

Title: “We Are of One Blood” – Understanding Populism in Hungary through Popular

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1 Introduction

The themes of political mobilisation, the manipulation and affective control of the masses have been a definitive concern in the critical traditions of the studying of popular culture and mass democracies. In theorisations of the social-political significance and role of the masses, the image of a homogenous quantity of people deprived of culture, and the image of organised power as a collective actor have been present with an equal weight. In this system of relations, popular culture appears as a tool for organising or integrating mass societies, which, as such, is capable of controlling the attention and affective tuning of the masses. In the analysis of Adorno and Horkheimer (1999), popular culture ultimately appears as a way of producing social dispositions and collective feeling, as a kind of psychotechnology.

The public commentary on populism that warns of its dangers typically operates with similar representations of the masses. In this approach, they are “defenseless” against populism, “unable to resist” populist leaders, and are susceptible to political manipulation and conspiracy theories. Such fears have generated growing academic interest that accompanies “the populist moment” in the western world (Brubaker 2017a).

In our paper, we look at the relationship between one particular segment of popular culture, namely popular music, and populism in Hungary after 2010, during the so-called “System of National Cooperation.” This can be understood as a new semi-peripheral regime of capital accumulation (Éber et al. 2019) or authoritarian capitalism (Scheiring 2020) introduced in 2010 by the second Viktor Orbán government and continued so far through two subsequent government cycles. In our research design, we attempted to revive critical traditions of the studying of popular culture, and have connected aesthetic and structural musical analysis with the studying of the political and social context through the method of musicological group analysis combined with anthropological field work. The songs we selected for analysis comprise the best-known pop songs transmitted through mainstream media (e.g. receiving radio airplay through the public service popular music radio station), which have at the same time been instrumentalized by politics, bound to political agendas and given a role in hegemony building. These songs are “Nélküled” (Without you) by Ismerős Arcok – a rock song from 2007, which has become an alternative, or unofficial, national anthem endorsed by the

governing Fidesz party; “Tizenötmillióból egy” (One of fifteen million) by the band Kowalsky meg a Vega, released in 2017; and “Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)” (Don’t tell me [there is no hope]), released in 2016, written and performed by János Bródy and Zsuzsa Koncz, respectively, two iconic figures of the Hungarian popular music world, who became stars during socialism as part of the Hungarian “beat” music generation in the 1960s and 1970s, and formed part of the liberal intellectual elite of the 1989-1990 regime change. Through these examples, we investigate the process of how popular songs afford the mainstreaming of political ideas and discourses.

2 Populism, critical theory and popular culture

The historical and generational experience of the German critical intellectuals forced into emigration by the Nazi dictatorship gave rise to little optimism as to the damage that authoritarian populisms can cause in societies, and this was also mirrored in their critique of mass culture and mass society. According to Adorno, for example, mass democracies first and foremost create needs among the masses, only to address these needs through their own framework, according to their own rules. Populist politics, however, is not aimed at community building and emancipation, but the cycle of creation, maintaining, and ostensible management of crises (Moffitt 2014; Brubaker 2017b; Taggart 2000). At the same time, it mediatizes this crisis and converts it into political capital. According to Adorno, this process also takes place in popular music: that is, the market first creates needs that have to be fulfilled. The creator no longer has an effect on the audience and the context of interpretation, the interpretation of culture degrades into an element of consumption, and content – similarly to populist crisis management – is replaced by spectacle and ready-made schemata. As Martin Jay aptly put it:

The Frankfurt School disliked mass culture, not because it was democratic, but precisely because it was not. The notion of "popular" culture, they argued, was ideological; the culture industry administered a nonspontaneous, reified, phony culture rather than the real thing. The old distinction between high and low culture had all but vanished in the "stylized barbarism" of mass culture. (Jay 1976: 216)

Our goal in this paper is not to honour the determining figures of critical theory, nor to provide a summary of the interrelations between popular culture and authoritarian systems. Rather, we aim to continue the methodological traditions of the Frankfurt School. In our research design,

we have connected aesthetic and structural musical analysis with the studying of the political and social context through the method of musicological group analysis combined with anthropological field work and paying attention to multiple opportunity structures (Sperling 2014).

The timeliness of the topic is indicated by the spreading of populist discourses in recent years. The danger of the dwindling of liberal democracy (Müller 2016), the decreasing of trust in prevailing institutional structures (Brubaker 2017a), antagonism towards expert knowledge, the polarising effects of populist discourses on society (Palonen 2009), the emphasis on justified confronting of the enemy (Taggart 2000) or the extremities of public discourse (Wodak 2015) are all viewed as phenomena that simultaneously create and maintain social crises. We argue that it is not sufficient to view the spreading of populism in light of election results, and similarly, the fact that populist actors communicate in a convincing way in social media and make effective use of online publicity does not offer a satisfactory explanation either. Our questions therefore do not concern the strict field of politics – namely party politics – but rather the broader social relations, since populism is driven, beyond politics, by the goal of achieving cultural hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Moffitt 2020).

