

# THE POST-PEASANT POPULISM OF EASTERN EUROPE: ON RESILIENCE AND THE MOBILISATION OF AN ECONOMIC BASE<sup>1</sup>

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This paper conceptualises an East European type of populism that I call post-peasant. It originated in state-socialist modernisation and mobilises people who are not peasants, but who nevertheless value the countryside as morally superior to a life in large cities. My major contention is that post-peasant populism emerges under specific cultural-economic conditions, among which the institution I call the 'post-peasant house' is paramount. This institution, in its economic and cultural dimensions, connects the recent agrarian past, socialist modernism, and the post-socialist present, both as a habitual practice and a representation of the people.

KEYWORDS: post-peasant populism, post-peasant house, cultural economy, Central and Eastern Europe, Slovakia, livelihood mobilisation

This paper conceptualises an East European type of populism that I call post-peasant. It originated in state-socialist modernisation and mobilises people who are not peasants, but who nevertheless value the countryside as morally superior to a life in large cities. My major contention is that post-peasant populism emerges under specific cultural-economic conditions, among which the institution I call the 'post-peasant house' is paramount. This institution, in its economic and cultural dimensions, connects the recent agrarian past, socialist modernism, and the post-socialist present, both as a habitual practice and a representation of the people.

In what follows, I first define what makes post-socialist populism post-peasant and follow this by connecting this definition to the persistence of the house as a cultural-economic institution in Slovakia and Eastern Europe, thereby demonstrating how it remains essential for contemporary populist politics. Finally, before I summarise the

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cultural-economic legacies of populism in post-socialist Europe, I present empirical material exemplifying post-peasant populism in national politics.

#### POPULISM AND THE POST-PEASANT HOUSE

This paper will endeavour to explain the mobilisation of popular economic memory and the resilience of a specific popular cultural-economic base of populism in Eastern Europe. I intend to complement the perspectives that emphasise material relations and market-based class conflict as the primary vehicle for the rise of post-socialist populism (Szombati 2018, Buchowski 2018, Hann 2019, Kalb 2011, 2022), as well as perspectives favouring such cultural factors as symbolic representations of pro-populist themes and/or the lack of democratic values (Vachudova 2020, Petsinis 2022, Gyárfášová 2018, Kotwas and Kubik 2019). As anthropologist Sandy Robertson (2001, 164) has written, peasants “have both persisted and changed depending largely on how we apply our ambiguous indexes of growth”. In this study, I am concerned with the emergence of a category of people during the period of state socialism, whom I call post-peasants. By post-peasant, I am referring to a specific form of peoples’ awareness anchored in the memory of having worked on the land quite recently as a means of making their livelihood, but distanced from this peasant past by one or two generations. It is also important to emphasize that socialist economic relations nurtured the post-peasant house as an institution that developed in parallel to the impersonal bureaucratic state and was separate from the impersonal market that clandestinely existed even under the harshest communist policy of nationalisation.

The term “post” refers to people who no longer are peasants – the self-subsistent producers working on land, relatively untouched by capitalist relations who due to socialist industrialisation, became nominal proletarians and were subjected to redistribution under the state-socialist shortage economy (Kornai 1980). There certainly was a radical material rupture which occurred due to differences in collectivisation and post-socialist transformation between the peasant and post-peasant life in Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, but in terms of habitus and values, post-peasants can still be considered as a “real” category of people found across Eastern Europe, regardless of specific nation-state contexts.<sup>2</sup>

I argue that a transformed version of the post-peasant house that emerged during the socialist era should be considered in any analysis of populist insurgency today.

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2 My primary interest is in the countries of the so-called Visegrád Four (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Czech Republic), because of my obvious familiarity with this regional setting and because of the ample opportunity afforded to me to compare between these cases. I nevertheless remain open to discussions on the wider implications of my cultural-economic perspective on populism.

It is a product of the cultural economy that emerged during the socialist era as an unintended outcome of modernisation, replacing land as the source of livelihood security and prestige, and has helped people to cope with post-socialism. The post-peasants – inhabitants of this house – should not therefore be seen as direct remnants of an agrarian past, but as representatives of a modern way of livelihood and participants in an economy that values the countryside and is suspicious of cosmopolitan worldviews and lifestyles. Margaret Canovan (1984, 326) noted in a different context, “...the contemporary equivalent of the peasant or farmer of so much populist myth is the suburban gardener, living a blameless and authentic life among his dahlias”.

My perspective on the post-peasant house has been inspired by Stephen Gudeman, who begins the discussion in his *Anthropology and Economy* (2016) by referring to his earlier work on house economy (Gudeman and Rivera 1990; see also Gudeman 2001). The house provides a material base that is little noticed and partially dismantled via calculative individual reasoning when markets spread, “but its features leave traces on the larger economy of which it is a part” (Gudeman 2016, 14). Gudeman’s model of the economy (2010) recognises the divide which exists between the areas of house and community, on one side, and commerce and finance on the other. This model does not imply an evolutionary political economy or a succession of modes of production, but rather proposes to construe economy as composed of institutions or spheres, “ranging from the house to meta-finance” (Gudeman 2016, 5). A community is a small, local group, but it can also mean a nation, and some types of global associations. In contrast, pure markets consist of anonymous and competitive exchanges among calculating individuals.

A house embedded in a community has been a fixture of many social and economic systems, ranging from ancient empires to capitalism. The house economy has persisted even under globalisation and flourished in former socialist areas of Eastern Europe (Gudeman 2016, 14–15). Sometimes the house produces and distributes goods, but as Gudeman notes, it is always a consumption unit.

