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Thorns in the side: Strategies of populist parties against local public administrations

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Abstract

The success of populist parties in national elections puts pressure on political leaders and their administrations, both at the central and sub-national levels. This paper explores the political tensions between two administrative levels—a central level governed by a populist party, and the city level headed by a liberal party—and the strategies populists use to challenge local political leaders and their city administrations. This paper analyzes three case studies: Prague, Warsaw, and Budapest. In all three cities, opposition candidates are visible challengers to the populist parties in government. The results show that city administrations face increasing tasks, cuts in budget transfers, higher scrutiny from central government, and administrative bottlenecks.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw met at the Central European University in Budapest to sign the “Pact of Free Cities”. They pledged to address common problems, such as migration, the environment, and housing. Above all, they made a common call to the European Union (EU) to help them combat political interference from their populist governments and safeguard these capital cities’ direct access to EU funds. In their view, central governments planned to obstruct their policies and stop the flow of funds to cities governed by the opposition, instead politically distributing these funds to the government’s cronies (Easton, 2020). In the words of Budapest’s Mayor, Gergely Karácsony, “Populism striving for hegemony cannot win over cities. Cities can be the bridgeheads from which all the current crises of democracy can be restored. This is why cities are a thorn in the side of populism” (Hopkins & Shoter, 2019).

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As democratic backsliding has advanced in EU countries, many cities have become strongholds of democratic opposition that defy their central government and are consequently perceived as a serious political threat (Ayan Musil & Yardımcı-Geyikçi, 2023). In recent years, many researchers have examined the policy effects of populist parties; fewer, however, have dealt with the impact of populist parties on public administration (Bauer & Becker, 2020), especially at the subnational level (Jakli & Stenberg, 2021; Paxton & Peace, 2020). The lack of research on the multi-level political strategies of populists is an important research gap with potentially important consequences beyond the local level. The local level carries a strategic interest for the survival of the populist project and the consolidation of power. Subordinating and disciplining subnational governments is an important strategy in democratic backsliding that has fallen under the radar of EU institutions (Jakli & Stenberg, 2021).

In the hands of the opposition, local government can become a breeding ground of resistance that showcases a political alternative and threatens the populist plan—especially in strategically important, prominent cities. Focusing on capital cities' defiance of populist governments, this article explores multi-level political tensions and populists' strategies against opposition-led subnational executive offices. Cities governed by liberal opposition parties in countries under populist rule face a unique set of pressures, as they have to provide public services under often quarreling masters.

In this article, populism is defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”. Based on this division, populists contend that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This definition is widely accepted, and is in line with contemporary research practices. This article investigates the strategies populists in central government use to challenge local city politicians and their administrations in a very visible place such as a capital city.

Populists pursue multi-level strategies to confront and target prominent opposition figures in sub-national government in their quest to “rewrite the operational manual of the state” (Bauer, 2023). Populist governments try to weaken liberal opposition by targeting local administrations and creating obstacles to cities' governance and policymaking. They target opposition-led subnational executive offices by cutting resources, overburdening them with new tasks, creating obstructions, and intensifying ad hoc oversight. In this way, they indirectly attack and hamper the programs of opposition leaders in charge of these cities.

This paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it contributes to the literature on populism that explores the multi-level tensions between populist and liberal parties in different levels of government. The multi-level perspective is still absent from the research agenda (Paxton, 2019; Paxton & Peace, 2020). Second, it explores the strategies that populist parties use against local administrations and opposition parties. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the argument and details potential populist strategies in multi-level settings. The third section deals with the empirical approach and data. The fourth section presents the results from three capital cities in Eastern Europe. The paper concludes with a discussion of the impact of populist parties on the future performance of subnational governments.

2 | POPULIST PRESSURE ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN MULTI-LEVEL SETTINGS

Two decades after populism erupted onto the European political space and settled in numerous national governments, much has been learned about the impact of these parties on party

competition, public policies like welfare, migration, and minority rights, and the quality of democracy more broadly (Afonso, 2015; Akkerman, Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016). Researchers have shown that populists strategically undermine the institutions that make up the backbones of the liberal democratic regime, causing “democratic backsliding” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). According to Bermeo (2016), populists concentrate power by executive aggrandizement and systematic harassment of the opposition. Similarly to semi-authoritarians, populists in government reduce pluralism and undermine systems of checks and balances (Canovan, 1999). Despite claiming to give voice to the people, populist parties reduce direct participation, restrict access to independent media and newspapers, and target civil society organizations (Hanley & Vachudová, 2018; Vachudová, 2020). In this way, they limit participation by possible challengers or critics.

Populists in power quickly turn their attention to public bureaucracies (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2022). In government, populist parties weaken administrative independence, impose massive firing and clientelist hiring, strengthen centralization tendencies, and curtail independent agencies (Bauer et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2020). Researchers have also shown how administrations fight back, revealing staff members’ individual coping mechanisms and means of resistance (Brodkin, 2021; Schuster et al., 2021).