For this reason, at this point we need to clarify the hegemony concept of Antonio Gramsci (1971). Looking at the political and cultural relations of the capitalist state, Gramsci points out that culture forms an organic part of community building and the asserting of power. In order for those in possession of power to acquire a hegemonic position, they need to be able to control ideas about social order, and to establish a representation of the social consensus legitimising their power (Femia 1987: 24). The struggles for hegemony, which are about establishing social norms and making them consensual, create a constantly changing system of relations between those in possession of power and those that are oppressed.

It is therefore clear that the struggle for hegemony does not only take place on the level of political messages or conflict, but it also promises the possibility of establishing the dominant culture. With the establishing of hegemony, however, those in power make their own worldviews and cultural practices valid for the entire society. According to Stuart Hall, popular culture is a special territory of this hegemony building, since it serves as an important context for the creation of collective identities and attachments, and the association of different ideological and emotional elements (see Hall and Whannel 2018, Hall 1981). This is made possible by the fact that access to popular culture is uncomplicated and the infrastructure of its distribution is widespread. Moreover, it is typically not controlled by the dominant power (Hall 1997). There is not necessarily a direct relationship that is easily shown between hegemony

building and popular culture (Hall 1981), in other words, cultural production – except for direct propaganda – is not the area of conscious political manipulation. At the same time, it is able to set the scene for the mainstreaming of populist ideas and create affordances that operate independent of political will.

An important characteristic of populist discourses is that they incorporate the desired consensus, the cultural elements imagined as mainstream, and the messages intended for a wide audience. For the articulation of each of these, they employ forms of expression perceived as familiar or easy to understand by the average consumer (Ostiguy 2009; Csigó 2016). For a more precise definition of populism, Pierre Ostiguy has established a socio-cultural conceptual framework that complements the argumentation based on the dichotomy of “everyday people” versus the “corrupt elite” (ibid.). Through this, he highlights the relation to the “average” person, especially in terms of behaviour, practices of decision-making and public performance. According to the observation of Ostiguy, the informal discourse, directness, body language, gestures, and so forth, characterising populist leaders express the belonging to a community, while performativity is another significant element. Benjamin Moffitt reached a similar conclusion, interpreting the phenomenon of populism as a political style: “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” (Moffitt 2016). These approaches, however, lack an acknowledgment of culture, the embeddedness of the dichotomizing and polarizing discourses generated by populism. That is, that the system of meanings and tastes present in the given society, as well as cultural practices enable the articulation, the transformation and the transfer of populist discourses, on both discursive and performative levels.

The Hungarian case is remarkable not only in the sense that in the past decade, the hegemony building of the government has unfolded in an increasingly spectacular manner, throughout which it continuously applied the tools of populism (Scheiring 2020). The example of Hungary also illustrates the establishing of an authoritarian populist system, and the process whereby the social polarisation generated by populism becomes banalised or taken-for-granted – that is, the ways in which it permeates various areas of everyday life. Our aim therefore is to discuss the political and social aspects of the hegemony building of the Orbán regime in one theoretical framework, looking at characteristic processes in the field of popular music. Through analysing selected mainstream songs, we intend to demonstrate the ways in which the hegemony building of Fidesz takes place in areas designated as “apolitical” – as well as the

ways in which critique is formulated in this same area. Our methodological and theoretical apparatus is able to integrate the following phenomena into one framework:

1. The framework of our analysis is primarily provided by the structural transformations taking place in Hungary: the election system reformed by Fidesz; the depletion of parliamentarianism; a dominating and controlling of mass media; a “colonisation” of the prosecution system and the courts. In relation to the establishing of the Orbán system starting from 2010, Gábor Scheiring (2020) identifies two important processes, namely *institutional authoritarianism* and *authoritarian populism*. The first is used by the author to point to the occupation and refeudalization of social institutions. He emphasises that institutional authoritarianism “serves to limit the rise of a competitive civic and political opposition by recourse to a kind of institutional bricolage, which preserves the façade of democratic institutions but tilts the political playing field to the advantage of the ruling party” (Scheiring 2020: 296). Authoritarian populism is described as a strategy through which the governing power is able to control oppositionary forces. Similarly to the observations of Stuart Hall, he shows how Fidesz “disaggregate[s] the opposition by addressing real contradictions in a way as to represent them within a logic of discourse which pulls them systematically in line with policies and class strategies of the new illiberal hegemony (Hall 1979)” (Scheiring 2020: 296).
2. Besides serving the structural transformation of the Hungarian state, the process of hegemony building has also involved presenting the strengthening of “their own camp” as a national interest. Within this, the connecting of Hungarian communities outside of the border to the nation and the centering of the issue of migration represented the political engagement of Viktor Orbán as the only guarantee of national unity and social security (Scheiring 2020; Egry 2019). Moreover, these issues also helped to legitimise the hegemony building of the government.
3. A further question is how, besides structural transformation and political power relations, all this has been manifest in everyday situations and other areas of culture. In relation to the transformation of the financing of culture, education, as well as the systems of academic knowledge production and media, several critics identified the elimination of the autonomy of these spheres along with their complete politicisation as the biggest problem (Kovács-Trencsényi 2019; OH 2020). In the popular music field, “the post-2010 period can be characterized by increasing state control and

