

The Language of Eroding Democracy: A Comparative CDA of Legitimation Strategies in Geo-Political Populism of Trump, Orbán, and Saïed

Benjamin Ankomah-Appiah *

Institution: Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ankomahppiahb@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7687-2964>

<https://doi.org/10.63939/JSS.2026-Vol10.N39.61-85>

Received: 26/02/2026, Accepted: 28/03/2026, Published: 30/03/2026

Abstract: This paper examines the discursive mechanisms facilitating the process of autocratization in contemporary global politics, that is, the gradual concentration of executive power by elected leaders who dismantle institutional checks on their authority. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Theo van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) framework of legitimisation, the study conducts a comparative analysis of the rhetoric employed by Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Kaïs Saïed (Tunisia). By analyzing key speeches, legislative defenses, and administrative narratives from 2021 to 2026, the research identifies a recurring "Autocratic Pivot" in political discourse. The findings suggest that while these leaders operate in diverse geopolitical contexts, ranging from a long-established democracy, to an electoral autocracy embedded within the EU, to a nascent post-revolutionary state, they converge on a shared rhetorical strategy: the continuous deployment of legitimisation strategies, particularly Moral Evaluation and Mythopoesis, to accompany and justify autocratic legal measures. This populist rhetoric does not replace autocratic action; rather, it perpetually escorts it. The paper concludes that the erosion of democratic norms is preceded and sustained by a linguistic transformation in which Authorization (the rule of law) is increasingly subordinated to the personalistic narrative of the leader, providing a framework for identifying discursive "red flags" of autocratization, defined here as rhetorical patterns that precede or accompany concrete institutional dismantling.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimation Strategies, Populism, Autocratization, Van Leeuwen.

©2026, Benjamin Ankomah-Appiah, licensee Democratic Arab Center. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC4.0), which permits non-commercial use of the material, appropriate credit, and indication if changes in the material were made. You can copy and red istribute the material in any medium or format as well as remix, transform, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited.// <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

*Corresponding author

The Language of Eroding Democracy: A Comparative CDA of Legitimation Strategies in Geo-Political Populism of Trump, Orbán, and Saïed

Benjamin Ankomah-Appiah *

Institution: Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary

ankomahppiahb@yahoo.com



<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7687-2964>

<https://doi.org/10.63939/JSS.2026-Vol10.N39.61-85>

Received: 26/02/2026, **Accepted:** 28/03/2026, **Published:** 30/03/2026

Abstract: This paper examines the discursive mechanisms facilitating the process of autocratization in contemporary global politics, that is, the gradual concentration of executive power by elected leaders who dismantle institutional checks on their authority. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Theo van Leeuwen's (2007, 2008) framework of legitimisation, the study conducts a comparative analysis of the rhetoric employed by Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Kaïs Saïed (Tunisia). By analyzing key speeches, legislative defenses, and administrative narratives from 2021 to 2026, the research identifies a recurring "Autocratic Pivot" in political discourse. The findings suggest that while these leaders operate in diverse geopolitical contexts, ranging from a long-established democracy, to an electoral autocracy embedded within the EU, to a nascent post-revolutionary state, they converge on a shared rhetorical strategy: the continuous deployment of legitimisation strategies, particularly Moral Evaluation and Mythopoesis, to accompany and justify autocratic legal measures. This populist rhetoric does not replace autocratic action; rather, it perpetually escorts it. The paper concludes that the erosion of democratic norms is preceded and sustained by a linguistic transformation in which Authorization (the rule of law) is increasingly subordinated to the personalistic narrative of the leader, providing a framework for identifying discursive "red flags" of autocratization, defined here as rhetorical patterns that precede or accompany concrete institutional dismantling.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Legitimation Strategies, Populism, Autocratization, Van Leeuwen.

