

Flaunting of the »High« Popular Music, Taste and Populism in Hungary

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Abstract: Hungary and the post-2010 Fidesz-led governments are often cited as an emblematic case in the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, or even globally. In our chapter, we build on a sociocultural theoretical approach to populism (Ostiguy 2017; Westheuser 2020) in order to analyse the example of the popular musician Ákos in Hungary, focusing on particular aspects of his career in relation to the respective political context, as well as on his performances, public persona, and communication with his audience. We argue that Ákos's music, performances, and public persona contribute to the spreading and affective embedding of certain hegemonic populist discourses in Hungarian society. At the same time, instead of addressing "the people" through low cultural markers and promising emancipation, as described in Ostiguy's sociocultural approach to populism, his performances and public persona aim "higher" in the social and cultural hierarchy. The dominant cultural markers he performs can be considered to be aligned with the government's class and gender politics, which are aimed at the creation of a loyal "national bourgeoisie" (Éber et al. 2019; Scheiring 2021) and favouring an imagined middle class. This finding also points towards the limitations of the populism approach which is frequently used to describe the relation between politics and popular culture in post-2010 Hungary.

1. Introduction

On 7 April 2018, the evening before the Fidesz Party's third supermajority win at the elections, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán checked in via his social media profile. The footage showed him arriving at the MŰPA [Palace of Arts], an important cultural venue in Budapest, accompanied by family members, and making the following speech: "Countdown: 24 hours left until the elections, but this is still Saturday night. MŰPA, Spring Festival, Ákos 50 [50th birthday] con-

cert. Ákos, I wish you a happy birthday, may God bless you! Go Ákos, go, Hungarians!”¹

The artist named in the speech, singer and songwriter Ákos Kovács, whose solo act goes by the name Ákos, is among the best-known Hungarian artists nationally. Four years later, on 22 January 2022, less than three months before Fidesz’s fourth supermajority win, Orbán posted another photograph with the artist on his social media profile as part of the election campaign. In the photo, Orbán and Kovács greet each other with a quick handshake at the door of the artist’s backstage dressing room before his Budapest Arena concert. The post was shared with the motto “Induljon a banzáj” [Start the Banzai], which referenced a 1989 album and song title by Ákos’s first band, Bonanza Banzai, a major hit back then.² In this way, it was possible to combine political mobilisation with the show’s kick-off, a feeling of nostalgia as well as the fervour of the 1989/1990 regime change.

The two social media posts raise two questions regarding the relation between popular music and populism: how does popular music, often viewed as apolitical, become politicised, and what relations may be identified between political discourse on the one hand, and taste and style enacted through musical performances on the other? Previous scholarly literature (e.g. Street 2007; Feischmidt and Pulay 2016; Caruso 2020) tends to emphasise that popular artists may serve populist leaders by mobilising new audiences. In addition, however, we want to show that popular artists are capable of creating or strengthening connections between populist discourses and certain habituses, styles, and tastes, which can be viewed as corresponding to social classes, and that these connections lie beyond the will and agency of political leaders. As we will demonstrate with the example of Ákos, popular music artists may provide a deeper affective embeddedness for political messages through their performing certain styles and tastes, as well as through their career moves and their political and social positioning.

In international media (e.g. *BBC News* 2019) as well as in scholarly literature, Hungary and the post-2010 Fidesz Party-led governments are often cited as an emblematic case in the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, or even globally. The mainstreaming of right-wing populism was initially, in the 2000s,

1 The post can be accessed at: <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/videos/10156106698091093/>

2 An English-language translation of the lyrics of “Induljon a banzáj” is available under the following link: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/5687/bonanza-banzai/cmon-start-the-banzai-induljon-a-banzaj-zeneszoveg.html, accessed 31 July, 2022. The Japanese exclamation is used in this context to refer to getting the party – the mayhem – started.

