

# Territorial Loss and Populism

## LISD Working Paper

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we argue for the importance of a previously-overlooked factor – the existence of prior grievances over historical loss of territory – as a source of support for ethnopopulist parties. While territorial loss is not a necessary condition for the emergence of populism, the issue lends itself unusually well to the backward-looking, loss-oriented framing of national victimization at the hands of elites that constitutes a key element of such parties’ electoral success. Drawing on original cross-national experimental and observational data from surveys conducted in Romania, Hungary, Germany, and Turkey in 2020–2021, we demonstrate that territorial loss attitudes are a remarkably robust predictor of support for ethnopopulist parties, although important differences in national context emerge across cases. Moreover, we show the existence of a trade-off that only faces populists in power, where priming past losses alienates voters who are unconcerned about territory even as it attracts those for whom it is important.

In addition, the panel structure of our data allows us to exploit a quasi-natural experiment in

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the form of the emergence of a new and highly successful populist party in Romania between waves, from which we conclude that loss attitudes are stable over time and temporally prior to support for populism.

## 1 Introduction

The rise of ethnopopulist parties in much of Europe in the past decade has attracted considerable scholarly attention, especially in the context of resistance to public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bobba & Hubé, 2021; Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2021). Existing explanations have focused on the role of immigration (Hobolt & Tilley, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020), corruption (Engler, 2020; Snegovaya, 2020), traditional values (Taggart, 2000), the threat of Islam (Brubaker, 2017), others on economic policy choices, such as the embrace of neoliberal economic policies by leftist parties (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019) or the consequences of neoliberal reforms more broadly (Appel & Orenstein, 2018).

In this paper, we focus on the politics of territorial losses as a reservoir of support for ethnopopulist parties. While the role of irredentist claims in driving conflict has received significant attention in the international relations literature (Chazan, 1991; Saideman & Ayres, 2000; Toft, 2014; Shelef, 2016), the issue has received much less attention in the debates about the drivers of ethnopopulist party success. Partial exceptions in this regard are Pirro (2014), who discusses irredentist rhetoric as part of the broader repertoire of East European radical right parties and Heinisch, Massetti, and Mazzoleni (2019), who analyze the “territorial” dimension of populism in the context of latent regional center-periphery cleavages. However, to the best of our knowledge the impact of irredentist territorial claims on the support for ethnopopulist parties has not been systematically theorized and tested to date.

Nevertheless, there are strong empirical and theoretical reasons to suppose that, where present, such claims frequently form an integral part of populist – specifically, ethnopopulist – politics. Explicit calls for military action, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s February 2022

speech announcing the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, in which he characterized the Ukrainian state as "wholly created by Russia" by means of "separating, ripping [from Russia] its historical territories" (Putin, 2022), are, of course, quite rare. More general discussions of lost territory, ranging from post-imperial nostalgia to lamentations of victimization by external foes responsible for dismembering the nation and an indolent political class, are, however, frequently heard from ethnonationalist populists, even in cases such as contemporary Germany where irredentism *per se* is widely discredited (Jackson, 2019). Highly typical in this regard is the following passage from a statement commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Soviet occupation of parts of Romania by the tellingly-named Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), a right-wing populist party that rose to prominence in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*One Friday, Christ was unjustly crucified, He, the one without fault.*

*One Friday, Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina and Herța County were ceded, approximately 18% of the surface of Romania at that time, territories inhabited by 4 million people, mostly Romanian ethnics.*

*In the face of a brutal and unjust ultimatum from the USSR, a country whose leaders claimed to be the most progressive form of social order, a Romanian political class incapable of greatness and honor gave its consent to an ignominy.*

...

*The politicians who control the Romanian state today will not organize any demonstration, will not give any speech and will not commemorate in any way this unfortunate moment of our history. People cut from the same fabric of cowardice and as petty in soul as those who ruled Romania 80 years ago will ignore June 28th. Their thoughts are on the acquisitions to be made, on the commissions that can be extracted, on the upcoming elections in which the people must again be deceived.*

...

***AUR will act to correct the consequences of the territorial and human***

*abduction produced on June 28, 1940, will support economically and culturally those Romanians who remained outside the country's borders so that they can preserve their national identity, and will take the necessary steps at a political and diplomatic level to achieve the union of the two Romanian states.* (AUR, 2020, emphasis original)

As we argue in this paper, this apparent affinity between ethnonationalist or right-wing populism and the politicization of territorial loss is not coincidental, but results from a combination of the issue's particular symbolic suitability for the type of backward-looking nationalist narratives such parties typically advance and its tendency to be ignored by mainstream political actors. In general, the drawing of territorial boundaries is fundamental to the enterprise of the historical construction of the nation. In Gellner's classic formulation, the principle of nationalism *by definition* "requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones" (Gellner, 2008, p. 1). Gellner's emphasis on *ethnic* boundaries is, of course, problematic in the many cases in which membership in the nation is not defined in purely ethnic terms, or where the imagined geographic reach of the nation includes land not currently occupied by members of the national community. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the definition of the physical boundaries of the nation, and highlighting instances of their incongruence with the state, is precisely the stuff that nationalist politics is made of.

For this reason, political entrepreneurs seeking to mobilize support on a nationalist basis enjoy greater symbolic resources in those countries where the mismatch between the actual and imagined boundaries of the nation is the greatest; that is, *where control over a substantial amount of territory widely believed to be part of the nation has been lost to another state*. Indeed, a brief glance at Eastern Europe is consistent with this intuition: Poland and Hungary, despite an initially promising period of democratization, lost large proportions of their territory during the 20th century, and have experienced the greatest degree of electoral success by nationalist-populist politicians in the region .

The relationship between territorial loss and ethnonationalist populism, we contend, goes beyond this general importance of boundary-drawing to nationalist movements. Rather, the issues around

which most ethnonationalist populist narratives center, such as opposition to immigration, trade liberalization, or supranational integration projects, share a common core of features in addition to their obvious nationalist content. To a greater or lesser degree, almost all of these issues are framed in terms that *look backwards* to a (usually imagined) past that compares favorably with the present and emphasize *loss* and *victimization* at the hands of external actors – typically foreign and domestic “elites”. The issue of lost territory, while partially dependent on the specific circumstances of the loss, powerfully combines these features, lending itself to the mobilization of emotionally resonant narratives of national victimization and nostalgia for better times that are consistent with the broader populist worldview.

At the same time, the politicization of this issue is in most cases unavailable to mainstream political elites, and especially to current incumbents. Due to the futility of most attempts to recover lost territory, and the widespread international norms of respecting existing national borders, sustained mobilization of claims on lost territory in competitive political environments, even if purely symbolic, invites discontent over a lack of results (Shelef, 2020). This is especially true in contemporary Europe, where international integration has severely limited opportunities for actively pursuing territorial claims. As a result, existing popular concern over historical losses – which in most cases far predates the emergence of “new” issues such as mass immigration – frequently goes unattended by the political mainstream, making it a ripe issue for mobilization by non-systemic parties. Populist parties in power, however, are likely to face the same constraints as mainstream parties, underscoring the need to distinguish between populism in opposition and in government (Pappas, 2019; Zellman, 2019; Aytaç, Çarkoğlu, & Elçi, 2021). At worst, they may provoke a double backlash: dissatisfaction with the lack of progress from the most ardent irredentists, and irritation from those who prefer to leave historical losses in the past.

In this paper, we test this argument using data from an original survey conducted in July 2020 in Romania, Hungary, Turkey, and Germany, including an embedded question order experiment that allows us to estimate the effect of priming the salience of territorial loss on party evaluations while retaining unbiased measurements of loss attitudes for all respondents. In addition, we provide behavioral evidence strongly indicating a causal effect of territorial attitudes on actual voting

outcomes using a follow-up in panel survey conducted in Romania after the December 2020 parliamentary elections, in which the ethnopopulist AUR party participated for the first time.

## 2 Populism and Territorial Loss

### 2.1 Sources of Populism

Although populism is a notoriously poorly defined concept (Van Kessel, 2014), the dramatic rise in the electoral success of parties that exhibit populist characteristics, particularly in Europe, over the last decade has attracted a great deal of academic attention (Moffitt, 2016; Algan et al., 2017). Drawing on definitions by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Norris (2020), by the term “populism” we mean primarily an *ideational* feature of the *language* employed by political actors, distinguished by the setting up of rhetorical opposition between the “people” and “elites” and the idea that the will of the nation ought to be decisive in decision-making.