©2026, Benjamin Ankomah-Appiah, licensee DemocraticArab Center. This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC4.0), which permits non-commercial use of the material, appropriate credit, and indication if changes in the material were made. You can copy and red istribute the material in any medium or format as well as remix, transform, and build upon the material, provided the original work is properly cited.// <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

*Corresponding author

1. Introduction

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, the global political landscape is increasingly shaped by processes of autocratization, a term preferred here over the more common “democratic backsliding,” which presupposes a consolidated democracy from which a country retreats. As Luría and Luhrmann (2021) note, autocratization refers to the gradual decline in democratic qualities of governance, and it can occur from very different starting points. The United States has over two hundred years of democratic tradition; Hungary experienced approximately two decades of post-communist democracy before its erosion began; and Tunisia had only a few years of fragile democratic transition after the 2011 revolution before its reversal. These differing baselines make the concept of ‘backsliding’ imprecise: it is the process of autocratization that is common to all three, not the level of democracy from which they started. The rejection of ‘backsliding’ as a catch-all term is particularly necessary given the disparate historical baselines of these cases. While the United States represents a consolidated democracy of over two centuries, Hungary’s democratic period spanned roughly twenty years, and Tunisia’s post-revolutionary transition lasted only a few years without reaching consolidation. Furthermore, the ‘red flags’ of autocratization must be defined not as mere rhetoric, but as diagnostic indicators such as the shift toward dehumanizing metaphors that provide early warning signals before concrete institutional dismantling occurs.

Unlike the abrupt military coups of the twentieth century, contemporary autocratization is often a “stealth” process, conducted through law and,

crucially, through language. It is vital to distinguish between these two dimensions: the law constitutes the substance of autocracy (the actual measures that concentrate power), while language constitutes its rhetoric (the discursive strategies that make those measures seem legitimate, necessary, or desirable). This paper is concerned primarily with the latter, while remaining attentive to the former. The claim is not that language “causes” autocracy, but that autocratic legal measures are systematically accompanied and enabled by specific legitimisation strategies in political discourse.

This paper examines these discursive mechanisms through a Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of three prominent global leaders: Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Kaïs Saïed (Tunisia). While these leaders operate in vastly different geopolitical contexts, they share a common rhetorical trajectory: the use of legitimisation strategies to justify the concentration of executive power and the delegitimation of opposition. Drawing on Theo van Leeuwen’s framework of legitimisation in discourse (2007, 2008), this study categorizes their rhetoric into four primary streams: Authorization (appeals to tradition or law), Moral Evaluation (appeals to value systems), Rationalization (appeals to utility or efficiency), and Mythopoesis (legitimation through narrative).

The central argument of this paper is that autocratization is not merely a political event, but a linguistic achievement. Rather than positing a clean “shift from populist rhetoric to autocracy”, which would incorrectly imply that populist language is eventually abandoned, this paper argues that populist rhetoric *continuously escorts* autocratic legal measures

throughout the process of power consolidation. What changes over time is not the presence of populist language, but its intensity and its specific targets: as leaders entrench their power, Moral Evaluation increasingly shifts from criticizing “policies” to attacking the “humanity” of opponents, and Mythopoesis escalates from national grievance to existential crisis narrative. It is this escalation, rather than a categorical shift, that marks the “Autocratic Pivot.” The “red flags” of autocratization identified in this paper are therefore defined as specific, observable rhetorical patterns, such as the dehumanization of political opponents and the framing of emergency rule as moral necessity, that *precede or accompany* concrete institutional dismantling and thus serve as early warning signals for scholars and citizens alike.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically the socio-political approach pioneered by Norman Fairclough (1995). CDA is not merely the study of grammar; it is the study of how power is reproduced through language. According to Fairclough (1995), discourse is a social practice that both reflects and shapes social structures. In the context of autocratization, CDA allows us to see how leaders use repetitive linguistic patterns to “naturalize” radical actions, making a power grab seem like a common-sense necessity. Crucially, CDA does not treat language as a mirror of political reality; rather, it treats language as a constitutive force, one that produces the very categories (the “enemy

within,” the “corrupt elite,” the “sovereign people”) that autocratic governance requires.