It holds the means for living from food, to tools, to assets. These holdings are not capital, but the base the house keeps for its use and persistence. The base may have a broader meaning than a collection of assets, however. It may include intangible items or emblems that comprise an impartible legacy... The base is a badge and assurance of identity in the world. (2016, 15)

The classical work of Meyer Fortes about time and change in Ashanti households showed how microsocial continuity was maintained in the household structure (Fortes 1949). It was Claude Lévi Strauss who “first drew attention to the potential theoretical significance of the indigenous category of the house in his study of systems of social organization, which appeared to make no sense when seen in terms of the categories of conventional kinship analysis” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 6). In

referring to Pierre Bourdieu's classic work on the Kabyle house (1980), Carsten and Hugh-Jones point out that the later development of the concept of habitus, and the "dialectical interaction between body and house play a key role in his [Bourdieu's] analysis of the logic of practice" (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 2). They argue,

If people construct houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups ... The space that surrounds a house is also an extension of the personal space of its occupants. (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 3)

Frances Pine (1996) discussed the role of the house in socialist and post-socialist Poland and in the social setting she studied, she found social groupings and hierarchies to be based on 'houses' rather than on other principles such as lineage or overt political faction. In the southern part of Poland, she discovered that many people maintained houses as basic units of social organisation in the late twentieth century despite being increasingly integrated into a highly centralised, industrialised nation state.

According to Pine, the house is an important unit not only in organizing village life but also in structuring people's relations with or opposition to the State and the Catholic Church, two powerful forces influencing the formation of collective identity above the local level. Houses also serve as markers of difference, as they divide kin and place social groups in opposition to each other (Pine 1996, 448). During the socialist era, the ideology of the house was reinforced via ritual, reciprocity between houses, gender and the generational division of labour; the house provided an alternative model to the state, and an alternative economy "which can diminish or increase in response to external change" (ibid, 456).

As Juraj Podoba (2013) has shown, the spacious modern house in the socialist countryside replaced the land, stable, and barn as the major symbols of prestige outside major Slovak cities. At least up until the 1970s, writes Josef Kandert (2004, 79) in reference to the villagers of Central Slovakia, house building and its location reflected old agrarian property patterns. According to Podoba (2013), between the 1950s and 1980s in Slovakia, two thirds of all housing were newly constructed and yet a culture and livelihood constructed around the 'house' remained robust.

Krisztina Fehervary (2013) characterises the earlier decades of socialism as being a time of upward mobility, reflected in the adoption of bourgeois elements in furnishing and architecture. The impersonal state later became to be associated with grey concrete housing that was in direct opposition to what people perceived to be connected with the good life. She points out, that the socialist regime made people follow what she calls *Organicist Modernism*, which was an attempt to use natural materials to cover and beautify impersonal concrete segments, the favoured material of modernism. State-socialism in practice followed the dominant tastes of the rural populace that were increasingly being incorporated into the emerging industrial society. Sheepskin

over mass-produced sofas in homes, the increasing awareness of industrial pollution and the imagery of a “primordial” rural nation are examples of this kind of organicism. This organicist modernism in/of material culture developed among the socialist middle-classes, the children of peasants and first generation professionals. Fehervary also suggests, that this organicist modernism, at least for some time, became the official aesthetic of post-socialism.

In the socialist economy, weakly penetrated by market relations, the house was the only private property in Czechoslovakia that had a value derived from its social and cultural embeddedness, but which was also an asset in market transactions and investment. For the first time ever, the majority of former peasants began living in modern walled dwellings. While structural changes resulting from industrialisation and urbanisation were huge in Slovakia and other state socialist countries, the socialist economy nurtured practices, which had their roots in an agrarian era. The reliance on kinship ties, barter-like social exchanges, and values associated with an agrarian past under a shortage economy further produced relations reminiscent of the village community.<sup>3</sup>

As I demonstrate in the following empirical section, political leaders often characterised as populist and who have enjoyed strong electoral support after state-socialism, have often invoked in their ideologies the imagery of the post-peasant house. The post-peasant house has been the most durable, continually reproduced modern popular economic institution in the region. Additionally, the house associated with its “peasantness,” has remained a forceful tool in memory politics and popular practices of commemoration. Before analysing this form of cultural-economic mobilisation, in what follows, I discuss two major themes: the persistence of the house as an institution able to coexist with various regimes and its continuing ability to play a role in the wider organisation of power. The existence of these two features helps to explain why the cultural economy of the house has survived until today.

#### THE MEANING OF THE HOUSE

Suburban areas are rapidly mushrooming around post-socialist cities with the building of new housing complexes despite the existence of serious infrastructural problems. Some city dwellers are leaving the comfort of large cities with their well-developed

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3 The economy of shortage was endemic for the state-socialist economy under central planning. The unavailability of basic everyday consumer goods meant that people had to make these available by themselves via informal practices that often turned into illegal under the rigid police state. The social ties that included and inhibited trust were essential for making-up these informal communities parallel to the formal structures of the communist state that were themselves subjects of popular appropriation (see Kornai 1980).

infrastructure and services whilst others from remote rural regions are moving closer to booming capitals just to own a house near the city.<sup>4</sup> Old generations are returning to their native areas if they can afford to. This is happening during an ongoing increase of housing prices and a shortage of flats in prosperous areas while villages in more remote regions have been depopulating for some decades.