Although scholars have addressed the connection between localism and populism (Pálné Kovács, 2022; Fitzgerald, 2018; Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Chou et al., 2022), less is known about how populist political strategies play out in a multi-level setting and how they impact city government. In his research on Italian, French, and Austrian municipalities, Paxton (2019, 2021) found that the strategies used by populists at the local level differ depending on which party forms the central government; the concomitant presence of a populist central government and populist mayor reinforces populist local claims.

Researchers have also shown that cities led by populists under a non-populist central government have a technocratic style of government and moderate their political claims (Drapalova & Wegrich, 2021; Paxton & Peace, 2020). Yet few have investigated what happens to cities when the incumbent and opposition swap their positions, with populists in charge of central government. O’Dwyer and Stenberg (2022) revealed how Fidesz’s council members changed local rules to gradually curtail the power of the opposition to control and propose local regulation. Ayan Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi (2023) showed how opposition-led local governments foster transnational linkages and networks to resist oppressive populist central governments.

2.1 | Multi-level pressures and populist tactics

Although subnational governments do not feature prominently in the literature on populism, the sub-national level is a strategic asset for populist parties. Regional and local governments are a source of financial revenue and a potential pool for new recruits and future candidates for high office. Parties that build a solid local support base have higher chances of surviving the next electoral cycle (Dinas & Foos, 2017). Populist leaders like Victor Orbán in Hungary have successfully managed to consolidate their power in part because they control local governments and rely on strong local grassroots. Many new populist parties are, however, relatively centralized, with weaker local party branches compared with established mass parties. This reduces their ability to identify, recruit, and develop political talent; they have relatively shallow pools to draw candidates from once they enter government, and limited control over the territory (Peters & Pierre, 2020). Therefore, controlling (large) cities and regions has become important for their political survival and consolidation.

When a subnational government is in the hands of the opposition, it can quickly become a breeding ground for political challengers and a place of resistance (Ayan Musil & Yardımcı-Geyikçi, 2023). The existence of a political challenger, even at the subnational level and especially in a very visible political position, may significantly threaten the credibility and effectiveness of the populist plan. Local opposition figures can cultivate their image as new and competent political leaders and gain visibility, showcasing alternative discourse and policy-making styles in contrast to the dominant populist discourse. These opposition leaders in capital cities can quickly become thorns in the populists' side.

Despite the limited knowledge of how different populists engage with political leaders and public administrations in a multi-level setting, the literature provides some clues. Studies have suggested that populists weaken administrative checks, centralize decision-making, and limit participation and oversight by possible challengers or critics. Bauer et al. (2021) suggested an array of possible administrative reform strategies, such as reshuffling organizational structures, cuts to staff and resources, changes to administrative norms, and accountability setting. Scholars have also associated populists in power with wide-scale patronage, politicization, and decreasing independence and expertise of administrations (Borins, 2018; Peters & Pierre, 2020). Meyer-Sahling and Toth (2020) researched the effect of Orbán's government on the hiring procedures of top civil servants and found greater politicization and staff turnover after Orbán became prime minister. These hiring practices can easily trickle down to the lower levels of government and influence administrative turnover.

Rather than directly dismantling the constitutional order and replacing local and regional elected politicians with state-appointed trustees (like in autocracies), populists in government often use indirect and covert methods to undermine bureaucratic capabilities and implement their political agenda. Populist leaders resort to these methods when "other ways to achieve illiberal change are out of reach (because they seem too time-consuming, they lack parliamentary support or majority, or they are bound by international agreements and membership in international organizations)" (Bauer, 2023, p. 6).

As populist parties tend to concentrate their power by "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo, 2016), they can be expected to centralize power vertically. They may limit the political representation of subnational governments by curtailing their autonomy, revenues, and law-making competencies (Jakli & Stenberg, 2021). Bauer et al. (2021) suggested that populists cut funds, increase ad hoc discretionary components of financing, eliminate taxes, and dismiss staff in "unruly" public institutions as a softer strategy to limit the power and independence of the public administration. Populists cut the resources required for institutional maintenance and wait until the institution decays and no longer provides services in a satisfactory manner. This drifting strategy is more powerful when local governments lack financial autonomy and depend on vertical budget transfers to finance their services.

I call the first strategy used by populist parties toward rebel local governments, "starve the enemy". Under this strategy, central government reduces the autonomy of local governments and (selectively) cuts resources, limiting the power of local governments to collect their own revenues, thereby increasing their dependence on central government. I expect that above the general centralization tendencies, populists will cut resources selectively, disproportionately targeting rebel local administrations or the opposition.