2.2 Van Leeuwen’s Legitimation Strategies

To analyze the specific mechanisms of this power-building, this paper adopts the framework of Theo van Leeuwen (2007, 2008). Van Leeuwen identifies four primary categories through which a social practice is made legitimate:

- **Authorization:** Legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom, law, or persons in whom institutional authority is vested (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the context of autocratization, Authorization can be used both to claim a democratic mandate and to rewrite the legal framework so that autocratic rule becomes “legal” by definition.
- **Moral Evaluation:** Legitimation by reference to value systems. Often “veiled,” this strategy relies on moral abstractions to link actions to what is deemed “good” or “clean” (van Leeuwen, 2008). Its most dangerous escalation occurs when it shifts from evaluating policies to evaluating persons, casting opponents not merely as wrong, but as morally unfit or subhuman.
- **Rationalization:** Legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, focusing on the utility and “truth” of the procedure (van Leeuwen, 2007). In autocratic discourse, Rationalization typically frames the bypassing of democratic deliberation as a pragmatic necessity: the nation’s problems are too urgent to wait for slow institutional processes.

- Mythopoesis: Legitimation through storytelling, specifically cautionary tales that warn of the dangers of non-compliance, or moral tales that reward adherence to the leader's path (van Leeuwen, 2008). In autocratic discourse, Mythopoesis constructs the leader as a messianic or redemptive figure, and the nation as existing in a state of existential peril that only this figure can resolve.

2.3 Populism, Anti-Pluralism, and the Limits of the Concept

To bridge these linguistic strategies with political science, this paper draws on Jan-Werner Müller's (2016) theorization of populism as, at its core, a rejection of political pluralism. For Müller, populists claim that they, and only they, represent "the real people," thereby delegitimizing all other political actors as "corrupt" or "illegitimate." This paper applies this characterization selectively and with important qualification: not all populists are anti-pluralist. Left-wing populists such as Bernie Sanders employ a rhetoric of popular sovereignty without delegitimizing democratic opponents or dismantling institutional checks. The anti-pluralist variant of populism identified by Müller is characteristic specifically of *right-wing authoritarian populism*, and it is this variant, exemplified by Trump, Orbán, and Saïed, that is the subject of this paper. This distinction is vital because, as noted by Müller (2016), while all three leaders in this study are anti-pluralist, not all populists share this trait. A leader may employ a rhetoric of popular sovereignty, such as Bernie Sanders, without delegitimizing democratic opponents or attempting to dismantle the institutional checks that define a pluralistic system. The theoretical contribution here is to map how van Leeuwen's

legitimation strategies are used to construct this unmediated, exclusionary mandate, transforming the leader from a “representative” into a “sovereign” who claims authority above established institutions.

3. Case Selection

3.1 Case Selection

The selection of Donald Trump (United States), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), and Kaïs Saïed (Tunisia) as the primary units of analysis follows a purposive sampling strategy. Specifically, this study utilizes a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) to examine convergent rhetorical patterns across diverse geopolitical and institutional landscapes. This approach is chosen to demonstrate that while these leaders operate in vastly different environments, their linguistic strategies for legitimizing power are strikingly convergent despite, and indeed across, those differences.

The rationale for selecting these specific cases rests on four primary criteria:

- **Institutional Diversity:** These cases represent three distinct stages and types of democratic experience. Trump operates within a long-standing constitutional democracy with entrenched institutional checks built over more than two centuries. Orbán represents an “electoral autocracy” (Diamond, 2002) within the European Union, having presided over the systematic capture of Hungary’s state institutions since 2010. Saïed offers a unique example of what scholars have termed an *autogolpe*, or self-coup,

in a nascent democracy: the leader's unilateral seizure of expanded powers from within a still-fragile post-revolutionary system (defined further in Section 5.1).