linked to the political success of the Jobbik party (e.g. Pirro 2015), while more recently it has become a regular term applied to the Orbán regime (e.g. Müller 2016; Brubaker 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2016). We draw on a sociocultural approach to populism (Ostiguy 2009; 2017; Westheuser 2020) in order to analyse the case of Ákos in Hungary, focusing on particular aspects of his career in relation to the political context. His performances, public persona, and communication with his audience are also critically examined. Our analysis is based on field work conducted at a live performance (a pre-Christmas show at the László Papp Budapest Aréna) in 2019 and on online performances during the Covid-19 lockdown period in 2020, when Ákos engaged in a series of interactive live-streamed gigs; furthermore, Ákos's media appearances (e.g. interviews or television portraits) during the given time period (between 2010 and 2021) are considered and evaluated.³ The analysis demonstrates that, despite the high frequency of references to Hungary as a prime example of right-wing populism, the framework of populism in itself is insufficient, and not entirely unproblematic, for describing the work of government-aligned popular artists in the post-2010 context, or for describing the politics of the post-2010 Fidesz governments. While Ákos's music, performances, and public persona undoubtedly contribute, as we show, to the spreading, interpreting, and affective embedding of certain hegemonic populist discourses, we also argue that, instead of addressing "the people" through appropriately low cultural markers and promising emancipation, as described in Ostiguy's and others' (2009; 2017; Ostiguy et al. 2021) sociocultural approach, his performances and public persona aim higher in the social and cultural hierarchy. The post-2010 Orbán regime has significantly transformed social institutions and social structure, creating, as we explain below, the structural as well as symbolic basis of a new middle class. In ideological and cultural terms, this imagined middle class is characterized by fixed (heterosexual) gender roles, Christian values, conservatism, and patriotism. The regime has also designated specific directions in cultural production – especially in the fields of literature, visual arts, and theatre – through its cultural policy and institutions (Barna et al. 2019) and centralized media. We ar-

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- 3 These formed part of research within a broader international research project addressing the relationship between popular music and the mainstreaming of populism in Europe, entitled "Popular Music and the Rise of Populism in Europe", Volkswagen Stiftung (ref. 94754). As part of this research, we also conducted group analysis of songs, including Ákos's "Hazatalál" ("Finding Home") (2019), as well as focus group research conducted in eight Hungarian towns, which aimed at studying tastes, habits and attitudes regarding music in general, and the connections between music and politics, among people between 30 and 50, varying from lower- to upper-middle class backgrounds.

gue that the dominant cultural markers – taste, style, habitus (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; 1977; 1993) – performed by Ákos can be considered as aligned with the government’s class politics, which aims at the establishment and strengthening of a loyal “national bourgeoisie” (Éber et al. 2019; Scheiring 2021) and favouring an imagined middle class, rather the working or lower classes.

2. Populism, Taste and Class

In what he defines as a socio-cultural approach to populism, Pierre Ostiguy (2009; 2017) emphasises that populist leaders strive to create a particular *rapport*, which is based on the culturally “low”: “With their performative emphasis on closeness,” Ostiguy argues, “populists concretely perform – in an antagonistic way – a *representation* (‘acting’) of the representation (‘portrayal’) of the people ‘as is’” (Ostiguy 2017, 74). Through performative practices, ranging “from political speeches to transgressive low cultural performances” (Ostiguy et al. 2021, 2), populist leaders seek a “close” (direct) and affectual relationship with their public, during which they politicise the symbols of this affectual relationship and its aesthetic, behavioural or habitual components. Examples mentioned by Ostiguy include behaviour that is regarded as unusual for a politician, such as wearing casual clothes, eating simple food associated with the “people” such as hot dogs, and engaging in direct, crude or sexist gestures and similar language, performing a particular kind of powerful and bold masculinity by demonstrating that they have “balls” (e.g. in the face of a political opponent). In other words, he identifies the use of codes associated with the lower social classes, the “culturally popular”, which he calls “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy 2017), as part of a populist politics that transgresses the formal codes of the dominant political system. In political performances such as speeches, gestures or public appearances, socio-cultural markers embody an affective community and a social closeness between the “leader of the people” and “the people” that transcends the boundaries of social class. The socio-cultural approach to populism is based to a significant extent on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984 [1979]) theory of taste – as well as Norbert Elias’ (1982 [1939]) work on “the civilizing process” – in the sense that the political leader posing as a representative of the people also becomes a legitimising actor with the power to define what is authentic to the people and what is not. For this reason, taste, as social distinction, is a particularly important tool for populists. Popular music can play a part in this in at least two ways: in community building, through affective engagement, identification and the construction of a shared social reality through stylistic elements; and more directly, in the spreading of populist discourses (e.g. through song lyrics) and the