Second, populists in government are very active in enacting laws (Pirro & Stanley, 2021). Populist leaders multiply existing laws, layer new regulations on top of existing ones to increase regulatory complexity, create uncertainty, and increase discretionary rule application. Populists frequently produce new regulations that add more responsibilities and secondary tasks, forcing

administrations to comply. The second strategy, which I call “over-burden the enemy”, entails overburdening administrations with new secondary tasks and ad hoc intermediary steps. Adding new duties and responsibilities can distract rebelling institutions from their agenda, and it puts an additional burden on their already overstretched budgets. The local level is especially suitable for institutional “layering” because it is the place where government regulation is implemented. Thus, reforms and new responsibilities are added directly to their agenda.

Third, populists in government can also retaliate against local administrations by ignoring their requests or being selectively passive. Peters and Pierre (2020) and Bauer et al. (2021) identified disregarding administrations as one of three possible strategies used by populists against administrations. Populists assume that the establishment is opposed to them and intends to resist. The public bureaucracy (especially in a capital city) is very clearly part of the establishment, and therefore a natural target for rejection and avoidance by populist politicians. By denying and stalling opposition requests, populist leaders pre-empt possible counter-strategies, neutralize resistance, and slow the opposition's political agenda.

The third strategy consists of “putting spokes in the wheels” of administrations by ignoring opposition government requests, slowing down standard procedures, keeping important administrative positions unfilled, taking time, and delaying procedures. This strategy, which I call “obstructionism”, generates administrative bottlenecks to slow the implementation of the challenger's political agenda. This strategy is especially useful in creating an image of an “incompetent opposition” before they can take their chance at running the central government (Mazur, 2021).

Fourth, with populist leaders in power, political-administrative relationships are expected to be plagued by conflict and distrust. Populists frequently “cleanse” administrations along ideological lines, offering patronage and securing de facto control of strategic positions (Bauer, 2023). Populist politicians at the central level might have little confidence in local civil servants' willingness and ability to implement policies or provide populist leaders with supporting information (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010), particularly when a local administration is headed by an opposition mayor. A growing number of articles have identified the counter-strategies public administrations adopt to challenge the new order, such as sabotage, transnational bypassing, and selective implementation (Brodtkin, 2021; Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2022; Schuster et al., 2021).

To pre-empt this administrative boycott, populists in government can engage in “ad-hoc accountability and naming and shaming” of a local government for its policy defeats. Populists are direct communicators, unafraid of confrontation and emotion-charged communication. They frequently use social media and alternative media channels to criticize the opposition. One communication strategy that populists use is to hold the opposition to higher standards, increasing scrutiny and efficiency demands while capitalizing on the opposition's integrity problems. Traditional opposition parties, especially the programmatic parties, compete with populists by offering voters greater expertise and better performance and policy results within their party and electoral programs. Populists tend to take advantage of these electoral programs and proclamations and highlight their failures and delays in implementation to discredit the opposition. They are also likely to highlight any sign of moral weakness, such as corruption.

3 | EMPIRICAL APPROACH

This article engages in a comparative subnational case study featuring three capital cities in three Eastern European countries that have experienced democratic backsliding. Prague, Warsaw,

and Budapest are located in countries with populist governments where opposition candidates have won recent local elections. I selected opposition-governed capital cities as they combine several factors that make them the most visible thorns in the populists' side. As capital cities, their mayors are prominent political figures and likely challengers to the central government in future electoral contests. Capital cities are often the economic centers of a country, headquarters of important companies, and sources of a substantial share of GDP. They are also administrative centers, employing a high number of civil servants who make important decisions. Capital cities are places where local and national governments physically cohabit and where the educated, well-off, and multi-cultural population (and elite) often reside.

These cities also share a similar national and local political context. They are all situated in the Eastern European "V4" countries which have experienced democratic backsliding and populist governments (Hanley & Vachudová, 2018). They held local elections roughly at the same time (the Czech Republic and Poland in 2018, and Hungary in 2019) and their capital cities are led by liberal opposition challengers. Despite being made up of different parties and coalitions, these local parties share a similar liberal lure, strong anti-populist rhetoric, and a pro-environmental agenda. They all have the environment, transportation, pro-LGBTQ rights, and anti-corruption as their policy priorities; their leaders are middle-aged, well-educated men.

In 2019, the cities' mayors signed a resolution agreeing to cooperate and actively resist their populist central governments. Local administrations in these three countries are characterized by strong politicization, patronage, political influence, and poor job security, making administrations vulnerable to political influence (Hanley & Vachudová, 2018). Given the institutional instability and high degree of clientelism in these administrations, political leadership has an important effect on the performance and direction of public administration.