- **Rhetorical Typology:** Each leader serves as an “ideal type” for different legitimisation strategies. Orbán excels in Legalistic Authorization; Trump in Redemptive Mythopoesis; Saïed in Moral Purification. This variation allows for a comprehensive mapping of how different rhetorical tools achieve the shared goal of autocratization.
- **Temporal Relevance:** As of March 2026, all three leaders are at critical junctures of power consolidation. Trump's 2025 return to the presidency provides a real-time laboratory for the intensification of executive power, building on, and substantially exceeding, the institutional pressures of his first term (discussed further in Section 3.2). Orbán's ongoing “Sovereignty” laws and Saïed's “New Republic” represent the current frontier of global illiberalism.
- **Evidence of Cross-Pollination:** There is significant evidence that these leaders observe and mirror each other's strategies. U.S. conservative movements have explicitly cited the “Orbanisation” of Hungary as a model for administrative reform in the second Trump term, suggesting the emergence of a shared “Global Autocratic Playbook” that transcends regional specificity.

3.2 Case Study 1: Donald Trump (The “Redeemer”)

This section analyzes the discourse of Donald Trump, focusing specifically on his second inauguration and early actions in 2025–2026. A clarification is warranted regarding the term “re-autocratization” used in some earlier discussions of this case: Trump’s second presidency is not simply a repetition of his first. While his first term (2017–2021) was characterized by autocratic rhetoric and repeated institutional friction, including attacks on the judiciary, the press, and the intelligence community, those tendencies were substantially constrained by career officials, congressional oversight, and legal challenges. His second term, by contrast, reflects a more systematic and better-prepared effort at executive consolidation, informed by blueprints such as Project 2025 and enabled by a more politically aligned executive branch. It is this *qualitative intensification*, rather than mere repetition, that justifies treating the current moment as a distinct and more advanced phase of autocratization. The term ‘re-autocratization’ highlights that Trump’s 2025 return is a qualitative intensification rather than a repetition. Unlike his first term, which was constrained by career officials and oversight, the current phase is characterized by a more systematic effort at executive consolidation, informed by detailed administrative blueprints and a more politically aligned executive branch

3.3 Mythopoesis: The Narrative of “Liberation Day”

A defining feature of Trump’s recent discourse is the shift from fixing a “broken” system to “liberating” the nation from it. During his campaign and subsequent administrative messaging, Trump has utilized

Mythopoesis to construct the status quo as a terminal crisis requiring a redemptive savior. He famously pledged to “root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country” (as cited in Washington Post, 2023). The zoomorphic language here, “vermin” is not merely hyperbole; it is a textbook instance of Moral Exclusion, moving opponents outside the boundary of the legitimate political community. By portraying his leadership as the sole “salvific force” capable of overcoming this internal rot, he legitimizes the bypassing of traditional democratic norms as a heroic, even necessary, act of national liberation.

This narrative structure follows what van Leeuwen (2008) calls the “moral tale” variant of Mythopoesis: the leader’s unconventional actions are presented as the courageous path that leads to national salvation, while adherence to institutional norms is recast as cowardice or complicity with the enemy. The January 6, 2025 inauguration speech exemplifies this: Trump framed his return not as a political victory but as a providential rescue, “America’s decline is over” rendering institutional resistance to his agenda rhetorically equivalent to wishing for the nation’s continued suffering.

3.4 Moral Evaluation: The “Enemy from Within”

Trump’s use of Moral Evaluation has intensified in his second term. The rhetorical target has expanded from abstract “elites” to specific institutional actors, whom he labels “the enemy from within” (Trump, 2024). This escalation employs what van Leeuwen (2008) describes as “moral triggers” language designed to lower the audience’s resistance to

radical institutional changes by casting them as defensive rather than aggressive acts.

A key example is Trump's characterization of the career federal civil service. By framing non-partisan professional administrators as a "corrupt establishment," he utilizes Moral Evaluation to justify replacing them with political loyalists, a process rhetorically framed as "cleansing" the government. The substance of this measure is autocratic (it removes independent institutional actors); the language accompanying it is populist-moral (it casts the removal as a restoration of the people's will against entrenched corruption).

