

Potential appendix to János Kornai's “revisited system paradigm”

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ABSTRACT

János Kornai published an interesting and important paper in 2000 about the “system paradigm”, and another in 2016 about the “system paradigm revisited”. In the last one he made a theoretical approach for differences between democracies, autocracies and dictatorships; made a typology for the most important elements for characterization of different political systems. In the second half of the 2010’s a debate has started among political analysts, public intellectuals and journalists, how we can characterize the new political system of Hungary led by Viktor Orbán. We can read detailed analyses about “hybrid regime”, “limited democracy”, “illiberal democracy”, “plebiscite leader democracy” etc. In this paper I would like to deal with the question of different political systems in general, and – on the experiences of the debates about the current Hungarian system – I would like to think further – the Kornai’s model. Kornai pointed out 10 elements for characterization of it (the questions of removable governments, opposition parties in parliaments, elections, civil society, freedom of press, etc.) – I would like to differentiate 10 new potential elements, especially from the side of the political ideas, historical backgrounds and other viewpoints.

KEYWORDS

system paradigm, political systems, characterization of political systems, autocracy, democracy

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D72, D78, F68, G18, H50

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1. INTRODUCTION

János Kornai addressed the question of the “system paradigm” in a major essay at the turn of the millennium (Kornai 2000). Then, and it was revisited by him in 2016, summarizing the experience of the changes in the world after 2010, and in particular, in the Hungarian political system (Kornai 2016a). In this paper, I try to summarize some elements of Kornai model and – use this model as a starting point – make a potential appendix to it.

2. THE “YEARNING FOR DEFINITION” AND THE KORNAI MODEL

The public debates have not yet fully subsided in Hungary and in other countries about the interpretation of the transformation of the Hungarian political system which began in 2010–2011, and more specifically about the overall nature of the transition. Many analysts praise the processes that began with Viktor Orbán’s rise to power as simply a shift of emphasis, others as a turnaround within the framework of the democratic rule of law that came about with the regime change of 1989–1990, and still others as a fundamental structural transition (a second regime change). I am one of those who subscribe to the concept of “two transitions”, otherwise regime change took place at both times. It should be added that in the latter case, the depth and intensity of change were not as great as in the former, but there is no doubt that a new political system was built after 2010, in terms of its nature, functioning, details and effects, compared to what it was before, in the 20 years between 1990 and 2010. The changes have not only transformed the political institutions (new fundamental law/constitution, new election system, new structure in the central and the local governance), but have influenced the party system, the political thought, the media and the civil society, the relationship between the individual and the power; and new policies unfolded (economic, education, cultural etc.). We should not forget that the leading and dominant personality of the system, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán interpreted the election success of his party in Spring of 2010 as a “revolution”. His statements since 2010 have consistently represented a conviction that his system is fundamentally different from the Western democracies. At the beginning of the 2020s many of the analysts agree that (borrowing a phrase often used by the Monty Python series) “something completely different” started in Hungary after the 2010 elections.

The period started sometime at the middle of the 2010s could be described as they “years of the crazy yearning” – because a whole range of politicians, political scientists, journalists and public intellectuals have felt the urge to try to define the specific political system built up by Viktor Orbán in Hungary. We cannot speak of a consensus – it is closely connected to the fact that the system is strong and functioning, building, so the directions of later expansions are undecided. But the definition was experienced as a real constraint by almost all analysts, it is no wonder that the number of the serious definitions and attempts for the definition of system is more than a dozen.

Viktor Orbán himself defined the system founded by him as an “illiberal state” in 2014, thus he only expressed its split from the Western European liberal democracies. Another popular common self-definition of the system is “the system of national cooperation” (“*nemzeti együttműködés rendszere*”/NER), it is a meaningless formulation in itself, as it does not refer to the Orbán regime’s relationship with others. Many have tried to escape the constraints of definition



by using the simple “Orbán regime”. It suggests that it is something special thing but takes no position on its classification or its relationship to democracy. Definitions were also provided by other political institutions, the most important is probably the declaration of the European Parliament in September 2022: “hybrid regime of electoral autocracy” (Liboreiro – Zsíros 2022). Among the political analysts there are so many descriptions that the desire for a definition has given rise to a veritable historiography of the different ideas. For example, some of them are “hybrid regime”, “operetta dictatorship”, “populist/selective/managed democracy”, “mafia state” etc. It is not a simple work to collect all these descriptions. Körösenyi et al. (2020) made a summary – as they noticed, a non-exhaustive list. (Since publishing their book and parallel with this, newer definitions and system descriptions emerged, e.g., “spin dictatorship”: Guriev – Treisman 2022). It is no doubt, now Körösenyi and his teammates’ monograph has the most comprehensive coverage, according to its conclusion the Orbán regime is a “plebiscitary leader democracy”.