However, the cities have a few important differences. Studies suggest that the degree of political autonomy and institutional differences, such as the mode of election and political strength of the mayor, might influence the strategic interest that local government plays for the central party (Jakli & Stenberg, 2021; Paxton, 2021). Directly elected mayors (especially in a single-round system) will have higher visibility and larger personal electoral support, and are therefore potentially more threatening. Poland is significantly more decentralized, and Polish local governments enjoy more autonomy than cities in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Mayors in Poland and Hungary¹ are directly elected, whereas in the Czech Republic the local mayor is elected by the majority of the council.

These populist parties are also from different party families. The governing parties in Poland and Hungary belong to the populist radical right; Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) in the Czech Republic is a centrist technocratic-populist party (Drapalova & Wegrich, 2021). The different ideologies might impact their choice of strategies or the intensity with which these are applied. Finally, populist parties show different degrees of political consolidation and vertical integration. Fidesz is the most consolidated, with a strong network of local branches. ANO in Czechia is the weakest, with the most top-down organization. PiS in Poland sits in the middle. For less consolidated and decentralized parties, specific cities might have higher strategic importance (Paxton, 2021).

The empirical material used in this study comes from a systematic collection of scientific publications and policy reports from the last 10 years. I undertook three sequential steps to analyze the data and test the theoretical expectations. First, I searched for all relevant material on the strategies and policies of populist parties toward the opposition and public administration at national and subnational levels. The material was collected by sampling the most relevant works (journal articles, books, book chapters, and policy reports) on populist governments'

strategies, using the Web of Science. This initial screening revealed 319 studies on populist strategies in government and 12 on public administration. After the initial screening of the literature, I derived a set of theoretical expectations that were subsequently checked in the empirical section on the three case studies. Given the influential nature and small number of these cases, this study cannot be considered a hard test of the theory nor claim external validity.

Second, I narrowed the literature search to gather more material on the three chosen cases. The search revealed 53 studies. With the additional material, I investigated populist strategies toward opposition leaders and subnational administrations in the three capital cities. I also noted references to specific people, events, and laws that illustrate the four strategies. Third, I complemented the search with reports and articles from international, national, and local newspapers. I searched within the main general-interest newspapers in all three countries and relevant local media: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Warsaw Voice*, and *Metro* (Poland), *Lidové noviny*, *Hospodářské noviny* and its online news site *Aktuálně.cz*, and *Metro* (the Czech Republic), and *24.hu* and the pro-government *About Hungary* (Hungary). The newspaper analysis spanned the period from January 2018 to January 2022. I analyzed the material searching for evidence to confirm or disprove proposed strategies or show any additional strategy employed.

4 | THREE HOT SPOTS OF RESISTANCE: PRAGUE, WARSAW, AND BUDAPEST

Opposition parties have gained momentum at the local level in all three countries. In 2018 PiS suffered a significant setback in the country's mayoral elections, losing in the 10 largest cities and in many mid-sized and smaller cities in Poland. In Hungary, the ruling Fidesz party also suffered a blow in the 2019 local elections, losing in Budapest. Despite Fidesz's strong grip on power in small towns and villages, candidates from the opposition alliance won in 10 of the 23 largest Hungarian cities. This is a steep improvement, as the opposition previously only held three large cities. Nevertheless, like PiS in Poland, Fidesz still dominates all county governments. In the Czech Republic, despite its recent history and very top-down structure, ANO quickly won representation in 13 county capitals. However, its progress stalled in the 2018 elections; despite leading seven county capitals, ANO lost the two largest cities, Prague and Brno.

4.1 | Pirate Party in Prague

After its foundation in 2011, ANO quickly became the strongest populist party in the Czech Republic. ANO was founded by Andrej Babiš, a Slovak millionaire and owner of a large conglomerate active in the agricultural, food, and print media sectors. The party dominated Czech politics with Andrej Babiš as prime minister from 2017 until 2021, when the right-wing and liberal parties formed a coalition to dethrone him. ANO's brand of populism is classified as centrist or technocratic (Bustikova & Guasti, 2018). This type of populism tends to focus more on output legitimacy, performance, and technocratic management (Drapalova & Wegrich, 2021).

In November 2018, an independent candidate on the Pirate Party ballot, Zdeněk Hřib, was elected mayor of Prague, replacing former mayor Adriana Krnáčová of the governing populist party ANO. He won 39 of 65 seats in the Prague City Council and formed a coalition government with two other parties (TOP and Praha Sobě).² The Pirate Party presents itself as a liberal anti-establishment party that promotes transparency and the wider use of technology in public

administration and state institutions (Havlik, 2019; Naxera, 2021). The Pirate Party's agenda for Prague emphasized integrity, a green economy, cost efficiency, and a digital upgrade of the city administration, to offer a glimpse of the modern administration that the Pirate Party wanted to implement at the national level. Since the Pirate Party took over in Prague, conflict has flared up between ANO in central government and Prague's local government.