3.5 Rationalization and Authorization: The Mandate for Speed

To legitimize the swift and extensive use of executive power, Trump relies on Rationalization centered on "efficiency." The centralization of federal agencies is justified as a matter of "economic growth" and "securing the border" (Trump, 2024) practical goals that frame the bypassing of Congressional deliberation as pragmatic rather than anti-democratic. This is complemented by Authorization through the claim of a massive electoral "mandate for change": the 2024 election result is construed not merely as a political victory but as a popular sovereign instruction that authorizes immediate and extensive executive action. Institutional actors who resist this mandate are thereby framed not as defenders of the constitutional order, but as obstacles to the democratically expressed will of the people.

4. Case Study 2: Viktor Orbán (The “Legalist”)

Viktor Orbán provides the “institutional blueprint” for autocratization through legal means. While Trump often relies on personal charisma and direct confrontation with institutions, Orbán’s discourse is a masterclass in Legalistic Authorization: he uses the language of democracy to hollow it out from within. It is essential to note, as Müller (2016) and others have observed, that Orbán has never theoretically rejected democratic deliberation; he consistently presents his actions as expressions of it. The autocratic substance, the systematic capture of the judiciary, media, and electoral system is always wrapped in the rhetorical form of popular mandate and constitutional procedure.

4.1 Authorization: The “Sovereignty” Defense

Orbán’s primary legitimisation strategy is Authorization, specifically through the lens of “national sovereignty.” Since returning to power in 2010, he has redefined law not as a check on power, but as a tool for it. This is the critical distinction: the legal instruments he deploys have the formal character of democratic authorization (parliamentary votes, constitutional amendments), but their substance systematically eliminates the conditions under which genuine democratic competition can occur.

- **The “Illiberal” Mandate:** In his 2024 addresses regarding the “Defense of Sovereignty Act,” Orbán justifies the creation of a state body to monitor foreign influence by citing the “mandate of the Hungarian people” (Orbán, 2024). By framing his actions as a defense of the nation against “Brussels bureaucrats” and “foreign-funded NGOs,” he uses Institutional Authorization to justify laws

that effectively criminalize civil society (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). The rhetorical move is always the same: the autocratic measure is the defense; the opponent of the measure is the aggressor.

- **Constitutional Majoritarianism:** He legitimizes the rewriting of the constitution by arguing that a two-thirds parliamentary majority constitutes an absolute moral and legal authority that supersedes liberal democratic norms. What is occluded in this argument is that the conditions producing this supermajority, gerrymandered electoral districts, state-captured media, restricted campaign finance, are themselves products of earlier autocratic measures.

4.2 Moral Evaluation: The Defender of “Christian Liberty”

Orbán utilizes Moral Evaluation to shift political debate from policy to identity. He famously coined the term “Illiberal Democracy” to frame his regime as a morally superior alternative to the “corrupt” and “decadent” West (Orbán, 2014). This strategy works by inverting the moral valence of liberalism: where liberal democracy presents itself as the defender of freedom and pluralism, Orbán’s rhetoric presents it as a threat to authentic national and religious identity.

- **Protective Morality:** His rhetoric frequently links national survival to the protection of “traditional family values” and “Christian culture.” By labeling opponents as “globalists” or “servants of Soros,” he employs what van Leeuwen (2008) calls Moral Triggers, which exclude opposition from the “moral

community” of the nation. Crucially, this exclusion is the rhetorical complement to the legal exclusion enacted by his sovereignty and NGO legislation.