Already at the end of 2010, János Kornai argued that the transition had started the construction of an autocratic system (Laki 2018: 4–5), in his later works, he continued this in detail, sometimes expanding on a point of his own analysis (Kornai 2016a: 563–566). These few pages and his table about the modelling of the different political systems made the starting point for my next pondering.

According to a brief summary of Kornai’s views, modern political regimes can be placed in a three-tier system with blurred boundaries: democracy – autocracy – dictatorship. In addition to the classification or “title”, the criteria we use to judge a given political system is just as important. Kornai himself set up on the reasoning for his model in the middle of the 2010s: “Before anything else, I have to say that there is no consensus on the interpretation of democracy, autocracy or dictatorship among political scientists, politicians and people working in the media. There is complete conceptual chaos; I can’t even begin to hope that things can be put in order here. Thus, I shall undertake a more modest task: I would like to supply my readers with a sort of explanatory glossary of what I mean by these expressions” (Kornai 2016b). Kornai argued that the systematization and prioritization of characteristics provide an appropriate basis for modelling the political systems. He identified a basic, defining criteria, on the basis of which he built a hierarchy of primary and secondary characteristics. Kornai pointed out the most important characteristic element in the removability of the government (on the basis of Josef Schumpeter’s and Samuel Huntington’s works), this was repeatedly underlined by him later. For example: “Many authors [...] follow his lead in viewing democracy as a procedure: a course of actions in which the government can be removed in a civilized way: legally, without bloodshed.” (Kornai 2016b)

I do not publish the Kornai’s model again, it is appeared in the relevant studies (for example: Magyar – Madlovics 2020: 63), I am merely summarizing the systemic criteria by which a given country’s system can be classified as a democracy, autocracy or dictatorship:

Primary characteristics:

1. Removability of the government. (In a democracy “the government can be removed through a peaceful and civilized procedure” – not in the other two systems.)
2. Stability of the institutions. (In a democracy, the institutions that together guarantee the removability of the government are stable, in autocracy the institutions are formal or weak, in dictatorship they do not exist at all.)



3. Presence of legal parliamentary opposition.
4. Minimal use of force in the political governance.

Secondary characteristics:

5. Repressive means against parliamentary opposition. (In democracies they do not exist, in autocracies they exist, in dictatorship there is no parliamentary opposition at all.)
6. System of “checks and balances”. (In democracies they are functioning, in autocracies they are formal and/or weak, in dictatorships, even the creation of such things is unimaginable.)
7. Importance of the officials nominated by the ruling political group. (In democracies there are hardly any, in autocracies most, in dictatorships only.)
8. Presence and importance of the civil society, the possibilities for civil resistance against the government guaranteed by the law.
9. Participation, the presence of the interested persons and organizations in preparations for the decision-making.
10. Question of freedom of the press. (Legal guarantees, ensuring the legal and economic independence of the press.)

3. SOME FEATURES AND USABILITY OF KORNAI’S MODEL ON AUTOCRACY

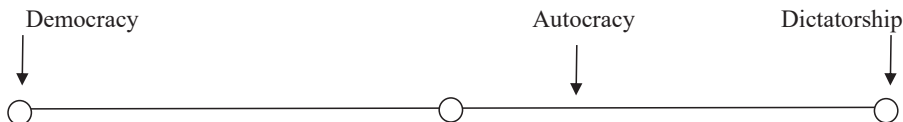
The analyses of the second half of the 2010s often deal with the Kornai’s model, sometimes critically. For example, Körösenyi and his colleagues acknowledge the authoritarian features of the Orbán regime, but do not fully accept Kornai’s definition, nor that the transition of 2010–2011 has resulted a new political system in every respect, like the transition of 1989–1990 (Körösenyi et al. 2020). However, the re-publishing and the attempts to summarize and rethink Kornai’s model are wide-spread in the last literature (Laki 2018: 6; Ricz 2021: 1254–1256; Hénin – Insel 2021: 238; Vahabi 2021: 9; Magyar – Madlovics 2020: 7–8; Piątek 2023: 159–160, 173–174). Based on these and my own summary, I highlight the following lessons from the Kornai model:

- Democracy, autocracy and dictatorship are three independent types of political systems. There are some similar or even identical features between two or more types, but together, these form a well-defined basic typology. (“Autocracy, in this paradigm, is no blurred »middle way« between democracy and dictatorship, but a sharply identifiable *type* in the sense Max Weber termed an »ideal type«.” Kornai 2016a: 566; Dallago 2020: 182; Martin 2020: 182.)
- Autocracy is situated in the middle between democracy and dictatorship, but in no way can we speak of a “mixture” of the two extreme types, it must be treated as a separate phenomenon, and therefore be interpreted as such (Kornai 2016a: 566).
- The use of “qualifiers” to describe a political system is not allowed or advisable. Kornai rejected the idea that democracy should be given some kind of interpretative words. So, the “illiberal democracy”, “hybrid democracy”, and “leader democracy” were not imaginable for him, as he suggested, whatever expressive interpretation is used, it is an admission that the system is essentially a democracy, only it has degenerated in any direction. In contrary,



Kornai argued for the phenomenon of autocracy as an independent type of political system (Kornai 2016a: 575).

- The first four of the 10 characteristics the model sets out, summarize the minimum criteria needed to distinguish among the three types of system. In addition, the set of characteristics is a sufficient and necessary condition for defining a given political system as a democracy, autocracy or dictatorship (Kornai 2016a: 564).
- Kornai repeatedly underlined that the most important differentiating factor is the removability of the government. In Kornai's eye the "bloodless, peaceful, civilized procedure for ousting the government" and the "competition among several parties, then elections according to legally endorsed procedures" were the most important criteria for a democratic regime (Kornai 2016a: 564).
- If we have a look "behind" the Kornai table (Kornai 2016a: 565), it can be seen that, while firmly separating autocracy from the extreme poles of democracy and dictatorship, it has not marked out its place halfway between them. It is clear from Kornai's text, that the autocracy is closer to the dictatorship, their existing and important differences are not so sharp and fundamental, than differences between autocracy and democracy. In 1 case out of the 10 characteristics, the definitions of democracy and autocracy are exactly the same. (Point 3: Legal parliamentary opposition exists; multiple parties run for elections.) Nevertheless, in 2 cases, the definitions of autocracy and democracy are same. (Point 1 and – essentially – Point 7.) As I mentioned, Kornai attached particular importance to point 1 on the removability of the government. It is important to mention, on most of the points, Kornai said that the democratic criterion is completely absent in the case of dictatorships, and that it exists in the case of autocracies, but is weak and/or formal. (Points 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10.) All in all, according to the Kornai model, we can summarize the distance of the three political systems in a simple form:



- Although political systems other than democracy are closer to each other, it is important to emphasize their differences. Kornai noticed about it (2016b): "A dictatorship abolishes the multi-party system by law as well. The opposition is not weak; it is non-existent. It is driven underground. In contrast, opposition forces are allowed to function in an autocracy. Autocracies also make use of intimidation, but they do not go as far as extracting confessions by torture or killing people. Many people have good reason to be afraid in autocracies, as well, because they may be thrown out of their jobs or become victims of character assassination; maybe they will be arrested on trumped up charges. But anybody who believes that there is only a difference of degree between autocracy and dictatorship has not yet lived under a dictatorship. Having said this, autocracies do have a tendency to turn into dictatorships." (Magyar – Madlovics 2020)
- Kornai considered to stress that it is difficult to create an unbiased model because political views have an impact on the use of certain categories.



