pre-Trianon form with all the lost territories (re)attached. He adopts an irredentist stance on the matter to re-connect Magyars inside and outside of Hungary and football, in particular, has become an institute through which all Magyars may be (re)united.

Here it is worth noting that irredentism and post-Trianon Hungary go hand-in-hand. The end of the Great War and the outcome of the consequent peace negotiations dissolved the Austro-Hungarian Empire and greatly reduced both the population and geographic size of Hungary. Beiner (2013: 41) observes that the late arriving Hungarian delegation was served a document 'fait accompli'. In particular Part II of the document (Frontiers of Hungary) 'stipulated that the Kingdom of Hungary was to lose approximately 70% of its former territory and, according to their reckoning, almost a third of its ethnic Hungarian population (3.3 million out of 10.7 million) to six neighbouring countries'. This historic decimation of Hungary both as a country and a nation left deep scars in the Hungarian psyche (Várdy 1997). This feeling of national resentment was somewhat oppressed during the communist era as it was considered 'as the product of imperialism, serving bourgeois and landowner interests' (Beiner, 2013: 42). However, in the new democracy such nationalistic sentiments resurfaced with gusto and Orbán harnessed them to serve his political ends.

The reunification efforts through sport is a sign Orbán's recognition of sport's socio-cultural significance in Hungary and in the construction of Hungarian national identity. For instance, through a survey-based study, Örkény (2005) demonstrated that in both 1995 and 2003 sport achievements were one of the highest sources of national pride in Hungary, significantly exceeding other categories such as the economy, social security, and democracy. Pertinent to our arguments on sport here, Örkény (2005: 40) also noted that 'those who run for a nationalist movement and popular sport should appeal, first of all, to people's ethnocentric dispositions'. This connection between Hungarian national identity and pride is astutely recognised by the Orbán regime. However, for Orbán, national identity often shifts to regional identity as a way of demarcating himself, the Hungarian nation, and the wider region from the 'oppressive' European Union. Csehi (2019: 1016), based on an analysis of Orbán's speeches, observes that for Orbán 'the corrupt elite' was more and more equated with 'European bureaucrats'. Consequently, the Prime Minister has been fostering a regional identity which shifted from calling on the people of Hungary, to Hungarians (Magyars), and then to 'Central Europeans'. Csehi (2019: 1017) argues that the 'constant reinterpretation of "the people" with newer and newer layers of identity was carried out to ensure stable, or even increased mobilization behind his political agenda'.

In relation to football, Orbán's reunification efforts have manifested through substantial state support for football academies inside and outside of the country's borders where Hungarian minorities reside, including Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia.<sup>2</sup> This shows a clear intention to symbolically unite Hungarians across national borders through football. The Hungarian Spectrum (2018) referred to these efforts of the government as creating 'extraterritorial football facilities as the glue of national cohesion.' Oroszi and Sipos (2018) unfolded the

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<sup>2</sup>See details at:

[https://index.hu/sport/futball/2018/01/09/20\\_milliard\\_felett\\_hataron\\_tuli\\_labdarugas\\_magyar\\_allami\\_tamogatasi/](https://index.hu/sport/futball/2018/01/09/20_milliard_felett_hataron_tuli_labdarugas_magyar_allami_tamogatasi/) [http://www.nemzetisport.hu/egyeb\\_egyeni/sportpolitika-ime-a-kormany-ev-vegi-sportcelu-tamogatasai-2676037](http://www.nemzetisport.hu/egyeb_egyeni/sportpolitika-ime-a-kormany-ev-vegi-sportcelu-tamogatasai-2676037)

Orbán government's investments into the construction of footballing facilities outside of Hungary's borders and have identified that between 2013 and 2018 there was an approximately HUF16 billion (€50 million) expenditure. These efforts are in-line with the aforementioned recent constitutional change to the official name of the country from Hungarian Republic to Hungary. Football's role in these nation (re)building endeavours has been to become a platform through which all Magyars living in and outside of Hungary may unite.