- **The “Peace” Narrative as Populist Rhetoric:** During the 2024 - 2025 European tensions, Orbán framed his autocratic control as a “pro-peace” necessity, painting domestic critics as “pro-war” actors who threaten Hungarian lives. It is important to distinguish this rhetorical strategy from the autocratic measures it accompanies: the “peace” narrative is a populist framing device, not an institutional action. The autocratic substance in this domain lies elsewhere specifically in the centralization of media ownership, which eliminates the conditions for independent journalistic scrutiny of that very narrative.
- Orbán’s ‘peace’ narrative serves as a clear example of populist rhetoric that lacks direct autocratic content. It must be distinguished from the autocratic substance it accompanies, such as the centralization of media ownership, which provides the institutional power to enforce that narrative. Additionally, it should be noted that Orbán does not theoretically deny democratic deliberation; rather, he maintains the outward form of a popular mandate while hollowing out the actual conditions such as judicial independence and media pluralism required for its practice.

4.3 Mythopoesis: The “Trianon” Trauma and Eternal Siege

Orbán is a master of Mythopoesis, specifically what may be called the “Siege Narrative.” He links modern political challenges to deep historical

Hungarian traumas, most notably the Treaty of Trianon (1920), which stripped Hungary of approximately two-thirds of its pre-war territory and remains a potent wound in national memory.

- **The Cautionary Tale:** He constructs a narrative in which Hungary is under constant attack from “migrant invasions” and “gender ideology” (Orbán, 2024). Following van Leeuwen’s (2008) taxonomy, this functions as a Cautionary Tale: if the leader is not granted continued and unconstrained power to defend the nation’s borders, physical, cultural, and moral, the nation will cease to exist as a coherent entity. The existential stakes of this narrative serve to render institutional constraints on executive power not merely inconvenient, but existentially dangerous.
- **The Moral Tale of Economic Sovereignty:** He justifies the centralization of media and economic assets in the hands of political allies by narrating it as a “Moral Tale” of national champions, local businesspeople whose success is framed as a victory for Hungarian independence rather than as the oligarchic cronyism that independent analysts have documented.

5. Case Study 3: Kaïs Saïed – The “Purist”

Kaïs Saïed offers a unique model of “anti-institutional” autocratization. Unlike Orbán, who works through a dominant party and maintains the formal architecture of parliamentary democracy, Saïed has legitimized the total dismantling of the party system itself, framing intermediary political bodies as the primary source of national decay.

5.1 Authorization: The “Exceptional” Mandate and the Concept of Autogolpe

Saïed’s primary strategy for seizing power was Authorization through a contested legal interpretation. On July 25, 2021, he invoked Article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, a clause explicitly intended for responding to “imminent danger” to freeze parliament and dismiss the Prime Minister (Yerkes & LaHood, 2022). This action constitutes what comparative political scientists term an *autogolpe* (self-coup): a seizure of expanded powers by an already-elected leader who uses the formal instruments of the state against the other branches of government, thereby concentrating authority without resorting to a military intervention or external coup. The concept is distinguished from a conventional coup by the fact that legitimacy is claimed however contested from within the constitutional order itself. Saïed’s status as a former constitutional law professor was instrumentalized in this regard: his professional authority was deployed to authorize what critics, including Redissi (2022), described as a blatant misapplication of the emergency clause. The seizure of power in Tunisia is best defined as an *autogolpe* (self-coup), wherein an elected leader uses the formal instruments of the state, such as Saïed’s invocation of Article 80, to concentrate authority and bypass other branches of government. By claiming legitimacy from within the constitutional order while simultaneously dismantling it, the leader transforms the legal source of authorization into a tool for personal charismatic rule.

- **The “Clean” Decree:** Saïed subsequently legitimized his rule by decree (Decree 117) by arguing that the 2014 Constitution was itself a “corrupt” document that prevented effective governance,

thereby necessitating a “New Republic” grounded in a direct and unmediated link between the leader and the people (Gobe, 2024). This rhetorical move is significant: it transforms the constitutional order from the source of Authorization into the object of moral condemnation, replacing legal legitimacy with personal charismatic authority.