4.2 | Rafał Kazimierz Trzaskowski in Warsaw

The Law and Justice Party (PiS) won the 2015 Polish elections and embarked on a route inspired by Hungary (Pirro & Stanley, 2021, p. 92). The PiS government (2015–2019) launched a series of changes to undermine the constitutional structure, the power and autonomy of institutions, and the rights and freedoms of individuals and social groups (Guasti, 2020; Hanley & Vachudová, 2018). PiS continued to undermine the existing constitution by capturing the Constitutional Tribunal and implementing judiciary reform (Bill & Stanley, 2020). However, despite PiS's consolidation of power, in 2018 the opposition politician Rafał Trzaskowski—representing Civic Platform and the Modern Political Party—won the mayoral election in Warsaw with 56.67% of the votes, defeating the Law and Justice candidate (PiS).

In direct opposition to the central government, Trzaskowski promoted liberal and environmentally-friendly policies, strengthened the rule of law, and supported minorities. During his mayoral term, Trzaskowski positioned himself against the conservative Law and Justice central government. Trzaskowski introduced a free nursery program and invested in public transport. He also openly supported the LGBTQ community against discrimination and suggested the introduction of anti-discrimination and sex education in city schools (Easton, 2020). In 2020, he ran as the main opposition candidate for the presidential election, challenging former president Duda (PiS) and only losing by a narrow margin.

4.3 | Gergely Szilveszter Karácsony in Budapest

Hungary has been described as a paradigm of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe (Hajnal, 2021; Vachudová, 2020). Since the election of Victor Orbán and Fidesz in 2010, the quality of democracy has continuously declined according to most available indicators of democracy (Pálné Kovács, 2022). The Fidesz government has used its super-majority to implement far-reaching legislative change and an anti-liberal political agenda. In 2012 the Fundamental Law came into force, formally replacing the 1949 Constitution (Pirro & Stanley, 2021, p. 91). In the 2014 and 2018 general elections, the party continued to consolidate its grip over Hungary (Pirro & Stanley, 2021). Fidesz suspended institutions that could check its power, especially the independent judiciary (Meyer-Sahling & Toth, 2020). Orbán also systematically concentrated power vertically, limiting the autonomy of regions and cities (O'Dwyer & Stenberg, 2022).

Despite the overall success of Orbán's strategy, in 2019 the Hungarian capital city came under the control of the political opposition. The previously fragmented opposition united to support Gergely Szilveszter Karácsony, a political scientist and politician. Karácsony won and became mayor of Budapest with 50.86% of the votes, defeating the incumbent Lord Mayor István Tarlós who was supported by the ruling coalition Fidesz–KDNP. Since taking office, he has openly challenged decisions taken by central government. He opposed the opening of the Chinese Fudan University in Budapest, which the central government supported (Walker, 2019).

Following Karácsony's initiative, the four mayors of the V4 capital cities signed the "Pact of Free Cities", which made them the main figures opposing democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe. In May 2021, six opposition parties formed a coalition against Fidesz for the 2022 national elections, with Karácsony as their prime ministerial candidate. Although Karácsony lost, this was the most visible challenge to Orbán, his power, and his leadership seen so far.

4.4 | Subnational populist strategies against opposition

4.4.1 | Starving the "enemy"

The three populist governments tried (with more or less success) to centralize and strengthen top-down command and control and cut administrative budgets to subdue independent parts of administration. The COVID-19 pandemic was used as a convenient pretext to further populists' reforms and consolidate control over subnational politics (Bohle et al., 2022; Stenberg et al., 2022).

Early on, Andrej Babiš showed a preference for greater centralization. He planned to abolish the Senate and regional governments, establishing instead a direct election of mayors following the example of Poland and Hungary (Babiš, 2017). Following their electoral victory, the PiS and Fidesz governments began to encroach on local autonomy and recentralize the country's political system (Baro Riba & Mangin, 2019; Medve-Balint & Bohle, 2022). Since then, Polish and Hungarian cities have lost many competences, resources, and revenues to the central level (Bohle et al., 2022; Mazur, 2021). Fidesz changed the local electoral system to single-round direct elections that favored the incumbents. Central government also pushed Fidesz-led city councils to change their regulations to reduce administrative oversight and limit electoral competition (Jakli & Stenberg, 2021). Most importantly, they selectively withdrew resources to starve opposition-led city governments (Rajca, 2020).