incorporation” (Barna, Nagy and Szarvas 2021). The government introduced an extensive popular music funding programme in 2014, “through which popular music has received significant state-level recognition and support for the first time since the regime change” (ibid.). In the live music sector – which has become the main source of income for Hungarian musicians in recent years – the programme has also strengthened the gatekeeping position and power of festival promoters, the most powerful of which also hold key positions in the allocation of state grants (ibid.). This is indicated, for instance, by the example of the “Warehouse Gigs” programme, launched by the government in support of the industry in the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Through the system of support, the allocation of resources and occupying of key positions by people close to the regime (e.g. the appointment of Szilárd Demeter, head of Petőfi Literary Museum, as Ministerial Commissioner for the Renewal of Hungarian Popular Music in 2020) can be interpreted as part of a process of incorporation (Barna, Madár, Nagy and Szarvas 2019). We are interested in how populist discourses are articulated or performed in the realm of mainstream popular music. Among many other factors popular music can afford mainstreaming populist discourses through negotiating the “common sense”, strengthening the feeling of belonging and togetherness, articulating values and judgements, and involving the “silent majority”, “the masses”, the audiences beyond the political fields.

4. The political context, the purportedly apolitical mainstream songs in question are being politicised and becoming linked to polarisation, reinforcing populist political discourses. We would like to understand how mainstream songs can resonate to the political discourses, how popular music can help the party-controlled hegemony building and mainstream a new taking-for-granted definition of the nation. At the same time the oppositional side is labeled as a network against the national will, against the unity of the peoples.
5. We argue that the song lyrics, genre aesthetics and compositional features help to construct particular audiences and affective spaces of reception. For analysing this coherence in the structure of the songs and the audience we used the method of *musicological group analysis* (MGA), developed by André Doehring (Doehring and Ginkel 2019), complete with fieldwork conducted in festivals, village-days and other events. The musicological group analysis, modeled on focus group interviews, is a method for understanding the relationship between meanings that listeners ascribe to a piece of music and its sonic structures in a specific social and cultural setting, a group

analysis with participation of musicologist experts who can link the structural settings with cultural meanings through an interpretative process.

6. Through this methodological setting, we identify *realms of memory* (Nora 1986) repeatedly constructed in the songs through sound, genre aesthetic, as well as lyrics, affording the reinforcement of feelings of intimacy and familiarity, which also facilitate this process. Pierre Nora argues that the relation between the historical events and the collective memory was changed irrevocably in the past decades, the collective stories can no longer be based on personal experience or the organically lived elements of shared memory. Realms of memory denote metaphorical and concrete places and things that reinforce and link the identity to the collective memory.

A reference to shared – national – knowledge also contributes towards the making conscious of national belonging, in a context where the political instrumentalization of national identity is an important element of the populism of the Orbán regime.

3 The nation building of Fidesz and the “fifteen million” as a realm of memory

In the following we look at two songs that have achieved mainstream popularity and success and that address the issue of ethnic Hungarians outside of the borders of Hungary – an issue that has been thematised as part of the nation building of the current hegemonic power.

Since 2010, the subsequent Viktor Orbán governments have introduced a series of measures for the institutionalisation and the strengthening of connections between the Hungarian state and ethnic Hungarians outside of the borders (Egry 2019). The process, termed “the reunification of the nation” by government-controlled media, incorporates a number of programmes and forms of support belonging to “national policy” that bind together Hungarian communities remained in neighbouring countries after the 1920 Peace Treaty of Trianon to Budapest. However, the most important element of this – including in symbolic terms – is the securing of a simplified dual citizenship for ethnic Hungarians in 2010. The measure, which was later extended to include the right to vote in Hungary, by 2020 resulted in Hungary gaining 1.1 million new citizens, who predominantly continue to live in their homelands (mostly Romania, Serbia and Ukraine). The discourse of recreating national unity has accompanied the last decade (Egry 2019). The extending of the nation reinforced, on an affective, political as well as cultural level, the new national ideology of Fidesz, the sense of national togetherness, and the self-termed “System of National Cooperation”.