According to human geographers Martin Šveda and Pavel Šuška, in the last twenty years, 55,000 flats for a total of 150,000 inhabitants were built in the adjacent towns and villages of Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia inhabited by a population of 500,000. It is estimated that only 40 percent of these new inhabitants migrated from the capital. One third have come from other regions of Slovakia, all of them predominantly rural with the exception of the second largest city of Košice (240,000 inhabitants). The remainder were the people who moved within the suburbs. Many geographers argue that city life has been rehabilitated over time as well, by contrast to the socialist hostility towards urban culture considered to be bourgeois, but it does not mean that the archetypal residence composed of a house with garden and playing children – this time the suburban residence near the city – has lost its grip on the social imagery of post-peasants.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the urban residents have not become cosmopolitans but rather petite-bourgeois romantics, passionately caring for their weekend houses in the country.

Between 35%–60% of the population in Central and Eastern Europe grow some of their own food in contrast to 10% in the West (Smith and Jehlička 2013, 149–51). Household food production is primarily a voluntary activity imbued with deep social and cultural meaning and associated with “feelings of exuberance, joy and a sense of achievement rather than constraints, necessity or a sense of obligation” (Ibid., 155). The popularity of urban gardening, along with the rejuvenation of private plots in the countryside, particularly by younger middle-class urbanites, can also be seen in light of an increasing awareness of the ecological crisis.

While half of the inhabitants of Germany own their place of residence, nine out of ten Slovaks own theirs. This is the second highest number in Europe after Romania’s 96%. The abundance of private ownership raises questions about the ongoing attachment to private property. An important reason for this lies not so much in the attractiveness of capitalism itself, but can be seen as the enduring pull of a cultural pattern formed in reaction to the socialist neglect of common property and the desire of post-socialist citizens to take back control over their immediate surroundings. In contrast to the low-cost maintenance provided by the housing cooperative or the factory (providers of housing in the communist past), ownership has become more costly

4 <https://dennikn.sk/332114/vacsie-mesta-stracaju-obyvatelov-stahuju-sa-vidiek-vracaju-sa-za-pracou/> (accessed 30. 12. 2019)

5 <https://dennikn.sk/1564507/pracovat-v-meste-zit-mimo-neho-co-so-sebou-prinasa-masivna-migracia-do-okolia-bratislavy/?ref=tema> (accessed 11. 1. 2020)

and requires much more attention of their owners who now have individual rights over their flats and have to make a joint decision in neighbourhoods together with other individual flat owners. Despite these apparent difficulties, including the investment required in maintaining aging residential properties, the popularity of owning one's house over renting, remains very high.<sup>6</sup>

The name commonly given to the head of a rural household, in terms of management of the household is *gazda*. His social position might be translated into English as farmer, but the meaning of *gazda* (and its female equivalent *gazdiná*) is broader. Being a *gazda* – one's own master, means belonging to the decisive strata in village society and politics to which only propertied peasants were privy.<sup>7</sup> The Jews, historically associated with towns and cities, could never become full-scale *gazda*. Not surprisingly, there is not a traditional word for *gazda* in Roma languages, despite the fact that the Roma, the largest indigenous ethnic minority group of Slovakia estimated to total half a million people, have been living predominantly in rural settings since their ancestors were forced to fully settle there at the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Urban visitors to the countryside, such as the owners of holiday houses, priests, teachers, medical and veterinary doctors, agricultural engineers and other members of the so called rural intelligentsia who do not come from the village, are usually not considered *gazda* either.

Radoslav Procházka, a Yale trained constitutional lawyer from the capital and a presidential candidate in 2014, called himself a “*gazda* of the right” (*gazda pravice*) in the parliamentary election campaign of 2016 in order to attract voters. Alojz Hlina, the former leader of Christian Democratic Movement, the second oldest post-socialist political party in Slovakia, stated in 2018:

A gazda is not one who raises dogs in his garden. A gazda is a gazda. You cannot fool him. Actually, you can fool him only once. I am sorry to see our gazdas have to fight for land with ‘agriculturalists’ who buy Ferraris instead of a milking sheds. (personal social media page of the politician)

In what follows, I wish to discuss the ongoing importance of the house as an institution across regimes through telling a story of two friends who disagree about postsocialist development, but whose lives centre around their dwellings. Zdenko (56), a bus driver, shared his opinion in the summer of 2019 on his social media page that “communists

6 In rural Hungary, Chris Hann explains the importance of the agrarian ethos of work, surviving state-socialism (see Hann 2018).

7 For a similar account of the patrimonial character of power in the countryside see Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 62 and Malewska-Szałygin 2021.

8 The philologist Viktor Elšík from Charles University in Prague (personal communication) found recent use of *gazda* among Roma in Central Slovakia, in reference to someone in the Roma settlement who decides independently about money and household activities, the activity usually made collectively among the mutually depending Roma.

robbed everybody of everything. Freedom, factories, craft services, and in 1953 all the money [the forced currency exchange was highly disadvantageous for ordinary savers, JB]”. Braňo (67), a former truck driver, replied:

The Democrats stole everything that the Communists left! The Democrats sold us those flats that the Communists gave us for free, along with the cooperatives, factories and so on, and they put the money in their private pockets. This is how they crushed the Slovak pride, the dignity of citizens, and then gave up our state sovereignty in favour of the European Union. How can I not side with the Communist Party when these crooks [the democrats, JB] managed to mess up everything?