embedding of these in social, cultural, and historical continuities (e.g. through genre conventions).

Ostiguy's approach is primarily grounded in the spreading of (primarily left-wing) populism in Latin America – even though his conceptualisation refers to “populism” in general, politically left *and* right – which addresses the lower social classes with a promise of emancipation (e.g. “the biting insults of Hugo Chávez, or the mischievous escapades of Carlos Menem, can be appreciatively received in certain parts of a society” [Ostiguy 2017, 76]). In contemporary semi-peripheral Europe, however, examples of the addressing of a middle class that the political actor intends to strengthen, while not addressing the interests and demands of the lower classes, seem to be more common; this can, for instance, be seen in the anti-corruption populist movement in Romania (Kiss and Székely 2021). We argue that the populist discourses propagated by Fidesz are also primarily aimed at the creation and representation of a middle class, performing cultural markers that signal a “legitimate” culture, which may be identified as middle-class taste. This corresponds to a systematic transformation in social policy by the post-2010 Fidesz governments, manifest in the redistribution of welfare allowances in a way that favours middle-class families, while simultaneously subjugating the lower classes and various specific groups not favoured by the regime (Éber et al. 2019, 29): “Ideological campaigns against women's rights, Roma, migrants, and the homeless were paired with conciliatory messages praising honest work and promises of a new middle-class development,” as Ágnes Gagyí and Tamás Gerőcs argue in relation to the post-2010 regime (Gagyí and Gerőcs 2022, 121). The gender politics of the post-2010 governments have further strengthened the class divide through a pro-natalist support of middle-class families (Csányi 2024). In ideological terms, attacks on “gender ideology”, identified as a foreign, “western” force (Kováts and Põim 2015), and a simultaneous propagation of “traditional” (heterosexual) gender roles as part of an “alter-genderism” (Csányi 2019) alternative to the “liberal” gender regime stigmatised in government rhetoric, have functioned to underpin this politics.⁴

Two approaches that rely on Ostiguy's theory, but also develop it further, are helpful for analysing the Hungarian case. Toygar Sinan Baykan (2021) explores the high-low divide in relation to the populism of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey – the JDP's reliance on “low-populist” political appeal, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's image as lower-class and lacking academic education, a football lover “representing traditional Turkish roughnecks” (Baykan 2021, 206) – and demonstrates its historical and social rootedness and

4 See Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják (forthcoming) for a more detailed elaboration of this argument.

its politicisation in the country's modernization process. Importantly, Baykan shows that Erdoğan and the JDP succeed in articulating the “love” and “resentment” of the lower classes, resulting in a stable cross-class electoral coalition, which includes upper- and middle-class conservatives (Baykan 2021, 200). Linus Westheuser develops Ostiguy's (2009; 2017) and Moffitt's (2016) “observation that the populist repertoire draws on symbols of the ‘sociocultural low’ and ‘the popular’ produced in non-political fields like food and leisure” (Westheuser 2020, 256).⁵ Based on Lévi-Strauss and Bourdieu, he views such “low” cultural markers as “metaphors for positions in vertical and horizontal class relations”, which are based on homologies between the symbolic sphere of “culture” and politics “grounded in the divisions of social space”, that is, “the class structure” (Westheuser 2020, 256). Similarly to Baykan, he argues that the symbolic politics of populism needs to be understood “as reflecting the class alliances it attempts to assemble” (Westheuser 2020, 270).