“Nélküled” (Without you) is a rock ballad, recorded in its original version by the band Ismerős Arcok in 2007 with just a vocal track and a piano. Formed in 1999, the band – playing music at the intersection of rock and rhythm and blues – was at that time regarded as belonging to the national rock scene, which in its turn formed part of a radical right subcultural network (Feischmidt and Pulay 2016). In narratives about their own biography, they attribute their “national turn” to a tour in Romania in the early 2000s, when the encounter with the Transylvanian ethnic Hungarian community, according to front singer Attila Nyerges, who authored the lyrics of the song, had an elemental effect on him. From then on, he has felt it his duty to care about the situation of Hungarians outside Hungary’s borders, the compensation of the injustices done to them, and to become involved in symbolic practices of national solidarity. As we show below, Transylvania and its representations, associated with ethnic Hungarians not only in Romania, but outside of Hungary’s borders in general, serve as a crucial element of the song itself. These experiences brought the band closer to the radical right, and later to the memory politics represented by Fidesz. Musically, the encounter meant that the band began integrating folk songs and elements into their repertoire.

The changing status of the band along with the career trajectory of the song can be understood by viewing it in the changing political context. Following a political crisis of 2006, national radicalism strengthened, which was indicated by the success of the dynamic, youthful right-wing party Jobbik (Feischmidt and Pulay 2016y; Scheiring 2020). Following the two-thirds majority victory of Fidesz in 2010 and the establishing of the self-termed “System of National Cooperation,” however, resulted in a new setup. The governing Fidesz-KDNP parties competed, and won, against national radicals for the authentic and exclusive representation of the national interest (Scheiring 2020). This has also affected popular culture. Upon its release in 2007, neither the album *Éberáalom*, nor the song “Nélküled” created much of a stir outside of the radical right-wing network. Public service or mainstream commercial radio stations did not play songs by the band, nor did they have much opportunity to perform outside of events belonging to the subculture. This changed radically after 2010. The song, along with the band themselves, was gradually both mainstreamed and legitimised by the hegemonic power. In 2014, “Nélküled” was selected to become the anthem of a Hungarian football team in Slovakia (FC DAC 1904). The supporting of football – for instance, through building stadiums around the country – has formed an important part of the hegemony building of Fidesz, and it has also become a tool of nation building. As part of the latter, Hungarian media began airing matches of ethnic Hungarian teams, which led to a popularisation of “Nélküled” as a football anthem within the borders in Hungary as well. Today, the song is extremely popular: currently its live

video has 47 million views on YouTube (with various other versions also available, with several million views each), the lyrics consistently hold the number one position on the Hungarian lyrics database *Zeneszöveg.hu* (which gives an indication of the number of people searching for the song so that they are able to sing along). Before the pandemic, the band was extensively performing at festivals, village days as well as their own concerts around the country, typically in front of mainstream audiences in addition to fans. The song has also become a staple item in wedding band repertoires and is frequently sung at school ceremonies, and it has inspired a huge variety of cover versions and fan videos, uploaded to YouTube and other social media. Moreover, the band has received substantial support in the form of state grants as well as sponsorship by companies close to the establishment. They have received multiple awards and have been personally endorsed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

The song's sparse instrumentation makes it similar to songs typically performed by more established artists during the intimate acoustic blocks sometimes forming part of rock concerts. The hint of ambition expressed in the band placing such a track on their 2007 album somehow predicts their later elevation into a higher and more legitimate status, turning into a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. In the rock tradition, piano-accompanied songs that would be delegated to an acoustic block would typically contain love songs – in this case, love of the country and Hungarian people are at the center, yet with a strong emphasis on a sense of loss. The words, rich with poetic images conjuring landscapes and natural phenomena, along with the melody and harmonic structure, evoke a Romantic aesthetic, sensibility and emotionality. The song belongs to the rock music tradition going back to the socialist period. The male singing voice is raw, giving the impression of an untrained singer – which itself partly corresponds to a rock aesthetic. In addition, it can also be heard as a performance of the singer being “of the people”, which corresponds to a strategy that Ostiguy terms “flaunting the low”, and which he identifies as “a core feature of populism” (2017: 75). Somewhat contradicting the potential highbrow connotations of the piano-voice instrumentation, the tone of the piano is not smooth – rather, this slightly dirty sound evokes the atmosphere of a small bar with a slightly off-key piano and a self-taught pianist. This reinforces the rawness and the biker-rock band credentials (which characterised the early period of the band). There is little variation in terms of dynamic in the track, however, the piano is stronger in places where the lyrics contain references to ethnic Hungarians, highlighting this theme.