Although populism in this sense need in principle neither be a stable feature of specific parties nor correlate with the left-right dimension (Pop-Eleches, 2010), it has recently been most prominent among the extreme right, especially in advanced industrial democracies (Pelinka, 2013; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Norris, 2020). For this reason, we focus here primarily on the sources of support for right-wing populism in particular, specifically in its ethnonationalist form (Bonikowski, 2017; Vachudova, 2021). In addition to the anti-elite orientation characteristic of populism more generally, right-wing populist parties are typically characterized by a traditionalist orientation and an opposition to globalization and modernization processes, particularly regarding immigration (Pelinka, 2013). What distinguishes them from traditional right-wing parties that may have broadly similar policy orientations is the way they talk about these issues, which is again characterized by setting up simple dichotomies and a focus on assigning blame.

A variety of explanations for the rise in support for such parties have been offered, most of which have focused on economic, cultural, or political factors. On the economic side, scholars have

emphasized that support for populist parties comes mainly from the economic “losers” of globalization, liberalization, and modernization processes, which tend to seek alternative solutions to their relative losses (Pelinka, 2013; Appel & Orenstein, 2018; Berman & Snegovaya, 2019; Rodrik, 2021). International economic processes are particularly decisive in this regard, with localized exposure to trade shocks strongly driving support for far-right populist parties (Milner, 2021).

A second set of explanations focuses on value change and cultural threat as driving factors behind individual support for populism. Norris and Inglehart (2019), for instance, find consistent support for “cultural backlash” against the increasing adoption of progressive values by the political mainstream as a driving factor behind the defection to populist alternatives, who promise to defend “traditional” values (Taggart, 2000; Brubaker, 2017). Hostility toward social “others” forms a particularly important component of the cultural dimension of populism, as mere exposure to refugees (Dinas et al., 2019) is sufficient to push voters towards far right parties. At the aggregate level, Bustikova (2014) shows that increases in the electoral performance of parties representing domestic minority groups trigger subsequent increases in the vote shares of right-populist parties, likely driven by status threat (Mutz, 2018).

Finally, support for populist parties may be driven less by attitudinal alignment with any specific set of policies they promote than by general dissatisfaction with the political establishment. Perceptions of corruption among elites are especially important in this regard, as populists are able to capitalize on a preexisting sense that the political establishment is hostile to the people (Grzymala-Busse, 2017; Engler, 2020; Snegovaya, 2020). Dissatisfaction may also be simply performance-based, as repeated failures to provide economic benefits despite alternation of power drive protest voters towards populist alternatives (Pop-Eleches, 2010). Similarly, when policies that are viewed as illegitimate or undesirable are uniformly embraced by mainstream parties, voters are likely to be driven towards anti-systemic parties even in the absence of strong value congruence (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019).

While the literature just discussed provides considerable insight into the general antecedents of

support for populism, something of a disconnect remains between these findings and the mobilization strategies that are actually employed by populist parties. A growing body of findings suggest that economic and cultural factors interact with each other, with background economic resentment increasing susceptibility to identity-based appeals (Noury & Roland, 2020). At the same time, studies that focus on the discourse employed by populists have repeatedly noted the key role of appeals relying on historical memory, especially with regard to territory (Pirro, 2014; Koposov, 2017; Caramani & Manucci, 2019; Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López, 2022). Unlike many of the “new” cleavages, these issues far predate the current wave of populism, leaving open the question of how they interact with these sources of broader dissatisfaction with mainstream politics, as well as of how effective populist appeals based on historically constructed loss are at generating support.

## 2.2 Territory, Loss, and National Identity

Although the concept of territory is often treated as relatively unproblematic – from a measurement standpoint, after all, it is generally straightforward to identify the geographical delimitations of formal political units – there are a number of subtle, yet important, barriers to conceptualizing “control over territory” in a manner that permits valid comparison. A single territory, in the sense of an area of land with arbitrarily drawn boundaries, may be interpreted in many ways by different groups and actors, resulting in multiple subjective constructions of the same physical space. The issue of *which* territory is appropriate to consider is also a complex one, as the boundaries drawn by different visions of “homeland” or even “region” generally do not overlap (Knight, 1982). The breakaway republic of South Ossetia, for example, overlaps with multiple administrative divisions of the Republic of Georgia, each with their own associated historical meaning, while for many Ossetians it is part of a larger region of Ossetia-Alania that includes parts of the Russian North Caucasus (Shnirelman, 2001). Moreover, the state-centric frame of ‘territorial control’ is often inadequate: states may not have *de facto* control over land that is formally part of their sovereign territory due to the presence of local non-state actors, and imperial powers often exercise significant control outside of their official boundaries (Agnew, 1994,



2017).

We resolve these ambiguities by adopting a purely subjective definition of territory that does not privilege the state and allows both boundaries and the fact of control to vary at the individual level. Thus, for instance, the territory of Chechnya in Russia does not necessarily need to coincide with the administrative boundaries of the Chechen Republic or be considered as under Russian control. The answer to these questions depends on the “mental geography” (Knight, 1982) of each person: some emphasize the formal subordination of the Republic to the Russian Federation and are content to conflate its legal with its actual borders, while others view its extensive autonomy as a sign of noncontrol, or consider parts of neighboring Ingushetia to be Chechen land (Cornell, 2005).

While these views are clearly the result of ongoing processes of social construction, they nonetheless exist at the level of individual perceptions, and without knowledge of the distribution of these perceptions, any attempt to aggregate them to a “generally accepted” view would be potentially misleading. We therefore adopt the more conservative approach of allowing each person to define their own national geography, although the lack of data on these perceptions will necessitate the imposition of simplifying assumptions when operationalizing this definition (cf. Shelef, 2016). This has the important implication that the same objectively defined territory may be simultaneously both lost and not lost – regardless of its empirical status – depending on individual beliefs about where it is appropriate to draw boundaries and what constitutes control. In extreme cases, for example, some people might consider their entire country to be “lost” to an illegitimate or foreign-backed regime, despite having legal sovereignty.

Much of the classic work on nationalism emphasizes the centrality of the territorial construction of memory in the development of modern nationalism (Gellner, 2008; Smith, 1986; Smith, 1996). In order to imagine the national community, it is necessary also to associate with a particular place, and to draw spatial lines that separate co-nationals from others (Anderson, 2006). These authors, however, generally advance a view of nationalism as ideology that is concerned with the conceptual coherence of nationalist thought but does not convincingly deal with why or how

people respond to nationalist appeals. Given the general incoherence of the political ideologies held by most individuals (Converse, 2006), this is a non-trivial issue and points to the need to establish the microlevel mechanisms linking an actual violation of nationalist principles with the emergence of nationalist politics.

In addition, much early work on nationalism defines the nation in ethnocultural terms (Gellner, 2008; Smith, 1986), leaving ambiguous the processes associated with “civic” nations. Clearly, territory is as important to nations defined in political as cultural terms, to the extent that they exist as a pure type (Smith et al., 1991; Yack, 1996). Any theory of the link between territory and nationalism must therefore avoid the trap of conflating the nation with ethnicity and focus on general mechanisms associated with the nation as a *group*, and not specifically as an *ethnic* group.

More recently, a large literature in international relations has recognized the significance of territory, and its association with nationalism, as a source of conflict. Although much of this literature emphasizes the material value of territory, with inter-state conflict driven by the desire to control strategic and economic resources (Gibler, 2007; Huth, 2009), an important strand emphasizes the peculiar meaning attached to land by nationalists and the potential for bargaining to break down due to claims of indivisibility (Toft, 2010, 2014; Goddard, 2006; Shelef, 2016; Manekin, Grossman, & Mitts, 2019). In particular, Shelef (2016) finds that the loss of territory that is discursively constructed as a homeland leads to increased conflict at all levels of intensity compared to territory that is not viewed as integral to the nation. However, this literature provides limited insight into the domestic political processes connecting territory to nationalist politics, as these studies tend to reify groups and either treat primordial attachments as given or as reducible to the economic interests of elites.

In an important recent study, for instance, Manekin, Grossman, and Mitts (2019) employ conjoint experiments to study attachment to Palestinian territory among Israelis at the individual level, but their focus is on understanding trade-offs between control over territory and material values and their effect on elite bargaining positions. The authors attribute the value placed on territory to partisanship, with supporters of left-wing parties willing to give up land in exchange for

prosperity and security, while right-wing voters are strictly opposed to compromise, but the *causal* role of partisan loyalty remains unclear, as do the mechanisms underlying attachment to territory. Similarly, Zellman (2019) finds that only Israeli and Serbian voters with irredentist outlooks respond positively to symbolic framing of territorial foreign policy goals, concluding that ethnopopulist parties are limited in their ability to garner support from the wider electorate. The extent to which this tendency reflects a causal relationship between the prevalence of underlying irredentist attitudes and the success of such parties, however, remains an open question.