Zdenko then argued that the privatised socialist flats had been sold for a good price by those who originally obtained them for a nominal price. And Braňo, himself the owner of a flat in a socialist block that the villager Zdenko never possessed, continued:

I just wanted to say that the housing problem was solved by the Communists and that these flats were built in such a way that citizens could purchase them for a modest price. Now they are selling them for extraordinary prices. But housing is not a problem any longer thanks to the Communists!

Socialist housing was provided to meet the needs of the growing category of industrial employees of the socialist economy, especially for recent migrants from the countryside. For most, the desired house of permanence remained the suburban house.

The value of socialist era flats has increased enormously and those, especially from the countryside, who were never the beneficiaries of a socialist flat, such as Zdenko, feel the injustice of the argument generally held by those nostalgic of communist times such as Braňo. On the contrary, many villagers have suffered a serious loss of value in their spacious village property built by using official and unofficial socialist subsidies and neighbours' help. For villagers like Zdenko, it is impossible to buy a flat in the capital where he has managed to find a decent job. Braňo, on the other hand, cannot forget the privileges country people enjoyed through living in the countryside; they were in a position to take advantage of their domestic food production and combined this with paid factory work. While Zdenko accepts post-socialist reality, commutes to the capital and stays in a workers' hotel, returning to his house at the weekends just to cut grass in his neglected vegetable garden, Braňo, who has a satisfactory local job, and whose property in a district capital has increased several times in market value, criticises 'the system' for destroying well-functioning communist housing policies. Yet in theory, Braňo and Zdenko continue to support the idea of strengthening the importance of agriculture, the values of village life, and the supposed healthy lifestyle they have nostalgically projected back into their childhood during the socialist era, despite the fact that their livelihood, along with that of their fellow citizens, depends on how well the automotive industry is faring.



The voting preferences of the two friends is also a matter of curiosity. While Braňo votes for the fascist radical right-wing populist People's Party Our Slovakia (*Ludová strana Naše Slovensko*), under the leadership of Marian Kotleba, Zdenko has remained a staunch supporter of centrist politics since 1989. Only recently has he voted for the populist anti-corruption movement of Igor Matovič's Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (*Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti*) party, the victor in the 2020 elections.<sup>9</sup> The only difference, at first sight, between the two men, is their family origin. Zdenko is the grandson of a peasant and the son of socialist cooperative workers who were moderately privileged in their socialist village. Braňo is the grandson of landless rural proletarians, whose numbers were high, especially on pre-socialist land estates of what is now Southern Slovakia, and whose parents obtained flats in cooperative housing blocks built in the 1970s.

The fascist *Ludová strana Naše Slovensko* party consciously tries to tap into the nostalgia of people such as Braňo by declaring their support for the construction of "state flats". Boris Kollár, the speaker of Parliament, media entrepreneur and leader and founder of the *Sme Rodina* (We Are Family) party who claims to support the idea of the "traditional family" despite being the father of twelve children with eleven different women, is critical of young couples who postpone their decision to have children because of a lack of financial wherewithal when it comes to housing. He has stated that he would provide them with a two-room "state flat" for two hundred euro per month, if he were in charge of the government.

The house in Bratislava, known today as Biľak's Villa, tells the story of a leader from a poor peasant background in North-East Slovakia, who made it to the best address in the capital.<sup>10</sup> He took over a villa in the villa district of the city, whose distinct character had been shaped by its former well-to-do German and Hungarian-speaking inhabitants. Several villas were subjected to "aryanisation" during the Slovak Republic (1939–1945), and later most of them were nationalised after the expulsion of German speakers, following the war and the nationalisation of property after the communist seizure of power in 1948. This Art Nouveau villa, with an estimated value of 1.5 million euro in 2019, is currently owned by Biľak's daughter and son-in law, the post-socialist leader of the marginal orthodox Communist Party of Slovakia and known art collector. It was originally built for an entrepreneurial family of Jewish origin and after the Second

9 A similar political mix was found among the "decent people", as they were called at protests which took place following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. The protesters were viewed as decent regardless of whether they belonged to the reactionary or liberal camps. They were viewed as neither right nor left (Makovicky, Larson, Buzalka 2020).

10 Vasil Biľak (1917–2014), a leading proponent of the "normalisation process" in Czechoslovakia, following the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in August 1968 in response to the Prague Spring, was one of the signatories of the official letter inviting these armies to "pacify the communist counter-revolution" in August 1968.

World War was occupied by a high level state official of the interwar period, who did not want to buy it until it was confirmed that no direct heirs were alive. In the 1970s, Biľak took possession of the villa, evicting the widow of the previous occupant in the process, arguing that his appropriation of it was a state concern.<sup>11</sup> Of more telling importance for ordinary citizens during the late socialist era was the three-floor cottage on the Slovak-Polish border built for Biľak near his native village. People continue to refer to the privileges of postsocialist power holders, as *papalášizmus*, a habit ascribed to communist and interwar fat cats.

The longest and most intense public protest in Slovakia in 2016 took place in front of a luxurious apartment residence near Bratislava Castle, located within walking distance of Biľak's villa. Thousands of people protested every week that summer against the Prime Minister Róbert Fico who had rented a large flat from a person suspected and later sentenced to tax fraud. The residential complex annoyed its neighbours, living in the villa quarter of the old town, as it was vastly in excess of the zoning norms, colours, and even the existing opulence of the area.

Given the continuing popularity of Slovakia's longest serving Prime Minister, Róbert Fico, even after he was forced to resign from office after the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé in March 2018, many voters seemed to have turned a blind eye to the dubious origins of the property at his disposal, his mistresses, and his twenty thousand euro watches.<sup>12</sup> The relaxed attitude of voters vis-à-vis their favourite leaders' behaviour can actually make sense from the perspective of the construal of power relations that in my view is rooted in images of power prevalent in the agrarian era.