In the following, we take the career path and (self-)representation of Ákos Kovács as an illustrative example of the relation between mainstream popular music and the politics of the post-2010 Orbán regime in Hungary. First, we look at the ways in which Kovács's career has become increasingly aligned, in an economic as well as symbolic sense, with the regime, and in particular with certain hegemonic populist discourses characterising it, such as the fight against “gender ideology” and the propagation of “traditional” gender roles. Drawing on the socio-cultural approach to populism, we then argue that Kovács's performances – whether musical or as a public persona – rather than flaunting the “low”, tend to be dominated by the boasting of cultural capital and the representation of a well-rounded and autonomous intellectual.

3. Music Career and Alignment with Hegemonic Populist Discourses

The solo career of Ákos Kovács is rooted in his nationwide popularity as the frontman of Bonanza Banzai between the late 1980s and mid-1990s. His solo career is characterised by a rich repertoire combining multiple genres – pop, rock, electronica – and performances, from unplugged concerts to sold-out stadium gigs; he has also engaged in various collaborations, which all paved the

5 As an example, Moffitt mentions that Pauline Hanson, founder of the One Nation right-wing populist party in Australia, “has made much of her regular nature as an owner of a takeaway fast food shop in suburban Queensland, claiming that ‘the fish and chip shop put me directly in touch with the average Australian’” (Moffitt 2016, 59).

way for him to become a top artist and to maintain this position for decades. Even though his successful career path was not generated by political support, acknowledgement of his work from the political field, support and opportunities secured by government actors during Fidesz-led governments, as well as sponsorship by companies close to the government, have increasingly yielded financial backing for his artistic ambitions. In exchange, his political statements, along with their timing, have backed particular topics of the Fidesz-led governments' communication, interpreting the messages and bringing them closer to his audience. These include, as we explore below, comments on gender roles, Christian and conservative values, as well as criticism of the European Union.

During his long career, spreading over more than 30 albums, Ákos's music has followed contemporary trends in melodic rock music. Besides synth-pop in the vein of Depeche Mode, which characterises his early work, the sound and style of his songs later incorporated world music elements, as well as alternative rock, metal, and electronica – at times alternating between these styles, at other times fusing them. To an extent, his style followed international trends (e.g. in relation to world music), which contributed to his continuing popularity through decades, and his ability to remain simultaneously novel and authentic to his audience – as our interviews with fans confirmed.

His song lyrics are characterised by a poetic style, the frequent use of metaphors and other poetic tools. Thematically, they often engage with the complexity and ambivalence of emotions, as well as frequently incorporating social critique, but in a characteristically abstract manner – for instance, with reference to general values, as opposed to concrete political events, figures, or perspectives. The system of references constructed within and between the lyrics partly alludes to social crisis ("edge of the abyss"⁶, "Because the wind is turning"⁷), from which Christian conservative values can show the way out ("If your mouth is filled with words, will you hear him? / The saviour?"⁸). In political songs, the enemy tends to be represented in an abstract form: "the

6 "A szakadék peremén", from the song "Újrakezdhetnénk" ("We Could Begin Again") (Ákos 2015). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/88913/akos/ujrakezdhetnenk-zeneszoveg.html

7 "Mert fordul a szél", from the song "Hazatalál" ("Finding Home") (Ákos 2019b). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/107882/akos/hazatalal-zeneszoveg.html