The literature discussed thus far treats territory passively – either as a good to be competed over, or as a symbolic reference point for the construction of a narrative. Land is not simply an empty container, however, instead being closely associated with those who live on it. In particular, when territory is lost, it typically results in the creation of a diaspora population either of co-nationals “left behind”, of IDPs distributed throughout the losing country, or of refugees in third countries. The existence of a significant diaspora living in lost territory significantly complicates the politics of nationalism, as the diaspora constitutes a separate actor with distinct interests and a potential symbolic resource for nationalizing elites (Brubaker, 1995, 2011). Foreign diasporas, moreover, often intervene actively in the construction of both identity and territoriality, tending to reproduce highly essentialist conceptions of nation and homeland and influence the politics of both the host and home country in support of their agenda (Schulz & Hammer, 2003; Carter, 2005; Ho & McConnell, 2019). As a consequence, wherever such diaspora populations are present, the relationship of individuals to lost territory cannot be fully accounted for without also considering their relation to the current and former occupants of that territory.

### 3 Lost Territory as a Populist Resource

In this section, we present a novel account of the role played by the issue of territorial loss in the broader repertoire of ethnonationalist populist rhetoric, as well as why, and under what circumstances, it is effective at generating support. We begin by considering the common features of the issues that are typically emphasized by populists and the reasons for their persuasive

power, highlighting the particularly fertile ground created by territorial losses in each regard. We then move onto a discussion of the limitations faced by parties that aspire to govern in effectively mobilizing the issue.

Although, as discussed previously, the specific issues that form the basis of populist party platforms vary considerably across national contexts, they share a set of basic commonalities that closely relate to their persuasive effectiveness: *nationalism*, *loss framing*, *victimization narratives*, and *backward-lookingness*. We now discuss each in turn.

Clearly, the core feature of ethnopopulist narratives, and of right-populism more generally, is *nationalism*. Of course, not all populist parties are explicitly nationalist, and many rhetorically salient issues are not directly tied to nationalist logic. In particular, neither economic grievances nor cultural backlash to progressive social policy have any inherent relationship to nationalist projects, although even these issues are frequently given a nationalist coloring by framing them as the result of foreign influence undermining the “true” values of the nation, as with anti-LGBT laws in Hungary and Russia, for example. Other highly salient populist issues, however, are almost impossible to express without recourse to nationalist ideology. Opposition to immigration and globalization, whether framed in economic or cultural terms, is fundamentally predicated on the drawing of boundaries around the nation, and these issues are often discussed in openly nationalist terms.

However, the affinity between nationalism and populism goes deeper than just these specific issue dimensions. Like populism, the conceptualization of “the people” as a more or less unitary entity capable of expressing a will and in opposition to external enemies is central to nationalism as an idea (Anderson, 2006). The populist use of nationalism therefore relies on representing mainstream elites, past or present, as having failed to serve the nation’s best interests in one way or another. This opposition also frequently takes on a territorial dimension, setting a spatially-defined heartland that represents the true core of the nation against its domestic or foreign oppressors (Heinisch, Massetti, & Mazzoleni, 2019). In this regard, it is straightforward to see how lost territory can serve as mobilizational resource for populists: not only is

non-congruence of state with human boundaries the very definition of nationalism (Gellner, 2008), but by definition existing elites must have failed to fulfill their patriotic duty by rectifying the situation. As such, among voters who identify strongly with the nation – especially with a maximalist, transborder conception thereof – the issue of territorial loss is particularly well-suited to populist mobilization.

A second, almost universal feature of populist rhetoric that has rarely been remarked on is a tendency to focus on *loss*. Whether in the economic or social domains, the emphasis is typically placed not on the possibility of improvement in the future, but on the harm that has already been done. In some cases, this loss may take the form of social status as a result of immigration and demographic shifts (Mutz, 2018), while in others it may be a loss of employment opportunities and relative income, but the representation of the present as in some way worse than the past is a constant feature of populist rhetoric.

In addition to its natural affinity with the narrative representation of the people as in need of saving from harm, this tendency to present issues in terms of losses that have either been incurred or have begun to occur has a particular emotional power. The phenomenon of loss aversion is well-documented across a wide variety of domains, and describes the general psychological tendency to respond to losses with strong negative emotions, such as anger and anxiety, that outweigh those experienced in response to an equivalent reward<sup>1</sup>. The core prediction of prospect theory – that this higher weighting of losses results in more acceptance of risk – has been repeatedly confirmed in both behavioral and neurological experiments, although the exact mechanisms and role of emotional states remain unknown (Thaler et al., 1997; Tom et al., 2007; Sokol-Hessner & Rutledge, 2019; Prietzel, 2020). In the case of territory, the potential for loss framing is clear: to be considered lost, the land in question must necessarily have been part of the state at some point in the past (though in some cases the link is quite tenuous). To the extent that this loss is personally felt, then, it has the same power as issues such as immigration to induce the kinds of emotional states that tend to push voters towards populist parties. This effect may be particularly strong for newer populist parties that are perceived as political “outsiders”,

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<sup>1</sup>Although it is worth noting that this effect only persists as long as the loss stimulus is present, underling the importance of constant reinforcement of loss narratives to maintain salience.

given the element of risk in abandoning the political establishment for unproven newcomers.

An important caveat is that, for efforts to prime voters with territorial losses to have an effect, those losses must resonate to some degree with voters. While the reasons some people place more value on lost territories than others fall outside of the scope of this paper, it is unlikely that reminding voters of losses will impact their behavior if the loss is viewed as inconsequential. At the same time, priming may also have little effect among the most committed irredentists if the consideration of past losses is already foremost in their minds. For this reason, we expect the effects of priming loss to be greatest among those with an intermediate level of concern.

Closely related to the representation of issues as losses is the use of narratives that embed these losses in a broader trend of *victimization* by outside forces. While populists generally either blame domestic elites for the losses, or for having failed to reverse them, the nature of this blame need not necessarily go beyond corruption or incompetence. In the case of immigration, for example, it is generally difficult for all but the most determined conspiracy theorists to frame the issue as part of a concerted effort to harm “the people”. With other issues, such as opposition to international integration, however, it is much more straightforward to identify clear external culprits with hostile intent. Indeed, in Europe it is precisely those far-right parties that have been most successful in associating contemporary EU policy disputes with historical memories of victimization that have enjoyed the greatest electoral success (Caramani & Manucci, 2019).

The potential to interpret territorial losses as instances of victimization is, of course, somewhat dependent on the circumstances of the loss in question. In cases of decolonization, for instance, there is clearly less scope for framing the metropole as a victim than there is when the loss occurred as a result of foreign conquest. Nevertheless, in most cases there is sufficient historical ambiguity that a loss can be readily blamed on foreign actors (Vardy, 1983; Keyman & Kanci, 2011; Akçali & Korkut, 2012; Narvselius & Bernsand, 2014). While the fact of feeling victimized need not necessarily lead someone to vote for populists, the promise of “taking back control” and exercising agency that typically accompanies populist rhetoric is nonetheless particularly appealing in this context.

Finally, a corollary of focusing on losses is that populist issue framing is necessarily *backward-looking*; that is, it tends to emphasize a reference point in the national past that compares favorably to the present on the relevant dimension. For instance, politicians attempting to mobilize anxiety over value change might invoke memories (real or imagined) of an earlier time when traditional values predominated, while opponents of globalization might emphasize an earlier period when the nation enjoyed greater autonomy over its own affairs. This association between the desired outcome and a point in the *past* has the effect of simultaneously delegitimizing *current* elites, who are presumably responsible for the nation's decline, while associating the populists with the certainty of the past. This latter point is particularly important for political outsiders, who may otherwise suffer from voter uncertainty over how they might actually behave if elected.

Territorial losses are, again, particularly well-suited to this kind of mobilization strategy because they are associated with a specific historical juncture. By associating the loss of territory not only with a violation of the principles of nationalism but also with a host of other ills that befell the nation in the intervening period, narratives of territorial loss can associate support for the populists with the prospect of returning to an idealized past. Indeed, this past need not even be within living memory: the memory of the Reconquista has been invoked by the VOX party in Spain to great effect, for instance, despite having ended in the fifteenth century (Esteve-Del-Valle & Costa López, [2022](#)).

While these features suggest a natural affinity between the mobilization of territorial loss and populist parties, it could in principle be used by other parties as well. There is, however, an important reason why this is unlikely to be the case: the difficulty of building an actionable policy program. While simply lamenting the loss of territory may have some emotional resonance with voters, raising the salience of the issue will tend to create expectations that something will be done about it. With rare exceptions<sup>2</sup>, however, the options available to incumbents are extremely limited, typically not extending beyond the financing of cultural programs in the territory in question or the extension of citizenship to its residents.

