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6 Illiberalism and popular religion in Hungary

State Christianity

László Kürti

Introduction

Church-state relations in the former socialist states are polychromatic and divergent.[1] Religiosity and secularization, together with the roles religious organizations play in the political process and how they relate to political power, are far from uniform. Seeing some of the reorganized national Churches and the increasing roles of the clergy, some researchers even refer to nationalists "hijacking" religion for their illiberal purposes.[2] In a study of three Orthodox Christian countries, Tronike Metreveli argues that, despite their similar dominant religion, Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, display "divergent political behavior [under] the influence of religious organizations on the political process."[3] The case of Slovakia, a predominantly Roman Catholic country, is interesting insofar as the Lutheran religious minority, though decreasing in number, figures in Slovak national tradition and identity.[4] In Romania and Bulgaria, both Orthodox and Church-state relations show divergent, albeit less confrontational and hostile attitudes toward homosexuality than in Catholic Slovakia, as well as where interfaith religiosity and human rights are concerned.[5] In Germany, as Pollack and Pickel argue, we are witnessing a more intense and increasing non-Church religiosity interwoven with individualized Christian religiosity.[6] In contrast to Poland, where religious affiliation has been slowly declining along with acceptance of various Church doctrines, and where the political role of the Roman Catholic Church faces persistent criticism,[7] Hungarian secularism in tandem with state Christianity presents an unprecedented development that requires closer scrutiny.[8] The Hungarian constitution recognizes the contribution of Christianity to nation-building and acknowledges freedom of religion as a fundamental right.[9] According to recent statistics, about 43% of the country's population profess Christianity; yet the weight of that religion's dogma and symbolism is ubiquitous and salient in current politics as well as in policies.[10] What is striking is that both those who claim to be Christians and those who have no religious affiliation exhibit the symptoms that have become prevalent among many citizens in the last three decades – vague Christian morality coupled with syncretism and alternative religious beliefs. For instance, nationalist neo-pagans see no problem with combining fundamentalist Christian tenets and illiberalism with Wicca, neo-shamanism, and faith-healing practices.[11] Linking local and national

Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary

This book offers an analysis of values in Hungary.

Following the proposition that civic values are crucial to liberal democracy and conducive to international peace, this book examines the extent to which these values are respected and practised in a number of policy spheres, with chapters devoted to the political system, the media, religion, relations with the European Union, history textbooks, cinema, Roma, and the attitudes of Hungarian women voters. The book also charts how, under Prime Minister Orbán, Hungary has gravitated away from the civic values spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the European Union.

This book will prove to be of great use to scholars and students of democracy, East Central Europe, minorities, Hungarian contemporary history and politics, civic culture, gender studies, nationalism, human rights, and more broadly the social sciences.

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Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary

Value Transformation, Politics, and Religion

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In memory of Ivan Volgyes (1936–2001), an early pioneer in Hungarian studies

and in memory of László's mother, who despised Admiral Horthy, disliked Rákosi and Kádár, and warned László about Viktor Orbán

Contents

Figures

Tables

Notes on contributors

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Preface

In the second half of the 1990s, Hungary was widely viewed as a success story of post-communist (or post-socialist) transition. But when Gyula Horn left the Prime Minister's office in 1998, his successor, Viktor Orbán, took the country in a new but not yet radical direction. Orbán's term as Prime Minister expired in 2002, but he returned to that office in 2010 and almost immediately changed the constitution and began to shift the media and major economic enterprises to the ownership of his cronies, including his son-in-law. Hungary had joined the European Union in 2003, thus during years between Orbán's first and second terms as Prime Minister. Since returning to power, Orbán has bucked the EU and also NATO (of which Hungary is a member) on various issues, siding with Russia's Vladimir Putin where the war in Ukraine is concerned. For several years, the Orbán regime has functioned as a competitive authoritarian system, meaning that multi-party elections are held but that the mainstream media, controlled by Orbán's friends, portray opposition politicians as corrupt and unfit for office. Civic values, which were strong in the 1990s, have weakened in the years that Orbán has been in office.

This volume is perhaps the first systematic analysis, in English, of the values that underpin the system in Hungary, offering insights into not just politics but also textbooks, cinema, literature, and even gender relations. It is our hope that this volume will enable the reader to grasp the significance of this era in Hungarian history.

Sabrina P. Ramet (NTNU)
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1   Civic values and the vulnerability of an illiberal political order

The case of Hungary

Sabrina P. Ramet[1]

From Immanuel Kant to the Charter of the European Union

In 1942, at the height of the Second World War, philosopher John Bourke returned to Immanuel Kant's magisterial thesis about perpetual peace. In his short essay, Bourke gave Kant credit for being ahead of his time in having advocated the creation of a *Völkerstaat* ("a state of nations" in which constituent "states must cease to be entirely independent").[2] Kant had first broached the idea of a cosmopolitan federation (guided by reason) in 1784, five years before the French Revolution ignited a continent-wide war, in his essay, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," refining this in 1793 within the framework of his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* where he called for an "ethical commonwealth" of nations.[3] Thus, upon returning to this theme in *Perpetual Peace*, the first edition of which was published in 1795, Kant had been reflecting on the ethical underpinning of a stable domestic and international order for more than a decade. Kant was, in the first place, a moral philosopher and, in his writings, one can find explicit stress on the centrality of individual rights and duties, including respect for the rights of others, respect for the harm principle (do not harm others except in defense of oneself or of others), the rule of law, and the gradual abandonment by Christian Churches of their emphases on doctrine and dogma with Kant favoring a moral consensus founded on reason.[4] This, then, is the vision he brought to his advocacy in *Perpetual Peace* of "a lawful settlement of [states'] differences by forming something analogous to a universal state."[5]

Just how prescient Kant was may be discerned by examining the Charter of the European Union, drawn up in 2000. In the EU Charter, one can find all of Kant's principal moral values explicitly supported. Thus, already in Article 3, one finds the guarantee that "Everyone has the right to respect for his or her physical and mental integrity" – thus enshrining respect for the harm principle, in what is arguably the earliest civic value endorsed in history (via the Code of Hammurabi, composed in 1755–1750 BCE).[6] Respect for individual rights, the second value on Kant's list, is endorsed in four places in the Charter – in Articles 6, 13, 14, and 15. Thus, in Article 6, the Charter declares that "Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person" – the most general and universal recognition of individual rights in the Charter. Article

2   *Sabrina P. Ramet*

13 adds that "The arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint. Academic freedom shall be respected" – echoing Kant's underlining, in the second edition of *Perpetual Peace* (1796), of the especial importance of "assur[ing] freedom of speech and press to philosophers."[7] Articles 14 and 15 elaborate on the theme of individual rights by guaranteeing individuals' right to education and to work.

The rule of law was, as is well known, fundamental to Kant's vision. He did *not* believe, as is sometimes claimed, that it was necessary to have a democratic constitution in order to have a stable, good government conducive to playing a constructive role in promoting international peace. What was crucial for Kant was that a political order, whether democratic or monarchical, be founded on the rule of law and on the answerability of the government to the people. (When he referred to "republican government," he meant a *nomocracy*.) So much stress is laid upon the rule of law in EU Charter that 12 Articles (38–50) are devoted to elaborating on this theme. In this context, we would lay especial stress on Articles 41, 43, 47, 48, and 49, which are as follows:

Article 41: Every person has the right to have his or her affairs handled impartially, fairly and within a reasonable time by the institutions and bodies of the Union…

Article 43: Any citizen of the Union and any natural or legal person residing…in a Member State has the right to refer to the Ombudsman of the Union in cases of maladministration of the Union in the activities of the Community institutions or bodies, with the exception of the Court of Justice and the Court of First Instance acting in their judicial role.

Article 47: Everyone whose rights and freedoms guaranteed by the law of the Union are violated has the right to an effective remedy before a tribunal in compliance with the conditions laid down in this Article…

Article 48: Everyone who had been charged shall be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law…

Article 49: No one shall be held guilty of any criminal offence on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a criminal offence under national law or international law at the time when it was committed [or omitted]…[8]

Kant, it will be recalled, wanted to see morality and ethical norms founded on reason ("right reason," as Cicero put it; "Universal Reason," in John Locke's terminology). This, in turn, entails neutrality of the state in matters of religious belief and individuals' "right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," as proclaimed in Article 10 of the Charter. To the foregoing principles, the Charter adds guarantees of toleration (Article 21) and equality (Articles 20 and 23), both entailed, at least implicitly, in any doctrine of individual rights.

Summarizing the Kantian values enshrined in the EU Charter we have, thus

- Respect for the harm principle;
- Individual rights (and duties);
- The rule of law;
- Neutrality of the state in matters of religious belief;

- Toleration; and
- Equality.

These we take to be the foundational civic values, without which long-term political stability is impossible.[9] Indeed, if one imagines their opposites (liberty for the state and individuals to harm others, no recognition of individual rights, rule by the *Leader*, the state aligned with a specific religion, state-supported intolerance of unwanted minorities, and treatment by the state of some people or groups as less worthy than others), the resulting list should look reminiscent of fascist systems of the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s and, in some ways, of the Stalinist system in the Soviet Union, 1928–53, its state-sponsored atheism notwithstanding. In addition, anti-liberalism is scarcely conducive to achieving a consensus in a diverse population. In addition to civic (or liberal) values, the values of a state and its laws, there are also civic virtues, appropriate to individuals. The first civic virtue would be respect for the civic values. Beyond that, one may list reasonableness in the sense explained by John Rawls in his *Political Liberalism*, alongside civility, empathy, and truthfulness.[10]

Viktor Orbán's contempt for the rule of law

The rights and values enumerated in the EU Charter had previously been spelled out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted in 1948). Among its key provisions was the declaration that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom to change his [or her] religion or belief."[11] In addition, the Declaration laid stress on the obligation of educational systems to "promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, [and] racial or religious groups."[12] Finally, the Declaration stipulated that refugees ("migrants" in today's terminology) living in dangerous or precarious circumstances enjoy a right of asylum (though not a right to select the country in which they can gain asylum). The European Convention on Human Rights, adopted on 4 November 1950 and amended several times thereafter, restated the basic principles of the Universal Declaration. Of particular importance is the Convention's emphasis, in Article 7, on the importance of the rule of law.[13] In addition, the European Commission issued a ruling in 2021, clarifying that Article 21 of the EU Charter forbids discrimination against sexual minorities, including members of the transgender community.[14]

Under Viktor Orbán (b. 1963), Prime Minister of Hungary since 2010 (after having served a previous term in that office between 1998 and 2002), Hungary has drifted away from the principles enshrined in the aforementioned international documents. He has shown contempt for the rule of law by rewriting the constitution to make it almost impossible for his Fidesz party to be removed from power, taken control of most of the mediascape, and subverted the judicial system. He has erected barriers – both legal and physical – for refugees to enter Hungary, replaced the law recognizing same-sex unions with a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, ended the possibility for people to change their legal gender, and, according to Zita Draskovich, "promotes a transcendental vision of history, as a fight between good and bad."[15]

4   *Sabrina P. Ramet*

Viktor Orbán, who presents himself as a defender of so-called traditional values, as a protector of the working class (both urban and rural), and as a champion of the Hungarian nation's interests, is best understood as a kleptocratic populist, which is to say a politician willing to mobilize his supporters in order to ignore or override the laws of the land and in order to aggrandize himself and his friends. He has instrumentalized chauvinistic nationalism (expressed both in allusions to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which stripped Hungary of more than two-thirds of its territory, and in the strident opposition to allowing refugees to enter Hungary). His regime has also fashioned a *de facto* alliance with the two largest Christian Churches in Hungary – the Catholic Church (with chiefly Roman and Greek rites present in Hungary) and the Reformed (Calvinist) Church (see Table 1.1) to legitimate his rule.

Table 1.1 Basic facts

Total area:	93,028 sq km
of which land:	89,608 sq km
Arable land:	48.5% (2018)
Forest:	22.5% (2018)
Population:	9,670,009 (2023 est.)
of whom in Budapest:	1.778 million (2023)
Ethnic groups:	85.6%
Hungarians:	3.2%
Romani:	1.9%
German:	2.6%
Other:	14.1% (2011 est.)
Unspecified:	
Religions:	30.1%
Catholic:	27.5%
Roman Catholic:	1.7%
Greek Catholic:	0.9%
Other Catholic:	9.8%
Calvinist:	1.8%
Lutheran:	1.6%
Other Christian:	0.4%
Other (non-Christian):	16.1%
Non:	40.1% (2022 data)
No answer:	
Percentage of adults who believe there is a God:	59% (2015/2016)
Percentage of adults who believe that homosexuality is wrong:	53% (2015/2016)
Population growth rate:	0.33% (2023)
Urban population:	72.9% (2023)
Life expectancy at birth:	75.3 years (2023)
Literacy:	91.9% (2021)
Unemployment rate:	4.2% (2023)
Public debt:	96.11% of GDP (2020)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Real annual GDP growth rate:	12% in 2021, - 4.55% in 2020, 4.86% in 2019
Real GDP per capita:	$33,600 (2021)
Inflation in consumer prices:	5.11% (2021)
Agricultural products:	Maize, wheat, milk, sunflower seed, barley, rapeseed, sugar beets, apples, pork, grapes
Industries:	Mining, metallurgy, construction materials, processed foods, textiles, chemicals (especially pharmaceuticals), motor vehicles
Industrial production growth rate:	6.64% (2021)

Sources: CIA, *World Factbook*, at www.cia.gov/ the-world-factbook/countries/hungary/; "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," *Pew Research Center*, at www.pewresearch. org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/; and Index Mundi – Hungary, at www.indexmundi.com/hung ary/demographics_profile.html – all accessed on 23 December 2023.

Hungary's "golden age," 1990–2010

The years 1990–2010 were years when liberal democracy was under construction in Hungary. The media were free of government interference, the courts were independent, elections were free and fair, and the rule of law seemed to have been secured. There was also no restriction on the organization of Churches and other religious associations, with the result that, by 2010, there were 358 religious associations operating in Hungary.[16] In November 1990, Hungary was admitted to the Council of Europe; then in 1999, Hungary was admitted to NATO, along with Poland and the Czech Republic. With the grant of membership in the European Union, among nine other states in 2004, including Poland, Hungary was widely considered one of post-communist Europe's big success stories, alongside Poland.

During the years that Gyula Horn served as prime minister, 1994–98 (see Table 1.2), Western capitals hoped that liberal democracy had been secured in Hungary. Thus, the election of Viktor Orbán to the prime ministership in 1998, at the head of a three-party coalition, did not provoke any consternation in Western capitals. Indeed, Fidesz, Orbán's party, had joined the Liberal International in 1992 and would not leave it until 2000.[17] But by September 2022, European Union lawmakers were declaring that Hungary had ceased to be a democracy and should be considered rather a "hybrid

Table 1.2 Prime ministers of Hungary 1990–present

1990–1993	József Antall	MDF-FKGP-KDNP
1993–1994	Péter Boross	MDF-KDNP
1994–1998	Gyula Horn	MSZP-SZDSZ
1998–2002	Viktor Orbán	Fidesz-FKGP-MDF
2002–2004	Péter Medgyessy	MSZP-SZDSZ
2004–2008	Ferenc Gyurcsány	MSZP-SZDSZ
2008–2009	Ferenc Gyurcsány	MSZP minority government
2009–2010	Gordon Bajnai	MSZP
2010–	Viktor Orbán	Fidesz-KDNP

Source: András Bozóki and Eszter Simon, "Two Faces of Hungary: From Democratization to Democratic Backsliding," in Sabrina P. Ramet and Christine M. Hassenstab (eds.), *Central and Southeast European Politics since 1989,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 241–242.