The ANO central government threatened to cut financial resources to Prague. Mayor Hřib frequently complained that Prague received less funding for public infrastructure than the much smaller city of Brno, and the central government's lack of funds for projects in Prague was a frequent point of conflict between the city's government and the prime minister. After a heated encounter, in which the prime minister and mayor failed to agree on an exchange of properties owned by the state and the local administration, Mayor Hřib declared: "The prime minister told me that Prague would receive nothing at all from the state" (Fendrych, 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, PiS continued its strategy of cutting resources and reducing the autonomy of local governments. The central government enacted the "Polish Deal" (Polski Ład) to mitigate the costs of the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of the deal was a plan to amend numerous tax laws. However, the deal also shifted economic losses to the large cities, cutting their budgets. This amendment limited resources for Warsaw, Krakow, and other large cities governed by the opposition (Dimitrova, 2021). Trzaskowski was strongly critical of the PiS attack on municipal autonomy. He complained that local governments were treated as the enemy; "This government dislikes everything that's independent. It started with the measures taken against the judiciary and the public sector. Now we (the cities) are the target" (Szymanski, 2019). Trzaskowski pointed to the disadvantages for his municipality: "We receive less and less funding from tax revenue... On top of that, they're trying to restrict our ability to pursue our own policies" (Szymanski, 2019).

Fidesz in Hungary has also restricted the financial autonomy of municipalities, bringing them under greater central control and limiting their ability to showcase their competence during the health crisis. At the same time, the principal element of the Fidesz government's blackmail

strategy was the threat to significantly reduce resources and the government's financial support to opposition municipalities (Ayan Musil & Yardımcı-Geyikçi, 2023; Szalai, 2020). The reforms disproportionately targeted larger cities where the opposition was more successful; among these, the Hungarian capital came first on the list. This was announced very clearly by Gergely Gulyás, who ran the Office of the Prime Minister and said that if the opposition won in Budapest, the Government would terminate an important agreement with the municipality (worth more than EUR 3 million to the capital).

Moreover, early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, the central government took part of the vehicle registration tax and suspended tourist tax and parking fees, important revenues for larger cities; Budapest sources almost 6.5% of its revenues from parking and tourist taxes. The government took local business taxes from the larger municipalities (under opposition rule) to cover the costs of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic (Stenberg et al., 2022).

Wealthier and larger municipalities were also subject to solidarity tax to compensate poorer and smaller towns, even though they had also been targeted by previous reforms (Medve-Balint & Bohle, 2022). Local business taxes for small and medium-sized enterprises were halved by decree, again hitting the budgets of larger and wealthier cities. While the central government partly compensated small cities for economic losses, larger cities had to apply for subsidies, left to the central government's discretion. As local business taxes are an important source of local revenues (Ayan Musil & Yardımcı-Geyikçi, 2023), these decisions made by central government posed a risk to the sustainability of local services.

The Mayor of Budapest described the state's policy of financial recentralization carried out by the state as "plunder to the detriment of local authorities... a risk of economic asphyxiation for the future" (Council of Europe, 2021). He also complained that the restrictions on local taxation had left the city 40% below its budgeted income (Kester, 2021; Szalai, 2020). This opinion was shared by several independent and opposition mayors, who issued a joint statement criticizing the government's policies (Stenberg et al., 2022).

4.4.2 | Overburden the enemy: Multiplication of tasks and procedures

As misfortunes never come alone, the reduction of available resources is frequently combined with the addition of new tasks to municipal agendas to overburden political challengers' local governments. Trzaskowski summarized this combination in the case of his municipality: "We receive less and less funding from tax revenue, and we're being burdened with additional tasks and costs, for example, the reform of the school system" (Szymanski, 2019). Reports show that Polish state authorities have interfered with local independent functions and undermined the assignment of full and exclusive powers to local authorities (Baro Riba & Mangin, 2019).

Several mayors of large cities also complained that the central government transferred several minor but costly responsibilities to local authorities in the areas of education, healthcare, and roadbuilding, without providing adequate, additional financial resources, forcing cities to run larger deficits (Bohle et al., 2022). This is especially true in places where the opposition holds power. At the same time, Warsaw, like other local authorities, gradually lost discretion in the exercising of its delegated functions due to detailed state regulation. In several of the regulations, the central government imposed rigid organizational solutions on local authorities. This rigidity undermines cities' power to decide how to best organize their service delivery, increasing central government control (Rajca, 2020).

Karácsony also declared that the Orbán government had used the COVID-19 pandemic to cut resources to cities and overburden them with new tasks. "From the start of the pandemic,

Hungarian cities had to take on new tasks while seeing their funding reduced” (Kester, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, municipalities were ordered to freeze prices for public services and were also allotted additional tasks to handle during the health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the tasks large cities like Prague had to perform, but there were no clues to link these tasks to central government populists’ strategies.

4.4.3 | Putting spokes in the “enemy’s” wheels

The third strategy employed by populists against liberal opposition is deliberate obstructionism, creating administrative bottlenecks, and stalling ordinary administrative procedures. Prague’s administration faced obstructions and deliberate delays (Heller, 2020). According to the mayor, the central government blocked construction of the Prague ring road despite several years of planning. Babiš made its construction conditional on the building of a ministerial and government office district in one of Prague’s neighborhoods, a project that the Pirate Party fiercely opposed. According to one of the council members, the same obstructionist stance was also adopted by state civil servants, mostly from the Office for Representation of the State in Property Matters (ÚZSVM). City Councilor Jan Chabr (TOP09) declared to the media: “Politics got unnecessarily in the way of the discussion about the exchange (of property between state and the city), which blocked the negotiations and made relations noticeably colder” (Heller, 2020).