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<sup>2</sup>Recent notable instances of military solutions to the problem include Azerbaijan's 2023 reconquest of Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine.

As a result, parties with a history of governing are unlikely to make significant electoral gains from politicizing lost territory, as they must somehow account for their proven inability to actually resolve the issue. Certainly, this does not necessarily prevent populists *in power* from doing so – Viktor Orban in Hungary and Vladimir Putin in Russia have made extensive reference to lost territories while in office, for example – but their ability to continue mobilizing support over the issue is likely to be circumscribed by their ability to produce visible results<sup>3</sup>. Populist parties in opposition, by contrast, do not face this limitation, and are consequently far more likely to benefit from raising the salience of territorial loss.

Finally, it is worth noting that while populists may be able to raise the issue salience of territorial loss and affect its relationship to political decisions through framing, it is unlikely that they are able to shape actual attitudes, at least over the short term. Instead, we argue, individual attitudes towards lost territory are more or less stable over time and are shaped largely by the degree of identification with a spatially maximalist concept of the nation. This means that the electoral payoffs of playing the territorial loss card will depend on the prior distribution of territorial loss concerns among voters: for individuals who are bothered by past territorial losses raising the salience of such losses should yield a greater boost in populist party support than for those who are less concerned about the lost territory. For the latter group raising the salience of territorial losses may even backfire, as the specter of irredentist policies could raise concerns about their domestic opportunity costs and international risks

We can then summarize the implications of the preceding discussion through the following hypotheses

**H<sub>1</sub>:** The effect of priming territorial losses is to increase support for populist parties.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Higher degrees of individual concern over lost territory lead to a greater likelihood of supporting populist parties.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Both of the preceding effects on party approval are more positive for opposition than for

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<sup>3</sup>Again, exceptions include Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories (and to a lesser extent Turkey's control over parts of Syria) , but these are rare in recent history.



governing ethnopopulists.

**H<sub>4</sub>:** The effect of priming concern on populist party approval is more positive among those who are more concerned about the loss, especially at intermediate levels.

**H<sub>5</sub>:** (a) Attitudes to lost territory are stable over time and cause electoral behavior, and not the reverse.

(b) Priming territorial loss does not only affect political preferences, but also increases broader historical nostalgia for periods of greater territorial extent, even if non-democratic.

## 4 Case Selection and Data

### 4.1 Data

In order to test the theory outlined in the previous section, we rely on an original survey conducted in June-July 2020 in Germany, Romania, Hungary, and Turkey with approximately 2000 respondents in each country, hereafter referred to as “loss survey” (LS). In addition to the geographic location of the respondents, the survey included a standard set of demographic measures, items measuring attitudes and beliefs regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, partisanship and voting questions, and a question order experiment manipulating the priming of territorial loss.

The experimental design, details of which can be found in Appendix ??, consisted of independently randomizing the position of two items to be either before or after the political outcome battery, one of which measured concern over lost territory and the other support for a range of policies towards the foreign diaspora in each country except Germany. This design thus ensures that we have unbiased measures for the level of concern of each respondent, while also being able to estimate priming effects.

In addition, follow-up surveys were fielded in Romania in December 2020-January 2021 and again

in January 2022. In the 2021 wave, we asked respondents to report their vote choice in the December 2020 parliamentary elections, in which the ethnopopulist AUR party, which was virtually unknown at the time of the first wave, received over 9% of the vote . Finally, in the most recent wave, the same question on concern for territorial loss was again included, allowing us to test the stability of attitudes over time.

## 4.2 Context and Background

The selection of Romania, Hungary, Turkey, and Germany as cases<sup>4</sup> provides variation on four major dimensions of interest: the political salience of lost territory, how and when the territory was lost, whether it is now inhabited by co-nationals, and the political meaning of the loss, summarized in Table 1. While salience of the respective losses has been extremely high in all four cases at some point in the past, at the time of the present study it is a near-constant feature of political discourse in Hungary and, to a lesser extent, Romania and Turkey. In Germany, by contrast, discussion of lost territories is largely absent from mainstream political narratives. As such, we expect the levels of average individual salience to be highest in Hungary, followed by Romania and Turkey, with Germany significantly lower.

These cases also vary considerably regarding the circumstances of the loss. While Hungary, Romania, Turkey, and Germany all experienced their losses in approximately the same time period – during the first half of the twentieth century as a result of the two world wars – the magnitude and type of each loss is distinct. Whereas in the aftermath of World War I Hungary lost approximately two thirds of its territory, much of which continues to be inhabited by Hungarian-speakers, to neighboring countries, Romania’s 1940 losses at the hands of the Soviet Union were relatively smaller, consisting primarily of Moldova, as well as parts of northern Bulgaria and Ukraine. These losses were accompanied by forced resettlements, so that only Moldova and northern Bucovina remain occupied by “co-nationals”, although the status of both the Moldovan language and its speakers as Romanians is contested in Moldova.

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<sup>4</sup>A reduced version of the same study was also fielded in Russia and yielded similar results, although we do not focus on this case in the present paper due to the non-competitive political environment.

Germany’s losses consisted primarily of parts of present-day Poland, France, and the Czech Republic, which were lost after both World Wars and are no longer inhabited to a significant degree by German speakers, due to large scale evictions at the end of WWII. However, the specific circumstances of Germany’s involvement in World War II have given them a rather different character than in Hungary or Romania. Whereas the original losses following the First World War were readily interpreted as unfair victimization by foreign powers, akin to those of Hungary or Romania, Germany’s role as instigator – and the prominence of irredentism and expansionism in the Nazi political project – has largely reversed this narrative and tied the territorial loss conceptually to the horrors of the Nazi era.

Turkey’s losses represent yet another model, as, while contiguous, they represent not the loss of “core” Turkish territory, but rather the loss of a multinational empire following the Ottoman defeat in the first world war. Turkey thus stands out from the other cases not only in having lost a vastly greater amount of territory<sup>5</sup>, but also in that very little of that territory is easily constructed as part of the Turkish nation. Nevertheless, it is also the only country in the sample that has made serious efforts to recover its lost territory militarily, notably via intervention in Cyprus in 1974 and the recent incursion into Northern Syria.

Table 1: Summary of Cases

		Case			
		<i>Romania</i>	<i>Hungary</i>	<i>Turkey</i>	<i>Germany</i>
Dimension	<i>Main Losses</i>	Bessarabia (Moldova) South Dobruja, Bucovina	Transylvania, Vojvodina Upper Hungary	Former Ottoman Empire	Silesia, Sudetenland Alsace-Lorraine
	<i>Salience</i>	High	High	Moderate	Low
	<i>Circumstances of Loss</i>	1940 Soviet annexation	1920 Defeat in WWI	1918 Defeat in WWI	1918, 1945 Defeat in WWI/II
	<i>Co-Nationals</i>	Primarily in Moldova	Numerous	Few <sup>6</sup>	Very few
	<i>Populist Parties</i>	PRM (Opposition), PMP (Opposition)  AUR (Opposition, new in 2020)	Fidesz (Governing)  Jobbik (Opposition)	AKP (Governing), MHP (Supporting, Pan-Turkist)  CHP & IYI (Opposition, Kemalist)	AfD (Opposition)

<sup>5</sup>As one of the Turkish survey respondents noted, Turkey had lost "Europe, Asia and Africa"

<sup>6</sup>While most of the territories comprising the former Ottoman Empire contain at most small populations of ethnic Turks, adherents of Pan-Turkist ideology adopt a far more expansive definition of the nation, which notably includes Azerbaijan.

## 5 Research Design

The experimental component of our analysis is based on a question order experiment: all participants were asked the same question<sup>7</sup>, but at different locations within the survey. Thus, in one version of the survey, respondents are asked about lost territory before answering outcome items, while in the other the outcome measures precede the lost territory prime.(see Table ?? for details of the question order). A third version of the survey also includes a question about policy preferences towards diaspora populations prior to the outcomes. We exclude all subjects assigned to this condition from the main experimental analyses due to the possibility of cross-priming, although all main results are unaffected by this decision (see the Online Appendix).

The question itself serves both as an informational prime and as a data source. The territorial loss treatment begins by providing a brief, neutrally-worded informational statement about the loss of territory, before asking respondents to recall a specific territory and report how concerned they are about its loss. Analogous to “racial priming” experiments in research on race in American politics (Mendelberg, 2017), this is thus a minimal treatment, intended not to persuade respondents or to elicit an emotional response, but simply to *prime* the issue of territorial loss by asking them to actively recall a specific example. Therefore, it should not be expected to make respondents significantly *more concerned* about loss of territory, but rather to increase the salience of pre-existing attitudes with respect to other choices. Moreover, the presence of multiple intervening questions between the prime and the main outcomes makes this a hard test of priming effects, as they must persist over time.