- In the Kornai's model autocracy is not simply the absence of certain democratic elements. According to him, it is a mistake if we characterize autocracies "not in how they really work, but in terms of absence of characteristics of democracies". (Roland 2020: 33–34)
- In creating his model, Kornai avoided answering questions such as what the desirable features of democracy are and whether they really express the will of the people (Kornai 2016a: 566). According to him the later question is a false assumption, as even dictators have sometimes been justified in claiming the enthusiastic support of the majority of the people behind them.
- Of course, each country's system may have its own specialties, so in cases of autocracies and dictatorships we can speak about the "hardness" or "softness" of solutions. But, based on the set of characteristics, the three-class model is sustainable. It is closely connected to the fact that in the process of centralization the practice of "reward and punishment" may differ from country to country. (Kornai 2016a: 567)
- Kornai did not focus on a comprehensive exploration of historical processes, but on "snapshots". That is why, he did not address the question of how certain autocracies could more slowly or more quickly transform into dictatorships (Kornai 2016a: 568). Nevertheless, Kornai considered it important to note that although the democratization of autocracies and dictatorships is a difficult process, usually accompanied by social upheavals, but democracies are vulnerable, not immune to the process of becoming autocracies or even dictatorships (Kornai 2016a: 568). A democracy can turn into autocracy, "the turning point depends on the value society assigns to liberal democracy" (Rosta – Tóth 2021: 218–219) and depends on the level of demand in the society to recognize and integrate these values (Vahabi 2021: 10–11). According to Kornai, the autocratic Orbán regime will end not with the defeat of the ruling party in the elections, but as a result of some "earthquake"-like circumstance (Kornai 2015: 21; Rosta 2019: 288). In fact, such systems cannot be dismantled, and the Hungarian example suggests that under favourable conditions of power-building they can even be "perennial autocracies" (Hénin – Insel 2021: 243), and it is linked to the level of civic consciousness. Collectivist cultures can sustain non-democratic systems over the longer term than those in which citizens are more informed and conscient (Roland 2020: 45; Vahabi 2021: 10). It is not clear or known to citizens of autocracies that democracies are more effective in the long-run in using economic resources, managing international relations peacefully, ensuring the well-being of society (Brands 2018: 90).

It is worth asking whether it is necessary or possible to think further Kornai's model? It is noteworthy that Magyar and Madlovics did exactly this to create a new, more detailed typology (Magyar – Madlovics 2020: 258). As for thinking forward, there are two important points to note:

1. Kornai himself stressed the institutional/procedural aspects of his model, so he kept opened it for thinking forward, further developing or refining. The mentioned authors also started from this point: "While these categories are clear-cut, they focus solely on political institutions and do not account for other spheres of social action. Moreover, if the spheres of social action are not separated, even political institutions work by different principles, which cannot be captured without a more holistic approach." (Magyar – Madlovics 2020: 658–659)
2. The Orbán regime has been running uninterrupted since 2010 in Hungary, three parliamentary elections meant a social mandate to build the system, and there has been no particular break in it. Kornai published his autocracy model in 2016, so the experience accumulated in the second half of the 2010s and in the 2020s in case of Hungary should be



taken into account: To what extent do recent events confirm or undermine the validity of the autocracy model?

At this point it should be mentioned that Kornai himself made a sceptic statement about the term of “autocracy” at the end of his life, but he strongly maintained the validity of structural elements of his model: “Hungary is still in the middle group, [...] It is distinguished according to clear criteria from those countries that are democracies and, according to other, equally clear criteria from those that are dictatorships. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find a clear and precise name for this middle group. I tried the name »autocracy«, but it did not work, because it is already covered in another dimension of system analysis.” (Kornai 2021: 48)

Nevertheless, the term “autocracy” is still readily used by many, so it is not worth rejecting the term Kornai’s suggestion altogether – if it is accompanied by an appropriate explanation. There are also some debates, that the “authoritarian” and the “autocratic” are synonyms or not, arguments for and against both positions can be made (Brands 2018: 101; Ricz 2021: 1262).

4. A POTENTIAL APPENDIX TO THE KORNAI MODEL

I emphasize that I can imagine additional features to the Kornai’s model, which can be understood as, shall we say, tertiary features, not as a shortcoming, but as a further elaboration and refinement. The characteristics derived from the thesis of the removability of the government can, in my view, be complemented primarily from the point of view of social policy. In addition, I think so, the differentiation of democracy – autocracy – dictatorship is important from the side of the political thinking, and from the viewpoint of the relation to other political systems (Table 1). Accordingly, as an appendix to the Kornai model, I can mention the following:

Tertiary characteristics:

11. Personal determination of the state, the impact of leader(s) to the functioning of the state. (Connected to Kornai model, points 2 and 7.)
12. The relation of the central power to the self-governments, and the characteristics of this relation. (Kornai model, point 2.)
13. Presence of dominant ideology. (Kornai model, point 4.)
14. Cooperative or conflict seeking behaviour in the international relations. (Kornai model, point 1.)
15. Presence of the idea of superiority. (Kornai model, point 4.)
16. Demanding respect; self-respecting political behaviour. (Kornai model, point 4.)
17. Presence of advertising of the political system; the weight of the state political propaganda. (Kornai model, point 8.)
18. Relation between church and state, presence of special interpretation of the religion from the side of the state. (Kornai model, point 10.)
19. Role of the historical past/memorial policy. (Kornai model, point 9.)
20. Presumption of the unity of the society and the nation. (Kornai model, point 5.)



Table 1. Features of the political systems according to “tertiary characteristics”

	Democracy	Autocracy	Dictatorship
11.	Strong institutions, the head of the state and the leaders of the institutions are subordinates to the functions of the institutions.	Weaker institutions, the role of the leader is more important, the functions of the institutions are subordinate to the position of leaders.	The role of the leader is exclusive, the persons dependent on him control the state, and the functions of the institutions are secondary.
12.	Independent local authorities that represent the interests of local society to the central authorities.	Moderately strong municipalities, they carry out foremost the will of the central power.	Local authorities implement the will of the central power.
13.	The system has no official or semi-official ideology.	The system has a (semi)official ideology, that is favoured over other views in public life, e.g., in education.	The system has an ideology to which it wants to indoctrinate the society, discriminating against those with different views.
14.	In international relations, the state is cooperative, seeking mutual benefits.	In international relations, the regime is confrontational, preferring to assert its interests by force.	In international relations, the regime is confrontational, seeking to assert its interests by force.
15.	The system does not proclaim superiority.	The system proclaims superiority.	The system proclaims superiority and exclusivity.
16.	The system demands no respect from others.	The system demands respect from others.	The system demands respect from others.
17.	The system does not carry out state propaganda.	The system carries out state propaganda.	The system carries out state propaganda.
18.	The state and the church are truly separate, religious communities are equal and have no influence on the state.	The churches are highly vulnerable to the state.	The churches are completely vulnerable and subordinate to the state.
19.	The state does not seek to reinterpret the past, it seeks consensus in the way it represents history.	The state has own memorial policy, and seeks to impose its own conception of history.	The state has own memorial policy, proclaims and implements the exclusivity of his conception of history.
20.	The system accepts the diversity of society, and unity is defined in terms of achieving common political goals.	The system does not accept the diversity of society, it proclaims national unity, there are those who are “more equal”.	The system embraces the concept of national and social unity, from which it excludes opponents of the official ideology.



5. SHORT COMMENTS TO THE POINTS OF THE APPENDIX

ad 11. Democracies are clearly distinguished from autocracies and especially dictatorships by the clear personalization. It is no coincidence that these systems are named after the people who created, defined and managed them over a long period of time. (In the case of Hungary for Viktor Orbán's role see: [Körösenyi et al. 2020](#); [Dallago 2020](#): 182; [Hénin – Insel 2021](#): 238.) For dictatorships in particular, the institutions that run the state have become fully formalized, the actual power relations do not depend on the position an official hold, but what kind of his/her relation to the first leader of the regime, where is his/her place in the hierarchy build up by the leader of the system.

ad 12. Kornai in his model emphasized – correctly – the removability of the central government as the most important primary characteristic, but it is also important, how the local authorities can preserve the freedom to coordinate the life of the local communities. The local self-governments are simple executors of the central will in dictatorships. In autocratic multi-party systems, it is possible for the different political parties to get local positions, but it is a potential conflict situation for them with the central government ([Rosta – Tóth 2021](#): 218–219), which will be owned by the local residents ([Fazekas – Fekete 2017](#)).

ad 13. The great dictators and dictatorships of the history are known to have sought to transform the society they ruled in the name of an ideology, and to do so by violence. (Hitler's Nazi Germany proclaimed the National Socialism, Stalin's Soviet Union proclaimed the extremist version of the Marxism-Leninism, etc.) However, the willingness to do so can also be seen in autocracies – without the use of physical violence. In Hungary “the system of national cooperation” can be characterized as a not “canonized”, but rather a loose set of principles that serve as a basis for transforming society. The situation is a little bit similar to the – more mentioned than detailed – “Christian National” ideology of the interwar Hungary ([Ádám – Bozóki 2016](#): 105).