With regard to the lyrical content, the first verse begins with abstract sense of imminent danger, the sense of being in the last minute, grabbing the last chance: “There are so many things I still have to say [tell you] / If I don't do it [now], there might not be a chance / To tell

you how good it is that we are here.”² This immediately creates an atmosphere of crisis. This part is followed by images of closeness, familiarity, and a reference to friends who understand one another without words: “Like good old friends, we speak as one, we think as one”. The second verse begins in a markedly different tone from the first one, which is more personal, with an “I” speaking – it is a list of poetic images of nature expressing loss and devastation, one after another: “Like the lonely pine tree struck by lightning / Like a stream that has lost its water, like a stone that has been kicked aside / Like the tired wanderer, who silently asks to eat / Who can no longer hope for a home, a house, a homeland” – with the last of these lines first referencing the homeland and thus mobilising a new set of meanings. The chorus speaks in second person singular: “Although you cannot yet grasp the real meaning / Until you have lived through difficult times.” While the reference is unclear upon first hearing, we soon get to the two most important and prominent lines, which start from the highest pitched note and follow a descending melody: “Whatever may happen / While we live and until we die / We are of one blood.” The change to “we” signifies a community, and there is a strong reference to being bound “by blood” (which echoes the line “we be of one blood, ye and I” from “Kaa’s Hunting” in Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*). This second part of the chorus is highlighted not only by the highest point in the melody, but also through a stress on the vocal (“whatever may happen”). It is a melodic line that is easy to sing – which is indicated by the football crowds in stadiums. The following line (“while we live and until we die”) rephrases the poem “Szózat” by Mihály Vörösmarty, which is a second national anthem in Hungary. This is a much-used phrase – even if here, we do not have an exact quote – in national-themed songs to represent national identity and the lifelong commitment to the homeland. The sparse instrumentation makes the words easy to understand – and perhaps to remember.

The song has provided a foundation of the simplified dual citizenship through the expression and performance of the pain felt over the lost national territories. The title “without you” addresses Hungarians within Hungary’s borders from the perspectives of those remaining outside, and clearly refers to the loss suffered after the Second World War. In addition to evoking national unity through the folk motifs and romantic style of natural images, the lyrics are also in harmony with Fidesz’ nation building on the level of political gestures. The line “like the five million Magyars unheard by the world”, which at live gigs is invariably accompanied by the ritual of the front singer as well as members of the audience raising their open palms to indicate the “five” million, refers to the lack of international solidarity with the Hungarian nation, and emphasises the polarisation of “us, oppressed Hungarians” and the neutral “world”. In the discourse of Fidesz, there is only one political power that can effectively tackle the lack

of solidarity and the external enemy – which can be manifested in big capital (banks), “Brussels”, (George) “Soros” or international migration – and lead a successful freedom fight in order to unify the nation – namely the governing party.

“Tizenötmillióból egy” (One of fifteen million) is a song recorded by the rock band Kowalsky meg a Vega in 2017. Formed in 1999 – just like Ismerős Arcok – the band is generally regarded as an act that started out as an alternative rock band, performing on the festival circuit year after year, but are now reaching mainstream audiences and capable of filling the Budapest Arena – the largest music venue in Hungary. Our field work confirmed that their audience and fan base included groups of young people as well as middle-aged, occasional concert-goers and families on a night out. The eclecticism of their repertoire, and even of the individual song – with a stadium-rock-like chorus, a spoken-singing style that is, however, not rapping, a light pop instrumentation, a varying of registers in the lyrics (occasional “street” style mixed with more conservative wording) – also confirms that they are aiming at a mainstream audience: “For me it is really difficult to tell [who the intended audience are], precisely because with this monstrous eclectic, he [the front singer and songwriter] wants to please so many people, as if he himself was unable to decide on the perspective or to pinpoint his own position” – as it was observed during the MGA session (MGA 8 May 2020).

The song was released together with a video produced in collaboration with the Hungarian Defence Forces, and serves partly as promotion for the Forces, especially for recruitment of voluntary reserves. The story narrated by the video highlights the self-sacrifice of a family man in the military, bringing individual heroic behaviour, a sense of crisis – through military conflict – and the (nuclear) family to the fore as key values. The official video includes a short behind-the-scenes clip at the end showing members of the band training with the Forces in order to show – through engaging their own bodies – their commitment to the Hungarian army and defending the nation. The video has been viewed more than 12 million times, and countless comments under the video on YouTube thank the defence forces and highlight their selfless efforts. For instance:

I’m only 13 but this really moved me. I’m thankful to those people that defend my life.

HUGE RESPECT TO HUNGARIAN SOLDIERS AND THANKS FOR THEIR WORK <3

I cried throughout your song, it is beautiful and moving. A million hugs to all Hungarian soldiers and police officers, and most importantly, respect, for they give and have given their lives for our beautiful country. They only deserve our respect and appreciation.