8 "Ha szavakkal teli a szád, vajon meghallod őt? Az üdvöztőt", from the song "Tabula Rasa" (Ákos 2010). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/57475/akos/tabula-rasa-zeneszoveg.html

people of revenge”⁹; “the mainstream is furious”¹⁰; or: “The censor is suffocating, sweating and choking”¹¹. On his 2021 album *Az utolsó békeév* (“The last year of peace”), released during the campaign period of the 2022 parliamentary elections, representations of the enemy became more concrete and directly linked to the discourse of the Fidesz campaign: “Permanent state of emergency / You know, the climate and the virus / And the pack barks the same way if the master chases them / Acronyms are writhing / They want your daughter, your son”¹². These lyrics allude to the climate crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions, as well as to the actions of international organisations, understood to threaten the survival of the nation. The song lending its title to the album (“*Az utolsó békeév*”) also touches on themes often repeated on Fidesz-controlled media, such as the effect of the Black Lives Matter movement on traditions (“Not all colour lives matter”¹³; “Statues are being thrown into canals”¹⁴; for Fidesz’ stance on the Black Lives Matter protests, see e.g. *Hungary Today* [2020]), the polarizing of Muslim and Christian communities (“The church is burning, but mosques are rising”¹⁵), and a view of history as a battleground (“The past has turned into a battlefield”¹⁶). The more concrete thematization on the one hand indicates a conscious political positioning on the part of Kovács. At the same time, the songs are able to create, through musical affordances, affective frameworks that make it easier for listeners to

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- 9 “A bosszú népe”, from the song “A bosszú népe” (“The People of Revenge”) (Ákos 2002). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/477/akos/a-bosszu-nepe-zeneszoveg.html
 - 10 “Dühöng a főszodor”, from the song “Hazatalál” (“Finding Home”) (Ákos 2019b). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/107882/akos/hazatalal-zeneszoveg.html
 - 11 “Fullad a cenzor, izzad és fűjtat”, from the song “Ellenség a kapuknál” (“Enemy at the Gates”) (Ákos 2019a). Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/107884/akos/ellenseg-a-kapuknal-zeneszoveg.html
 - 12 “Örök szükségállapot / Tudod, a klíma meg a vírusok / És egyformán csahol a falka, ha a gazda hajtja / Vonaglanak betűszavak / Szeretnék a lányod, fiad”, from the song “Több nem is kell” (“There Is No Need for More”) (Ákos 2021b). Our translation from the original lyrics.
 - 13 “Nem mindegyik színű élet számít”. Our translation from the original lyrics, available at: https://m.zeneszoveg.hu/m_dalszoveg/6387/ad-studio/az-utolso-bekeev-zeneszoveg.html
 - 14 “A szobrokat a csatornába dobják” (available at the link mentioned in footnote 13)
 - 15 “A templom ég, de emelkednek dzsámik” (available at the link mentioned in footnote 13)
 - 16 “Csatatérre változott a múlt” (available at the link mentioned in footnote 13)

identify with populist ideas spread by the government (even if this relation between the song and listening is by no means direct or uncomplicated; for a detailed analysis of the aesthetics and reception of the song “Hazatalál”, see Barna and Patakfalvi-Czirják [forthcoming]).

In interviews, Kovács has linked his engagement with rock music, defined as traditionally representative of anti-systemic critique, with the symbolic politics around the representation of national interest and conservative cultural values against “liberal” views, placed in the context of a global hegemony (“Ákos 50 portréfilm” 2018). In his online communication, despite being among the best-earning musicians in the country, he frequently refers to being attacked and not being appreciated enough, often linking this to the idea that conservative values are not trending – on the contrary, they are in a minority in relation to the mainstream. For instance, in an interview published by the pro-government news portal *Origo.hu*, presenter Éva Szilléry (ÉS) asks him (ÁK) about a scandal that broke out in relation to views he had expressed on “traditional” gender roles (which we detail below):

ÉS: In 2015, when you advocated the classic female role, what was the strongest criticism that you received from the left?

ÁK: I didn't receive any criticism, I received rejection. If somebody wanted to debate [my] point of view, what would be wrong with that?
(*Origo.hu* 2021)

The assertion of being outright rejected for the expression of certain views – finding himself on the “wrong” side – is analogous with populist leadership making claims on behalf of an “oppressed majority” (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Taggart 2000). In the case of Hungary, the populist leadership has retained discourses rooted in an oppositional stance even in a hegemonic position and similarly continues to make claims on behalf of an “oppressed majority”.