5.2 Moral Evaluation: The War on “Political Cancer”

Saïed utilizes Moral Evaluation more aggressively than almost any other contemporary populist to dehumanize the political class. He characterizes political parties not as legitimate competitors, but as “corrupt elites” and “locusts” that have “betrayed the revolution” (Legal Agenda, 2021). The agricultural metaphor of “locusts” is telling: like Trump’s “vermin,” it positions opponents not as political adversaries to be defeated in elections, but as parasitic organisms to be eradicated.

- **The “Pure” vs. “Corrupt” Dichotomy:** Following the classic populist logic identified by Müller (2016), Saïed frames Tunisian society as split between the “virtuous people” and a “nefarious elite.” The rhetorical function of this binary is to pre-empt legitimate political opposition: any critic of Saïed’s measures can be categorized as belonging to the “corrupt” side of the divide, rendering their objections not arguments to be answered but symptoms of the very disease he claims to be treating.
- **Purification of the Judiciary:** In 2022, Saïed dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, legitimizing the move as a moral necessity to “cleanse” a judiciary he labeled as “partisan” and

“unclean” (Freedom House, 2022). The purification language here is the rhetorical complement to the institutional substance: the dissolution of an independent judicial body is framed not as an attack on the separation of powers, but as a hygienic act of national renewal.

5.3 Mythopoesis: Conspiracist Populism and “Great Replacement”

Saïed’s rhetoric increasingly relies on Mythopoesis through conspiracy theories to explain Tunisia’s persistent economic and social failures.

- **The Internal and External Enemy:** He frequently warns of “dark rooms” and “secret plots” orchestrated by domestic traitors and foreign powers to destabilize Tunisia (ResearchGate, 2025). This narrative functions as what van Leeuwen (2008) identifies as a Cautionary Tale: the permanence of the conspiratorial threat legitimizes the permanence of emergency rule.
- **The “Great Replacement” Narrative:** In early 2023, Saïed employed a racialized variant of Mythopoesis, claiming there was a “criminal plot” to change Tunisia’s demographic composition through sub-Saharan migration (MDPI, 2024). By constructing this existential Cautionary Tale, he legitimizes a hyper-securitized state in which dissent is equated with national treason. This represents the most extreme deployment of Moral Exclusion analyzed in this paper: the excluded group is not political opponents but an entire racialized population.

6. Comparative Discussion: The “Autocratic Pivot”

6.1 Convergent Patterns: The Crisis-Exception Loop

Despite their diverse political systems, Trump, Orbán, and Saïed converge on a singular discursive mechanism: the Crisis-Exception Loop. All three leaders utilize Mythopoesis to construct an existential threat whether it is the “Deep State” (USA), “Migration/Brussels” (Hungary), or “Corrupt Parties” (Tunisia). Once a “terminal crisis” is narratively established, Rationalization is used to argue that traditional democratic deliberation is a luxury the nation can no longer afford. The result is that autocratization is presented not as a desire for power, but as a rational emergency response to ensure national survival. Importantly, this loop does not replace democratic institutions immediately; it constructs the rhetorical conditions under which their dismantling becomes publicly acceptable.

6.2 Divergent Methods of Authorization

The primary difference between the three cases lies in their use of Authorization to dismantle checks and balances:

- **Institutional Capture (Orbán):** Legitimation occurs through the law. He uses “Constitutional Authorization” to rewrite the rules of the game, making autocracy legal by definition. At no point does Orbán theoretically reject democratic deliberation; he simply ensures that the conditions under which genuine deliberation could occur are progressively eliminated.

- **Anti-Institutional Purge (Saïed):** Legitimation occurs against existing law. He uses “Charismatic Authorization,” claiming a direct mandate from “the people” that is presented as superior to any written constitution or parliament. This is the most radical Authorization strategy: it dissolves the distinction between the leader’s will and the general will.
- **Personalistic Disruptor (Trump):** Legitimation occurs above the bureaucracy. He uses “Mandate Authorization,” framing the 2024 election as a “Liberation Day” that grants him moral authority to bypass “unelected” institutional actors. Unlike Orbán, Trump does not consistently work through existing legal frameworks; unlike Saïed, he has not formally suspended constitutional governance. His strategy occupies an intermediate position: utilizing democratic procedures to claim authority that transcends them.