Notes:
MDF = Hungarian Democratic Forum
FKGP = Independent Smallholders, Agrarian Workers, and Civic Party
KDNP = Christian Democratic People's Party
MSZP = Hungarian Socialist Party
SZDSZ = Alliance of Free Democrats.

regime of electoral autocracy,"[18] and, in its December 2023 Democracy Index, *The Economist* classified Hungary as a "flawed democracy" and ranked it 50th in terms of democratic attainment, where first place (Norway) is best.[19] What happened? The short answer is that Orbán transmogrified from a liberal, anti-clerical into a kleptocratic, populist champion of "Christian Democracy," giving that term a meaning and content which some people viewed as radicalized.[20] The longer answer is that, in the years since Orbán regained the prime ministership in 2010, his regime has trampled on all six of the fundamental civic values enshrined in the EU Charter. Orbán's strategy for regaining office centered on building a loyal and influential press; his strategy for securing political dominance included undermining the independent media, corrupting the courts, gerrymandering electoral districts, and coopting Hungary's three mainline Christian bodies – the Catholic, Reformed (Calvinist), Lutheran Churches – together with the United Hungarian Jewish Congregation, into a symbiotic marriage-of-convenience with his regime. In addition to trimming the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court, the Orbán regime also replaced four ombudsmen, each of whom had had a separate staff, with a single "parliamentary commissioner for human rights" supported by a small staff.[21]

Orbán targets the media, the constitution, the Constitutional Court, and Central European University

Back in 2002, when Orbán lost the leadership post, he wanted to regain it. Ominously, he stated, during his electoral campaign in 2010, "We need to win only once, but [we] need to win big."[22] Orbán understood that favorable coverage in the media could be enormously useful. So he set about building a network of pro-Fidesz media. He was not content to appeal to just one opinion grouping and therefore

promoted *Inforádió* and the newspaper *Heti Válasz* to appeal to conservatives; *Hír TV*, *Lánchíd Rádió*, and the daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* to reach a nationalist audience, and *Echo TV*, *Magyar Demokrata*, and *Magyar Hírlap* to win over right-wing extremists. At the same time, he began to put together a network of rural clubs promoting Hungarian patriotism, Christian mores, and of course the cult of Viktor Orbán.[23] In addition to these instruments, Orbán enjoyed an additional advantage over the Socialists, who had shared power in coalitions from 1994 to 1998 and again during 2002–10: during both periods when Fidesz was out of power, the economy suffered, people lost their jobs, and poverty increased. On the other hand, during Orbán's four-year stint as prime minister, 1998–2002, the economy rebounded. What Orbán offered – and achieved once more after his return to the prime minister-ship in 2010 – was a second economic recovery, including a decrease in the number of unemployed.[24] Thus, under Orbán, unemployment, which had risen to 11.2% by March 2010, in the wake of the economic recession of 2008, the month before his return to power, declined steadily until reaching 3.7% in 2018 (although this figure was achieved thanks, in part, to the introduction of a new methodology for counting unemployment).[25] At the same time, the regime made drastic cuts to annual paid vacation days, sick leave, and unemployment benefits, and set up a program to put those otherwise unemployed to work on large public works programs in what the regime heralded as a "workfare" (as opposed to welfare) concept.[26]

In the April 2010 elections, Fidesz and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic Party, swept to victory with 52.75% of the vote, leaving the second-place Socialists trailing with just 19.3%. The radical-right, irredentist Jobbik party, fantasizing about reversing the Treaty of Trianon, signed on 4 June 1920, came in third with 16.88% of the vote. With this result, the Fidesz-Christian Democratic coalition picked up 68% of the seats in the parliament – a "super majority," entitling the coalition to pass legislation without the support of other parties. In taking the oath of office, Orbán had to swear to uphold the constitution. But immediately after being sworn in, he set about replacing the constitution. By April 2011, Hungary had a new Fundamental Law (as the constitution was now called), which had been approved by 262 members of the 386-member parliament. Among other things, the Fundamental Law restricted the Constitutional Court to reviewing matters that did not affect taxation or the budget. It also defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman. This Fundamental Law laid the groundwork for Orbán and Fidesz allegedly to engage in gerrymandering and to extend the suffrage to Hungarians living in neighboring countries. A new law lowered the age for mandatory retire-ment for judges, allowing Orbán to pension off the more liberal judges on the Constitutional Court and replace them with Fidesz loyalists. A new media law was passed already in the course of 2010, immediately condemned by the European Parliament for infringing on press freedom. The Orbán regime used diverse strat-egies, including imposing exorbitantly high taxes on foreign-owned media, to encourage them to sell their media firms to Fidesz insiders.[27] Pressures were also brought to bear on domestic owners of independent media. Over time, the hitherto independent media company Origo was added to Orbán's media empire, while the newspaper *Népszabadság*, which since 1989 had become the most influential left-oriented daily and regularly critical of Orbán's policies, was snuffed out in October

2016. Klubrádio, the most meaningful independent radio broadcaster, was shorn of its broadcasting frequency in February 2021, leaving it limited to broadcasting online.[28]

But it was not only foreign-owned media that were targeted for takeover. On the contrary, according to a report published in the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*,[29] the Orbán regime has used "mafia methods" to force German companies operating in Hungary to sell out to Hungarian businessmen favored by the regime.[30] In July 2021, the regime demanded that German companies producing plastic, chalk, sand, lime, clay, gypsum, gravel, and cement remit to government coffers 90% of net earnings.[31] In response to this and other pressures, more than a dozen German companies formed the German Eastern Business Association in an effort to give themselves better protection.

Then, in November 2023, the regime introduced a bill to amend the constitution, the criminal code, and other laws, by way of establishing an Office for the Defense of Sovereignty. *Human Rights Watch* reported that the Office would be empowered

> to conduct investigations into any organization or person it seems or suspects to pose a threat, including by forcing the disclosure of sensitive data such as client information and medical records…The bill is the latest in a government campaign against civil society organizations and independent journalists, attempting to undermine their work by creating a climate of fear and intimidation.[32]

By the end of 2023, the bill had become law, provoking critical responses from the human rights agency Article 19 and the European Union.

On 26 July 2014, Orbán delivered a political speech at Tusnádfürdo/Baile Tusnad in Romania, in which he touted *illiberalism* as the ideology best suited to meet the challenges of the 21st century.[33] Strikingly, in this speech, he singled out China, India, Russia, Singapore, and Turkey as the "stars" of world politics in the present era. Illiberalism includes embracing a doctrine of inequality and intolerance and, along the way, the identification of "enemies of the people." For the Orbán regime, there have been "enemies" on all sides, including religious minorities, refugees, liberal professors at Central European University, and sexual minorities. Where religious minorities were concerned, the parliament passed a law already in 2010 withdrawing legal registration from all but 14 of the 358 religious associations which had hitherto been registered. After howls of protest from both Hungary and abroad, the regime increased the number of legally registered religious associations to 32.[34] To keep refugees and migrants out of Hungary, Orbán had a high-tech barbed wire fence erected along the country's southern border in 2017.[35] The prestigious Central European University was next on the chopping block. Founded by billionaire George Soros in 1991, CEU had more than 1,400 students from 108 countries in 2017, attending classes in Budapest. (CEU had originally been set up as a multi-campus university, operating not only in Budapest but also in Prague and Warsaw. Later, however, all operations were moved to Budapest.[36]) To put pressure on CEU to pull out of Hungary, the parliament passed a law in April 2017, imposing a requirement that CEU, registered in New York state, open a campus

in the United States, if it wished to continue to operate in Budapest. CEU balked and some 70,000 protesters, mostly young people, crowded onto the city's Chain Bridge, spilling over onto adjacent streets, to register their outrage. The regime then offered that CEU could continue to operate in Budapest if it agreed to issue its degrees in partnership with a Hungarian university. Once again, the board of CEU refused and eventually, in November 2019, CEU moved its campus to Vienna.

Finally, there was the question of the country's gay, lesbian, and transgender communities. Already denied marriage, same-sex couples were formally denied the right to adopt children in December 2020 and, the following year, a measure was adopted prohibiting any discussion of homosexuality with minors, provoking a protest from the Venice Commission. As for Hungary's very small transgender community, a law passed in 2020 ended any legal recognition of gender change and, in February 2023, the country's Constitutional Court upheld the law, against a challenge.[37] Gender has become a particular focus of Orbán's hostility. The Hungarian regime has twisted the meaning of the word, framing it as an unwelcome foreign import, even as a "Trojan horse" for Western liberalism.[38] At the same time, women have been encouraged to produce more children, even while being expected to hold salaried jobs.

Orbán and Fidesz were due to face a new election on 3 April 2022. The regime already had the advantage of controlling a large part of the mediascape, but, in order to secure a clear electoral victory in 2022, adopted a new law, ending run-offs, so that a candidate winning only a plurality of votes could be declared the winner and setting new hurdles for party coalitions to win seats in parliament. For a single party, the old 5% hurdle remained in place; but, for a coalition of two parties, the threshold was now set at 10%, largely eliminating any advantage for two parties to form a bloc. For three or more parties, the threshold was raised to 15%.[39] To have a chance to oust Orbán, Péter Márki-Zay assembled a six-party coalition under the rubric, United for Hungary. But Viktor Orbán had one more trick up his sleeve. Under a law adopted in November 2021, dubbed the "voter tourism" law, voters can register to vote anywhere in Hungary, thus in a district different from where they live. In fact, 157,551 voters made use of this provision, helping Fidesz to win in districts otherwise too close to call.[40] When the dust had settled, the Fidesz-Christian Democratic coalition had won just over half of the voters but, with this, secured two-thirds of the seats in the parliament.[41] With that, Viktor Orbán had won his fourth term in a row as prime minister.

In many ways, Orbán had shown himself to be an astute, ruthless political strategist. His control of the media, of the Constitutional Court, and of public procurement, as well as his ability to change the boundaries of electoral districts and electoral laws apparently at will are all significant tools of power. But his long list of declared "enemies," even if minorities, and his repeated confrontations with the EU, culminating in his demand in December 2022 that the European Parliament be abolished,[42] suggest that he may nonetheless be vulnerable. Moreover, at least some of his support derives from pre-election handouts, such as a 13th-month pension for seniors on the eve of the 2022 election. Beyond that, Orbán's hold on the younger generation seems to be weaker than his hold on older people.

Specifically, according to the *2021 Youth Study* for Hungary, prepared for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, "[a]n absolute majority of young Hungarians (51 per cent) feel that their interests are not represented in national politics, and only 14 per cent have the opposite opinion."[43] Moreover, 17% of young Hungarians (the largest opinion grouping) identify precisely as *liberals* in officially "illiberal" Hungary, while the second largest opinion grouping, at 12%, consists of those identifying as greens/environmentalists.[44] Above all, as with other autocrats, Orbán maintains his support because the economy has been strong during the years he has been in power; specifically, he restored relative economic prosperity to Hungary, put the erstwhile unemployed back to work, and gave people economic hope. If the economy were to take a turn for the worse, a tangible part of his support could evaporate. A report for *bne_Intellinews* in February 2023 warned that "Hungary…has been suffering from extremely high 25%+ inflation that is now impacting retail sales" and judged that the country was already in recession at the time the report was filed.[45] In addition, under Western pressure, the Orbán regime was, by March 2023, considering the possibility of abandoning its profitable relationship with Russia and, belatedly joining the Western sanctions on the Putin regime.[46] At this point in time, however, it is unclear whether any of this ultimately matters for Orbán's political future.

With the electoral victory of the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland in 2015, Viktor Orbán had populist partners not only there (Jarosław Kaczyński, head of PiS, above all) but also in Serbia (in the person of Aleksandar Vučić, Prime Minister 2014–2017 and President of Serbia since 2017). Then, in October 2023, PiS was forced out of power when a three-party coalition headed by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform won control of the Polish *Sejm.* But two weeks earlier, parliamentary elections in Slovakia resulted in a victory by a coalition headed by Smer-SD, whose populist and homophobic leader became Slovakia's new Prime Minister on 25 October. While Kaczyński's PiS regime clearly considered Russia a threat and began building up Poland's military arsenal, Orbán, Vučić, and Fico have been more ambivalent, even straddling the fence, albeit in different ways. Thus, in February 2024, the *Financial Times* reported that Hungary was blocking a fresh round of EU sanctions targeting Russia,[47] even as Hungary continued to purchase billions of dollars of Russian oil and gas annually, in defiance of an EU effort to boycott Russian fuel exports.[48] Hungary also held up approval of Sweden's admission into NATO until February 2024. The Hungarian parliament gave its approval, as the last NATO member to do so, only on 26 February, three days after it was announced that Sweden had agreed to sell Hungary four Jas 39 Gripen fighter jets.[49]

Conclusion

Arthur de Gobineau (1816–1882) was a French diplomat, ethnologist, and racist author who, in his four-volume *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55), argued that the white (Aryan) race was superior to all others. Although he offered no scientific documentation for any of his opinions, he also claimed that Aryan societies could flourish only as long as they maintained racial homogeneity.[50]

Orbán's insistence on keeping non-white refugees and would-be immigrants out of Hungary echoes Gobineau's thinking.

But there is more to Viktor Orbán than his ethnocentrism. His behavior also reflects an instinctive ruthlessness reminiscent of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the Italian political philosopher and secretary of the Florentine Republic. Machiavelli famously argued that an ambitious politician could legitimately adopt any means useful to seize power and, as ruler, any means necessary to maintain and expand his power, qualifying this only by urging that a wise ruler would always take precautions to *appear* to be moral and just in the eyes of his subjects. Moreover, Machiavelli viewed religion in functionalist terms, arguing in his *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* that religion could be useful in controlling or even minimizing people's natural selfishness and bind them to the state.[51]

I am not aware of any evidence that Orbán ever read either Gobineau or Machiavelli, but he would not have had to read their works in order to embrace white racism and to be driven by an apparently insatiable lust for power and a ruthlessness that exceeds what is found among most European heads of state today. But Orbán is un-Machiavellian in (at least) one respect, viz., that where, in the course of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli argued that power should promote "republican" politics (by which he meant not what Kant intended by this term, but rather something closer to the contemporary use of the word) and to promote as well civic equality,[52] Orbán has turned his back on both democracy (as we usually call what Machiavelli called "republicanism") and civic equality. Indeed, under Orbán's rule, the civic values spelled out by Kant and enshrined in the Charter of the European Union have been shredded and treated with contempt.

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Part 1

The system

2 Politics in Hungary

Two critical junctures

András Bozóki and István Benedek

Introduction

Hungary is the experimental laboratory of contemporary politics of autocratization, with Viktor Orbán as the chief experimenter. This statement holds true according to both the prime minister, who has enjoyed an almost uninterrupted constitutional majority since 2010, and his fragmented opposition, as well as political scientists focusing on the Orbán regime. However, there is significant difference in terms of what is being experimented upon. While Orbán argues that it is a battle for sovereignty and a fight for freedom, aiming to construct in Hungary "an illiberal state"[1] as a response to the "progressive liberal virus,"[2] the opposition sees it as a struggle against Orbán's boundless hunger for power. On the other hand, political scientists interpret the past decade and a half mainly as a highly spectacular experiment in authoritarian rule disguised in a formally democratic framework, which enjoys considerable social support.

Indeed, numerous researchers have pointed out the simultaneous democratic and autocratic nature of the Orbán regime or focused on the mix of these components. Most of them emphasize the authoritarian features of the system. According to Ágh, the "Potemkin democracy" in Hungary turned into an elected autocracy by 2014 when the formal institutions of democracy became a façade for authoritarian rule.[3] Similarly, Kornai has argued that, during its U-turn after 2010, Hungary became an in-between country which is neither a democracy nor a dictatorship, but an autocracy which Kornai defines as a sort of nonviolent dictatorship.[4] Likewise, Heller have called the Orbán regime a "postmodern tyranny" in order to highlight the non-ideological character of Orbán's personalist rule.[5] Bozóki and Hegedűs characterized it as an "externally constrained hybrid regime" due to the European Union's role in not only providing support and legitimacy but also exerting constraints on the Hungarian political system.[6] Magyar and Madlovics have revealed different forms of dependent relationships and have described the Orbán regime as a "patronal autocracy," a distinct type of regime that lies between liberal democracy and communist dictatorship.[7] In this system, the state effectively functions as a business enterprise controlled by a political-economic clan, operating under the guise of democratic institutions while serving the interests of the chief patron and his adopted political family. While Magyar calls this state a

18 *András Bozóki and István Benedek*

"mafia state,"[8] for Scheiring[9] this represents an "accumulative state" as opposed to the competition state characteristic of the early post-communist, neoliberal era.[10] Most authors have accepted that the Orbán regime belongs to a subtype of hybrid regime which covers a range of configurations from illiberal democracy to electoral authoritarianism.[11]

Other researchers have highlighted the role of authoritarian capitalism in the establishment and operation of the Orbán regime, which disguised its everyday neoliberal policies with a combative populist-nationalist rhetoric.[12] Another view has questioned the validity of the popular notion of "illiberal democracy" and claimed that the regime should rather be called a "liberal autocracy," implying formal acceptance of the rule of law while abusing democracy.[13] The ideological and political formula of the regime has also been equated with "illiberalism,"[14] a "mutant fascistic" setup,[15] traditionalist neo-conservativism,[16] a combination of paternalist populism and illiberal elitism,[17] and, alternatively, an elastic mix of personalism, populism, and authoritarianism. More recently, Mária Csanádi and her associates consider Hungary as an "authoritarian system,"[18] while Bozóki and Fleck analyze it as an "embedded autocracy."[19]

A few authors still consider the regime some sort of democracy. Pap[20] and Sajó[21] accept the concept of "illiberal democracy" although the latter suggests that cheating became a definitive element of the regime. Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai have proposed the notion of "plebiscitary leader democracy," thus interpreting the Orbán regime from the perspective of Weber's types of legitimacy by developing a framework that integrates features of both charismatic and legal-rational authority. While they reject the concept of a hybrid regime, they agree that it is a somewhat mixed regime that is "democratic in form but authoritarian in substance."[22]

As can be seen from the above, despite their highly diverse conceptual frameworks, and even epistemological positions, most scholars typically highlight the coexistence of democratic and autocratic elements in their interpretation of the Orbán regime. Some of them mention the importance of "invisible reality," by which they mean the façade nature of the existing institutions which serve to hide the characteristic practices of the regime.[23] Here we aim to capture the confusing and contradicting duality of the regime by combining the strengths of research on populism and the literature focusing on hybrid regimes. More specifically, our belief is that, through the combination of populism research, that emphasizes the dimensions of politics, and the hybrid regime literature, that focuses on the processes of hollowing out the substantive content in political contestation at the polity level, we can achieve a synthesis of dynamic and static approaches to understanding political regimes. In order to bridge the gap between the populism and hybrid regime approaches, as the "software" and the "hardware" dimensions of political regimes, we utilize the concept of *populist autocratization*.[24] We argue that populism, understood as an inherently anti-pluralist interpretation of democracy and political representation,[25] plays a crucial role in explaining the autocratic tendencies witnessed in Hungary, even prior to 2010.