#### THE POWER DISTRIBUTION

In 1993, I worked as a receptionist in the sanatorium of a small spa town in Southern Slovakia. Since the end of 1980s when this modern building, covered in yellow marble, was built, it has been considered luxurious. It used to be at the disposal of party members, and those who worked there were carefully selected. Visitors to this sanatorium included popular actors, scientists, communist journalists, and high-level bureaucrats. There were, however, some places reserved for heavy industrial workers and miners, the

11 <https://zivot.pluska.sk/clanok/16165/trpke-spomienky-bilak-chcel-vilu-tak-sa-z-nej-museli-vystahovat>, accessed 20.6.2019.

12 The electoral success of the former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a billionaire accused of fraud while building a luxurious resort in Central Bohemia, and the long-term popularity of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is re-building a large Habsburg-era estate near Budapest and the former royal palace in the castle quarters in the centre of Budapest for his use, are further cases in point.

heroes of socialist labour. And although ordinary people were not allowed to enter the building, rumours spread before 1989 about the opulence of the presidential apartment, the high-end spa equipment imported from the West, the underground garage for guests, drinks unavailable in regular stores on offer in the café, all considered luxuries.

The employees in the sanatorium had low salaries, commuted from surrounding villages and hurried home every afternoon to catch the bus home, so they could take care of their pigs, gardens, and vineyards. Minor industrial towns were located an hour's drive away and the village men who did not work in the cooperative or in the spa (which had a predominantly female work force), commuted there. The sanatorium is still operating and remains in state hands, but post 1989 it was opened to the general public, with prices rising accordingly. In this sense, as during the socialist era, the sanatorium has remained unaffordable for ordinary citizens. Since the 1990s, many of my colleagues have lost their jobs in the sanatorium or retired. Nevertheless, I returned in 2018 and talked to those who still worked there. The salaries were still very low, but my friends were happy with their jobs, close to home, that were considered to have value on the local job market. Few still kept their parental vineyards, and even fewer professed any liking of working in the garden for self-subsistence.

In the 1990s, when I was working in the sanatorium, German and Austrian pensioners constituted a solid share of the clientele. Nevertheless, the sanatorium maintained its reputation as a luxurious and exclusive enclave for elites, which had the first rooftop pool in the region. In 2018, I heard many guests speaking Russian, and more and more prosperous Slovaks have clearly discovered the spa in recent years. Thus, the inequalities which existed in communist times between ordinary people's communist lords, now represented by financial sharks who have privatised the spa under dubious conditions and used European subsidies for renovation purposes, and the locals have an older agrarian pedigree that was particularly well-cultivated during the socialist era.

From this perspective on inequality, I once learned that it was acceptable for high level officials to use their drivers for private purposes. An elderly woman told me this when I mentioned a minister whose driver was found driving the minister's son to school and his wife to the supermarket without his presence in the car. In 2012, I took part in a wine tour in Western Slovakia. Managers and professionals from the capital denounced one of the government ministers who arrived at the event (during the pre-election period) in his chauffeur-driven limousine. The managers who themselves were forking out exorbitant prices for wines, rented their cars with drivers, and talked about their adventures on yachts. They complained about 'their' (public) money being spent on the minister's car which, according to the law, every government minister had to use in both their private and public lives while in office, for security reasons.

In October 2018, my friend's wife, an artist, shared a photo on social media of the Finnish president visiting a book fair as a private person. Because the president came late to the event, he had to sit on the stairs in the crowded hall. My friend's

wife seemed to be suggesting that the modest behaviour of this president should be followed by ‘our’ post-communist rulers with their penchant for privileges. A very similar reaction appeared in the Slovak social media at the end of 2019, when the Austrian Prime Minister, travelling privately by low cost airline, was pictured in jeans, among ordinary travellers.

These reminders of status made me think about the comment of a village friend in regard to the assassination of Anna Lindh, the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2003 – it happened as a result of her naïve egalitarian behaviour, as she refused bodyguards, symbols of a politician’s power. Fifteen years later, following similar logic, several of my friends thought that Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, was weak for welcoming Muslims fleeing war in Syria. She should have shown them her fist, as Viktor Orban did, they thought. According to some of my friends, all of these politicians, such as French President Emanuel Macron who rode a bike in Copenhagen instead of being driven in a far more appropriate means of transport such as presidential limousine, wanted to appeal to ordinary people, but many believe that leadership requires building respect via conspicuous demonstrations of power, something that Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin do very well.

In 2018, the Polish film director, Agnieszka Holland, referred to a discussion with a person who voted for Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Polish populist governing party Law and Order (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*). The voter complained about the nepotism and corruption this government practices, but he still wanted to vote for them. “Although they steal, at least they share some money with the people”, was his explanation. Holland expresses an opinion, common among liberal-leaning intellectuals, that some parts of the population suffer from ‘communist mentality’.<sup>13</sup> My reading of this ‘communist mentality’ easily is that it fits power patterns reminiscent of an agrarian empire, to which communist regimes owned a lot of their power legacy, despite being ideologically presented as diametrically opposed to this agrarian past. In other words, post-peasant populist voters are not simply fooled by their leaders, even though this has occurred. Instead, they tend to respect the right of elites, who spawn demagogic and inaccurate interpretations of reality, and who preach equality in the style of the enlightened aristocracy or communist fat cats of yore, to enjoy their privileges. This paternalism displayed by populist leaders in their public performances is at the core of the accepted post-peasant model of leadership of Eastern Europe, in sharp contrast to the dominant public culture of liberal democracies, which emphasise civic accountability and a system in which the alignment of official and unofficial rules is a desired ideal.