The comment section also includes posts by many current or former soldiers, similarly expressing their gratitude to the band for bringing attention to their work:

As a Hungarian soldier, I'm really thankful to you for this wonderful song. I have always loved you and this will continue in the future!

The video is also included by the band along with live performances of the song, so it appears justified to consider it in fact as part of the song text. The song is characterised by a repetitive, loop-like musical structure with lengthy verses and a chorus that slightly contrasts the verse with its melody line and a major sixth interval at “fifteen million” that jumps out, highlighting the phrase. A drum sound that was identified as “militant” during the musicological group analysis session accompanies the track, corresponding to the military context and the theme of the video. The fifteen million of the title is to be understood, similarly to “Nélküled”, as a reference to the Hungarian nation understood as inclusive of ethnic minority Hungarians outside of the borders. The symbolic use of this number to include those living outside the border in fact refers back to the 1989-1990 regime change. As Szemere observes:

Following the Berlin Wall's fall, József Antall, head of the first postsocialist government, raised eyebrows by declaring himself leader of “15 million Hungarians”, only about 10 million of whom lived within the borders. He primarily referred to the ethnic Hungarians of the neighbouring Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia, Serbia-Montenegro and, secondarily, the émigré diaspora worldwide. Orbán's regime took this ethnonationalist concept of citizenship further in 2011 when granting dual citizenship to all extraterritorial non-resident Hungarians in the name of national reunification beyond the borders. (Szemere 2020: 12)

This line in the chorus – “You are a star of fifteen million” – with its unambiguous reference to the national community, however, seems to stand out from the rest of the lyrics, even though it is directly connected to the military theme of the video and the context of production – defending the nation. Throughout the rest of the lyrics, the singing voice addresses its audience in second person singular through a spoken-singing style, a fairly soft voice accompanying a tough appearance – a muscular, tattooed male body. The lyrics cover the theme of self-sacrifice

(“Tell me, what does it mean to you that there is no greater love / Than you giving your life willingly for others”) – through this, connecting to the theme of the video – together with images alluding to the crisis brought by modern civilization (“Where people only talk to one another on the internet”) and a sense of threat towards conservative values („It is now debated what respect means”), including conservative gender roles (“Where the difference between man and woman / Is slowly fading, like the night behind the rising sun”). The voice and mode of address (“Where you think, now too, that I’m talking about others / You keep nodding, but I’m telling you about ourselves, about me, about you”) creates affordances resembling a therapeutic situation – as it was observed during the song analysis session: “This guy just talks and talks, leading your thoughts while you relive or survive your traumas, deal with them” (MGA 8 May 2020). We identified the voice and corresponding persona as that of a “guru,” with its soft suggestive, even didactic tone that keeps the addressee locked into the conversation (ibid.). The body of the performer in the meantime is the embodiment of a health regime – the front singer Gyula Balázs “Kowalsky”, along with the rest of the band, promotes his vegetarian lifestyle and also works as a yoga instructor. Through his persona, the singing voice and the lyrical theme of the song, the theme of self-sacrifice is connected, on the one hand, with neoliberal technologies of the self (Foucault 1988) – the individual’s imperative to work on their body and the soul –, framed in moral terms and connected to conservative values, and directly connected to Hungarian national identity and the realm of memory of the “fifteen million”. The individual focus appears alongside a representation of community – “the desire to recreate community by reassembling an atomized world that is falling apart” (MGA 8 May 2020). When the voice sings, repeatedly, “We belong together, we belong together,” at two-thirds of the song, a bell is ringing in the background, endowing the notion of togetherness – and, ultimately, national unity – with a ceremonial, and even religious atmosphere (correspondingly, the mentioned line is preceded by “Before God, every human is the same”). Individual “sins” are listed and individuals are asked to work on themselves, but they are also called on to realise that they are part of the fifteen million. The audience are addressed as subjects of nation building.

4 Polarisation and “victims” of the new hegemony

The hegemony building of Fidesz, as populist discourses in general, produces its own representations of the enemy – those responsible for attacks on the system coming from outside and striving to dismantle the national unity (Scheiring 2020). The polarisation characterising the System of National Cooperation has enabled not only a symbolic victory over political

opponents along with a constant mobilisation, but also, through the propagation of anti-elite discourses, the scapegoating of the self-identified pro-European post-transition Hungarian intellectual elite.