In the following pages, we shall investigate the Orbán regime empirically by using two "critical junctures"[26] as starting points, specifically the second half of

the 2000s and the mid-2010s, in order to unravel the historically embedded process of populist autocratization in Hungary and to gain insight into the operations of the regime. Our analysis is interpretive, it is based on qualitative methods which include research on speeches, manifestos, discourses, elite interviews, and contextual political analysis.

The concept of populist autocratization

To uncover the nature of the Orbán regime, we need to connect the terms populism and autocratization. As for the concept of autocratization, it seems reasonable to interpret it as the opposite of democratization. Contemporary democracy places plurality at its core, as a central civic value, as elaborated in Dahl's polyarchy,[27] which, in contrast to a Schumpeterian minimalist approach, enforces political pluralism not only formally but also substantively. Hence, in line with the highly popular V-Dem approach,[28] we define "electoral democracy" by three formal criteria (universal suffrage, elected officials, and procedurally clean elections) and two substantive criteria (freedom of association and media pluralism) of political contestation. Within these conditions, democratic elections (through a "chain of democratic choice") have the potential to provide meaningful alternatives for political leadership "within a community of free and equal citizens."[29] Moving beyond these conditions, "liberal democracy" refers to a regime which is characterized by a more direct implementation of the rule of law, the principle of horizontal accountability and the separation of powers, different forms of political participation, a plethora of civil liberties, including toleration of minorities, and neutrality of the state in the religious sphere.

From this standpoint, autocratization can be seen as a deviation from the fulfillment of the aforementioned criteria of both electoral and liberal democracy. It makes the exercise of political power more arbitrary and repressive and restricts the space for public contestation and political participation. Where democratic conditions are not met, resulting in fundamentally unequal political competition, and also in deconstruction of fundamental democratic institutions, we can use the concept electoral autocracy[30] or electoral authoritarianism.[31] Other important approaches focus on the terms "competitive authoritarianism"[32] or, more generally, on the umbrella term "hybrid regime."[33] The term "electoral autocracy," however, places greater emphasis on regime-level manipulation techniques rather than highlighting competition and electoral uncertainty. In this regard, we find this concept applicable for capturing the nature of the Orbán regime. Finally, if there would be a complete absence of multiparty competition, we could use the term hegemonic authoritarianism or closed (full) autocracy.

In our view, these structural approaches in comparative political science would benefit from the inclusion of the concept of populism, which emphasizes the role of politics. While we recognize the importance of strategic and socio-cultural approaches to populism,[34] here we focus on the "ideational" approach of populism[35] by highlighting the anti-pluralist and exclusionary characteristics of populist leaders. According to Mudde's renowned definition, which fundamentally

shaped the research on populism over the past two decades, populists "consider society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."[36] Building upon this classic formulation, we propose a definition which places increased focus on the Manichean worldview and political identification, as well as the moralizing and deeply exclusionary representative logic characterizing populism, viewing it as an inherently anti-pluralistic interpretation of democracy and political representation. More specifically, we capture the concept of populism through three characteristics.

First, the Manichean worldview and political identification merit attention. Populists promote an antagonistic vision of politics by framing it as a clash between good and bad forces, and by relying on a permanent crisis narrative and intensifying political divisions through extreme polarization.[37] The political friend vs. foe logic at the core of this worldview[38] is based on the belief that there is an existential crisis confronting the political community. Populist leaders use this perception to justify morally their claim to political power by presenting themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the people. They shape the identity of the people by naming enemies who are viewed as an epical threat to the community. The process of identification involves the antagonistic and asymmetric counter-concepts of "the people" and "the elite"[39] along with their allies.

Secondly, we underline the importance of an absolutistic and homogeneous approach to the people and its will. Populism goes beyond mere people-centrism by advocating for the enforcement of the transparent will of the people as the ultimate goal of politics.[40] It rejects the idea of social and political diversity, and suppresses the pluralistic values of democracy, disregarding legitimate dissent and promoting a unified perception of the "people-as-one."[41] This populist logic, such as Carl Schmitt's model of democracy, views the people as a uniform collective rather than as a heterogeneous collection of social groups and individuals with diverse values, needs, and opinions.[42] By disregarding any limitations on popular sovereignty, populism seeks to consolidate power in the hands of a populist leader, who is regarded as the sole legitimate representative of the morally superior people.

Thirdly, we identify the prevalence of moralizing and extremely exclusionary representative logic. Populist leaders use highly exclusionary representative arguments,[43] relying on an acclamatory notion of representation rather than an electoral-procedural one.[44] They embody and articulate the unified will of the homogeneous people, discrediting the representation of specific interests. This direct and unmediated relationship between the leader and the people relies on unquestioning faith and devotion, granting the populist leader an extremely high degree of agency to shape the will of the people. Invoking Hanna Pitkin's framework,[45] we can argue that this "inverse representation" aligns with the fascist theory of representation and its radical leader (*Führer*) principle with its blank-cheque authorization and full transfer of political rights. In this extreme form of Pitkin's "symbolic representation," the "incapacitated people" are subordinate to the

leadership's tutelary role which makes holding the leader accountable by the citizens practically impossible.

In our view, the term populist autocratization provides a fruitful framework for understanding not only the functioning of the Orbán regime since 2010 but also its formation. Populist autocratization refers to the process in which autocrats undermine the principles of liberal or electoral democracy by employing a populist view of democracy and political representation.[46] Although this term can be applied to the entire regime spectrum, we argue that this process converges on primarily electoral autocracies. This is because both populists and electoral autocrats aim to wield power in the name of the people, but without their genuine control. The "friend versus foe" logic of populism not only fosters political divisions in societies but also morally excludes alternative viewpoints, which has both repressive (moral exclusion) and co-optative (fear of being moral excluded) effects. Furthermore, populism often serves as a source of charismatic legitimation, which goes beyond the formal-procedural framework of democracy. As a result, it facilitates the shaping of citizens' perception of political reality by the populist autocrats by emphasizing emotional and charismatic identification with the in-group and its leader, rather than focusing on policy issues and substantive matters.[47] The archetypal narrative employed by populist autocrats revolves around an existential crisis of political community, intertwined with a permanent heroic struggle between the local heroes and both foreign and domestic villains who threaten the unity and identity of the people.

Consequently, as the case of Hungary demonstrates, there exist alternative sources of information in a populist electoral autocracy, although their impact is significantly restricted. Rather, it is the strong emotional identification that renders the influence of political dissent and alternative viewpoints marginal, as they serve primarily to reinforce already existing political identities and align with one's own camp. Dissenting opinions, information, and actors function merely as necessary counterpoints to affirm identities, driven by the unconditional commitment fostered by populist polarization. Indeed, researches indicate that the followers of the governing Fidesz party constitute the most integrated and cohesive voter group, displaying remarkable resilience and unwavering loyalty since the mid-2010s.[48] Since then, no social, political, or economic challenges or crises have been able to shake their support for the governing party. We argue that this widespread social attachment cannot be fully explained by the traditional autocratic measures alone, such as the elimination of the separation of powers, the suppression and co-optation of civil society, independent media, and the opposition. In addition to these factors, populist polarization also plays a significant role in maintaining the cohesion of the governing party's political camp and justifying the aforementioned measures. Therefore, Orbán's resounding success stems from the combined and complementary utilization of autocratization and populism, which effectively transformed the democratic electoral arena of the post-1989 Hungary into an "arena of acclamation."[49] This phenomenon reminds us of the long-lasting impact of Peronism in Argentina, which created a deep cleavage between Peronists and anti-Peronists in domestic party politics which survived for decades.

In the following pages, we delve into the key characteristics of Orbán's populist autocratization during two pivotal time periods or, in other words, critical junctures. The concept of a critical juncture is used to describe periods of significant change in the political system.[50] It signifies a time when institutions and political conditions experience fundamental shifts, and new opportunities arise for shaping alternative political trajectories and structures. These periods can have a profound impact on the stability or instability of a political system, and can underpin the consolidation or dismantling of democracy. These moments of change can be decisive in shaping political transitions and determining the fate of democratic institutions. The first critical juncture, fueled by a massive populist autocratization, directly paved the way for Orbán's power takeover in 2010, while the second occurred around the mid-2010s when the ongoing democratic backsliding reached the point of electoral authoritarianism.

The first critical juncture. Crisis and deconsolidation of liberal democracy in the second half of the 2000s

Taking a step back, not only his time in opposition (2002–2010), but also Orbán's first cabinet (1998–2002) had shown signs of populist autocratization, which can be seen as a precursor to the first critical juncture. Following the painful economic transformational crisis, Fidesz capitalized on public dissatisfaction with the previous government. However, initially presenting himself as a centrist, pro-European, and democratic leader, Orbán gradually shifted toward more personalistic, conservative, and action-oriented narratives. He promised law and order, as well as impressive economic growth. In 1998, Fidesz addressed the public's desire for both change and security. Orbán, portraying himself as both radical and conservative, depicted the post-regime change era as a period of turmoil in need of transformation for the sake of order and security. As an anti-communist he emphasized the necessity of a drastic elite change and the marginalization of former communists.[51] His administration showed a preference for business circles based on friendship and kinship, while marginalizing and occasionally criminalizing those outside the favored middle class. The appointment of party treasurer Lajos Simicska as the president of the tax authority sparked significant controversy. Another early sign of Orbán's authoritarian aspirations was his self-perception as a "chancellor" and his efforts to centralize power within the coalition government by strengthening the chancellery. These actions were seen at that time as clear steps in the ongoing process of "presidentialization" in Hungary.[52] Warning signs, such as increased control over decision-making, autocratic behavior toward media pluralism, corruption scandals, or the cannibalization of the party's coalition partners, emerged during this period, indicating Orbán's intolerance for dissenting voices.

The first Orbán government displayed an early version of "executive aggrandizement" as he redefined the Hungarian political system as "chancellor democracy," referring to the German system "*Kanzlerdemokratie*" to make sure that governance would be based on the primacy of executive power. Besides putting

his closest ally in charge of the tax authority, he forced the chief prosecutor, whose position was independent from the government, to resign "voluntarily." Orbán put a party loyalist in this position in order to control, and possibly prevent, any process of impeachment. In Hungary, public radio and television came under the supervision of a multiparty media council in which, according to the Media Act of 1997, government and opposition delegates appeared in equal numbers. However, the governing Fidesz established close cooperation with MIÉP, a far-right, semi-loyal opposition party to gain majority in the media council.

Authoritarian-minded leaders tend to restrict not only the role of independent institutions but also the space for opposition parties. Orbán's Fidesz planned to reduce the plenary sessions of the Parliament from every week to every third week, in order to eliminate the control power of the legislative body. Fidesz also repeatedly rejected any initiative from the opposition to set up a parliamentary committee to investigate certain political issues. On the top of that, Orbán *de facto* eliminated the coalition government by the second part of his term. The leader of the coalition partner (József Torgyán, president of the Smallholders' Party) was publicly compromised and other members of that party were impeached. By the end of the term of the first Orbán cabinet practically no coalition partner had survived the "partnership": neither the Smallholders' Party, which ceased to exist, nor the Christian Democratic People's Party, which separated from Fidesz for the next eight years.

All of this naturally ended up in an electoral campaign in 2002 in which Orbán changed his rhetoric and started to call his adversaries enemies. Despite the existence of democratic institutions, Orbán's actions signaled a preference for consolidating his own power rather than upholding democratic principles. He restructured the electoral landscape, leading to a two-bloc system driven by the rise of populist mobilization. Orbán had started his first term as a center-right, civic, conservative prime minister and ended it as a full-blown populist leader. However, he did not manage to stay in power. In 2002, he lost the elections by a narrow margin and was forced into opposition. After the electoral defeat, he famously equated his party with the nation by declaring that "the nation cannot be in opposition."[53] All of his actions clearly demonstrated his opposition to political pluralism.

After the defeat, Orbán took nearly a year to reorganize his party, in terms of both its legal framework and its sociological character. He transformed Fidesz from a conservative party into a nationalist populist force, emphasizing his rural roots and positioning himself as the voice of the countryside. In connection with this, he announced the "civic circles" movement, consisting mainly of rural, less educated, religious, and non-partisan people, as well as educated middle-class conservatives who became increasingly radicalized.[54] Their loyalty was primarily to Orbán himself rather than to Fidesz. In 2003, he facilitated the wave-like entry of members from the civic circles into the party. By creating high positions for the newcomers, Orbán effectively purged Fidesz over a few years, transforming it into his own party. Secondly, as the party president, Orbán restructured Fidesz on the basis of electoral districts, and gained full control over candidate selection in both individual districts and the party list.

24 *András Bozóki and István Benedek*

By the time of the first critical juncture in the second half of the 2000s, Orbán had established full authority over Fidesz, transforming it into his own centralized, top-down hierarchical political machine without internal pluralism, where the party leader wielded virtually unlimited power. These internal dynamics of Fidesz were essential for Orbán not only to survive his second consecutive electoral defeat in 2006 but also to fully exploit the subsequent political collapse of his main political rival, Ferenc Gyurcsány, the erstwhile Prime Minister of the socialist-liberal coalition government. This led to the complete disruption of the equilibrium in the voters' left-right self-identification[55] and paved the way for the critical 2010 "critical elections,"[56] which granted Orbán an unprecedented level of social and institutional authorization. Subsequently, Orbán's authoritarian tendencies expanded beyond the party and permeated the state and the society. However, the roots of these processes can be traced back to the consolidation of power in his first (coalition) government and within his party. In sum, a closer examination of the internal dynamics within Fidesz reveals that Orbán, even before the regime change in 2010, consciously utilized the mutually reinforcing impacts of populism and autocratization to strengthen his personal power.

However, the success of the 2010 elections was influenced primarily by external factors that went beyond internal party dynamics. The most important factors included the toxic levels of political polarization fueled by populism, the sudden loss of balance in the intense rivalry between the two populist leaders (due to the rapid collapse of Gyurcsány's popularity), and the economic challenges after the mid-2000s that had already plunged the country into political and economic turmoil before the emerging social discontent caused by the 2008 economic crisis. The previously dominant liberal-technocratic politics that had characterized the post-1989 period[57] was gradually replaced by the era of "competing populism,"[58] primarily revolving around the Orbán vs. Gyurcsány rivalry. This growing polarization undermined the elite consensus, rendering the norms of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance – the soft "guardrails" of democracy – increasingly fragile.[59]

As a result, concerns about the country's transformation into a façade democracy, where the existence of elite consensus is merely on paper, started emerging even before 2010.[60] One visible manifestation of the intensifying polarization was the right-wing's appropriation of the national symbol, the cockade. This created a dichotomy where the display of the cockade indicated alignment with the right-wing, while its absence was associated with the left-wing, leaving no room for middle ground.[61] Political adversaries were now perceived as illegitimate and menacing enemies, thereby shaking the foundations of democracy. The consequences of this populist polarization and the erosion of democratic norms have had far-reaching implications for Hungary's political landscape and democratic institutions. It has challenged the principles of inclusiveness, compromise, and pluralism that are essential for a viable democracy.

During this period, the two opposing political sides exhibited distinct characteristics. Initially, following their victory in the 2002 elections, the socialists pursued a social democratic agenda, which later shifted toward a

third-way approach. However, the latter turned into failure due to a severe political crisis caused partly by the new austerity measures and Gyurcsány's controversial "Őszöd speech" presented in a closed circle of socialists in May 2006 after the electoral victory of the socialists.[62] In this speech, leaked in September, it was revealed that the country's economic condition was worse than previously claimed by the re-elected prime minister. In a meeting in Balatonőszöd, Gyurcsány attempted to convince his party members about the necessity of reforms and admitted to having lied about the financial situation during the election campaign. Since austerity measures had already been introduced, the speech shocked the public and sparked immediate protests. The prime minister took responsibility for the entire political elite, presenting himself as the one breaking the cycle of lies and framing his speech as a "speech of truth." Despite declining social legitimacy, Gyurcsány managed to retain his position through a vote of confidence and public apology.

In these conditions, however, the government's new structural reforms lacked sufficient social support, and the devastating impacts of the global financial crisis starting in 2008 made smooth governing impossible. The governing parties continued with efforts at reform, employing a mixture of populism and technocracy, while the right-wing opposition, led by Orbán, capitalized on demonstrations and emerging societal dissatisfaction. Gyurcsány lost his charisma as the unifier of the left and the symbol of Western-oriented reforms.[63] Political tensions escalated, leading to the coalition's dissolution following the 2008 social referendum, which highlighted the lack of social legitimacy of the proposed reforms. The escalating polarization between the two political blocs further solidified the role of party leaders by moderating internal competition.[64]

On the right side of the political spectrum, Fidesz underwent a populist shift after the 2002 elections. The party successfully unified its supporters by portraying the domestic "neoliberal and post-communist" elite as the enemy of the ordinary people, contrasting them with the multitude of losers of regime change whom Fidesz claimed to represent.[65] Right-wing parties successfully mobilized social resentment against the economic dynamics of the post-1989 period through the combination of populism and conservative-nationalist ideologies.[66] Enjoying the support of the national bourgeoisie Fidesz positioned itself as the champion of national interests, which were jointly targeted by Western business interests and domestic liberal-technocratic elites.[67] The privatization processes tied to the left and the rise of foreign direct investments further strengthened the perception of liberal elitism and the merging of a "comprador bourgeoisie" recruited from former communists with multinational capital. As a result, stereotypical enemies such as the "left attacking its own nation ('communists'), liberalism serving foreign interests, multinational capital following global profit motives, and cosmopolitans ('Jews') conveying non-national values" gained prominence.[68] Amidst the government's struggle with reforms, technocratic politics reminiscent of the pre-Gyurcsány era reemerged, culminating in the establishment of Bajnai Gordon's expert government in 2009. Bajnai's "technical crisis management"[69] stood in stark contrast to Orbán's moralizing-populist approach, which promised the restoration

of democratic responsiveness (for example, in Fidesz's election program in 2010, "Politics of National Affairs") and the re-politicization of society.[70]

Re-politicization of the public was an attractive goal initially because the socialist-liberal coalition parties tended to use a technical, macroeconomic language when addressing their voters. Social democracy has two important traditions: modernization and solidarity. The post-communist Left focused solely on modernization to rebuild the country and to reintegrate it into the European Union. This has been presented in a rather narrow, technocratic approach which favored the educated elites, but rather forgot large segments of the society. The expert-led discourse of the socialists overemphasized the political impact of structural conditions and underrated solidarity, empathy, and generally the emotional-passionate components of politics. Marginalized millions who felt like the losers of economic transformation needed solidarity. This is what they had not received from the "leftist" parties; so they turned to the populist right. Orbán's narrative that based itself on ethnic national identity and political voluntarism resonated well among these people.