Kovács, moreover, has frequently named those that fail to appreciate him – his artistic values as well as what he represents – and those that spread lies about him. For instance, during one Covid-19 YouTube live-stream, where Ákos streamed a 2018 Budapest Arena gig but was present online to chat with his fans (Karanténkoncertek 11 November 2020), those “enemies” named include the news portal *Index.hu* (at the time when it was still an independent media outlet, until July 2020), “liberals”, “those braindead ones”, “them”, “the mainstream”, “the clever ones”, and “journalists” (including a couple of derogatory terms standing for “journalist”). This strengthens the populist logic of moral boundaries drawn between “us” and “them” (e.g. Laclau 2005).

Kovács already participated in several state projects even during the first Fidesz government (between 1998 and 2002): for instance, he acted as music ex-

part for the telecommunications company Magyar Telekom and the House of Terror Museum – opened in 2002; the latter is an important symbolic project for Fidesz's memory politics. The musician continued to take on similar roles after the political turn of 2010: during the second Viktor Orbán government, he was contracted by the restructured, centralised public service media to compose new signals for public service television and radio – and thus legitimise a highly debated move in Fidesz' centralisation of power (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020), which was crucial in the establishment of a powerful ideological apparatus. Back in 2002, Kovács received the Officer Cross of the Order of Merit, and the prestigious Kossuth Prize ten years later (the highest state award that can be granted in acknowledgment of contribution to the field of culture). In both cases, the awards were granted by the Orbán government, which complemented Kovács's political statements and strengthened his position as a right-wing, conservative artist.

The aforementioned 2015 scandal can be considered as a symbolic moment in Kovács's public image and position, during which the government defended the musician by taking extraordinary measures. With reference to the sexist views Kovács had expressed in an interview, where he argued (amongst other things) that women were not supposed to earn as much money as men, as their tasks were different, the telecommunications company Magyar Telekom – at that time partly German-owned and partly owned by the Hungarian state – terminated their sponsorship contract with the artist.¹⁷ The government attempted to retaliate by ordering ministries and other state institutions to also terminate their mobile subscriptions with Magyar Telekom (24.hu 2016). This incident was key in Kovács's career, as he thereafter increasingly relied, in economic terms, on government support, which ultimately strengthened his symbolic alignment with, and loyalty to, the government and the Fidesz party. In addition, it demonstrated how the audience could be mobilised in relation to political and ideological issues: more precisely, how Ákos's audience acted in defence of the ideas communicated by Fidesz regarding the threat of western "gender ideology" and the necessity to defend "traditional" gender roles. As a concert review on the conservative online media outlet *Válasz.hu* reported, Ákos highlighted the issue during his live gigs at the time – in part joking about it, saying that he had received more publicity in the preceding weeks, in part indignantly referring to "haters", and in part defending his statements, insisting that unlike

17 The statement emphasised that "The Magyar Telekom Group is committed to providing equal conditions of employment and career opportunities to women and men and maintaining gender equality within the company under all circumstances." (Herczeg 2015).

what is suggested by the (liberal) media, he does not look down on women, especially since he lives with four of them (meaning his wife and three daughters). As the review put it, he wished women to belong to a man, and men to belong to a woman, “let us belong to each other, stick to each other, as this is the only way to survive” (*Hvg.hu* 2015).¹⁸ In other words, he drew on a discourse of familism (c.f. Fodor and Kispéter 2014) that has provided a fundamental ideological basis – as “alter-genderism” (Csányi 2019) – for the government’s middle-class-directed politics, as well as the reinforcing of heterosexual gender roles, at a time of impending crisis, implied through the notion of survival. Many of his fans defended Ákos’s opinion, and the values it was understood to stand for, in online spaces, as well as during live events: they performed their solidarity during gigs by chanting “We are with you” (*Hvg.hu* 2015).