In the following, we intend to show, through the analysis of a song by Zsuzsa Koncz, that members of this intellectual elite are also active in positioning themselves through assuming this representation of the enemy, self-defining and -identifying as the victims of the new hegemony. Through this process, they also contribute to the reinforcing of the populist discourse, and, ultimately, the process of hegemony building. As Barna, Madár, Nagy and Szarvas similarly observe:

The [oppositional] critique of the excessive power of the state or the stigma of unprofessionalism fits into the dichotomies also used by the new hegemony (e.g. authentic Hungarian–European, liberal–national etc.). These alternative and oppositional practices are, according to the description of Raymond Williams, merely counter-discourses, since they are rooted in the categories of the dominant class and organise resistance according to the logic of the regime (Williams 1973: 10). (Barna, Madár, Nagy and Szarvas 2019: 247)

Zsuzsa Koncz is a well-known, iconic figure of the Hungarian popular music world as well as the liberal elite of the 1989-1990 regime change. The start of her career can be traced back to the 1960s, when she, still a secondary school student, made her debut as the winner of the first talent contest broadcast on Hungarian television. Later, she performed with the most important so-called beat music (rock and roll) bands of the period (such as Illés, Metro and Omega). János Bródy, a former member of Illés, continued to act as her co-writer after the regime change, authoring many of her songs and lyrics. As a celebrated star of the Hungarian beat music era, she gained not only national recognition, but also the opportunity to reach international audiences, which secured a position for her that counted as privileged in the context of socialism. Throughout her career, she released almost one hundred solo albums in Hungary, and twenty-four abroad. The albums often include old songs recorded in new instrumentation or new versions, which simultaneously helps her to maintain a continuity and a structure of self-referentiality in her work. Besides Hungarian beat and pop-rock, the songs also frequently integrate folk music elements.

Besides performing, the career of Koncz has also been defined by her image as a public figure and her embeddedness into the bourgeois milieu of the capital city. Currently, in addition to her yearly show at the Budapest Arena, she performs in theaters and cultural community

centers. Her work links her to the popular music field, yet thanks to the social prestige attached to her figure, and according to the taste hierarchies solidifying in Hungarian society in the post-socialist period, she is clearly being regarded as a (high) artist and an intellectual. Since the young artists of the 1960s and 1970s Hungarian beat era integrated into the elite after the regime change, and the pop-rock music of that era has been elevated, through their intermediation, into the symbol of resistance against the socialist system, both the era and the artists have been consecrated (Bourdieu 1993) and have become realms of memory.

The songs of Koncz, like many other performing artists who were her contemporaries, is permeated by a coded language artists employed before the regime change as a political strategy in order to avoid censorship and conflict with the governing power (Csatári 2013). Metaphors, associations, word play, certain lyrical elements and sounds (see, for instance, the song “Sárga rózsa” [Yellow rose]; Szemere 2001: 36) acquired a new function after 2010. Since the liberal intellectual elite of the regime change perceived the cultural hegemony building of the government and the anti-intellectualism aimed at them as a continuation of the regime change, the songs once again turned into protest gestures against the hegemonic power. “Ne mondd (hogy nincs remény)” (Don’t tell me [there is no hope]), a song released in 2016 and sung by Zsuzsa Koncz, and the accompanying video reactivates this resentment and the pre-’89 aesthetic language of resistance. The images and metaphors in the song follow the canon and tradition of her own oeuvre. At the same time, the instrumentation and sound is markedly different from much of her repertoire. The particular use of guitar sounds, synthesizer, strings and drums – a metal sound and a female singing voice – evoke the sounds of the “fantasy metal,” “gothic metal” or progressive rock styles – as observed in the song analysis sessions: “Even if not very modern, it certainly isn’t the guitar sound that we can link to her musical world established over the 1960s-70s-80s. To me, this is much rather ‘90s and 2000s.” (MGA 20 February 2020) Or:

I was really surprised at the guitar entering with a bang at the beginning. It created an expectation of a hard sound, but then it was only the chorus that was more aggressive. There was a guitar pounding throughout, under the verses, it made [the song] quite agitated. The chorus sounded hard. (MGA 20 February 2020)

The participants of the session identified the song as a work created by someone with a certain skillset attempting to imitate or acquire a particular style, or to create a certain atmosphere.

The tension created by the militant electric guitar riffs and the pounding drums is paralleled in the lyrics by a repetition of negative imperative sentences: “Don’t tell me it hurts, don’t tell me it is a shame / Don’t tell me everything is in vain” (repeated twice every time). This tension and stifled anger is concretized by in the lyrics when, although using coded language, the singer alludes to the dominant regime through the image of the Castle and the “new clothes of the *táltos*”. As Szemere observes, the Prime Minister’s relocation of his office to the (Royal) Castle in Buda can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture in line with his “regal aspirations” (Szemere 2020: 4), and it is this interpretation that the lyrics also engage with. The “new clothes of the *táltos*” refer to the well-known folk tale of the emperor’s new clothes, where the figure of the emperor is replaced by the Hungarian shaman-like mythological figure of the *táltos*.