As we have seen, polarization and identity politics based on permanent enemy images have played a pivotal role in Orbán's rise to power, and populism served as a democratic disguise of Fidesz's anti-pluralism stance and the promotion of uncivic values. The success of Orbán's populism in channeling public discontent over the socialist-liberal government's austerity measures and its contradictory elite-driven technocratic reforms before and during the recession generated an insurmountable force that undermined the foundations and the fragile elite consensus of Hungary's post-1989 liberal democracy. Orbán, acting as both the primary catalyst and the greatest beneficiary of the "cold civil war" caused by the toxic level of political polarization in the 2000s, seized the opportunity in the 2010 elections, securing a *de facto* one-party constitutional majority in the legislature – which stands out in comparative terms within liberal democracies.

The second critical juncture. From the Orbán government to the Orbán regime: The rise of populist electoral autocracy in the 2010s

While populist autocratization catalyzed the crisis and deconsolidation of liberal democracy before 2010, following the two-thirds electoral victory, it became the tool for reshaping the relations between state and the society according to the ruling party's vision. During the first parliamentary cycle between 2010 and 2014, Orbán's Fidesz systematically dismantled the already fragile liberal democracy, and the opposition was unable to offer a credible alternative. Consequently, the results of the 2014 elections clearly showed how weak the legitimacy of the post-communist party system was: "of the seven elections since 1990, only three have produced results such that the winning parties enjoyed popular support greater than the share of citizens who refused to vote."[71] The number of non-voters rose considerably due to the loss of the centrist opposition in 2014. Orbán's strategy of polarization worked, even if the relative majority of citizens decided to stay at home on election day. Then, in the second critical juncture, the Hungarian political system

transformed into an electoral autocracy during the mid-2010s. As a result, the 2018 elections took place within the confines of an entrenched populist electoral autocracy which led to the repeated victory of Fidesz.

As in the previous section, our analysis in this section will delve into the mechanisms of autocratization, focusing on the dismantling of institutional checks and balances and the hollowing out of the democratic political competition. Furthermore, we will explore the role of populism in bolstering the process of autocratization. In our view, just as the year 2006 and the subsequent period had a pivotal role in the erosion of the post-1989 liberal democratic regime, the mid-2010s assumed a decisive significance in solidifying of the Orbán regime.

Let us review the major steps in a nutshell. In 2013, Orbán's parliamentary supermajority eliminated the right of the Constitutional Court to use pre-2010 precedents in judging actual legal cases. In 2014, the first dishonest elections secured the victory of the Fidesz party, which created a *de facto* puppet state to serve the interests of personalist rule. In 2015, the Orbán regime, as a response to the migration wave from the Middle East, introduced a state of exception.[72] The inflow of refugees offered an opportunity for Orbán to display his zero-tolerance policy vis-à-vis West European liberal governments, and to hide his own domestic autocratization policies. The state of exception was not lifted after 2015 but "normalized" and later replaced with a much stricter one by exploiting the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2016, pro-government paramilitary groups violently prevented an opposition MP from initiating a referendum against the policies of the government. In the same year, the government initiated an anti-migration referendum, which turned out to be invalid. As a response the government forced the most influential daily newspaper, *Népszabadság*, to be shut down.[73] This led to the extensive *Gleichschaltung* of the public media. During this period, from early 2013 until the end of 2016, the conditions of defective democracy deteriorated spectacularly and the regime incrementally turned to tougher forms of hybrid regimes, such as competitive or electoral authoritarianism.

As foreshadowed by Orbán in his speech in Kötcse in September 2009,[74] the 2010 election indeed marked the collapse of the previous two-bloc party system, paving the way for an era of "central field of political power," dominated by the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition as the hegemonic force. By reinterpreting its electoral mandate ("revolution in the voting booths") as an authorization to establish the new political regime of the "System of National Cooperation" (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*, NER) and by calling the parliament a "constituent national assembly and system-founding parliament,"[75] Fidesz established the normative foundation for utilizing the unprecedentedly broad institutional power for its own interests, even at the expense of the democratic framework. While the first critical juncture led to the breakdown of the fragile elite consensus, hence the "soft guardrails" of democracy, the years following 2010 witnessed the systematic dismantling of the institutional safeguards ("hard guardrails") of liberal democracy. This resulted in a state that Levitsky and Ziblatt describe as "politics without guardrails," when partisan rivals became enemies, political competition turned into

warfare, and institutions became political weapons, "wielded forcefully by those who control them against those who do not."[76]

Indeed, as the previous signs indicated during Orbán's first term in government and eight years in opposition, the exercise of power of the Fidesz has been characterized by the principle of the primacy of politics, the preference of sovereign actors over constraining structures, leading to the instrumentalization of the law and the political institutions. As we mentioned briefly above, the term "executive aggrandizement" aptly describes the form of autocratization and institutional changes that took place after Fidesz came to power in 2010. As defined by Nancy Bermeo, this type of democratic backsliding "occurs when elected executives weaken checks on executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences."[77] During this "authoritarian institutionalism,"[78] the main targets of the second Orbán government (2010–14) included the constitution, the autonomous state authorities, the judiciary, state-owned companies and agencies, the media system, the cultural sphere, and the electoral rules. Indeed, Orbán's second term witnessed amendments to the civil code, the occupation of the Constitutional Court by party loyalists, increased control over the media, manipulation of the electoral system including party funding and campaigning regulation, and growing political influence over public administration.[79]

One of the fiercest battles of the government was waged against the Constitutional Court, and its concise history vividly demonstrates the direction and pace of the changes. The government reformed the nomination and election procedures of the Court by increasing the number and extending the term of its members, as well as modifying the process of electing its president. Throughout the conflicts between the government and the Constitutional Court, the former limited the Court's jurisdiction (by prohibiting the annulment of unconstitutional financial and tax measures) and incorporated invalidated provisions directly into the new Fundamental Law. The confrontation reached its breaking point in spring 2013 when government-aligned judges became the majority, and the fourth amendment to the Fundamental Law was adopted.[80] The latter excluded in-merit constitutional review, invalidated judicial precedents, and limited access to the Constitutional Court by abolishing *actio popularis* (popular initiative).

Other attacks on judicial independence included the termination of the mandates of key positions (at the Supreme Court and the National Council of Justice), as well as the establishment of a new central administrative supervisory body (the National Judicial Office), led by the spouse of a Fidesz member of the European Parliament. Additionally, the selection processes for lower-court judges were changed alongside the lowering of the retirement age for judges.[81] These actions were accompanied by public criticism of judicial decisions taken by Fidesz politicians,[82] by which they aimed to undermine judicial independence. Furthermore, a series of "cardinal laws" were passed, requiring a two-thirds majority for modification, and Fidesz loyalists occupied key positions at every level of the state. These complex changes, coupled with the absence of an upper house and an independently elected president, granted the governing party's constitutional majority unrestricted power

over domestic political institutions within a few years. Thanks to these complex changes and the absence of an upper house and an independently elected president, the governing party's constitutional majority became unrestrained by domestic political institutions within a few years, which goes beyond a mere shift from strong to weak judicial review or from legal to political constitutionalism.[83]

In sum, Hungary underwent a U-turn in the early 2010s,[84] resulting in the emergence of an illiberal "Frankenstate"[85] characterized by reverse state capture, a lack of institutional checks on the executive, and an increasingly unequal political competition, which led to the "free but unfair" parliamentary elections in 2014.[86] Moreover, although the influence of external actors, particularly the Janus-faced European Union, on Hungary's hybridization was rather ineffective and contradictory,[87] Orbán's skillful maneuvering on the international stage – which he described as a "peacock dance" – proved successful.

Orbán's objective, who was familiar with the writings of Antonio Gramsci, was to build a new political, economic, and cultural-ideological hegemony,[88] which has directly led to the replacement of the rule of law with the *rule by law* approach, and an extreme level of institutional and informal centralization. Interestingly, Orbán and his advisors had always entertained the ambition to connect their state engineering ideas to some conservative or "realist" political thinkers, cherry-picked from different continents and periods of time to use them for the justification of their policies. This reference list included Carl Schmitt, Tilo Schabert, Patrick Deneen, and others.

As we have described above, Orbán's autocratization was accompanied by populism. More precisely, the institutional changes can be grasped with the term "populist constitutionalism."[89] While in opposition, Fidesz emphasized the importance of an unconstrained popular will to counteract corruption and manipulated institutions; after coming to power, the party employed constitutionalism as a means to maintain political control, imposing constraints on the popular will formulated exclusively by them. The constitutional process was completely unilateral and secret, lacking genuine and transparent dialogue with civil society organizations, opposition parties, and the general public.[90] Instead, citizens were engaged through a nonbinding "national consultation" characterized by vague and general questions, lacking formal rules and transparency. This plebiscitary tool was deliberately designed to shape the popular will arbitrarily, thereby legitimizing the government's actions and mobilizing its supporters.[91] Fidesz's populist rhetoric increasingly deepened an antagonistic contrast between "us, Hungarians" and "them, globalists," framing it within a larger narrative of defending the nation's sovereignty.[92] However, a scale change in the intensity of Fidesz's populism occurred as a response to the refugee crisis in 2015, enabling the governing party to unite the previously separate enemy images into a cohesive enemy-network, revolved around George Soros and "the left-liberal global elite," depicting them as conspirators plotting against the interests of the Hungarian nation. All of those Hungarians who opposed the Orbán regime have been pictured as domestic agents of the global "fifth column" by the central propaganda.[93] In this imagination of global conspiracy, Western donors and educated liberal elites allegedly

collaborated with "Brussels" and also with the transnational and domestic NGOs in order to open the borders of Hungary. In this narrative, cosmopolitan elites, under the aegis of Brussels, organize Muslim migrants to come to Hungary to undermine the country's national sovereignty and its Christian values.

The Orbán regime's Manichean worldview and its mechanisms of political identification rely on a Schmittian friend-foe logic,[94] creating a permanent state of exception, both in legal and in discursive terms,[95] and employing crisis narratives and war metaphors.[96] It has turned out that the Orbán regime has not been able to consolidate itself because its social legitimacy relies on the propagandistic beating of the drum of Hungarian national identity and on the permanent rhetorical fight with the "enemy." Since the refugee crisis of 2015 Hungarian citizens have lived in a state of continuous exception: first because of the migration wave, later due to the COVID pandemic (2020–22), and most recently due to the war in Ukraine since 2022. This populist vision of democracy frames the increasingly globalized elite as the enemy of the Hungarian people which is represented by the heroic figure of the populist leader.[97] The overarching crisis narrative of the regime revolves around the well-known trope of the "decline of the West" and the struggle for freedom and the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation. Orbán always contrasts national interest vis-à-vis the European Union. On his understanding of national sovereignty, the EU is not a voluntary association of member states based on commonly shared democratic and liberal values but a battlefield of states. In this arena Hungarian interests must be defended against the "attacks" of the majority of Western liberal democracies symbolized by "Brussels."

The internationalization of the Orbán regime's enemy image during the second critical juncture has played a significant role in maintaining the anti-establishment populist narrative even in government (i.e., in the *de facto* elite position at the national level).[98] Orbán's people-centrism involves an ethno-populist vision of a homogeneous Hungarian nation absolutizing its general will, which was further intensified by the refugee crisis in 2015. He positioned himself as the heroic protector of the entire Hungarian political community, conflating external threats and internal critics, such as the opposition, media, and civil society. Due to the regime's heavy propaganda, this originally exogenous but reconstructed and perpetuated crisis resulted in a situation which made the state and the ruling party intertwined on the level of citizens' perception.

In stark contrast to the previous technocratic-bureaucratic style of the liberal elite, Orbán demonstrates his connection with the idealized people through his clothing, use of personal and everyday language, folk sayings, rejection of political correctness, appeals to the traditional Hungarian spirit, and love of football.[99] Sports became the symbol of Orbán's politics, which is less about regulated competition than about a desperate fight until final victory.[100] Manipulated national consultations, just as the (invalid) referendum about "migrant quotas" in 2016, also play a vital role in framing and articulating the people's will in a top-down manner and demonstrating its unified, homogeneous nature. The political value of rationality has been questioned, and has been replaced by passions, propaganda, and short-term thinking. Finally, the moralizing and exclusionary logic of

the Orbán regime openly repudiates pluralism, asserting that only its leading fig-
ures, especially Orbán himself, legitimately represent the people. Orbán portrays
his political opponents as foreign agents, hence the enemies of the people and
the "strong and sovereign Hungary."[101] Again, since the 2015 refugee crisis, this
kind of populist approach of political representation has been prevalent.[102] In this
top-down understanding of representation, Orbán possesses a personal mandate,
granting him a "blank cheque" authorization in shaping and articulating the will
of the people.[103]

However, the mid-2010s, accompanied by growing populism, marked also
a scale change in autocratization, particularly in hollowing out the substantive
dimensions of political contestation. Indeed, the government sought not only to dis-
mantle the foundations of liberal democracy but also to undermine the principles of
freedom of association (in terms of the opposition parties and the civil society), and
freedom in the public sphere (media pluralism in a broad sense). While the formal-
procedural framework of electoral democracy (universal suffrage, elected officials,
procedurally clean elections) remained more or less intact, the hollowing out of
the substantive political contestation led to Hungary's autocratic transition in the
mid-2010s.[104] As regards the freedom of association, the regime's actions included
restricting the autonomy of opposition parties and civil society, as well as control-
ling and marginalizing NGOs. The severe curtailment of the opposition parties'
ability to offer political alternatives was achieved through manipulation strategies
such as co-optation, the establishment of fake parties, and the infiltration of subver-
sive agents into the opposition parties.[105] Furthermore, various attacks and popu-
list campaigns have targeted civil society organizations, especially foreign-funded
NGOs, as well as individuals including journalists, labelling them as "agents of
Soros" or engaging in alleged "malpractices."[106] Physical violence was often out-
sourced to football hooligans and other non-state actors.[107]

These steps created significant informal obstacles that hindered the effective
functioning of freedom of association, already by the mid-2010s.[108] Later, the
introduction of the "Lex CEU" which prohibited the continued operation of the
Hungarian-American private university, the Central European University, and
"Lex NGO" stigmatizing and penalizing foreign-supported watchdog NGOs
made 2017 the "darkest year for Hungarian civil society since 1989–90"[109] and
further restricted academic freedom and freedom of association. These attacks
on civil society were accompanied by another national consultation ("Let's Stop
Brussels!"), as well as the government's populist information campaign, and
finally the "Stop Soros!" legislative package, which criminalized activities "pro-
moting illegal migration" and imposed a special tax on NGOs engaged in "pro-
migration propaganda," supported by another national consultation (targeting the
"Soros Plan"). As a result, by the time of the 2018 elections, freedom of associ-
ation had been fundamentally undermined, allowing the governing parties during
the campaign period easily to associate opposition parties with this global enemy
image that had been constructed by using enormous state resources.

Secondly, the mid-2010s brought substantial changes also in terms of freedom in
the public sphere. The radical changes in this field can be categorized into two main

areas since 2010: the institutional strategies of manipulation and the anti-pluralist trends in the media landscape. After 2010, the manipulation strategies included institutional attacks and growing control over the media system. In addition to the adoption of new media regulations, the occupation of media supervisory bodies, state press agencies, and the public media were the initials steps of the government.[110] State advertising began to be allocated to loyal elite groups to support pro-government media outlets.[111] Third-party campaigning, bypassing spending limits mainly through state and out-sourced state resources (e.g., by "public service advertisements"), became a permanent and highly influential practice.[112] As accompanying phenomena to institutional changes, anti-pluralist trends emerged within the Hungarian media system, because the government gained ownership or at least control of a significant portion of the media through economic groups closely associated with the ruling party.[113]

The conflict with Lajos Simicska from 2015 to 2018, a former ally and party treasurer turned rebel, further solidified the government's grip on the media, since Orbán realized the need for tighter control over the acquired media, which were increasingly utilized as a pro-government propaganda machine. As a result, by the mid-2010s, pro-government outlets had come to dominate the Hungarian media market,[114] accompanied by a notable increase in the level of censorship and self-censorship.[115] Furthermore, through the further centralization of the public media, and the establishment of a "communication ministry" under the leadership of Antal Rogán in 2015, the objective of the strategic control of the political public sphere became central also within the government. Available data clearly indicate that regime-friendly media had established a dominance by the late 2010s, while non-governmental media outlets remained competitive mainly in online platforms and the limited market segment of printed weeklies.[116] In summary, a complex political-communicative machinery emerged in the mid-2010s, fueled by state resources, enabling continuous control over public discourse and shaping voters' political perceptions and sentiments.