4. Flaunting of the “High”: Performing the Role of the Artist-Intellectual

Besides his individual musical career as Ákos, Kovács has also participated in the production of children’s music records and musicals, composed and produced music for theatre plays, published poems and short stories (including a short story collection entitled *Ezt nem lehet megúszni* [You Can’t Get Out of This] in 2021), and most recently directed a short feature film (*Magunk maradtunk* [We Are on Our Own Now; 2022]). He has also toured at length with adaptations of various classic works of Hungarian literature put to music. All this has contributed to the establishment of a position and image as a refined intellectual, one who is at home in various cultural areas, as opposed to simply being a rock star.

When talking about his music, he highlights the role of lyrics – as opposed to sound, voice, melody, harmony or other elements of the musical composition: “I consider lyrics as the content of a song. (...) This is my approach to my own style” (*Origo.hu* 2021). In another interview, he connects his songwriting to various literary forms in which he is also active, highlighting the seriousness of the written word:

Learning that a word that is spoken has a weight, has significance, I have learnt this from books. But anyone that deals with texts, and I write lyrics, I’m a songwriter, I write poems, I’m a short story writer too, I have also written a script, but I think – I’m sorry for the long list, this is not about how

18 The original review on *Válasz.hu* is no longer accessible. The article on *Hvg.hu* provides a summary of the review.

multifaceted I am, but it's the same energy (...) there is no difference really, only in form, but no essential difference between expressing something on stage or in writing. (Hajógyár 2022)

While the identification with the rock tradition, as we argued above, is important for him from the perspective of ideological positioning (the maintaining of an anti-systemic stance), he also seems to consistently strive towards recognition as a well-rounded, serious and autonomous artist, a position which would not be granted to a mere rock star, due to the relatively low status that is still often attributed to popular music in the cultural hierarchy. The written word and also the written work of classical music, in contrast, is more legitimate in the Bourdieusian sense; it is historically in a higher position in “the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts” (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], 1) than the performing arts, including popular music.¹⁹ In the second interview mentioned above, Kovács also emphasises that he is from a bourgeois family who had been dispossessed of their material wealth, but not of their library (Hajógyár 2022) – thus they retained their cultural capital. These examples indicate that rather than a flaunting of the low, we can observe a consistent flaunting of the “high” in Ákos’s self-presentation.

Moreover, Kovács has also frequently collaborated with symphonic orchestras, in addition to his rock band, in his performances – which can be viewed as another strategy to demonstrate cultural capital.²⁰ During his pre-Christmas show at the László Papp Budapest Aréna in 2019, which we attended as participant observers, it was evident that this cultural capital (combined with economic capital) is also embodied in the technical apparatus, which contributed to providing a highly professional sound and visuals. The background of the Aréna stage was framed by large screens – complete with one more four-sided screen in the middle of the stadium, hung from the top – which were used throughout the show to accompany the songs, alternately showing excerpts from the official videos, new visuals, as well as Ákos’s and the band’s performance. Throughout the gig, Ákos stood at the centre of the stage in front, singing or playing guitar solos, while his musicians remained behind him. The stage, however, was

19 See also Johnson (2009, 40–47) on the socially and historically constructed superiority of written language in relation to orality and sound, and the implications of this regarding music.

20 See e.g. ÁKOS – MOST KEZDŐDIK EL.: Official video (2006). As another example, in one of his “quarantine diary” videos from 2020, he welcomes piano teacher, arranger, and choir leader Szabolcs Balásy to try out a 1933 August Förster upright piano. The video is partly educational, but also features Ákos’s songs (AkoxVlog :: 20E08 • ZONGORAFUTAM 2020).

transformed mid-show when he invited his eldest daughter Anna to perform a number of duets with him – at this point, lights became monochrome, the projections subdued, and the rock concert turned into an unplugged gig – making the performance more personal and lyrical.