In the song, realms of memory operate in two ways: they use an external referentiality and an internal referentiality, one within the artist’s own oeuvre. Firstly, the mentioned symbols of domination and their violent appropriation (“... up in the castle somebody has lost the plot”; “The heroic past on the painted picture is fake”; “I’m not interested in the *táltos*’ new clothes”) are linked to anger. Secondly, she subtly refers to an older song, which has become a pop cultural reference of the Hungarian memory of the Holocaust. The song “Százéves pályaudvar” (A hundred-year-old railway station) was written by Péter Gerendás and János Bródy, released in 1993, and was later performed, amongst others, at the Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest as part of the 2011 March of the Living Hungary event (as a duet with actor János Kulka). The song makes a direct reference to the victims of the Holocaust, recalling characteristic realms of memory through images such as the sign on the wall of the house, the railway station, the rail tracks, and so on: “There are times when we need to go / When the sign appears on the wall of the house (...) / Hate was marching down the streets / And the glow of the past appeared on the horizon / They felt that they now have to go / Because it always begins the same”. “Ne mondd ...” from 2016 revives the same social context – oppression and force: “Don’t tell me you are ready for the journey if we need to go”. However, instead of the melancholy and lyrical mode of the 1993 song, it embodies resistance against this oppression. The MGA also revealed that there is a perceived dissonance between the tension, anger and rebellion on the one hand, and the tone and style of the singer – which creates an inauthentic experience.

The song at the same time creates a context not only for stifled anger, but also the gesture of fighting for freedom and equality: “There will be a new spring and a beautiful summer / We deserve the sweet sunshine”; “The world will be beautiful again, let’s not give up / In this land, you could live, and not only die”. The last of these lines similarly cites the poem “Szózat” – the

second Hungarian national anthem – to “Nélküled” by Ismerős Arcok (“In the great world outside of here / There is no place for you / May fortune's hand bless or beat you / Here you must live and die” – in the translation of Watson Kirkconnell). The choice of genre, as well as the elitist positioning of the singer as the voice or spokesperson of the oppressed, strengthens the interpretation that the songwriter and lyricists, as well as the performer is attempting to fit the forms used to the imagined taste of the audience in order to reach a broader mass of people. Nevertheless, since it fails to work as a harmonic whole, it rather feels as an exercise in style and condescending towards its audience: “This is a classic attitude on the part of the intellectual elite, I [as the author] imagine [what I want to say] and I assume that I can only say this in this particular framework” (MGA 20 February 2020).

In all, “Ne mondd ...” – with its direct and subtle referential framework – speaks, and engages in symbolic struggle, on behalf of those that are excluded, oppressed, and rid of their position with authoritative force, while placing the aggression of the contemporary right-wing hegemony building within the succession of traumas suffered during the 20th Century by alluding the Hungarian victims of the Holocaust and socialism. The protest character of the song was also strengthened by media discourses around it: following the release of the song, the oppositional press celebrated it as “throwing a punch” or “answering back”, that is, as symbolic resistance, and the high record sales (the album reached platinum status within weeks of its release), along with the sold-out shows was portrayed as a result of the mass-level need for an oppositional voice. In contrast, the government-friendly media referred to the song as disrespect for the Prime Minister and offensive. In part they attributed its tone to the artist’s waning popularity and her resulting resentment, and in part labelled it as a money-making enterprise of the failed liberal party and the intellectual elite.

5 Conclusions

In our paper, we investigated the new hegemony building that has taken place from 2010 in Hungary through popular music. We asked how the restructuring of power generated by the Orbán governments are present in popular music, and how popular music functions to embed for the spreading of popular discourses. The three songs we analysed simultaneously play a part in the reinforcing of political polarisation and the mobilisation of political “sides”. In all three cases, the political and social instrumentalisation is clear: while “Nélküled” was transformed into an alternative national anthem from a radical right-wing subcultural context after 2010, the song “Tizenötmillióból egy” was utilised as promotion for voluntary reserves by the Ministry

of Defence, and “Ne mondd” was inserted into their symbolic politics by the opposition. The song lyrics, genre aesthetics and compositional features help to construct particular audiences and affective spaces of reception. In our research, we sought to answer what particular aesthetic and structural features within the songs can be identified that afford their political instrumentalization – the fact that they have proven suitable for the embodiment of political sides. With this enquiry, we intend to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Orbán regime by linking a structural analysis of the social system with research of popular culture. At the same time, we aim to extend the politics-centredness of the theoretical framework of populism research and return to the perspective of critical theory that is able to view social and political systems and cultural production and consumption within the same frame.

Notes

1. Our proposed paper is based on research conducted for the Volkswagen Stiftung project “Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe” (ref. 94 754).
2. We present Hungarian lyrics in our own translations. This also applies to direct quotations from the MGA sessions and from Hungarian-language sources.

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