ad 14. The autocracies and the dictatorships are more inclined to associate conflict-seeking foreign policies with the assertion of their interests. They seek to expand their own system, but by emphasizing the “national interest” they not only come into conflict with democracies, but there is also a very real possibility for them to decide to assert their interests firmly against each other. Nationalist foreign policies – by their nature – are formulated in opposition to each other. From the perspective of democracies, autocracies tend to be unpredictable, prone to conflict, to external projection of their internal insecurities ([Brands 2018](#): 68, 98). The special Hungarian Orbán regime is also characterized by nationalism, and since the second half of the 2010s, has openly sought to become a kind of universal European model ([Rosta 2019](#): 288; [Hénin – Insel 2021](#): 238–239). Now this is an open possibility, but the Hungarian “exportation” into Slovenia and Czech Republic proved unsuccessful in the short-term so far ([Ricz 2021](#): 1254).

ad 15. Origin of this point was the self-definition cannot be the starting point for classifying a political system: every politician in power sees himself as a democrat, his regime as a “democracy” by claiming to be a manifestation of the will of the people. Autocracies and dictatorships, however, are not content with this, they regularly classify themselves as “better” or “real” democracies unlike the Western European type liberal democracies.

ad 16. This idea is closely linked to the issue of self-respect. Autocracies and dictatorships routinely expect democratic regimes they consider less effective to show respect for them, and they keep saying so. They tend to see democratic criticism of their system as an aggressive attack,



while take for granted the right to criticize democratic regimes. The leaders of autocracies and dictatorships do not make a moral issue out of it – it is more a feature of democracies anyway (Brands 2018: 67). In several statements, the Hungarian government has argued that it does not get the respect it deserves from the countries and institutions of the European Union, at the European Parliament election of 2014 Viktor Orbán and his party build their campaign on the “disrespect” of “Brussels”.

ad 17. Political propaganda in democratic systems is rarely aimed at promoting the political system itself, but in autocracies and dictatorships there is frequent propaganda activity, including beyond election campaign periods. In this propaganda activity they try to convince the citizens about the success of the system. The quality, the tools, the extent and the level of aggressiveness of self-promotion is very much a feature of the distinction between political systems.

ad 18. János Kornai highlighted the issue of freedom of the press and the independence of the media among the fundamental freedom rights. I think, it must be added the issues of religious freedom and the relationship between the church and the state.

Autocracies, and especially dictatorships build ideologically committed political systems (see point 13), it is logic, they are not able to make a natural relation with churches living within the framework of their political system and religiousness represented by them. They tend, for example, to develop their “own” Christianity, and also tend to judge religious communities according to which ones are willing to cooperate with the system and support its goals and which ones are not.

ad 19. Autocracies and dictatorships not only want to see themselves as stable and successful in the present, but tend to project this image back into the past, ascribe a strong historical foundation to themselves. The representation of the glorious national past in street names, public sculptures, school education and national holidays is very important for them. Kornai did not include nationalism among the fundamental characteristics of autocracies during the formation of the “revisited system paradigm” (Kornai 2016b), but in his other works he has focused on the issue. He set the phenomenon of autocracy in a historical context in his analysis about the “U-turn” of Hungary, and called the attention, autocracies are not so much copying each other, but re-enact their own historical past (Kornai 2015: 14–16, 19; Rosta 2019: 288; in detail: Bonet – Zamorano 2021).

ad 20. Closely related to the previous point is another characteristic of autocracies, and dictatorships in particular: the presumption of “national unity” (Hénin–Insel 2021: 244). For them – unlike democracies – the diversity of society is treated as a factor of uncertainty. They want to govern a society with as unified set of values and worldviews as possible according their ideology, seeing this as the most important factor for stability.

6. CONCLUSION

The 10 additional appendices to János Kornai’s model of autocracy can be understood as a kind of thinking, nevertheless it also inspires us to further refine his system, which has proved to be timeless overall. The latter is based on the fact that, for example, the Orbán regime in Hungary and similar attempts at a regime are important phenomena in the European politics in the 2020s. This will certainly remain the case – with ramifications and time horizons not yet visible.



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