You recently returned from doing research in Europe. Can you explain your research?

I measured how populist the government leaders of Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia are. Populism is a type of political ideas or worldview, one in which politicians and citizens see politics as a Manichaean conflict between a reified “will of the people” and a conspiring elite. I measured populism among these leaders by working with almost 60 graduate students at Central European University in Budapest to select and code small samples of speeches in their original languages. The students and I spent one week in training, then several weeks collecting and analyzing the speeches. Together, we coded over 60 current or recent leaders in almost 30 countries. Central European University was an ideal location for this work, because it brings together students from all of these countries and uses English as its language of instruction.

What do you see as the benefits of this research?

Part of the excitement is in comparing these leaders to each other, and to leaders from Latin America that I have already coded in previous years. But ultimately the data allow us to measure the impact of populism on democracy and to determine why populist leaders come to power in some countries more than others. Scholars have suggested—and my own data confirm—that populism is one of the most significant causes of democratic backsliding today. In Latin America, all current cases of illiberal democracy or competitive authoritarian government are the product of populist leaders.

What do you hope to do next?

Of course, I will need time to write up the results of this project. It will be the key component of a book I am writing on the causes of populism. But I am also working on experiments—online and in the laboratory—that test my arguments about the causes of populism at the individual level. Populism is rooted in a set of traits or a disposition that many of us share, but which only seem to be activated by outside events that can be perceived as “normative threats,” or threats to the moral foundations of our communities.