By 2018, the erosion of diversity and public criticism had led to a radical decline in civic autonomy and rationality, hence popular accountability, resulting in the transformation of the political public sphere into an electoral autocracy's "arena of acclamation," where public preferences and the will of the people are substantially manipulated through the utilization of state resources.[117] Although in the lead-up to the 2022 elections, Orbán appealed to his supporters, asking them to vote for him in order to "let us first have strength and then be right," he had already accumulated unprecedented strength to shape the citizen's political perceptions.

The local elections of 2019 gave some hope for the fragmented opposition forces to modify the nature of the regime. Opposition mayors took over the cities of Budapest, Szeged, Pécs, Miskolc, and also some towns. The urban vs. rural cleavage became clearly visible as a divide between the supporters of the government and the opposition. Fidesz dominated most towns as well as the rural areas, while the opposition became stronger in urban settings. Nevertheless, this situation did not lead to "dual power" because Fidesz further centralized the political system to deprive local governments of most of their financial sources.

After the 2018 elections Orbán completed the centralization and homogenization of public radio and television, and also the newspapers in the countryside, by creating a new state media institution (KESMA) for controlling the news. The KESMA media outlets transmit government propaganda which is amplified by echoing the messages of fake NGOs and "independent" movements, just as corrupted "opposition" politicians. It became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the real opposition forces and the fake ones.

In higher education, to establish a stronger cultural background the government created the University of National Public Service (which educates future military leaders, managers, and public servants together) and neutralized the independence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences by stripping it of its research institutes. Those institutes became semi-independent due to the mixed composition of their board that contains both scholars and politicians. Similarly, the government out-sourced the state universities to foundations which are led by boards staffed by Fidesz loyalists for life. This unusual form of "privatization" aimed at fixing Fidesz's political control over higher education even at times when it would be out of power. To serve the goal of cultural hegemony the government also pumped billions into the Mathias Corvinus College (MCC), a school for selected university students to promote neo-conservative views. MCC, led by the political director of the prime minister, often invites Fidesz politicians to its events. The institution offers rich fellowships to students and visiting professors; moreover, it controls several well-known literary publishers and a broad network of bookstores.

These steps of institution-building fit into Orbán's strategy to create not only political but also cultural hegemony. As he stated openly after winning the third consecutive elections in 2018, establishing political and economic power might not last long; so it was, in his view, necessary to open a new cultural epoch. As he argued, in 2010 Fidesz received a mandate to close the two troubled decades of transition. In 2014, it received a mandate to stabilize regime. And finally, according to his interpretation, the victory of 2018 was nothing less than a mandate for constructing a new era. This has been considered to involve more than the political system; it was understood to involve also the moral dimension, public taste, mode of behavior, and the cultural and spiritual context. Orbán claimed: "We have to embed the political system into a cultural epoch."[118]

To sum up, the first critical juncture in the second half of the 2000s brought liberal democracy to the brink of collapse by 2010, while the second critical juncture, a decade later, marked the crystallization of Orbán's populist electoral autocracy by 2018. The lack of substantial political competition, together with the uneven playing field, resulted in Fidesz's further consecutive victories, securing a two-thirds majority in the 2018 and 2022 elections. Furthermore, the 2022 election witnessed a remarkably high voter turnout (exceeding 70 per cent) and a record-high electoral support for the ruling party (with more than 54 per cent supporting the party list), despite – or rather, because of – the election taking place amidst the external shocks of the COVID-19 crisis and the Russian aggression toward Ukraine. Thus, in the final section of our chapter, we will delve into the characteristics of

the seemingly full-fledged and resilient populist electoral autocracy in Hungary, as well as offer some concluding remarks.

Epilogue

In this chapter, we have investigated the transformation of Hungarian politics by focusing on two critical junctures. First it was the deconsolidation of pluralist democracy after 2006, and second it was the definitive part of autocratization in the mid-2010s. The latter period can be characterized not only by the formal, constitutional changes, but as the accommodation of a populist electoral autocracy. We should add that, in one way or another, Hungarians have been living in the state of exception since 2015. It was first introduced as a response to the migration crisis, but later it was considerably expanded at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2022 the state of exception has a new name, referring to the war in Ukraine. No other country in Europe has maintained the state of exception for nine years by referring to three different dangers. In the meantime, the government "normalized" the state of exception by expanding it as part of the Fundamental Law.

To put it in a nutshell, Orbán's Fidesz first deconsolidated democracy, and secondly it consolidated the war-like tension in the society. The treatment of refugees was just a pale reflection of how the regime treated its own citizens. For Orbán, consolidation means the permanent state of exception. For him consolidation is the stabilization of his personal power.

In the international arena, the evaluation of the Orbán regime changed radically during the past few years. The former Western perception of Orbán as a Maverick politician who always offered some relevant critical comments quickly changed to the perception of him as an anti-democratic mafia boss who intends to deconstruct the integrity of the EU. By 2021, the center-right European People's Party decided to expel Fidesz from its ranks, and, as a result of this, Orbán suddenly found himself marginalized in the European Union. His former allies either lost elections or turned away from him.

After the long period of Orbán's "peacock dance," the disrespect to European fundamental values and the misuse of EU funds, the leaders of the European Union finally froze further payments to Hungary. The rule of law conditionality mechanism was activated against Orbán's Hungary due to the repeated unlawful actions of the regime. By 2022 the European Union finally drew a red line for the Hungarian government. After all, the EU had not only tolerated but also continuously financed a non-democratic member state for a decade, by which it had contributed to strengthening an electoral autocracy.

Between 2020 and 2022 Orbán tried to reinforce the cooperation of Visegrad countries against Brussels and he also hoped for a deeper collaboration with the far-right parties of Western Europe. None of these efforts turned out to be successful. Orbán's failure became clear upon the Russian military attack on Ukraine in early 2022. Although Orbán's Hungary, a member-state of NATO and the EU, formally voted for the Western sanctions against Russia, it still tried to slow down the process by its repeated vetoes. Likewise, Hungary did not ratify Finland's application

to NATO for eight months, and Sweden's application for more than a year. The Hungarian foreign minister was awarded a Friendship medal by his Russian counterpart, and their meetings remained frequent during the war. Unlike other Central European countries, Hungary refused to expel Russian diplomats and refused to send weapons to support Ukraine. Hungary's financial contribution to help Ukraine remained extremely modest as compared to other EU countries.[119] Over the last two years it has become clear that Orbán serves Russian interests in the EU, and he holds bilateral meetings with autocrats rather than democratic leaders.

As of 2023, the Orbán regime is marginalized in Europe, which means that even the Visegrad countries, including Poland, have turned away from their former ally. All the EU countries unambiguously support Ukraine in its defensive war against Putin's Russia. The traditionally anti-communist Central European peoples stand together in condemning the Russian aggression – except Hungary. This unique situation might deserve further investigation about the real scope of Russian influence and the role of Orbán who is promoting and maintaining Hungary's dependence. It is the irony of contemporary history that the loudest European spokesman of sovereignty gives up the sovereignty of his own country.

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3   The Hungarian media system

Unequal worlds

Attila Bátorfy

Introduction

In the months leading up to the April 2022 elections, my Facebook began to be flooded with pro-government advertisements and paid content. Some of these were paid by the government itself, some by Fidesz politicians, and some by various pro-government media outlets and influencers, who were also sponsored by state transfers. This paid content was impossible to avoid. As I am one of those people who are irritated by all kinds of political advertising, I have flagged every single ad that appeared on Facebook that I no longer wish to see, and I have blocked most of the sources. Facebook also allows one to choose why one no longer wants to see a paid ad. I usually mark misleading, spam, or fake news. Even so, it took weeks for Facebook to remove this content, but I was pleased that my persistence was finally rewarded. My joy did not last long, however: after a few weeks, Facebook started to feed me again with immense amounts of government campaign messages, many of them blatant lies, even from pages I had categorically blocked before. The result is known. Fidesz-KDNP won the April 2022 elections for the fourth time in a row with a two-thirds majority. Probably few people are as persistent ad killers as I am. According to one calculation[1] in the 50 days preceding the elections, the government and its various associated platforms spent HUF 1.8 billion (EUR 4.7 million) on paid advertising on Facebook alone, which was 60% of the total ad spending.

Obviously, the policy and compliance of Facebook and other social media platforms could be questioned. This is also relevant to the delicate bonds of friendship between dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, disinformation, deliberate misinformation, and for-profit social media platforms. But more relevant for this line of thought, and crucial to understanding the Hungarian media system, is how, in an apparently pluralistic media environment, voices critical of the government are prevented from reaching broader sections of society. In my view, the problem in Hungary at the moment is not primarily one of media pluralism and press freedom, but rather of different types of information not competing on equal terms in the public sphere. The Hungarian government is simply buying access to the public with the unlimited public money at its disposal.

Contemporary interpretations of the Hungarian media system

"The media situation in Hungary today is more diverse than ever before," said András Koltay, Chairman of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority and Media Council, in an interview in 2022.[2] He said this in connection with his view that in the 21st century, the rise of online communication makes it an outdated question to deal with the proportions and ownership limitations of traditional media (print, television, radio) in 2022. Unfortunately, the quoted interview does not address Koltay's role as a regulator for ten years in determining the shares of non-government and government media by 2022.[3] In any case, one of the arguments often put forward by the government and pro-government intellectuals is that the Hungarian media and the Hungarian public have never been as free as they have been since 2010. I will come back to this argument later.

On the contrary, according to internationally accepted research and rankings, which raise many methodological questions, the situation of the Hungarian media has been steadily deteriorating since 2010. According to the Reporters Without Borders' *Press Freedom Index*, Hungary was ranked 23rd globally in 2010 in terms of freedom of the press, but by 2023 it had dropped to 72nd place.[4] Of all European Union countries, only Greece ranked worse. According to Freedom House's *Freedom of the Press* ranking until 2017, Hungary was ranked 21st globally in 2010, but only 32nd in 2017.[5] In seven years, Hungary has moved from the free category to the partly free category. The *Media Pluralism Monitor*, a 200-question survey conducted annually since 2016 by the European University Institute's Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), has shown a worsening trend since its inception and ranks Hungary as medium or high risk in four indicators it assesses: fundamental rights, market pluralism, political independence, and social inclusiveness.[6] The Hungarian government and the government-influenced National Media and Infocommunications Authority are contesting the questions, methodologies, findings, and results of these studies,[7] as governments of countries that are usually badly ranked in these rankings generally do. However, it is still thought-provoking that independent research and reports find a worsening trend despite the fact that in Hungary there is no open censorship and journalists are not subjected to physical violence and imprisonment.

It is also worth briefly listing where comparative media system theories have placed Hungary since 2010, or how they have described it, based on the characteristics of Hungarian media. In 2014, the NGO Mérték Media Monitor used the term *media capture*, adapting the concept of *state capture* from the corruption literature,[8] as the main media policy ambition of the government at that time seemed to be channeling public money into private pockets through the media for media owners linked to the government. When other considerations were obviously added to the corruption agenda, the emphasis was on total control of the media market.[9] In 2015, Polish media scholar Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska put Hungary in the politicized media model.[10] The common characteristics of countries that fit this model are weak and unstable democracy, steadily declining performance in press freedom rankings, mixed foreign and domestic ownership of

the commercial sector, partisanship of the public press and news media, owners' ties and exposure to political parties, and foreign owners' distancing themselves from political content. At the same time, the Hungarian media already shared a number of features with Russia and Belarus, which Dobek-Ostrowska considered representatives of the authoritarian model, such as centralized political power, fake competition, a shrinking space for relatively independent online media, and the redefinition and framing of journalists as *de facto* political actors. This is reflected in the authoritarian interpretation of the government's arbitrary regulatory practices, the discriminatory and distortive use of state funds, and the analysis of smear campaigns and surveillance scandals against journalists and media owners critical of the government.[11] Péter Bajomi-Lázár's notion of the "patron-client" media system reflected the financial and existential dependence of journalists and media companies on the various intentions of the government.[12] In the last few years, it has become clear that, in parallel with the extreme polarization of society and political space, two parallel media systems have actually developed side by side in Hungary.[13] The first is a pluralist, competing media, independent of the government, living predominantly from market advertising and readers' contributions, following higher journalistic standards, which more or less corresponds to the classical liberal-social responsible model of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm.[14] The other is the centralized pro-government media, whose revenue is typically derived from the state, whose journalists see their patriotic duty as serving the government and conveying its message, and whose operation corresponds to Siebert's authoritarian-Soviet/Communist model. Péter Bajomi-Lázár and Kata Horváth recently attempted to identify these two "media cultures" in the Hungarian journalists' roles.[15] According to the well-documented evidence, in summary it can be said there are two journalistic cultures in Hungary. The majority of political journalists who are independent of the government consider their primary task to be to check the government's control of power and to hold the government accountable. Journalists are most likely to carry out fact-based journalism in the spirit of objectivity. However, pro-government journalists see their primary task as defending the Orbán government and effecting its policies, deny that there is such a thing as independent, fact-based journalism,[16] and see themselves as proud warriors who are "not afraid to pull the trigger if necessary."[17] The pro-government media have lost a staggering number of press lawsuits in recent years due to false allegations, defamation, and kompromat campaigns.[18] The courts have ruled in many of these cases that the articles were not intended to present the facts in good faith, but to deliberately mislead readers.[19]

While in this coexisting model, the independent media remain exposed to government attacks and discriminatory regulation, it is also evident that the expansion of pro-government media has slowed down in recent years. This is perhaps partly because the government has stretched the European Union's framework for media concentration to its limits, and because the war of numbers with the European Union and government critics continues to reveal that there are many independent media outlets critical of the government. Thus, the focus has shifted from the acquisition and occupation of new media to how best to amplify the government's messages in

the existing media space, and in turn to blunt the power of critical voices. Indeed, if it is not possible, or does not make sense, to buy more media, then the public's attention should be bought,[20] to be exposed to government communications only.

Two historical narratives and their implications

In order to understand the government's position, it is important to look at the arguments that the Orbán governments have used to justify the transformation of the Hungarian media space. There are basically two contrasting narratives about the media system in the 20 years since the regime change with the second electoral victory by Orbán's Fidesz in 2010. In the interpretation of the left and liberals, free market competition dominated after the fall of Communism, with the almost immediate withdrawal of the state and the launch of privatization. The fact that the pluralistic media system that emerged organically in this way was unfavorable to the right could simply be described in terms of market processes: there was no lucrative social demand for right-wing media. Since the right was unable to accept this, they tried to counteract it from time to time by various means, such as the takeover of the public broadcaster or state funding of right-wing media. This is what the Socialist then-Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy was referring to in 2002 when he told Orbán after Fidesz's election defeat that "those who want TV should buy their own!"[21]

On the contrary, the right's claim, which has been made to this day, is that the profitable and high-profile products of the former state media conglomerate were acquired by multinational corporations and the post-communist elite under suspicious circumstances, so that the right had no chance to enter this competition as an equal. Thus, not only was there no real competition, but as a result, the so-called "left-liberal" media predominance was created and became dominant, but supposedly it did not reflect the real needs of society. This claim was made by the radical right immediately after the regime change. According to this narrative, which was frequently tinged with anti-Semitic overtones and conspiracy theories, the "unpatriotic" liberal multinational media corporations and the "treasonous" left-wing post-communist elite deliberately suppressed patriotic, national, Christian voices in the Hungarian media.

Although some analyses have refuted this narrative at least partially,[22] it was seamlessly adapted by the first Orbán government between 1998 and 2002, which also considered the attempt to transform the media market as a "moral mission."[23] Orbán had already broken with the liberal weekly *Magyar Narancs*, which had been partly founded by Fidesz in 1989, because it refused to become Fidesz's propaganda voice. In addition, the Fidesz party leadership attributed the party's disastrous electoral performance in 1994 in large part to the fact that the media were "almost exclusively dismissive of Fidesz."[24] The narrative of the radical right thus met Orbán's then nearly decade-long media battle in 1998. The first Orbán government tried to compensate for this perceived hostile media environment by various means. Almost immediately, left-wing, liberal staff were dismissed from the public media. Citing the supposed liberal bias of market advertisers, the then

Orbán government began forcefully to channel the advertisements of state-owned companies into the right-wing media supporting the government.[25] The argument of the Orbán government's media policy adviser at the time, István Elek, was that, since market advertisers deliberately do not advertise in the right-wing press, the state has a "duty" to balance this injustice.[26] At the same time, the first Orbán government set out to take over the public broadcaster, creating a weekly newspaper, *Heti Válasz*, with public money, and merging the far-right *Napi Magyarország* with the then more conservative *Magyar Nemzet*. It is not known how far the first Orbán government wanted to go in transforming the Hungarian media, but the conclusion Fidesz drew from its 2002 election defeat was that it had not gone far enough. The election defeat was blamed on the persistence of the leftist-liberal media dominance, which remained critical of the right.[27] After the electoral defeat, Orbán therefore identified building a media empire as one of the most important tasks of the right in opposition. Between 2002 and 2010, not only did Orbán find partners in right-wing businessmen and oligarchs, but right-wing voters also perceived subscribing to Orbán's newspapers as an act of patriotism.