Tony Coles (2009) argues that, with the help of Bourdieu's notions of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; 1977; 1993), we can interpret Connell's (1995) theory of "hegemonic masculinity" to conceive of masculinities in the plural, where masculinity itself constitutes a field with sites of domination and subordination, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The flaunting of cultural capital in the form of a refined taste, along with an autonomous and multifaceted artistic persona, is accompanied by the performance of a particular dominant masculinity linked to intellectual power. Ákos's performance style and image can arguably be interpreted as a representation of a white middle-class masculinity: a youthful, fashionable undercut hairstyle, characteristic glasses, an ageless, always freshly shaven face, and a good taste in wine (for a time, he partly owned the wine bar *Andante*) constitute a modern gentlemanly image. This image is also reinforced through his style of clothing: he often wears a suit but sometimes switches to a leather jacket, rocker-style (see Figures 1 & 2). A branded watch and elegant footwear are also central elements of his self-presentation, which enable a simultaneous appearance as an intellectual and a rock star. His well-chosen words, elaborate ideas about global public issues and the poetic imagery of his lyrics constitute the habitus of an erudite middle-class man – reading, thinking and capable, whose articulated ideas about gender roles and general conservative mindset, as shown above, are framed as courage and an anti-systemic attitude. This masculine image is completed by the frequent public presentation of his spouse and children, who often accompany him on images shared through social media. Kovács's eldest daughter, as we have seen, has in recent years often appeared during his live shows, singing duets with her father. In the context of his alignment with hegemonic populist discourses associated with the Orbán regime, the display of familial intimacy – similarly to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who frequently appears in the company of his wife and five children on holiday photographs – can be interpreted as the performing of Hungarian heterosexual, patriarchal "normality", where the male artist or politician is head of the family.



Figure 1: Ákos Kovács, 2015.²¹



Figure 2: Ákos Kovács in Hódmezővásárhely in 2005.²²

Masculinity has been described as a crucial attribute in populist leaders' performance of authenticity and "being of the people" (Taggart 2000, 100–103.). At the same time, the cult of personality established around the "charismatic strongman" enhances the masculinisation of politics (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 62–63). The outspoken, forthright, often crude and sexist talk combined with determination and success-orientation, the image of a strong but just leader that is accessible to "everyday people" has become, in European versions of populism, intertwined with the image of a patriarchal man who is consistently defending national and conservative values and is willing to sacrifice himself for the "people" (Baykan 2021). Not unlike the male breadwinner responsible for his family, he is the one capable of taking on struggles and conflicts in order to save the community. In Ostiguy's (2009; 2017) approach, crude talk and sexist utterances illustrate the class strategy of the populist leader, in a duality where a charismatic leader with special talents is able to emerge from the community, yet nevertheless, as somebody who is of the

21 CC BY-SA 4.0 International. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ákos_-_2015.jpg

22 CC BY-SA 3.0 Unported. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kovács_Ákos.jpg

people, continues to embody and represent the forms of behaviour and values of their – typically *his* – community. In the Hungarian context, however, the kind of sexist discourse articulated by Ákos does not function as a tool for performing identification with the lower classes, but rather the performance of a hegemonic white middle-class masculinity primarily based not on physical traits, but intellectual superiority and talent.

5. Conclusions

With our analysis, we have attempted to demonstrate that when studying populism, it is not sufficient to look at the speeches, style or media activity of politicians – and not only because they obscure hegemony building and structural transformation. In spaces, online or offline, where people from various backgrounds and perhaps even political attitudes gather, such as an arena concert, certain gestures, behaviour, and discourses, together with the affective conditioning enabled by popular music, are able to create and reinforce certain homologies with political discourses. For instance, between a white middle-class masculinity and conservative values, between particular modes of performing a class position and fundamental values communicated by the hegemonic power. From the perspective of studying the relation between popular music and populism, the public image of mainstream cultural figures such as Ákos Kovács is therefore not only interesting because it is made use of by political actors such as Viktor Orbán. While Ákos's music, performances, and public persona undoubtedly contribute, as we have shown, to the spreading, interpreting, and affective embedding of hegemonic populist discourses, perhaps even more importantly he embodies the promise of hegemony, namely the "reinstating" of a middle class and a heterosexual patriarchy, which underscores the class politics of the post-2010 Fidesz governments.

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