6.3 The “Moral Exclusion” Mechanism

The most significant theoretical finding of this study is the evolution of Moral Evaluation across all three cases. As these leaders consolidate power, their rhetoric shifts from criticizing “policies” to attacking the “humanity” of political opponents. By labeling opponents as “vermin” (Trump), “locusts” or “traitors” (Saïed), or “alien elements” (Orbán), they move from political competition to what this paper terms Moral Exclusion. Once an opponent is morally excluded from “the people,” their disenfranchisement, prosecution, or removal is no longer experienced as a democratic violation; it is framed as a “moral cleansing” of the state. This mechanism is the rhetorical precondition for the most severe autocratic

measures, and it represents the clearest “red flag” of advanced autocratization.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that autocratization is not merely a political event, but a linguistic achievement. By mapping the legitimisation strategies of Trump, Orbán, and Saïed, it has demonstrated that the erosion of democratic norms is preceded and sustained by specific discursive patterns that are convergent across radically different institutional and historical contexts.

The “Autocratic Pivot” identified in this paper is not a clean transition from populist language to autocratic language, but rather an escalation within the continuous deployment of populist rhetoric that accompanies autocratic legal measures. What changes over time is the intensity and target of Moral Evaluation (from policies to persons), and the urgency of Mythopoesis (from national grievance to existential crisis). These escalations constitute the discursive “red flags” of autocratization: observable rhetorical patterns that reliably precede or accompany concrete institutional dismantling.

The critical distinction between autocratic substance and populist rhetoric, maintained throughout this analysis, is essential for future research. Scholars must attend not only to what leaders say, but to the relationship between their language and their legal measures — asking always how specific legitimisation strategies function to normalize, accelerate, or obscure specific institutional changes. Future research should also examine how these digital-age strategies are increasingly shared across

borders, creating a global “playbook” for the linguistic dismantling of democratic institutions.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to **Prof Emeritus Halmai Gábor** of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary, for his invaluable guidance, patience, and insightful feedback throughout this research. His expertise was instrumental in shaping this study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their unwavering and immense emotional support.

References

Bozóki, A., & Hegedűs, D. (2018). An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union. *Democratization*, 25(7), 1173–1189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2018.1455664>

Diamond, L. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13(2), 21–35.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. Longman.

Freedom House. (2022, June 30). *Tunisia: Saïed’s draft constitution is an assault on checks and balances and political pluralism*. <https://freedomhouse.org>

Gobe, É. (2024). Kaïs Saïed’s Tunisia: A “New Republic” with old authoritarian tactics. *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*. <https://www.iemed.org>

Luría, A., & Luhrmann, A. (2021). A third wave of autocratization is here: What is new about it? *Democratization*, 26(7), 1095–1113.

Müller, J.-W. (2016). *What is populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Orbán, V. (2014, July 26). *Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp* [Speech transcript]. Website of the Hungarian Government.

Orbán, V. (2024, March 15). *Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the 176th anniversary of the 1848–49 Revolution* [Speech transcript]. About Hungary. <https://abouthungary.hu>

Redissi, H. (2022). Kais Saïed's governance: The Tunisian President's drift from inclusive populism to political 'Caesarism.' *The Journal of North African Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2025965>

Trump, D. J. (2024, March 16). *Buckeye Values PAC Rally* [Speech transcript]. Rev. <https://www.rev.com>

van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986>

van Leeuwen, T. (2008). *Discourse and practice: New tools for critical discourse analysis*. Oxford University Press.

Washington Post. (2023, November 13). *Trump calls political enemies 'vermin,' echoing dictators Hitler, Mussolini*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

Yerkes, S., & LaHood, S. (2022, May 18). *Tunisia's democracy is in the hands of its people*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org>