In fact, the Hungarian mediascape started to tilt in Orban's favor in 2006. On 1 October 2006, Fidesz-KDNP and its allies virtually swept the countryside in local government elections, bringing the majority of local government newspapers, radio, and TV under Fidesz control.[28] By 2010, the pro-Orban media network included hundreds of local media, two dailies, two weekly newspapers, a news channel, and several billboard companies. It is also worth considering how the independent media contributed to Orban's two-thirds victory in 2010. A significant part of the corruption and other scandals of the Socialist-Liberal Democrat governments were not uncovered by Fidesz's party press, but by the non-partisan independent media. Before 2010, Orbán himself relied on these independent media as the cornerstone of democracy. And last but not least, after eight years of left-liberal government, some of these media believed that Orbán was only trying to correct the unevenness of the Hungarian media landscape. The majority of these media and journalists now fall into the category of traitors and foreign agents in the government's communications.

The Hungarian media after 2010

Since Orbán, Fidesz politicians, and pro-government intellectuals very rarely comment on the government's media policy, the only way to deduce what the more long-term media policy goal was is to look at the consequences of its decisions. What seems certain is that the Orbán government has taken the argument that a country's media offering should reflect the will of the electorate further and even more strongly. And with Fidesz enjoying a two-thirds electoral mandate, it could be construed as just a matter of principle that pro-government voices should predominate in the Hungarian media space.

To this end, after 2010, the government took control of the public media almost immediately as a first step, and the pro-government oligarchs began a forced round of acquisitions of other media companies. This process is very well documented by

its varied and sometimes bordering on illegal means, even using public money.[29] In fact, apart from a few protests, Hungarian society has not been particularly moved by this takeover over the last 13 years. Currently, the pro-government empire includes the entire public media, the most watched commercial TV (*Tv2*), the two largest commercial radio stations (*Retro Rádió*, *Rádió1*), all regional daily newspapers (19), the second and third most read tabloids (*Bors*, *Ripost*), the only free daily newspaper (*Metropol*), and two of the five leading general news sites (*Origo.hu*, *Index.hu*). In addition to these, dozens of other weekly newspapers, tabloids, news portals, radio and TV channels, and billboard companies belong to the media empire of the governing party, under the umbrella of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), established in November 2018.[30] KESMA was created by a personal decree of Viktor Orbán, reclassifying the company as "of national strategic importance," so that neither the Competition Authority nor the Media Authority could investigate whether the new company violated the Media Act's regulations on ownership limits.[31] The main media holding company of KESMA is Mediaworks, owned by Lőrinc Mészáros, now the richest man in Hungary, and childhood friend of Viktor Orbán. A significant part of these consisted of independent media in 2010, while a smaller part consists of newly created media.

It is difficult to say how big an audience and outreach these have, because the data currently available are even more limited than in the past. There is no point in aggregating by piece, since the publication of audited paid circulation figures for newspapers is scarce, and audience data for radio and television are either not available or too aggregated to allow one to draw meaningful conclusions. It is sad that, since 2020, the previously vibrant media research data collection, which was at least annual, has also diminished.[32] In any case, the Mérték Media Monitor's 2019 *Soft Censorship* report calculated that the combined revenues of the pro-government news media in 2018 accounted for 80% of the total Hungarian news media market.[33]

The 2019 edition of the biennial survey on political information conducted by the Mérték Media Monitor and the research company Medián found that 81% of media consumers are dominated by pro-government news sources.[34] And in their most recent research, they found that, while even Fidesz voters believe the government has significantly more influence over the public, only half of Hungarian society thinks it is unacceptable for politics to interfere in the work of newsrooms, while the other half thinks it is somewhat permissible.[35]

Publicity with public money

The EU's concerns about the Hungarian media system, the government's media ownership, media diversity, and the freedom of the Hungarian press cannot be overwhelming because not only does the Hungarian government have a large number of media outlets critical of the government, but Hungarian society does not feel that there is a lack of diversity in Hungary. Let's return to the part of the Hungarian right's argument that the left-liberal media market has suppressed

and marginalized conservative, patriotic, Christian opinions and views against the demands of society, and that that is why right-wing governments have a social responsibility to give these views more publicity. The argument for government intervention in the name of social justice may be familiar from American left-wing media criticism in the 1980s. For instance, media scholar Robert Picard's claim was that a liberal media policy based on free-market capitalism, free of government interference, is inherently undemocratic and in the long run leads to a decline in public discourse, freedom of expression, and media pluralism. The reason for this, he argued, is that the main business of media companies is not to serve readers and the democratic public discourse, but to serve advertisers. It follows that the state must balance the resulting information and representational inequalities.[36] Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman argued that the operating principle of the mass media is inherently designed to convey the messages of the political and economic elite and to keep voices of discontent on the sidelines. This operation, the authors argue, operates through five interrelated filters: (1) the concentration of media ownership and wealth; (2) the dominance of an advertising-based funding model; (3) the information monopoly of government and economic elites; (4) campaigns to discipline the media; and (5) "anti-communism" as a national religion and control mechanism.[37]

Are these not the same arguments that are being twisted and recycled in the arguments of the Orbán governments? For, in this narrative, the post-communist/transitional media landscape in Hungary, concentrated by left-wing oligarchs and liberal media corporations, conveyed the ideological messages of the left-liberal political and economic elite, suppressed the voices of right-wing discontent even under right-wing governments, and explained why the right-wing media had problems making money by the omnipotence of the market and the rationality of advertisers. Hence, since 2010, the Hungarian government has seen its own media policy not as repression, but as liberation of the Hungarian media. Buying up and maintaining the pro-government media empire and getting the government's message across consumes huge amounts of public money.[38] According to the latest figures, the Hungarian state spent HUF 128.2 billion (EUR 330 million) on media advertising in 2020, 80 percent of which was spent on pro-government media.[39] The European Commission has been investigating this practice since 2019 from the perspective of competition and forbidden state aid, but in 2021 it recommended to reject the complaint arguing that "the value of advertisement depends on a number of elements, such as timing, length and possibly other factors, which may justify the differences between the aggregated value and advertisement time for different media outlets."[40] The budget of the Public Media in 2024 will be HUF 142 billion (EUR 366 million).[41] Add to this the social media advertising by the government, government-related organizations, and pro-government media, which not only dominate public communication on Facebook[42] with their paid content, but also reinforce each other through their interlinked network.[43] It is difficult to estimate how much public money is actually spent annually on pro-government domination of the public discourse at the moment, but in 2020 it was roughly HUF 220 billion.[44] To put this in perspective, in the same year the total advertising revenue

of the Hungarian media market was HUF 223 billion (EUR 580 million), according to the Hungarian Advertising Association.[45] However, the Hungarian government counts this amount as a social cost paid for maintaining media pluralism and diversity, to balance what it sees as "liberal" discrimination in the advertising market against right-wing media.

Government control through subsidized speech

This level of government control of the public sphere, financed by public money, could also be examined from a constitutional point of view. Those arguments that say that the constitution also guarantees the government's right to speak, forget that the original spirit of civil constitutions protects the right of citizens and the media to speak out against government without being penalized and punished by the government. However, government speaks not only through its own voice, but also through the voices of others, and pays for it. This act is known in the literature as *subsidized speech*. There is a substantial American literature on this problem, and it is far from uniform as to whether or not government can use money to shape public opinion.

Constitutional lawyer Robert Kamenshine summed up the concerns as the fear that, if governments have every opportunity to use the unprecedented arsenal of media sources and legal prerogatives to serve their political ends, they will use this opportunity to reduce the effectiveness of criticism of them to zero, undermining the principle of citizen control and government accountability.[46] Mark Yudof feared that the uncontrolled indoctrination of governments in the form of subsidized speech would create only a false consensus and majority will, based on partial truths in the interests of the government.[47]

At the same time, as Robert C. Post, Professor at Yale Law School, has pointed out,[48] subsidized speech can be understood not only as government intervention in public discourse, but also as participation in a marketplace of different views, ideas, and opinions, following John Milton. To complicate matters further, government support and involvement are not seen as inherently bad, when compared with the left-wing media critique of the 1980s. This is what Martin Redish and Daryl Kessler call the "Jekyll and Hyde nature" of subsidized speech, and this is how they distinguish between negative and positive subsidies.[49] They write that it is hardly arguable that government support for the cultural and arts sector, for example, can increase the autonomy of the beneficiaries and serve community interests. They argue that "it would appear Orwellian to prohibit the government totally from facilitating expression in the name of the First Amendment."[50] They write that "a democratic society must permit the government on occasion to communicate with the populace, both with its own voice and through the voices of others." They also point out that indirect subsidies can give a voice to actors who would have no chance of public representation without them.[51]

As Adam Shinar points out,[52] the constitutional problem of subsidized speech is almost unknown in European/Continental law, but in practice it is a growing threat to democratic discourse in Europe as well. However, he believes that the rise of

subsidized speech cannot be approached solely from the perspective of freedom of expression and equal right to speech. In his view, subsidized speech is already a structural challenge in the three countries he analyses as examples of democratic deficits: Israel, Poland, and Hungary. The structural problem of government-paid speech is what Shinar calls *majoritarian entrenchment*, which seeks to both diminish the public discourse through a robust, publicly funded amplification of the government's voice and prevent voters from accessing other kinds of information – all this without the government having to resort to the classic tools of negative media control, such as open censorship and banning media outlets. Since the government has unlimited financial resources to amplify its own voice in the public sphere, with which the market and democratic opposition are unable to compete, it creates extreme information asymmetry in the public sphere, ultimately making democratic competition impossible.

Conclusion

The cure for the deficit of the public sphere resulting from market dysfunctionality is usually expected from government media policy, while government overreach should be balanced by the market. This latter expectation is often exploited by governments, which, claiming to protect the interests of citizens, extend the boundaries of influence beyond what is expected. As Shinar has pointed out, authoritarian regimes claims to speak for the nation, while in many cases they represent only a group of citizens. Meanwhile, all the political actors are naturally seeking to exploit the media landscape to gain power. Among other things, the battle for votes can be called a fair contest if parties, politicians, and movements have equal access to the public sphere. The pre-2010 "party-colonized" Hungarian media[53] at least provided external pluralism, but there were also many more editorial offices where internal pluralism prevailed. That government policy, which Shinar calls majoritarian entrenchment, is precisely built on pushing this pluralism into a corner. A significant proportion of citizens feel safe within the walls built by the government. However, these walls were not built to protect them, but to enclose them. And the men with guns on the walls are not cavalrymen, but prison guards.

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Part 2

Values

4 Hungarian civic values in a European context

Kristen Ringdal

Introduction

This chapter examines civic values in Hungary after the fall of communism based on data from the European Values Study (EVS).[1] Hungarian civic values will be compared with those of other European countries at two points of time; 1990, just after the fall of communism, and 2017, the year of latest wave of the EVS.

First on the list of civic values are the basic values inherent in the concept of democracy. Møller and Skaaning distinguished between electoral rights (regular free and fair general elections), political liberties (freedom of speech, association, demonstration, and petition), and the rule of law (civil rights, equal access, and treatment, under the law).[2] Unfortunately, the EVS did not include questions on these three basic aspects of democracy. The EVS 2017, does, however, include questions on attitudes to democracy and on fairness and irregularities in elections.

The landmark study of Almond and Verba opened a more comprehensive approach based on important aspects of civic culture.[3] The civic culture is based on values and attitudes that work to sustain participatory democratic institutions including political interest, feeling of political efficacy, and active participation in civil society and politics. Civic culture includes trust in other people and tolerance. General social trust and participation in civil society have also been used as indicators of social capital, which is important for the development of sustainable democracies. Ronald Inglehart argued that civic culture is an important link between economic development and a stable democracy. His concept of civic culture contains three elements: general social trust, life satisfaction, and attitudes to societal change.[4]

The empirical part of the chapter will start with attitudes to democracy and the way elections are conducted. The second theme is social capital, which is seen as composed of social trust and participation in civil society. Next, gender role attitudes will be examined. Modern gender roles, with equal participation in society by both men and women, are important for democracy to encompass all citizens. Tolerance is also an important aspect of a functioning democracy. Ideally, I would have liked to cover both ethnic and political tolerance, but due to limitations in the EVS, only ethnic tolerance will be covered. Another key component in a well-functioning democracy is political participation, both in the electoral channel and through

unconventional political activities, also known as political action. This type of political participation has increased over the decades and includes demonstrations and illegal strikes. In a democratic society citizens' evaluation of the output-side of politics is important. In this chapter, the focus will be on confidence in political institutions and life satisfaction.

The democracy ratings of Hungary

The Freedom House's annual Freedom ratings date back to the 1970s. The measure is based on ratings of political rights and civil liberties on a scale from 1 (best) to 7 (worst). Although the ratings determine the state of freedom assigned to each country, the ratings may also be interpreted as a measure of the state of democracy. Figure 4.1 shows the Freedom scores for Hungary for the period 1988 to 2018. The numbers are based on the annual Freedom of the World reports.[5] The figure was inspired by a graph by Arch Puddington for six East European countries.[6] For a more intuitive rendering of the trend, the figure is based on a reversed scale, that is, 7 is the best and 1 is the worst.

The rating in 1988 was the lowest point for Hungary (3.5). After the fall of communism, Hungary's ratings rose to 6.0 in 1991, with further increases until the top score of 7 for 2009. The downward trend started in 2010 and reached 5 in 2018. The Freedom ratings are based on a thin concept of democracy based only on political rights and civil liberties. Since 2015 they have published a democracy score based
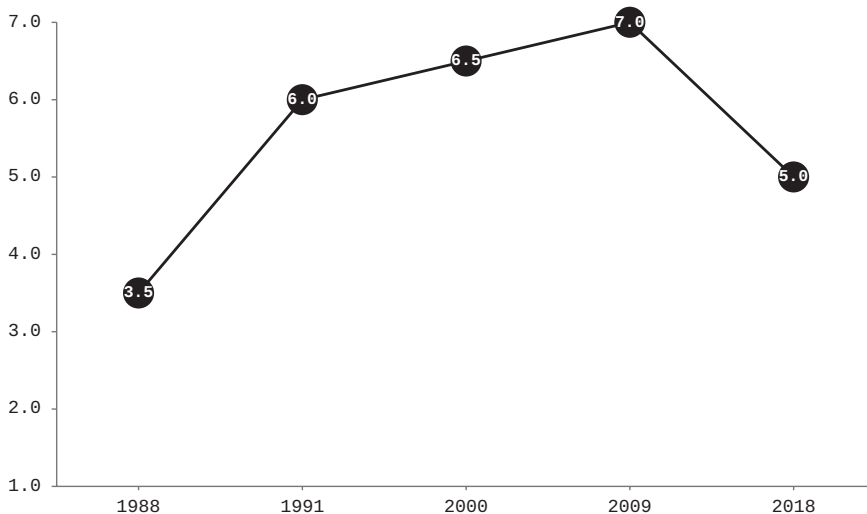
Figure 4.1 The scores of Hungary on the Freedom House index of freedom 1988–2018.

Source: Freedom House World yearly Reports on Hungary, at https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary.

on a wider set of criteria. Hungary's democracy score for 2015 was 4.82 (7 maximum) and declined to 3.96 in 2020 and had further declined to 3.57 in 2023.[7]

The Economist Intelligence Unit has published its Democracy Index since 2006. The index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties. Based on its scores on a range of indicators within these categories, each country is then classified as one of four types of regimes: "full democracy," "flawed democracy," "hybrid regime," or "authoritarian regime."[8] Since the start of the index in 2006, Hungary has been classified as a flawed democracy with scores on the Democracy Index at the level of Albania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. The highest score for Hungary was at the start of the Democracy Index in 2006 with 7.53. The largest drop occurred between 2008 and 2012, when the score was 6.96. Thereafter, the index showed a decline to a low point of 6.56 in 2020.[9]

This development in the direction of an illiberal state coincides with the reign of Viktor Orbán. From 2010 and onwards, constitutional and legal changes with the aim of increased state control of the country's independent institutions have been introduced.

In the *Democracy Index 2015*, the democratic decline in the former communist states of Eastern Europe was seen as a confirmation of the thesis of John Gray in an article from 1994.[10] Gray held that the established consensus in the West, that Western democratic institutions would extend throughout the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union was mistaken. He further stated that this collapse had also triggered a melt-down of political consensus in the West. "There is, in fact, no model of stable Western institutions for the post-communist societies to emulate or seek to replicate. Neither market institutions, nor political institutions are likely to evolve, in most of the post-communist countries, on any Western model."[11]

In a recent article Martijn Mos discusses the roots of the current value crises in the EU.[12] He contends that the fundamental values of the EU are ambiguous and may be seen as a flawed attempt at an incomplete contract with which the EU has now means to force member states to comply. This has resulted in a battle of competing interpretation of the fundamental values, leaving ample room for Viktor Orbán to promote his illiberal version of democracy and "style himself as a pro-European statesman who is ready to steer the Union back to its moral roots."[13]

What are the expectations regarding Hungarian civic values?