13 <https://magazyn.aktualne.cz/kultura/film/agnieszka-holland-forum-2000-politika-polsko-film-rozhovor/r-640d50c0cfc311e890eac1f6b220ee8/?redirected=1539671094> (accessed 6. 1. 2020)

I have noticed that pundits, think-tank analysts, and some scholars use the term ‘neo-feudalism’ in their descriptions of the current populist insurgence in East Central Europe.<sup>14</sup> The philosopher Ágnes Heller talks about a more precise process of ‘re-feudalisation’ characterizing Viktor Orbán’s regime. “Orbán is not Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary (1920–1944), but there is a similarity between Horthy and János Kádár, the long serving General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (1956–1988)”, she says. Heller argues that, traditionally, corruption meant that the rich pay a politician to support their economic interests. Re-feudalisation in Hungary means governing cliques create a friendly oligarchy, and it is the oligarchs who are dependent on politicians, not vice versa (for a more complex conceptualisation of “neo-feudalisation” see Kollai 2020). Heller also observes that, ‘gulash communism’ still exists, but there is one more key ingredient in the dish, and this is that Orbán understands his country and takes into account its peoples’ fears and concerns.<sup>15</sup>

All of these fragmentary stories on power and prestige and their critiques reveal the complex nature of social differentiation during the socialist era and after. What needs to be emphasized is the long history of status differentiation, with roots in the agrarian and state-socialist past and its conception of the “house” which, despite its transformation under modern circumstances, has found its way into post-socialist life. The memories of the house crucially influence the way contemporary leaders speak about security, the subject of my final section.

Mykola Mušinka (born in 1936), a distinguished Ukrainian philologist, gave an interview for a leading Slovak newspaper in 2018, where he was asked questions about his studies in Soviet Ukraine, as well as the dissident period of his life in state-socialist rural Slovakia. The following is his account of a story from his native village in North-East Slovakia:

Every evening our neighbours used to come to our house to pluck geese. They talked and I was reading or writing something under the kerosene lamp. They said: “Mykolaj, read something from what they teach you in Prešov!” [the regional academic centre, JB] I read them Pushkin and Nekrasov, but they didn’t understand. Then I read “Kateryna” by Shevtshenko [the Ukrainian national poet, JB] about how Moskal’ [the derogatory nickname for ethnic Russians, JB] raped a village girl and left her with child. I looked around and all the women were crying. They understood. The next day even more women came: “Mykolaj, read something more in our language”.<sup>16</sup>

14 <http://visegradrevue.eu/the-results-of-a-traditionalist-turn-hungarys-democratic-neo-feudalism/> (accessed 6. 1. 2020) The term ‘neo-feudalism’ might refer to the similar pattern of politics I call post-peasantism. But is important to remember that the term post-peasant populism refers also to the legacy of communist modernisation and its version of populism. The term is also used to describe a specific pattern of the state-business relations that often emerges when right-wing populists are in power (Kollai 2020).

15 <https://a2larm.cz/2018/09/agnes-heller-orban-neni-populista-ale-tyran/> (accessed 6. 1. 2020)

16 <https://dennikn.sk/1197842/ukrajinja-musinka-na-krym-som-za-socializmus-jazdil-s-rodinou-trabantom-na-dovolenky-bolo-to-skvele/?ref=mpm> (accessed April 4, 2019, translation from Slovak by the author)

Although the philologist sees this encounter via a particular ethnic lens – as he says, “because my own mother doesn’t understand me [reading in Russian, JB], but she understands Ukrainian” – there is an additional interpretation of this story. This example refers to the women’s understanding of the value and dignity of peasant life, rural (in)equality and (in)security vis-à-vis the outside world and the lord speaking a different language, all parameters essential to my conceptualization of the peasant house.

A specific form of rural violence (and for many of its perpetrators and victims just the continuation of the injustices of war) relates to collectivisation and the building of a communist utopia. The Red army was not always remembered as a liberating force among ordinary peasants. The sexually motivated killing of Anna Kolesárová in 1945 by a Red Army soldier in a village near Michalovce, Eastern Slovakia, for example, received a lot of attention in Catholic Church circles in 2018, when she was officially beatified for her supposed refusal to surrender her chastity, as she was shot by the Red Army soldier. The setting of the tragic story (there is an entire narrative about how the perpetrator asked for food in the peaceful peasant household before he committed the crime) reveals the security associated with the memory of the house.

The burning of houses, the slaughter of cattle, the stealing of grain, the desecration of sites considered sacred by villagers, vividly exemplified today by the horrors being perpetrated by Vladimir Putin’s army in Ukraine, were strategies used by authoritarian states, insurgents and marching armies to frighten agrarian producers in the past. Additionally, rural violence during World War II was commemorated in the post-socialist period. I studied this politics of commemoration in the early 2000s (Buzalka 2007). Even the commemorative dramatisations of ethnic cleansings were organised in the style of a folk festival, in territories which had been affected by rural violence, such as South-East Poland (see Pasieka 2016). Tom Nairn (1997) referred to the setting I have in mind as:

areas where “rural” tends to mean “peasant” – that is, where an historical pattern of small landholding prevails, or has until recently prevailed, marked by intense heritable rights, rigid morality or faith, customary exclusivity and an accompanying small-town or village culture. (Nairn 1997, 90)

The relative isolation of rural areas, its suitability for guerrilla warfare, the importance of land for both material and symbolic survival of peasants and perpetrators alike encouraged twentieth century violence and suffering in postsocialist countries, predominantly in rural areas. It is this predominantly rural violence that has been remembered and commemorated most by their inhabitants. Although certainly no less painful than violence in urban settings, this rural character of in/security must be considered in any viable political mobilisation today.