Additionally, since the loss treatment is expected to prime territorial loss, we are interested not only the direct effect of the treatment, but also its *interaction* with reported concern over loss. If the theory is correct, then the effect of the treatment would be to increase the effect of higher levels of concern on other decisions. Since this measure is available for all respondents regardless of question order, its inclusion does not bias the estimates, and we report interacted models as the baseline specification.

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<sup>7</sup>An additional question order randomization on policies towards diaspora communities was also included, but we marginalize over the effects of this treatment since it is not directly related to the main hypotheses.

Finally, the panel structure of the data makes it possible to assess the actual behavioral consequences of holding attitudes towards lost territory, mitigating the typical difficulty of connecting hypothetical choices in survey experiments to real outcomes of interest. Between the first and third waves of the panel survey, a parliamentary election was held in Romania (December 6, 2020), in which a new ethnopopulist party, AUR, achieved an unexpectedly high share, becoming the second largest opposition party with just over 9% of the vote. Although the party officially formed in 2019, its rise to national prominence occurred after the first wave of the panel survey, due to a combination of criticism of government-enacted COVID policies and a platform that emphasized the need to push for reunification with Moldova.<sup>8</sup>

As such, by examining the effect of attitudes towards territorial loss held in the first wave on subsequent vote choice, we can estimate the effect of holding such attitudes on voting for populists without concern for the possibility of reverse causality. Since respondents were unlikely to have been exposed to any AUR messaging at the time of the initial wave, we can be confident that their expressed level of concern was not a result of partisan-motivated reasoning or of opinion leadership from the party elite. While this does not definitively establish causality, as it is still possible that both vote choice and attitudes are caused by an unmeasured third factor, we can minimize this concern by controlling for other factors that might plausibly influence vote choice.

## 5.1 Attitudes to Territorial Loss

Before presenting the main experimental results, we provide a descriptive overview of the general attitudinal patterns observed in the data. While all findings presented in this section are necessarily correlational, to our knowledge they represent the first systematic comparative evidence on the prevalence of popular irredentism in countries without active territorial conflicts.

In all cases except Germany, lost territory has a high baseline level of salience, as evidenced by Figure 1, with responses in the 95-100 range as the modal category in Romania, Hungary, and

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<sup>8</sup>As late as October 2020, two months before the parliamentary elections, AUR only received .33% of the vote in the local elections.

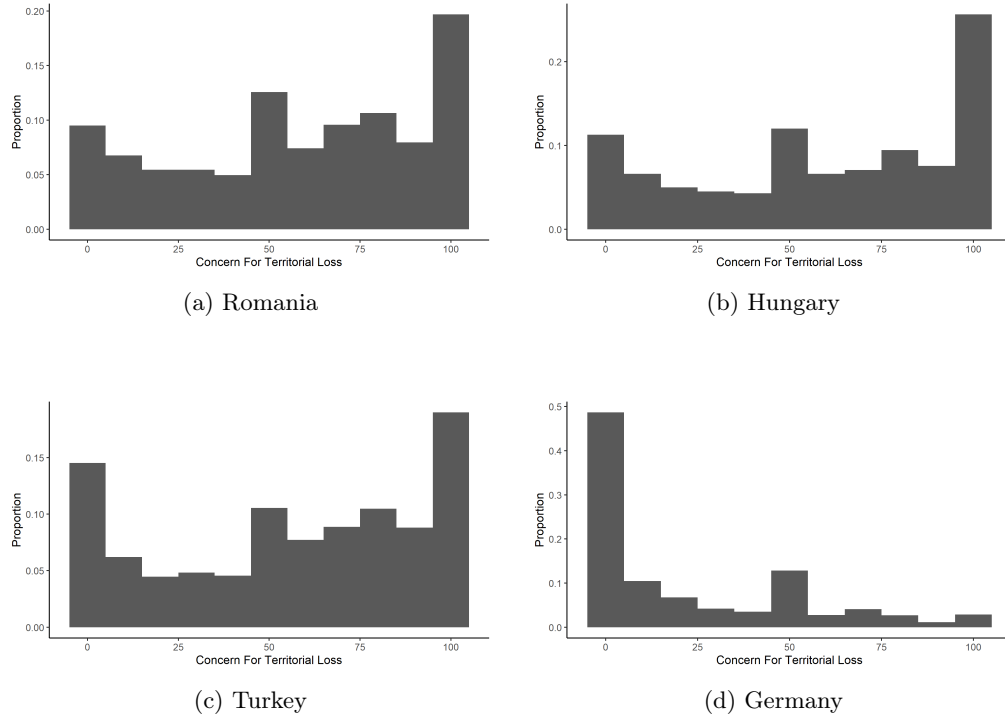


Figure 1: Distribution of concern about lost territories on a 100-point feeling thermometer scale by country.

Turkey for an item tasking respondents with indicating their level of concern on a 100-point “feeling thermometer” scale. Although all samples display clustering at the end- and mid-points, the item has support throughout its entire range, suggesting that the feeling thermometer does indeed capture meaningful variation in attitudes at all levels. Notably, even in Germany, where the largest number of respondents reported 0 concern over lost territories, an absolute majority (60%) nevertheless indicated a positive value in response to the item, reflecting the enduring resonance of this issue.

Table 2 gives the major demographic and attitudinal correlates of loss concern for each country based on a simple multiple regression. The dependent variable in these regressions was the level of concern for lost territories (measured on a 0-100 scale), while the predictors included the level of identification with each country’s culture, nation and state (measured on a 5-point scale), along with a series of demographic indicators and partisanship. The results in Table 2 reflect important

differences in the meaning of lost territory in each country. In Romania and Hungary, where higher education often contains a significant patriotic component, frames of national victimization vis-à-vis the territorial losses are widespread and significant diasporas inhabit the lost territories, both education and identification with the nation, state and ethnic group are strongly associated with concern over lost territory. In Turkey and Germany, by contrast, higher education is weakly negatively associated with average concern over territory, although the relationship is not significant. Notably, support for democracy is also negatively associated with concern over lost territory in Hungary and Germany, where irredentism is particularly strongly associated with anti-democratic political actors. These differences across cases are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2: Correlates of Concern over Territorial Loss by Country

	Territorial Loss Concern				
	Hungary	Romania	Turkey	Germany	Pooled
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Age	-0.098 (0.059)	0.030 (0.081)	-0.136 (0.123)	-0.052 (0.058)	-0.058 (0.036)
Completed University	5.389* (3.018)	9.101** (3.881)	-1.068 (3.751)	-2.397 (3.205)	2.246 (1.810)
Completed Secondary	8.760*** (3.127)	6.510* (3.832)	-1.529 (4.464)	-3.144 (3.518)	3.721* (2.046)
Technical/Vocational Education	6.099** (2.822)	8.000 (5.332)	-0.166 (4.017)	4.156 (3.054)	4.344** (1.842)
Male	7.666*** (1.619)	5.931** (2.496)	-6.466** (2.987)	1.791 (2.154)	3.003*** (1.106)
National Language Speaker	2.273 (3.234)	3.626 (4.839)	7.226 (4.600)	-5.104 (3.472)	0.277 (2.011)
Political Interest	0.855 (0.788)	-0.064 (1.226)	2.181 (1.451)	1.734 (1.077)	1.673*** (0.543)
Cultural ID	3.825*** (1.306)	7.404*** (2.260)	5.802** (2.251)	2.753* (1.559)	4.100*** (0.916)
National ID	6.114*** (1.489)	1.507 (2.318)	0.220 (2.143)	-0.978 (1.791)	2.285** (0.992)
State ID	2.992*** (1.097)	3.561** (1.795)	-3.705* (2.031)	1.276 (1.518)	1.885** (0.780)
Rural	-5.459*** (2.041)	0.440 (2.982)	-7.482 (6.712)	0.858 (2.949)	-2.266 (1.547)
Urban	-4.852* (2.477)	0.700 (2.625)	-0.978 (3.385)	1.834 (2.493)	-0.517 (1.413)
Support for Democracy	-3.325*** (0.966)	-2.845 (1.743)	-3.221* (1.844)	-6.776*** (1.763)	-3.569*** (0.704)
N	1,739	1,629	1,315	1,530	6,249

Note: Region fixed effects included for all models

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

In addition to numerical ratings of concern, the prime also required respondents to name a specific territory that first came to mind. Table 3 gives the overall distribution of territories named in for the whole sample in each case. Notably, although a single territory is noticeably more salient than others in all four cases, only in Romania and Hungary do a majority of respondents name a single territory. In all four cases, moreover, there are at least four distinct territories that are named by over 5% of respondents, underlining the rich array of potential irredentist issues available to political entrepreneurs.