Previous volumes in this book series, from the first one on Slovenia to the volume on Poland, include chapters comparing European countries on several of the aspects of civic culture covered in this chapter: social capital, gender role attitudes, political tolerance political trust, political participation, and trust in political institutions.[14] They were all mainly based on data from the European Values Study (EVS) up to the 2009 wave. These studies indicated that countries in Eastern Europe largely cluster together with low scores on most aspects of civic culture, sometimes accompanied by countries in Southern Europe, such as Portugal, Italy, and Spain. Hungary scored relatively low on social trust in 2008 and very low on doing unpaid work

in voluntary organizations, and in untraditional political activities. Hungary did, however, score relatively high on ethnic and political tolerance. The analyses in this chapter will extend the time frame up to the latest wave of the EVS in 2017.

A study by Hilde Coffé and Tanja van der Lippe on citizenship norms of four East European countries: Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, was based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2002.[15] This study focused on engaged citizenship and citizen duty and indicated that Hungarians seemed to hold a traditional understanding of citizenship with a focus on the need to participate in elections and obey laws. The authors found the results to be in accordance with the view that the experience of the communist period still influenced their view on citizenship. Furthermore, the authors held that differences among the communist regimes could explain differences on citizenship norms among the four countries.

Germ Janmaat's study of civic culture in Europe explored the internal consistency and durability of civic culture by means of data from the World Values Survey and the EVS. The main finding is that the attitudes associated with the civic culture did not form a coherent and persistent syndrome as some theorists have assumed it to be.[16] This led him to question the usefulness of the concept of civic culture. The weak support for his hypotheses on historic roots and path dependency implies that countries that at present score low on aspects of civic culture, may not be stuck in authoritarian cultures forever.

A study by Alla Marencho covered all countries in Eastern Europe in the EVS 2009.[17] The dependent variable was civic activities, doing unpaid work in voluntary organizations, and unconventional political activities. She found that civic activities were significantly related to interest in politics, but not to confidence in political institutions (political trust), and satisfaction with democracy. Marchenko described civic activists in Eastern Europe as dispassionate but interested and wanted to problematize the stereotype of civically passive East European countries. She stressed the need to reconsider the latent form of civic engagement in Eastern Europe and their application to cases where civic engagement has had immense effects with Ukraine 2014 as the most recent example. Since civic activities were low, the media remain the most important source of political information and engagement.

The decline of democratic institutions that Hungary shares with most post-communist countries in Europe may lead us to predict a weakening of civic culture as the great hopes related to changes to a democratic system and a market economy have waned. Another possibility is, however, that the democratic decline has been driven mainly from above so that the civic culture may be unchanged.

The European Values Study

The description of Hungarian civic values is based on data from the European Values Study (EVS). The EVS is a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values initiated by the European Value Systems Study Group in the late 1970s. The surveys cover a range of topics including life satisfaction, attitudes, and values relating to family, work, religion, politics, and society.

The main analysis makes use of the EVS Trend File 1981–2017, with five waves (rounds) of surveys: 1981, 1990, 1999, 2008, and 2017.[18] Hungary has participated in all but the first wave of the EVS. In the second wave, the fieldwork in Hungary took place in 1991, and in the most recent wave, the survey in Hungary was fielded in 2018. In the trend file, a minimum of 23 countries participated in both the 1990 and 2017 waves; these were selected for the comparative analysis. In addition, the EVS 2017 wave with 36 countries will be used for the comparative analysis of new themes introduced in the fifth wave.[19]

Attitudes about democracy: 2017

The EVS 2017 included two new questions on democracy. The first focused on the importance of democracy for the respondents and the second was about how democratically their country was being governed: "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically? On this scale where 1 means it is 'not at all important' and 10 means 'absolutely important' what position would you choose?" "And how democratically is this country being governed today? Again, using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that it is 'not at all democratic' and 10 means that it is 'completely democratic' what position would you choose?"

The means for each country on the two variables are displayed in Figure 4.2. The pattern indicates a positive Pearson correlation between the two variables (r = 0.54). That is, countries that scored high on the importance of democracy also
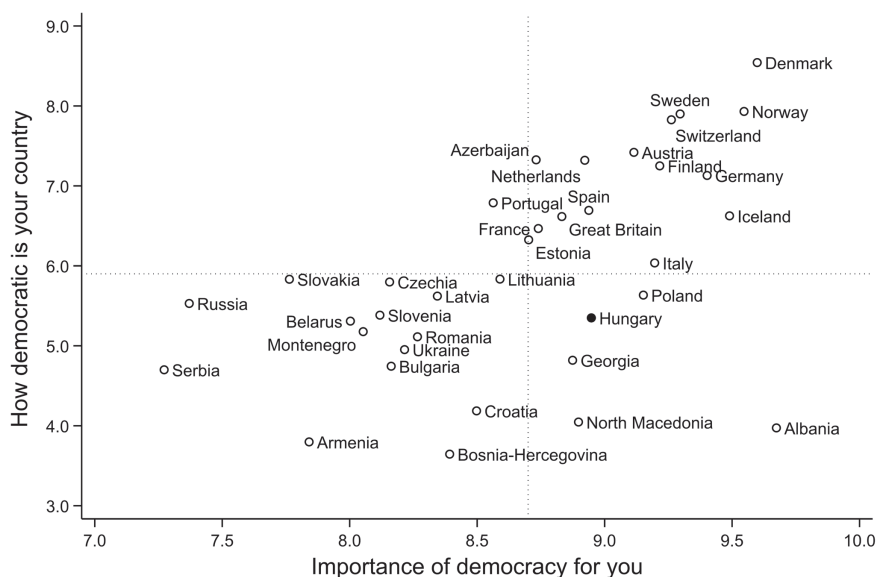
Figure 4.2 How democratic a country and the importance of democracy.

Source: EVS 2017.

tend to score high on how democratically the country was governed. There are, however, exceptions to this pattern.

As in the remaining graphs in this chapter, reference lines have been added at the mean value for the two variables. The overall mean for importance of democracy was 8.7, whereas the mean for how democratic the country is governed was 5.9 on a rating scale from 0 to 10. Both variables, and especially scores for the importance of democracy, were skewed toward high values. The countries with the highest mean on the importance of democracy included established democracies, especially the Nordic counties, but also Albania. At the other end of the scale, we find Serbia and Russia with relatively low scores, followed by Slovakia and Armenia. Hungary scored relatively high at the level of Great Britain, Spain, and Georgia.

Turning to the perception of how democratically the country of the respondent was governed, the Nordic countries, Switzerland, and Austria are at the top with mean scores of around 8, but also Azerbaijan scored high, at the level of the Netherlands (7.3). Five countries stand out with the lowest scores (around 4) on how democratic these countries were perceived by their own citizens: Bosnia-Hercegovina, Armenia, Albania, North Macedonia, and Croatia. The score for Hungary was 5.3, somewhat below the overall mean of 5.9. At the same level we find mostly East European countries, including Belarus, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Romania.

The higher scores on the importance of democracy than for the actual state of democracy indicate an overall democratic deficit. Table 4.1 shows countries with a democratic deficit of 3 or more. Albania tops the list with a score of 5.7, followed by North Macedonia, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Croatia, Georgia, Armenia, and Hungary with a score of 3.6. Note that some countries with low scores on

Table 4.1 The countries with the largest democratic deficit in 2017

Country	Deficit
Albania	5.7
North Macedonia	4.8
Bosnia-Hercegovina	4.8
Croatia	4.3
Georgia	4.1
Armenia	4.1
Hungary	3.6
Poland	3.6
Bulgaria	3.4
Ukraine	3.3
Italy	3.2
Romania	3.2

Note: Democratic deficit: importance of democracy – how democratic is your country being governed. *Source: EVS 2017.*

democratic governance, especially Russia and Serbia, also scored relatively low on the importance of democracy. As a result, their democratic deficits were low.

Questions on democracy have been scarce and subject to changes in earlier waves of the EVS. One question related to illiberal governance was, however, asked in both 1999 and 2017. "I'm going to describe various types of political systems and ask what you think about each as a way of governing this country. For each one, would you say it is a very good, fairly good, fairly bad or very bad way of governing this country? Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections." On this question Hungary is found in a cluster with countries with mainly West European countries where the respondents on the average thought this was a bad idea. Also, the score of Hungary was almost identical for 1999 and 2017.

Fair or unfair elections: 2017

The 2017-wave of the EVS also included a set of questions on how elections are performed: "In your view, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections?"

- Votes are counted fairly (reversed scores)
- Opposition candidates are prevented from running
- TV news favors the governing party
- Voters are bribed
- Journalists provide fair coverage of elections (reversed scores)
- Election officials are fair (reversed scores)
- Rich people buy elections
- Voters are threatened with violence at the polls

The response categories were: 1. "very often," 2. "fairly often," 3. "not often," and 4. "not at all often." Since three of the questions were loaded differently from the others, the scores for those three questions were reversed so that high scores indicate fair elections for all items. The detailed distributions for Hungary are displayed in Figure 4.3. The yellow and gray in the bars indicate that elections were held to be fair, the blue and orange in the bars indicate that irregularities were considered to occur often. Few respondents seem to believe that voters are threatened by violence at the polls. Also, a large majority agree that votes are counted fairly. On the other hand, a majority held that TV news favors the governing party "very often" or "fairly often." Also, around 40% of the Hungarian respondents believed that rich people buy elections and that voters are bribed.

To be able to compare the results for Hungary with the results for the other countries, a more aggregate measurement was needed. A factor analysis of the eight items indicated that all but the question on journalists load on one dimension. Therefore, a "fair elections" scale was formed as the mean score of the seven items. This scale constitutes the x-axis in Figure 4.4 and the question on fair journalists constitutes the y-axis. Note that the scale on both axes may range from 1 to 4.

How often in (Hungarian) elections:

Voters are threatened with violence at the polls	
Voters are counted fairly (Rev.)	
Opposition candidates are prevented from running	
Election officials are fair (Rev.)	
Voters are bribed	
Rich people buy elections	
Journalists provide fair coverage of elections (Rev.)	
TV news favors the governing party	

Percent: 0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

■Very often   ■Fairly often   ■Not often   ■Not at all

Figure 4.3 Fairness and irregularities in (Hungarian) elections.

Source: EVS 2017.
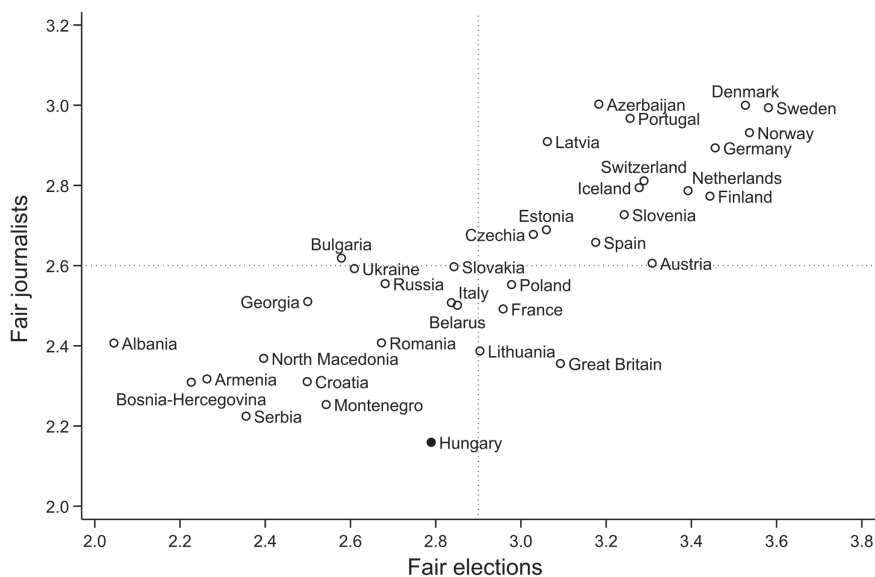
Figure 4.4 How fair are journalists and how fair are elections.

Source: EVS 2017.

Hungary had the lowest confidence that journalists provide fair coverage of elections, with a scale score of 2, which indicates that they held journalists to be fair "not so often." Hungary was followed by Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Croatia, and Armenia. At the other end of the scale, Denmark, Sweden, Azerbaijan, and Portugal had scores around 3, indicating that the respondents believed that journalists "very often" or "fairly often" provide fair coverage of elections.

The score for Hungary on fair elections is 2.8, just below the average for all countries. At the bottom of the scale, we find Albania with a score just above 2.0, which indicates that the Albanian respondents believed elections to be fair "not so often." Albania was followed by Bosnia-Hercegovina, Armenia, and Serbia. At the upper end of the scale, Denmark and Sweden had scale scores around 3, which indicates that the respondents in these two countries rated the elections to be fair, "fairly often."

Social capital: 1990–2017

Social capital is an important resource for the individual and is important for the development of society. Robert Putnam made the important distinction between bridging and bonding social capital. Bridging social capital is inclusive and stems from weak social ties in rough participation in society, whereas bonding social capital creates strong social ties and strong in-group solidarity.[20] Strong ties are assumed to be accompanied by high levels of trust in close rations and in-groups with which the individual identifies, but such ties also lead to mistrust of out-groups. Weak ties in social networks support norms of reciprocity and expand general social trust. Thus, the mix of bridging and bonding social capital may be of importance for the level of general trust, both at the individual and country levels. Participation in networks and general trust are not perfectly correlated and they are both used in the measurement of social capital. Both measurements are included in the EVS.

General social trust: 1990–2017

General social trust is measured by a single question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" The response categories were: "most people can be trusted" and "one can't be too careful."

In Figure 4.5, trust in most people in the 1990 and 2017 studies constitutes the y- and x-axes, respectively. In 1990, 35% answered that most people can be trusted. This increased to 40% in 2017. Hungary is found in the lower left quadrant of the figure, along with mostly East-European countries. Hungary was close to France, with around 25% giving the trusting answer in 1990 and close to 30% in 2017.

In the upper-right quadrant, we find the Nordic countries and the Netherlands where more than half of the respondents answered that most people can be trusted at both points in time. A few countries show clear increases in general trust: Denmark and Iceland with increases of about 20 percentage points, Austria with a gain of about 15 percentage points, and Finland, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands,
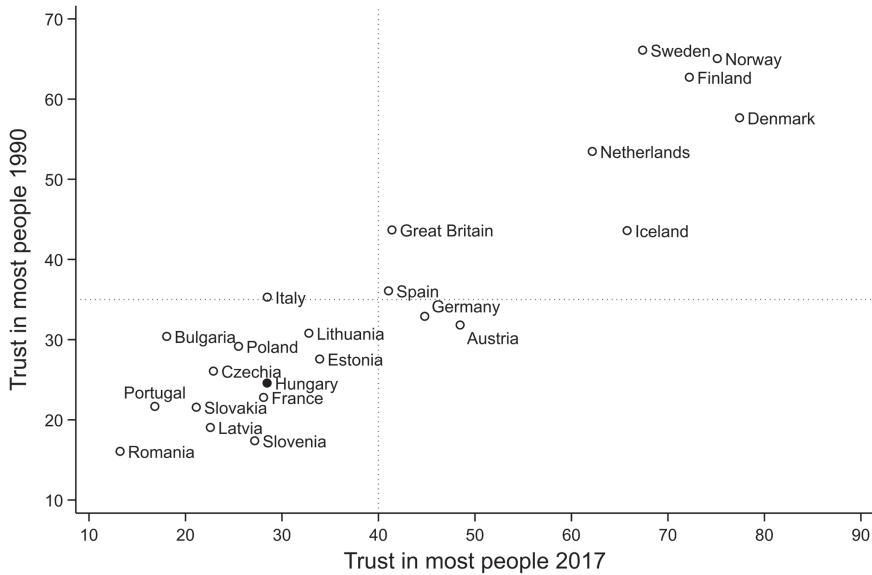
Figure 4.5 General social trust: 1990 and 2017.

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

Austria, and Slovenia with a gain of about 10 percentage points. Bulgaria is the only country with a substantial drop in general trust. The country's trust percentage dropped 12 percentage points, from 30 for 1990 to 18 for 2017.

The single question on whether one can trust most people with only two response categories is a very crude measure of general trust and has led researchers to question whether the individuals interpret "most people" in a similar way or whether "the radius of trust" varies between individuals and countries.[21] The "radius of trust" may range from trust in one's family and friends to people one has never met, of different ethnicity and religions. In the EVS 2017, an additional question was added to measure both in-group and out-group trust. "I would like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much, or not at all?" The respondents were asked to rate their trust in three in-groups and three out-groups:

• Your family
• People in your neighborhood
• People you know personally
• People you met for the first time
• People of other religions
• People of other nationality
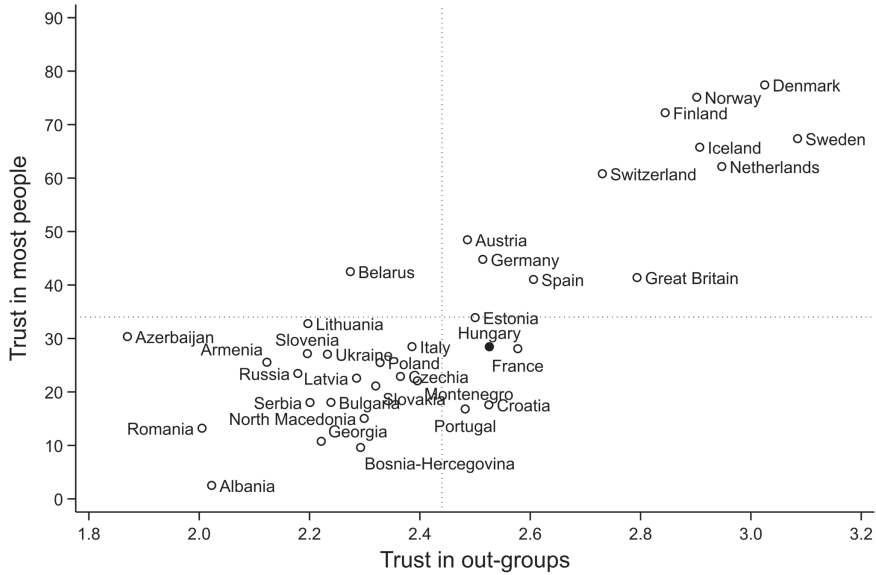
Figure 4.6 Trust in most people by trust in out-groups: 2017.