In February 2016, my friend Ján (50) shared on his social media page the well-known photograph of Czechoslovak president Gustáv Husák that used to hang in

every school classroom from 1975 to 1989. The photograph contained the following alleged quotation of Husák written in the peculiar “Czechoslovak” language that the Slovak-born president was known for:

So, what my children, are you doing better? Comrades, you are now not doing well. Under the leading role of the Communist Party you were doing well. All of you had everything and altogether you had nothing. But you were happy, anyway. Your G. Husák

The photograph was produced by “fans of nostalgia from Levice”, a small city in the Southwest of Slovakia, close to Ján’s home village. His parents are pensioners who still live in their large house built during the socialist conjuncture of the 1970s, and they are undoubtedly nostalgic about their previous times. Ján’s photograph, widely shared on social media especially by *Husák’s children* (the baby-boom generation who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s), nevertheless illustrates the ambivalence that people, who predominantly vote for populists, have toward memories projected onto these decades of socialism.

#### POPULISM OF THE HOUSE

The most successful leaders address their appeals to this post-peasant base, for whose members the house, an unintended product of state-socialist modernity, provides security even in postsocialist decades. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1991–2, 1992–4, and 1994–8) was frequently accused of manipulating peoples’ nostalgia for communism by his opponents. Róbert Fico, Slovakia’s longest serving Prime Minister (2006–10, 2012–18) was a former young communist and post-communist nominal social democrat, who was proud of not recalling the events of the November 1989 revolution, that swept away the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Fico’s party deputy and former Speaker of the Parliament, Pavol Paška (1958–2018) did remember the November 1989 revolution very well, because he was – in his own words – installing tiles in his flat’s bathroom.<sup>17</sup> In the opinion of the influential media and political

17 Fico gave an interview in 2000 to the Slovak magazine *Domino Forum* stating: “If I look back I do not realise that in 1989 a fundamental breakthrough happened in my life” (cited in Vagovič 2016). In the media’s opinion he remains someone “who did not notice November 1989” (see, for example, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/6605252/robert-fico-vyrocie-neznej-oslavovat-nebude.html>, accessed 28.08.2017). Although the former speaker of Parliament Pavol Paška (1958–2018) explained that his reference to putting tile contractors in November 1989 referred to the everyday skills of the inhabitants of late socialist Czechoslovakia who paid more attention to their private matters in contrast to sacrifices made by communist dissidents, this statement is perceived in the serious media as a kind of indifference about, if not blasphemy of, the fall of communism (<https://tv.sme.sk/v/30984/paska-ako-filozof-a-politolog-vysvetluje-preco-v-novembri-89-kachlickoval.html>, accessed 23.8.2017).

opponents, both of these politicians aimed to distance themselves from the 1989 Velvet Revolution's positive legacy, and signal to those from among their electorate who found themselves either disadvantaged after socialism or were directly nostalgic for state socialism that they felt negative or at least indifferent about the Velvet Revolution.

In the opinion of Fico's opponents, the victorious 2012 campaign that gave him the opportunity of forming a single party government was built upon nostalgia for the supposedly stable and socially upward late socialist years. In contrast, the "perceived" stability of late socialism was interpreted in a negative way – as a sign of the dysfunctionality of the "normalisation" period and the need to reform the state and economy – by Fico's and Mečiar's opponents.<sup>18</sup> In my opinion, however, the criticisms of the 1989 changes waged by these populist politicians were tied to what most of their voters felt nostalgically about, and it was unrelated to political ideologies of the left and right. It was the mobilisation around an economic and socio-cultural goal that always mattered most for the majority of people under socialism: informal making of "the house" by using either one's own skills or collective skills organized via social networks. It was this longing for a peoples' economy – neither socialist nor capitalist, but parallel or opposed to the impersonal economy of market reformers – that such slogans as Róbert Fico's "People Deserve Guaranties" (*Ludia si zaslúžia istoty!*) appealed to – rather tacitly, than openly – in his winning campaign.

While analysts highlight that populists tend to espouse ethno-nationalism or embrace national-populism, the most successful of post-socialist leaders have appealed skilfully to what people see as 'common sense' regarding livelihood, which is an alternative knowledge of how society operates, regardless of the political-economic regime or opinions of professional ideologues. At the centre of this knowledge, is the image and practice associated with the post-peasant house.<sup>19</sup>

In my earlier work on memory and religion in the South-East of Poland (Buzalka 2007), I defined the post-peasant condition as one inherited from pre-socialist times. Although I touched upon the rural origin of this ideology, I offered little discussion of the socio-economic conditions underlying populist appeal – direct or unintentional – created by the communist system. Many elements of social imagery and practices that evolved under the socialist 'shortage economy' laid the groundwork for the subsequent popularity of populism among some people. Many of these people came from families that enjoyed some benefits of the communist project, while managing to keeping their

18 Normalisation was used as a semi-formal (or sometimes ironic) concept to describe the period of 1969–89 (in contrast to the "abnormal" Prague Spring of 1968).