Attitudes towards lost territory also vary spatially within cases, summarized in Figure 2. As might be expected, the general pattern is of an increase in average concern near borders with lost territories. This is particularly prevalent in Romania, where the highest-concern areas are those nearest Moldova, although similar patterns can be observed in Germany (with Saarland and Baden-Wurttemberg displaying particularly high levels of concern) and in the easternmost regions of Turkey. However, this pattern does not hold for all country-territory pairs: in Hungary, for instance, concern is high in essentially all regions, with only slightly higher average values in the regions bordering Romania and Ukraine. In contrast, the western regions of Turkey, despite being the most proximate to the high-salience Aegean islands (see Table 3 for a full breakdown of named territories by case), display the lowest overall salience of lost territory.

The choice of territory is also affected by within-country geographic differences. Figure 3 shows the distribution of respondents naming the overall most-salient territory: Moldova/Bessarabia in Romania, Transylvania/Erdely in Hungary, Greece (particularly the Aegean islands) in Turkey, and Poland/Silesia in Germany. In Romania, Turkey, and Germany, the expected pattern of respondents living closer to the territory in question naming it with higher frequency strongly holds. In Hungary, in contrast, Transylvania is mentioned by the highest proportion of respondents in the regions *furthest* away from the Romanian border.

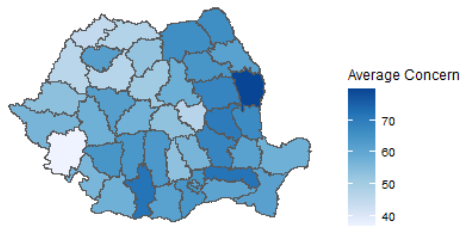
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<sup>9</sup>Note that some respondents listed more than one territory without prompting, so that percentages do not necessarily total to 100%.

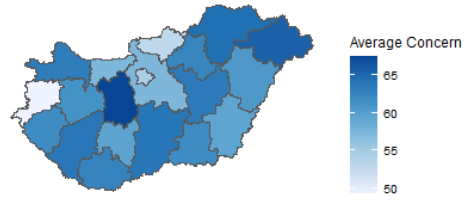


Table 3: Proportion of Respondents Naming Most Salient Territories by Country

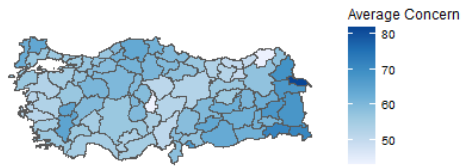
Territory	Proportion <sup>9</sup>
<b>Hungary</b>	
Transylvania/Erdely	69.3 %
Upper Hungary (Slovakia)	12.1 %
Kingdom of Hungary	6.9 %
Vojvodina (Serbia)	6.1 %
Transcarpathia (Ukraine)	5.6 %
Bratislava/Pozsony (Slovakia)	4.7 %
Other	14.3 %
DK/RA	2 %
<b>Romania</b>	
Bessarabia (Moldova)	65.4 %
Bukovina (Ukraine)	12.1 %
South Dobruja (Bulgaria)	8.2 %
Other	16 %
DK/RA	3.8 %
<b>Turkey</b>	
Greece/Aegean Islands	36.7 %
Iraq	17.1 %
Syria	17 %
Balkans	12.9 %
Bulgaria	11.6 %
Arabia/North Africa	7.2 %
Ottoman Empire/Turkey	6 %
Other	16.8 %
DK/RA	8.9 %
<b>Germany</b>	
Silesia (Poland)	41.1 %
Alsace (France)	12.1 %
Kaliningrad (Russia)	10.7 %
Other	23.8 %
DK/RA	14.8 %



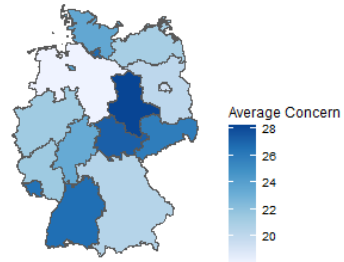
(a) Romania



(b) Hungary



(c) Turkey



(d) Germany

Figure 2: Spatial distribution of concern about lost territories on a 100-point feeling thermometer scale by country. For Turkey, values are spatially interpolated as the average of neighboring regions where the sample size per region is less than 20.

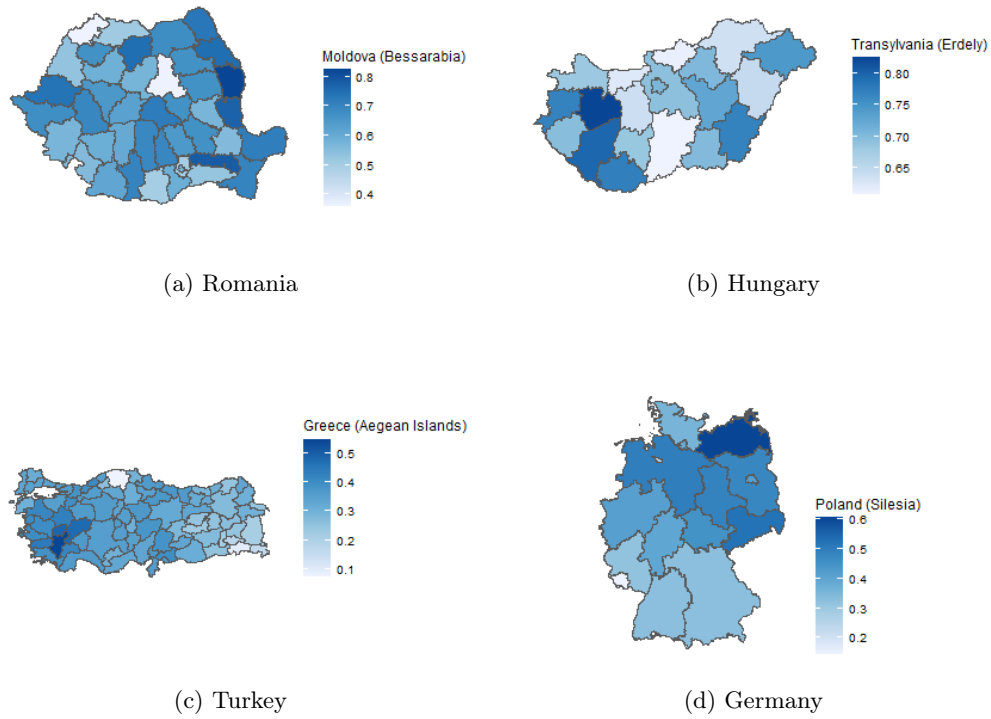


Figure 3: Spatial distribution of proportion of respondents reporting highest-salience lost territory. For Turkey, values are spatially interpolated as the average of neighboring regions where the sample size per region is less than 20.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Territorial Loss Attitudes and Party Choice

We first report the effect of priming territorial loss on ratings of parties that are identifiably populist based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2019<sup>10</sup>. All results come from weighted regressions using inverse probability survey weights and a fixed set of controls, consisting of age, education, gender, urban status, political interest, and support for democracy. The effects on the highest<sup>11</sup> rating assigned to any of the populist parties in the pooled model are shown graphically in Figure 4, as well as disaggregated by the parties in power (Fidesz in Hungary and the AKP and MHP<sup>12</sup> in Turkey) and those in opposition. Average treatment effect estimates of the prime are given in Figure 4a, while Figure 4b shows the estimated effects of reported concern. The predicted probabilities of retrospective vote choice, along with the full set of coefficient estimates across multiple specifications, can be found in the Appendix<sup>13</sup>.

Overall, the results are consistent with both  $H_1$  and  $H_2$ . Territorial loss concerns are strongly and robustly associated with ethnopopulist party ratings, with a shift from 0 to 100 concern equating to an increase in average ratings of over 15 points, or approximately 0.5 standard deviations.