According to Chabr, the administrative stalling was primarily caused by heated relations and political conflict between the mayor of Prague and the prime minister of the Czech Republic. He added that dealing with state officials became much more difficult after the conflict began between the two politicians. He gave examples of state officials purposely delaying and thwarting even the most ordinary procedures: “For example, we have been waiting for 3 months for approval of the contract to purchase the tennis courts at Letná. This is not normal... The fact that Babiš is now prime minister does not mean that Prague should remain cut off from any dealings with the state for years” (Heller, 2020).

The Polish central government also engaged in obstructionism and excessive regulation and fiercely criticized Warsaw’s progressive policies (Rajca, 2020). In Hungary, the City Council was stonewalled in its attempt to coordinate with the government. Karácsony told the foreign press in 2021 that “after being elected mayor of Budapest, I did my best to create a partnership with the government, despite our political differences, but this proved unsuccessful. In the wake of the pandemic and associated economic problems, it became clear that the government considers us to be competitors and not partners” (Kester, 2021).

4.4.4 | Blame and ad hoc scrutiny

The central governments of the Czech Republic and Hungary openly challenged the two mayors’ capability to govern, invoking comparisons between the capital city and the central government. Mayor Hřib in Prague was accused of being unable to efficiently organize public services and navigate the pandemic. Orbán portrayed the mayor of Budapest as a naïve theorist incapable of delivering on his agenda. In Warsaw, the central government used the framing of identity and values by portraying Trzaskowski as a supporter of the Jewish lobby and foreign capital.

Leaders of large Polish municipalities also complained that the supervision of local authorities by government representatives was applied selectively and overused against opposition cities

(Baro Riba & Mangin, 2019; Rajca, 2020). The proposal to introduce sex education in schools was criticized by the Minister of National Education, Dariusz Piontkowski, who described it as “an attempt to sexualize children by force” (Easton, 2020).

After announcing that he would be running for presidency and openly challenging former president Duda, Trzaskowski faced fierce negative campaigns and attacks from the governing party and national media. These attacks did not target his performance as mayor of Warsaw, but his morals and values. As mayor of Warsaw, Trzaskowski had supported LGBTQ rights, a position that the governing party also seized upon to depict him as a threat to the traditional family model in this predominantly Catholic country.

Babiš frequently criticized Prague's mayor on Twitter and in his online streaming program, *Čau lidi!* (Hi people!), even for minor problems such as full rubbish bins, poor webpage design, or the cost of public transportation tickets. A photo of an overflowing trash bin in Prague's city center appeared on the prime minister's Facebook and Twitter profiles with the comment, “Mr Mayor, could you arrange for garbage collection, thank you” (Lidovky.cz, 2017). He also criticized the mayor for increasing the price of public transport tickets, though most Czech cities had been forced to increase prices in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (echo.cz, 2021). “Our dear Pirates [Pirate Party] have raised the price of our transportation tickets in Prague” said Andrej Babiš as he opened his Sunday show *Čau lidi!* adding, “I don't get it, Prague has so much money, but they're making everything more expensive. So, remember this well, how the Pirates manage Prague. And this is how they will do it in government—a complete disaster” (echo.cz, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also provided an opportunity for the two parties to sharpen their knives. Despite the government's disastrous management of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant the country had the highest mortality rates in the EU, the prime minister openly blamed the higher rate of incidences of COVID-19 in Prague on the lack of administrative planning, effective policy-making, and discipline of the citizens of Prague. He added that Prague had spoiled Christmas for the rest of the country. During the pandemic, Babiš criticized the operation of the city's public transportation, saying that Prague had not increased its public transportation capacity to avoid contagion and “people are crowded into trams like sardines” (irozhlas.cz, 2020). To question the Pirates' proclaimed integrity and dedication to fighting corruption, ANO frequently criticized the city government's spending.

Orbán also tried to discredit Karácsony as unfit to rule a city administration, holding him responsible for the high number of deaths in the city's nursing homes. Orbán attacked Karácsony in a radio interview and portrayed the mayor of Budapest as a theorist who freerides on the hard work of others: “here is another example. The family is slaughtering a pig, but this is the type of man who arrives only at dinnertime. These theoretical folks write excellent studies, and I'm sure the Lord mayor will write excellent research about the infections at the nursing home on Pesti Street. There is no doubt about that, but meanwhile, more than 40 people have died” (miniszterelnok.hu, 2020).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper examines the strategies introduced by populists in central government toward local political leaders, specifically liberal mayors of capital cities. I argued that as they perceive these mayors to be challengers, populists try to sabotage subnational governments that might challenge them, and hamper the performance of local administrations. I presented evidence of four of the populists' strategies: depriving the “enemy” of necessary financial resources,

overburdening the administration with new secondary tasks, creating administrative bottlenecks and obstructions, and increasing ad hoc scrutiny.