19 In her analysis of local models of agency and subjectivity in Highland Poland, Nicolette Makovicky (2018) explores the informal economic activity of *kombinowanie*, a type of socio-historically developed identity tactics of people aware of the formal functioning of the institutions but still showing their ability to manoeuvre their 'poetics of self' parallel or in opposition to formal models of economy and politics.



‘agrarian’ heritage alive and relying on it as a symbolic resource for their flourishing ‘rural’ identity, despite inhabiting state-socialist block houses in rapidly growing cities.

I believed in the early 2000s that social critique of populism was offered predominantly by Catholicism as an alternative ideology to the dominant discourses of capitalist modernity and the secular individualist civil society of the time, after socialist ideology’s discreditation (see Ost 2006) or disappearance. As the guardian of memories, national histories and moral order, institutional religion exceeded the conventionally defined ‘national populism’ centred on ethnic nationalism and illiberal politics, that were diagnosed as the primary malady of post-socialist transformation.

It turned out, however, that although religion was a source of societal tension in some regions, such as in Southeastern Poland, it also promoted a dose of tolerance (Buzalka 2006). And this civilising influence of religion often questioned populist politics with its majoritarian tendencies.<sup>20</sup> This twofold role of Catholicism – as a source of tension as well as anti-populist tolerance – made me realise that post-peasant populism has become more than merely a newly enacted ‘agrarian ideology’. In my recent work on Slovakia (Buzalka 2021a), I suggested that people’s economic practices and ideas developed under the communist modernisation project constitute a distinct cultural syndrome and should be examined more thoroughly to show how they have been transmitted and/or re-invented by contemporary populism. I have argued that it is the cultural-economic institution of the post-peasant house formed under state-socialism – the dominant unit of cultural economy providing livelihood, economic security, and a symbol of prestige – that populists mobilise today.

A cultural economic model of the populist movement must start from the dialectics of mutuality and self-interest that operate in every human economy (Gudeman 2016). A more specific political dialectic is that between progressivism (the statecraft project inspired by secular modernity), and integralism (the Counter-Enlightenment reaction to that modernity) (Holmes 2000). In cases such as Slovakia, the outcome of these multiple dialectics will depend to a significant degree on the ability of charismatic leaders to invoke the resilient agrarian features that first emerged in state-socialist modernity but rely also on symbolism of nation-building of the pre-socialist, agrarian period. A positive evaluation of the post-peasant house both as an institution providing people with a livelihood and as a symbolic representation of a good life that is always potentially available to mitigate the negative effects of the market and protect its members from the excessive intrusion of a police state, is consonant with a specific type of politics, namely, populism.

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<sup>20</sup> There were significant voices raised by imminent church representatives in 1990s Slovakia, such as Bishop Rudolf Baláž, against the politics of Vladimír Mečiar, considered to be an archetypal populist and illiberal in the context of East Central Europe.

In other words, the electoral success of populists is partially attributable to their mobilising of memory related to the post-peasant house, an institution that evolved under socialism, but far less to nostalgia for socialism itself. This memory is grounded both in peoples' informal livelihood strategies and in networks of mutual assistance prevalent under state-socialism, that have lost much of their independence under market transformation. Reminiscing about the peasant ideal of household autonomy, many people believe that under state-socialism they had more independence in securing their livelihood through the work of their own hands than under market transformations. Such views are held regardless of how well they used to live under state-socialism or how better off they have been after 1989 in absolute numbers. Formally equipped with all the hallmarks of modernity – increasing urbanisation, technical modernisation, and the development of a state welfare system – societies such as Slovakia have remained socially and culturally close to the village. I argue that nowadays populist leaders such as Róbert Fico, Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński (and Miloš Zeman in a different manner, considering the 'urban' characteristics of Czech populism), are exploiting the ideological potential of cultural economy centred on the house, in particular because this model has been ignored or discredited by more progressive forces. The question whether the existence of this popular concept of post-peasant house will be exploited in the programs of political forces other than right-wing populists (see Buzalka 2021b on progressive populism of Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová) remains open.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The main argument of this paper is that explanations of the rise of right-wing populism that rely primarily on the concept of peripheral global neoliberalism, uneven development, and the lack of civil virtues or institutional incapacity in postsocialist societies, are insufficient. It is my contention that the rise of right-wing populism in East European post-socialist politics is a distinctive phenomenon that may be called "post-peasant populism". In my view, populist protest in Eastern Europe emerges when the people whose image of themselves, their practices and ideals of livelihood is organised around the concept of post-peasant house are successfully mobilised. I conceptualized the post-peasant populism as a phenomenon that has its origins in the state-socialist modernisation of predominantly agrarian societies, and which mobilises people who trace their genealogy to ancestral rural areas.

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<sup>21</sup> For analyses of the legacies of popular emancipation in Poland as opposed to elite-led projects, see for example, Leszczyński (2020). A valuable analysis of legacies of neo-feudalism can be found in Pobłocki 2021. The peasant revolts are well-presented by Rauszer 2020.

I have endeavoured to show how the economy of the house changed during the state-socialist era, how it replaced land as the primary source of livelihood, dignity, and economic security, and how this cultural-economic institution has remained a source of certainty ever since. While continuing to be a very popular form of investment and a widely recognised symbol of prestige, the post-peasant house is an institution, whose social significance extends beyond and across dominant economic ideologies. The house, as an economic institution, an idea and representation of kinship and community, and particularly the subject of power (re)distribution and prestige, is common for all Europeans, East and West. What I have stressed in this paper, however, is that the key element of the house in the ex-socialist countries of the European Union is its post-peasant quality.

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