To this end, whilst the Orbán government's extra-territorial sporting investments may be easily interpreted as nothing more than regional diplomacy or a form of 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995), we contend that those activities are of greater importance in relation to the reconstruction of a conceptualisation of a Hungarian nation which invokes ethnically-rooted, 'hot' forms of nationalism (Hutchinson, 2006). In other words, it can be argued that the re-emergence of irredentist attitudes in post-communist Hungary have been harnessed by the Orbán administration to create a form of sports policy with the view to reinvent a post-communist, Western Hungary. This strategic approach, thus, can be argued to resemble a form of Hungarian cultural imperialism in the Carpathian Basin, aiming to portray Hungary as a '*football-smart nation*' with a reach beyond its geographic borders to unite all ethnic Hungarians, thereby (re)vitalising a national identity that has been continuously oppressed, bruised, and challenged in the twentieth century and beyond (Várdy & Várdy, 1989; Várdy, 1997; Molnar & Dóczy, forthcoming). The words of Orbán himself at the grand opening of the MOL Football Academy in Dunajská Streda, Slovakia in 2018 explicate our contentions regarding the symbolic significance of these strategic foreign investments in sporting infrastructure as an ethnically-derived form of 'hot nationalism' uniting ethnic Hungarians across existing state borders:

I would like to make it clear – without pathos or pomp – that, now and in the future, the people of Dunaszerdahely and the Hungarians of Felvidék [the Hungarian-populated region of Slovakia] can rely on Hungary, on the Hungarian government, and on me personally... we should be happy that Hungarians beyond the borders and Hungarians at home have found one another, and are capable of building and creating things together not only at home, but also beyond the borders... Sport is an excellent link between the peoples and countries of the Carpathian Basin – and therefore also between Hungary and Slovakia (<https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-inauguration-of-the-mol-football-academy>).

## **Concluding thoughts**

In this article we have focused on the gradual emergence of popular politics across Europe, and have provided a brief summary of some of the relevant and burgeoning literature to foreground our discussion of the specific manifestation of populist politics in the domain of Hungarian sport and society. We argued that while a degree of dissonance remains in contemporary politically-inclined research as regards to how to specifically define and interpret popular politics, some common trends are observable. However, we deem it essential to explore popular politics and populist political parties in action within their own socio-cultural settings.

To unpack some of the existing tendencies of right-wing populist political parties, we focused on Hungary and the current Hungarian government's ever increasing presence in sport, specifically football. We have contended that the FIDESZ-lead administration deviated from previous post-communist practices in terms of their relation to sport and football development. In fact, we argue that since 2010, the beginning of the FIDESZ era, significant changes have taken place across Hungary and Hungarian sport. Sport has become part of the government's strategic plan, in which football in particular has gained a significant role. We explained that football's centrality has derived from two reasons: personal and political. Personal reasons included the long-term, active football involvement of Victor Orbán who has invested millions of Euros into football stadia development (most of which are highly controversial), endeavouring to bring back the golden days of the 'Magical Magyars' in order to successfully re-frame Hungary as a *'football smart nation'*.

The political reasons, not disconnected from the personal, centre more around issues regarding the Hungarian nation and national identity. Given that Hungary's turbulent history and the consequences of World War I peace negotiations have remained in the Magyar national psyche, but were suppressed during the communist period, the post-Iron Curtain democratic era has given rise to irredentist sentiments across the nation. We argued that the Orbán government has harnessed them for their own political ends. In this arrangement, Orbán has been portrayed as the 'Defender of the Homeland' whereby he is there to protect Hungary as a country and to unite all Magyars in and outside of the country. In this irredentist endeavour, football and related investments have become a key political tool for the government, which has made a number of significant foreign investments in building stadia and other football facilities in areas that used to belong to the pre-Trianon Kingdom of Hungary.

In this light, we argue that these activities of the government can be seen as a form of reconstruction of a conceptualisation of a Hungarian nation which invokes ethnically-rooted, 'hot' forms of nationalism and primordial perception of nationhood. This approach aims to remedy and (re)vitalise a Magyar national identity as a strategic response to the multitude of contemporary challenges that span from economic uncertainties, European Union-based centralism and mass migration triggered national fears. However, as similar right-wing populist movements continue to gain momentum across other European nations in response to these contemporary global challenges, what remains to be seen is the extent to which these endeavours by Orbán's government do indeed bear fruit in terms of Hungary's economic, social and political development within the tumultuous political climate which is impacting upon the supra-national project of the European Union.

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