I identified various combinations of all of these strategies in the three cities. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, populist governments cut or selectively withdrew resources from local governments. In Budapest and Prague, the central governments created administrative bottlenecks, while in Warsaw and Budapest they imposed additional tasks on the capital cities because they were governed by opposition parties. The central governments also tried to discredit local governments' performance in public.

However, there are also visible differences in the strategies deployed, stemming from the varying ideological positions of populist parties and the degree of populist party nationalization and consolidation. Under the umbrella concept of populism, there are political projects that differ in terms of their political objectives, targets, and positions regarding the role of the state. The approaches populists adopt toward the bureaucracy depend on their specific underlying ideologies (Hunger & Paxton, 2022). While the technocratic ANO targeted Prague's administrative performance and management skills, the radical right-wing populist parties PiS and Fidesz also framed their attack on the opposition in anti-elite, cultural, and moral terms.

The populist party's entrenchment and party nationalization also play a role in the dominant strategy and the aggressivity with which strategies are deployed. The more populist parties have consolidated power, the more shamelessly they have acted and interfered with local government autonomy and actions. In comparison, more recently established and top-down parties like ANO have focused more on small but "noisy" interventions that did not require far-fetched institutional change but had immediate results. Finally, contrary to what might be expected, local autonomy, institutional differences (such as the type of mayoral election), and local electoral systems played a minor role in the selection of strategies. Whether mayors are directly or indirectly elected, leaders of capital cities are more politically visible figures than other local politicians and mayors. This political visibility, institutional importance, and political ambition make opposition or disloyal mayors in capital cities important political challengers, and thus excellent targets.

This article offers a new perspective on democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe, with a comparative consideration of multi-level relations between populists and the opposition. By investigating how a populist government deploys its strategies in a multilevel setting, this study contributes to the literature on the growing influence of populist parties in democratic societies and adds another channel of backsliding. Populists pursue subnational strategies to build a solid local support base and gain better access to financial revenues for the next electoral cycle. They also attempt to control local governments to uproot and neutralize political challengers and undermine pluralism. Subordinating and harassing subnational governments is therefore another channel of democratic backsliding.

Although these tactics are primarily aimed at the political opposition at the subnational level, they have non-trivial consequences for public administration and the political system. Stalling, starving, and overburdening are negative strategies; they disrupt and compromise the rationality of the administrative system and are unlikely to lead to the creation of any kinds of coherent policy models or alternatives (Bauer, 2023). They enfeeble the administration so that it is not able to uphold prior policy standards, and disrupt the administrative processes. Decreasing administrative performance at the local level has negative consequences for citizens' trust in the political system, which plays to the advantage of populists and their supporting coalition. Moreover, these negative strategies might be more damaging than the favoritism and "pork barrel politics" practiced by traditional parties, as it is harder to dismantle them and restore the rational administrative order.

Unfortunately, the scope conditions of the article remain limited. The methodology employed in this article does not allow for a systematic study of whether these strategies are unique to these opposition-led cities or can be applied to local governments in general. Also, as the study focused on right-wing and centrist-technocratic populist parties, it remains an open question whether left-leaning populist parties also employ similar strategies. These questions are important for understanding these multi-level dynamics and are a potential avenue for future research.

The findings also relate to the literature on subnational governance. The populists' strategy of forcing centralization and undermining local governments is detrimental and could reverse the gains in local autonomy and democratization that have been achieved in the region since the 1990s. Moreover, the erosion of subnational democracy is frequently missed by international observers and watchdogs.

Finally, these multilevel political tensions have significant repercussions for national politics. Growing populist support among rural and peripheral populations fuels the differences between the center and the margins, increasing polarization (Fitzgerald, 2018). Increasing polarization could have serious policy consequences and lead to policy bottlenecks, protests, and ineffective policy-making. It creates friction and tensions in the interactions between central governments, capital cities, and other prominent urban centers with an educated population that do not share the same values as the central government and its supporting voter base. The recent political defeats that populist parties have suffered in large urban areas point exactly in this direction.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ENDNOTES

¹ In Hungary, local elections take place in a single round with a simple majority required to win. Poland uses a two-round system if no mayoral candidate obtains an absolute majority in the first round.

² The Pirate Party has been part of the central government coalition since 2022. In 2022, the Pirate Party came third in the local elections in Prague and Zdeněk Hřib stepped down as mayor, but he has continued as a councillor responsible for transportation (with a very notable portfolio).

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