Priming respondents with territorial loss also provides a slight but statistically significant boost to ratings of ethnopopulist parties. Furthermore, as can be seen from Figure 5, which reports marginal effects of the prime by territorial loss concern based on a quadratic interaction model,<sup>14</sup>,

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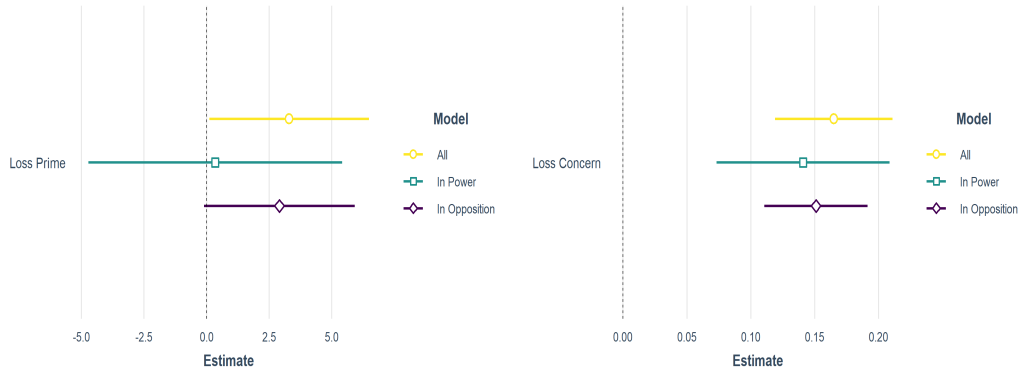
<sup>10</sup>Specifically, we code a party as right populist if it scores above the sample median for 2019 on at least 3 of: GALTAN, People vs. Elite position, and Nationalism, as well as being over 5 on Left vs. Right. For our cases, this yields a classification of AfD (Germany), Fidesz (Hungary), Jobbik (Hungary), AKP (Turkey), MHP (Turkey), IYI (Turkey), PRM (Romania) and PMP (Romania) as right-populist.

<sup>11</sup>We also repeat the analysis using average ratings, as well as using only the “most” populist party in each country based on the CHES. While this choice does not dramatically affect results, the maximum specification is preferred since in several instances populist parties exist on opposite ends of the political spectrum, and polarization effects (i.e. an increase in ratings for some parties and a corresponding decrease in ratings of their opponents) may therefore result in erroneous null estimates of average effects.

<sup>12</sup>While the MHP were not represented in government at the time of the survey, we include them under this category given their open support of Erdogan and the AKP. The results are unchanged by their inclusion or exclusion.

<sup>13</sup>Since vote choice occurred prior to the survey and reports are thus unlikely to have been influenced by the prime, these effects should not be interpreted causally but nonetheless provides additional evidence of an association between loss attitudes and behavior.

<sup>14</sup>See the Appendix for linear interactions and other specifications. In order to interpret this interaction effect as evidence of causal moderation, we must assume that the observed level of concern is unaffected by variation in question order. Since the measurement of territorial loss concern is itself the prime, this item is inherently post-



(a) Average Treatment Effect Estimates of Ex- (b) Coefficient Estimates for Reported Concern  
perimental Prime

Figure 4: Effects of Prime and Loss Concern on Ethnopolulist Party Ratings by Opposition Status

the effect of the prime is largest among respondents with upper-intermediate (around 75 out of 100) levels of reported concern, consistent with  $H_4$ .

In order to test  $H_3$ , we also disaggregate the outcome measure to ratings of parties in power versus those in opposition, shown in the bottom part of Figure 4. Since only two countries – Hungary and Turkey – had populist parties in power at the time of the surveys, the sample size is cut in half for these models, resulting in somewhat larger standard errors.

Although point estimates for effects of both the prime and loss attitudes on populist party ratings are higher for opposition parties than for parties in power, these differences are not significant, indicating weak support for  $H_3$ . However, Figure 5 indicates that there is an important difference in the way priming territorial loss affects respondents with high and low concern between populists in power and those in opposition. Whereas the prime has a slight but non-significant effect on respondents' evaluations of opposition parties at all levels of concern (while ratings increase significantly with concern), priming respondents with territorial loss actually *decreases* the rating of populist parties in power among those with low levels of concern, and has a significant positive effect only on those with moderately high levels of concern.

treatment. In practice, there is no clear reason to expect reported concern to vary systematically as a result of question order, and there is no statistically significant average effect of the question's location on reported concern. Moreover, as we show in the next section, reported concern is quite stable over time. Nevertheless, this caveat should be borne in mind when interpreting these results.

This pattern suggests the potential existence of a trade-off facing populists in power that does not affect their opposition counterparts. While priming territorial losses may result in an increase in support among those who view them as important, it has the opposite effect among those who do *not*. While this finding falls outside of the scope of our stated hypotheses, one potential explanation is that populists in power have strong ownership of the territorial issue, such that for those voters for whom it has negative valence, priming the issue generates harsher evaluative judgements of the party. It is also possible that mentions of lost territories are interpreted as a more credible threat of aggressive (and potentially costly) policy when made by parties that actually hold power, as opposed to marginal opposition parties. For those who view such outcomes as undesirable, then, being reminded of the association between governing populists and irredentist claims may carry more weight. While our data does not allow us to definitively distinguish between these two explanations, we contend that the latter is more likely, since there is no evidence in any of the cases under consideration that populists in opposition have weaker ownership of the territorial issue; if anything, the opposite is true with regards to both Jobbik in Hungary and IYI in Turkey.

Although these results strongly support an association between concern for lost territory and support for populists, they provide only limited information on the broader effects of salient territorial loss on voters' worldviews. To explore this question, we examined the effects of the loss prime on historical evaluations using an item that asked respondents to name the best period in their country's history. Figure 6 shows the predicted probabilities of naming the period of greatest territorial extent across all countries, while the results for individual periods are reported in the Appendix. Consistent with  $\mathbf{H}_5(b)$ , both the prime and the level of concern are positively associated with a significantly higher likelihood of naming the period of the greatest territorial extent.

Of note is that these results also hold in Germany (see Appendix), where the territorial loss prime is associated with a large increase in the odds of naming the Nazi or Kaiserreich eras as the best period in the country's history. Given the ongoing association between right-wing populism and fascist legacies (Caramani & Manucci, 2019), this strongly suggests the ongoing power of

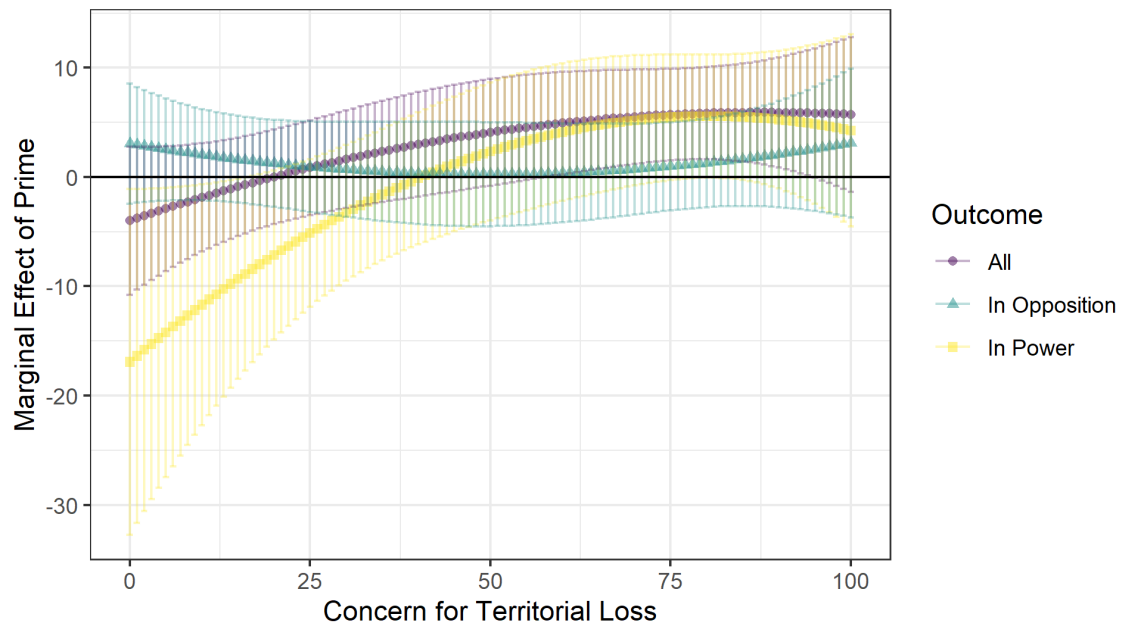


Figure 5: Marginal Effects of Loss Prime by Territorial Loss Status

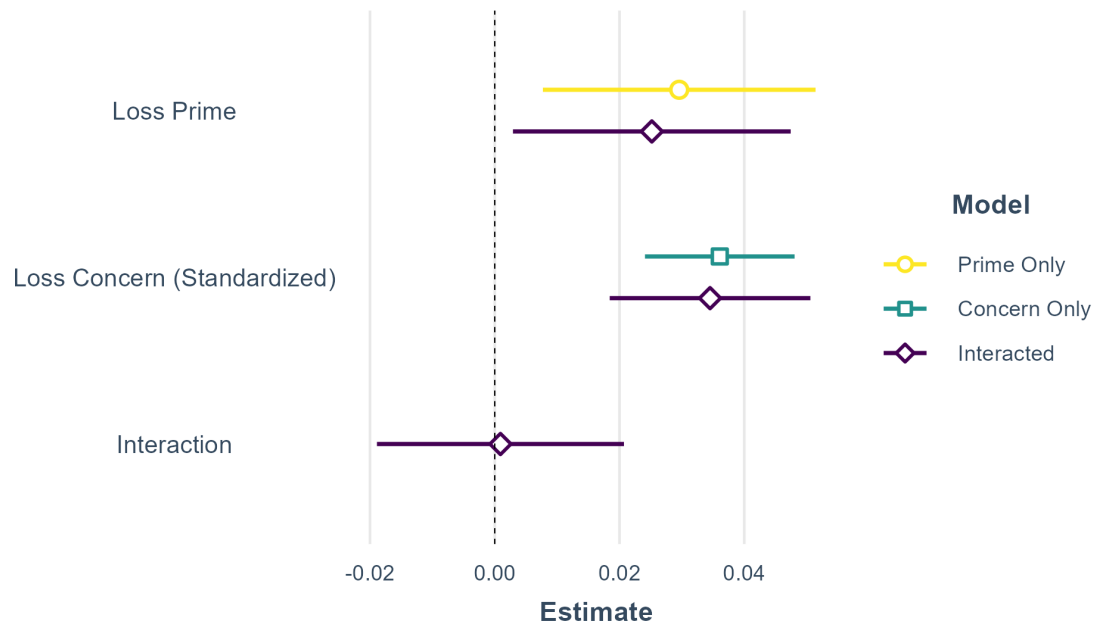


Figure 6: Coefficient Estimates for probability of naming the period of greatest territorial extent as the best time in the country's history

territorial aspirations to shape perceptions of the past, even in least-likely cases like Germany, where irredentism has been broadly discredited and marginalized in mainstream political discourse.

## 6.2 Behavioral Consequences of Concern for Lost Territory: Voting for AUR

As discussed earlier, the sudden rise in popularity between consecutive waves of the survey of AUR, a right-populist party openly running on a platform emphasizing reunification with Moldova as a high priority and criticizing the established parties over their inaction on that front, presents an ideal opportunity to examine the actual behavioral consequences of attitudes toward territory. Since the design of Study 1 involves asking *all* respondents, regardless of treatment assignment, how concerned they are about lost territory – as well as which specific territories – at some point in the survey, it is possible to test for all respondents who participated in both waves whether those who were initially more concerned about the loss of territory were also more likely to defect to AUR.

A potential concern in this analysis is the high attrition rate between waves, as correlation between attrition and political attitudes could lead to spurious findings. Although Wave 1 territorial loss attitudes are uncorrelated with attrition, the potential for indirect confounding still exists. In order to mitigate this issue, we therefore re-weight all respondents by their predicted probability of attrition.

As the first two columns of Table 4 clearly show, the expectation that concern about lost territory causes defection to ethnopopulist parties is strongly borne out in this case. For both actual voting and subjective proximity to the party measured after the election, the effect of territorial loss concern on a 100-point scale is significant and similar in magnitude to being one year younger, which is the other strongest predictors of AUR support.

Respondents' approval of the government's handling of the pandemic in 2020<sup>15</sup> (again, prior to

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<sup>15</sup>Specifically, we use a four-item scale measuring respondents' degree of satisfaction with the handling of the pandemic by different authorities, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.88$



Table 4: Effects of Concern over Loss on AUR Support

	Voted for AUR (1)	Close to AUR (2)	Loss Concern (W4) (3)
Loss Concern (W1)	3.421** (1.409)	18.873*** (3.710)	0.590*** (0.065)
COVID Policy Approval (W1)	-3.379* (1.911)	-20.598*** (6.907)	
Age	-0.055* (0.032)	-0.234** (0.116)	0.002 (0.002)
N	303	302	164

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

All models include regional fixed effects as well as demographic and attitudinal controls. Standard errors are HC1. Model (1) is a logistic regression.

Loss Concern and COVID Approval are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

AUR's rise to prominence), moreover, *does not* predict the decision to vote for AUR, although it is significantly associated with reported closeness to a substantively similar degree to territorial loss concern. Given AUR's position as an anti-lockdown party in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic – an aspect of its programme frequently emphasized by political observers at the time (Heil, Popescu, & Andrei, 2020) – this finding is especially remarkable. Although the small sample size implies that caution should be taken in generalizing this conclusion, it strongly suggests that, at least for a significant number of voters, latent concern over Moldova played as much of a role in defecting to this new populist party as did disillusionment over lockdown policies.

The main threat to interpreting these estimates as causal is the possibility voters are simply taking their cues from elites, and that it is an (unmeasured) preexisting exposure to AUR leaders or other affiliated elites that is generating the association, and not a genuine effect of stable attitudes. While the timing of the waves makes this unlikely, were this the case, we would also expect a post-election effect of AUR partisanship, as people bring their views more in line with the party after voting for them. Column 3 of Table 4, which regresses the reported concern in the fourth wave on voting in the third wave and concern in the first, reveals the opposite: attitudes are highly stable across waves, and having voted for AUR has no statistically significant effect, with the point estimate in the opposite direction from expected. It is therefore highly unlikely that elite

signalling is driving the observed relationship, lending further weight to a causal interpretation.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, we argue for the role of territorial loss as an important and thus far overlooked determinant of support for populist parties. Due to its close conceptual affinity with the rhetorical strategies employed by right-wing populists, the issue of territorial loss is particularly well-suited to parties of this type. By playing on a combination of nationalism, victimization narratives, and nostalgia, populist parties in countries that have experienced significant territorial losses are able to benefit from positive associations with an imagined past while discrediting their mainstream opponents.

Using a combination of a panel survey and an original experiment, we provide evidence to support this intuition, demonstrating that attitudes towards territorial loss are robustly associated with party evaluations and vote choice. This holds observationally: individuals who report greater concern over past territorial losses also indicate greater support for ethnopopulist parties. Our experimental findings also support a causal interpretation for this relationship, as respondents who reflect on past losses subsequently increase their support for populist parties. This holds particularly true for those with a moderately high level of concern over the loss they named, indicating that populists seeking to mobilize support around feelings of loss may benefit primarily through its heightened salience for those who already feel strong attachments. At the same time, analysis of heterogeneity between governing and opposition parties indicates that populists in power face a trade-off between gaining support from this demographic and losing it from those for whom territorial losses carry no weight.

At the same time, descriptive evidence suggests that the magnitude of this trade-off may be relatively small. With the exception of Germany, the distribution of concern over territorial losses skews rather high in all cases, despite the limited scope for territorial aggression in Romania and Hungary. Notably, the distribution of concern reported in Hungary and Romania is not

significantly different from that in Turkey – a country which is currently occupying parts of neighboring Syria, a fact referred to by a substantial proportion of respondents. To the extent that populist politicians stand to gain from exploiting popular concern over past territorial losses, then, our results suggest that they frequently enjoy a deep well of potential support.

This interpretation is supported by our analysis of a natural experiment created by the emergence of a new populist party in Romania between survey waves. The case of AUR allows us to demonstrate that attitudes to territorial loss are both stable over time and have a causal effect on voting for populism, and not the reverse. While politicians undoubtedly play a role in fostering such attitudes over the long term, the results presented in this paper are more consistent with the interpretation of historical attitudes as stable features of individuals that are shaped by education and social environment than as something that can be created from thin air by opportunistic elites. Instead, at least over the relatively short time scale considered here, our findings suggest that the association between territorial loss concern and support for populism stems from the ability of populist parties – especially in opposition – to exploit existing attitudes, rather than to create them.

Beyond the narrow issue for support for populist parties, we find large effects of the minimal prime of lost territory on evaluations of national history, including a significant rise in positive evaluations of the Nazi era in Germany. Unlike party ratings, which may be relatively settled, people are rarely called upon in everyday life to determine the greatest period in their country's history. In this context, the effect of reflecting on loss is to increase the relevance of territory in historical evaluations. This, in turn, has potentially dramatic implications for contemporary politics: if political entrepreneurs are successful in equating the value of historical models with their territorial extent, it may be easier to convince their audience to accept trade-offs with regard to redistribution, regime type, or other relevant policy dimensions.

Taken together, the results of this paper suggest that, despite strong international norms to the contrary, territorial claims remain an important determinant of domestic politics, and should not be overlooked. Even in cases such as Germany, where the idea of territorial expansion has been

repudiated in mainstream political discourse, large numbers of people continue to feel strong concern over past losses. This latent concern represents a potential wellspring of support for populist challengers, even if they face potential trade-offs with regard to alienating voters who are unconcerned about territory. As such, future analyses of the sources of support for populist parties would benefit from taking into account the potential for mobilization around historical narratives of territorial loss.

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