Source: EVS 2017.

There are several ways of measuring the radius of trust based on this set of questions. Delhey, Newton, and Welzel developed a complex procedure to measure the radius of trust at the country level. They found, however, that a simple measurement based on out-group trust may work equally well at the country level and with the additional advantage of being identified at the individual level.[22]

Figure 4.6 displays country scores on trust in most people by trust in out-groups. Note that the scale of the y-axis is the % who gave the answer that "most people can be trusted" and the scale on the x-axis range from 1 (not at all) to 4 (completely). The correlation at the country level between the two types of trust (r = 0.83) indicates a strong positive correlation between general trust and out-group trust. That is, in countries with a high level of general trust in people, the trust in people in out-groups was also high. This is especially true for the countries in the upper-right quadrant: the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. Hungary is located a little below the overall mean of general trust (28%) and a little above the mean in out-group trust (2.5). In the lower left quadrant, countries below the overall mean on both trust variables are located. The lowest trust in out-groups is found in Azerbaijan (1.9), followed by Romania and Albania (2.0).

Membership of voluntary organizations

The second indicator of social capital is membership of voluntary organizations. This is an indicator of the extensiveness of civil society. It is important for democracy

because participation in voluntary organizations gives training and skills that may prepare citizens for political activities. Also, members of organizations may give voice to policy-relevant views and claims.

All waves of the EVS from 1981 to 2008 include a question on membership and doing unpaid work for voluntary organizations: "Please look carefully at the following list of voluntary organizations and activities and say … a) which, if any, do you belong to?… b) which, if any, are you currently doing unpaid voluntary work for." In EVS 2017, the b-part about doing unpaid work was dropped. The list of organizations presented has also changed. The following eight items were included in both the 1990 and the 2017 EVS study:

- Religious organization
- Education, arts, music, or cultural activities
- Labor unions
- Political parties
- Conservation, the environment, ecology, animal rights
- Professional associations
- Sports or recreation
- Other groups

The number of types of organizations mentioned is a measure of the extent of membership in voluntary organizations. Very few reported that they belonged to more than one or two organizations. The most important divide is between those who belonged to one or more and those who did not report to belong to any organizations. Figure 4.7 shows that 54% belonged to one or more organizations in 1990. That figure had sunk to 49% by 2017.

In the upper-right quadrant of Figure 4.7, we find the countries where almost all were members of one or more types of organizations. This includes the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Germany. In the lower-left quadrant, the countries with the lowest membership rates are located. Spain had the lowest level of membership in 1990 (19%), but showed an increase to 27% in 2017. The pattern for Portugal is the opposite, with the highest level in 1990 (30%) and a decline to 10% in 2017. Hungary is also located in this quadrant, but closer to the overall means for the two years, with a membership level of 47% in 1990 that had declined to 35% by 2017.

Gender roles: 1990–2017

Modern gender roles are important for democracy as an indicator of the extent of participation of women in society. A set of questions on gender roles has been included in all EVS waves since 1990. In all waves from 1990 to 2008 they were introduced by this question: "People talk about the changing roles of men and women today. For each of the following statements I read out, can you tell me how much you agree with each. Please use the responses on this card." In the EVS for 2017, the introductory question was phrased more neutrally: "For each of the
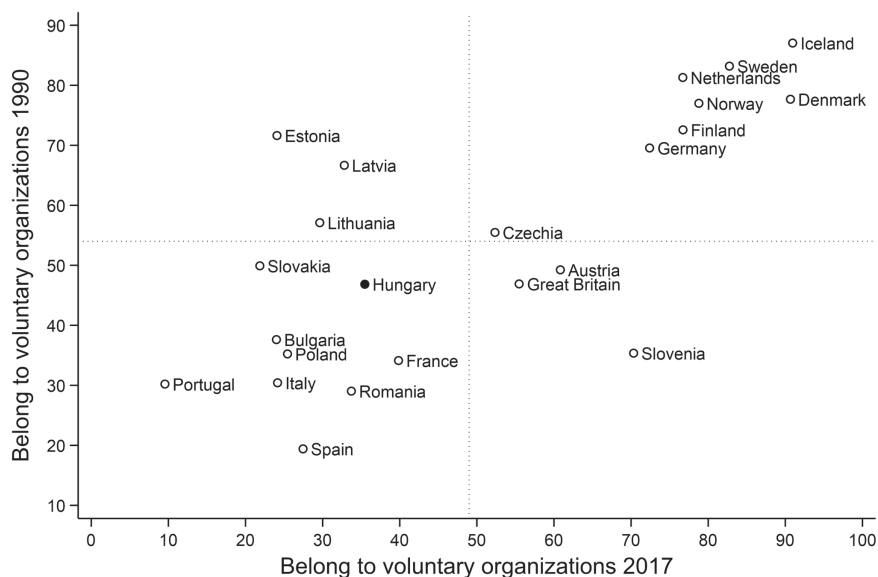
Figure 4.7 Membership in voluntary organizations: 1990 and 2017 (percent).

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

following statements I read out, can you tell me how strongly you agree or disagree with each. Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?" These response categories are the same as those presented on a card in earlier waves. The number and content of the statements have changed over the EVS waves and only two statements remain for the comparison of gender role attitudes in 1990 and 2017:

• Pre-school child suffers with working mother
• Women want a home and children

The four response categories were coded 1 to 4, and a scale of modern gender roles was formed as the mean response on the two questions. Thus, the scale may vary from 1 to 4 and high scale values indicate modern gender roles.

Figure 4.8 shows the scale of gender role attitudes for each country for 1990 and 2017. The scale means were 2.15 and 2.73 for 1900 and 2017, respectively. Thus, gender role attitudes have changed in a modern direction since 1990. The country swarm forms a linear pattern, with a strong linear relationship between the attitudes for the two time points (r = 0.89). The Scandinavian countries showed the most modern gender roles followed by Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain. The most traditional gender role attitudes for 1990 were found in Lithuania and Poland. Latvia and Estonia have moved from traditional attitudes in 1990 to
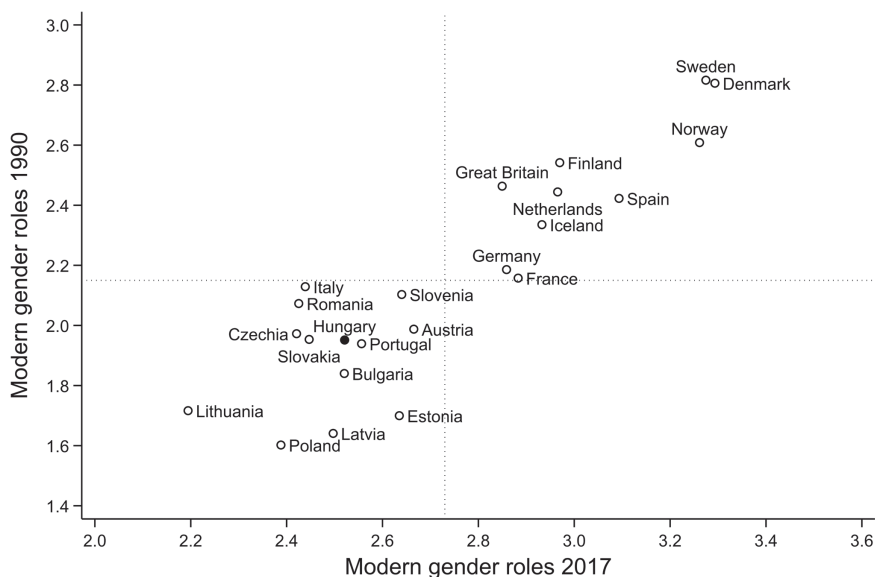
Figure 4.8　Modern gender roles: 1990 and 2017.

Note: Only one of the two questions (with a different format) was asked in Sweden in 1990. Thus, the estimate for Sweden was replaced by the estimate from EVS round 3, 1999.

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

come closer to the overall country mean in 2017. Hungary is also found in the quadrant with the most traditional gender roles. The scores of 2 and 2.5 for the two time points indicate that on the average the Hungarians agreed with the statements in 1990 and had moved in the direction of disagreeing with the statements in 2017. Hungary is surrounded by other East European countries, but also Italy and Portugal as well as Austria are found in the same cluster of countries.

The EVS 2017 includes a larger set of statements about gender roles with four response categories ranging from "agree strongly" (1) to "disagree strongly" (4):

- When a mother works for pay, the children suffer
- A job is alright but what most women really want is a home and children
- All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job
- A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family
- On the whole, men make better political leaders than women do
- A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl
- On the whole, men make better business executives than women do

A factor analysis indicated a strong first factor with the highest factor loadings for the first three statements and a weak second factor with highest loadings for

Table 4.2 Modern gender roles based on seven statements, EVS 2017

Country	Mean	Country	Mean
Norway	3.55	North Macedonia	2.73
Sweden	3.52	Romania	2.71
Denmark	3.41	Poland	2.69
Iceland	3.32	Montenegro	2.67
Spain	3.29	Czechia	2.65
France	3.23	Latvia	2.62
Finland	3.19	Ukraine	2.62
Netherlands	3.15	Bulgaria	2.62
Germany	3.11	Slovakia	2.59
Great Britain	3.07	Belarus	2.58
Switzerland	3.06	Lithuania	2.51
Austria	2.97	Russia	2.40
Croatia	2.93	Georgia	2.35
Slovenia	2.88	Armenia	2.22
Portugal	2.86	Azerbaijan	2.21
Estonia	2.80	Nordic countries	3.39
Serbia	2.80	West European c.	3.02
Italy	2.80	Balkan countries	2.80
Bosnia-Hercegovina	2.78	Baltic countries	2.64
Albania	2.78	East European c.	2.50
348 Hungary	*2.74*	Total	2.84

the three last statements, with the statement in the middle loading about equally on both factors. Further analysis did, however, indicate that the second factor may be due to the comparison between men and women in the four last statements that we may ignore. There were almost perfect correlations ($r > 0.9$) between a scale of all statements and the two sub-scales. In conclusion, the best solution was to make a single scale as the mean of the response category scores on the seven statements.

The resulting scale range from 2.2 to 3.6, with a mean of 2.8, just below the "agree" category. High scale values indicate modern conceptions of the role of women as active in society outside the family and low scale values indicate a more traditional role for women as caretakers. Table 4.2 shows the ranked country means, and country group means on the gender roles scale. Norway and Sweden are found at the top of the table, with means just above 3.5. This may be interpreted as between "disagree" (3) and "disagree strongly" (4). The means for all the Nordic countries was 3.39. Next follow countries in West Europe with a mean of 3.2. Hungary is at the bottom of the first column with a mean of 2.74, together with Bosnia-Hercegovina, Albania, and North Macedonia. The mean of 2.74 for Hungary is, however, clearly above the mean for the group of East European countries. Within this group, Azerbaijan and Armenia, followed by Georgia, and Russia have means from 2.21 to 2.4. This indicates that these countries have the most traditional gender roles in Europe.

Ethnic tolerance: 1990–2017

Both the 1990 and the 2017 EVS included a question on which groups the respondent would dislike as neighbors: "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbors?" Two groups of political extremists were, however, not included in the 2017 study, and "Gypsies" was not included in the 1990 study. This leaves four groups that could be used to compare ethnic intolerance in 1990 and 2017:

• Immigrants/foreign workers
• People of different race
• Jews
• Muslims

A factor analysis showed that a one-dimensional scale may be formed from these four items. A scale of ethnic intolerance was formed by counting the number of groups mentioned. This resulted in a scale with a 0–4 range where more than two-thirds did not mention any of the groups. The heavy skew of the distribution made it clear that the main difference was between those that did not mention any of the groups, the ethnically tolerant, and those who mentioned one or more, the ethnically intolerant. As a result, a new variable based on this distinction was made with the value of one for the ethnically tolerant category and the value zero for those who mentioned one or more of the groups.

The resultant measure of ethnic tolerance is presented in Figure 4.9 for 1990 and 2017. The overall mean was stable, with around two-thirds of the respondents being classified as ethnically tolerant at both points in time. The correlation between ethnic tolerance in 1990 and 2017 is 0.69, indicating a medium to strong positive relationship.

In the upper-right quadrant, the countries above the overall mean at both points in time is found. This cluster of countries with the highest level of ethnic tolerance includes the Nordic countries, some West European, and some South European countries. The opposite quadrant, with the least ethnically tolerant countries, includes the East European countries. Hungary was close to the overall mean in 1990 with 61% tolerant respondents. By 2017, however, this number had shrunk to 41%. Looking at ethnic tolerance across all EVS waves gives a more complex picture. The figure is lacking for 1999, but the percentage classified as tolerant in Hungary rose to 70% in 2008, before declining to 41% in 2017.

Political participation: 1990–2017

We may distinguish between conventional and unconventional political participation. The former is linked to the electoral channel and may include voting and active membership in political parties. We will focus on unconventional political participation, also described as political activism and political action. Political action includes any action that applies pressure on political or governmental agencies and
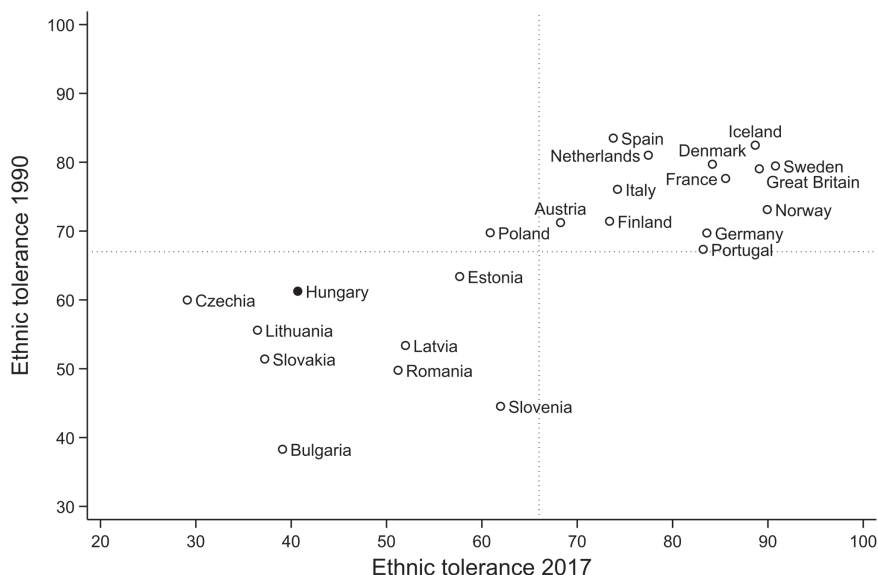
Figure 4.9 Ethnic tolerance: 1990 and 2017 (percent).

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

individuals, to persuade them to adopt certain policies or change their behavior. This focus is a good choice because political activism has increased, whereas traditional political participation has largely declined.[23] This view is supported by Dalton and Welzel, who argue that citizens have become more distrustful of electoral politics and are now more likely to confront elites with demands from below through political activism.[24] The EVS has not covered traditional political activity, but all waves of the EVS have included one question on political actions: "Now I'd like you to look at this card. I'm going to read out some different forms of political action that people can take, and I'd like you to tell me, for each one, whether you have actually done any of these things (1), whether you might do it (2) or would never, under any circumstances, do it (3)."

The show-card included the following five types of political actions:

• Signing a petition
• Joining in boycotts
• Attending lawful/peaceful demonstrations
• Joining unofficial strikes
• Occupying buildings or factories

I tried out two summary scales of political action. The first version was based on a count of the number of actions that the respondents reported that they had

done. The distribution was strongly skewed to the right since few had engaged in more than one type of activity. Accordingly, the scale was recoded so that those who reported that they had engaged in one or more types of activity were coded as one, and those who had never engaged in any of the actions were coded as zero. The result was multiplied by 100 to give a %-scale ranging from 0 to 100. The other summary scale was based on the mean of the reversed category scores for the five items. I decided to use the first version, but I will mention any substantial differences between the two summary scales.

The overall country means were just below 50% for both 1990 and 2017. The upper-right quadrant includes countries with political action percentages above 60 in 1990 and above 70 in 2017: Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Denmark, France, Iceland, and the Netherlands (Figure 4.10).

The lower-left quadrant is composed of countries with relatively low levels of political action at both time points, especially Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Latvia and Lithuania had high percentages of participation in political action in 1990 (around 65%), but the level of activity dropped to the 20–30% range by 2017. In the version of the figure based on all response categories, Lithuania received a higher score for 2017, and Great Britain a lower score, whereas the position of Romania and Hungary, the countries least involved in political action, remained unchanged.
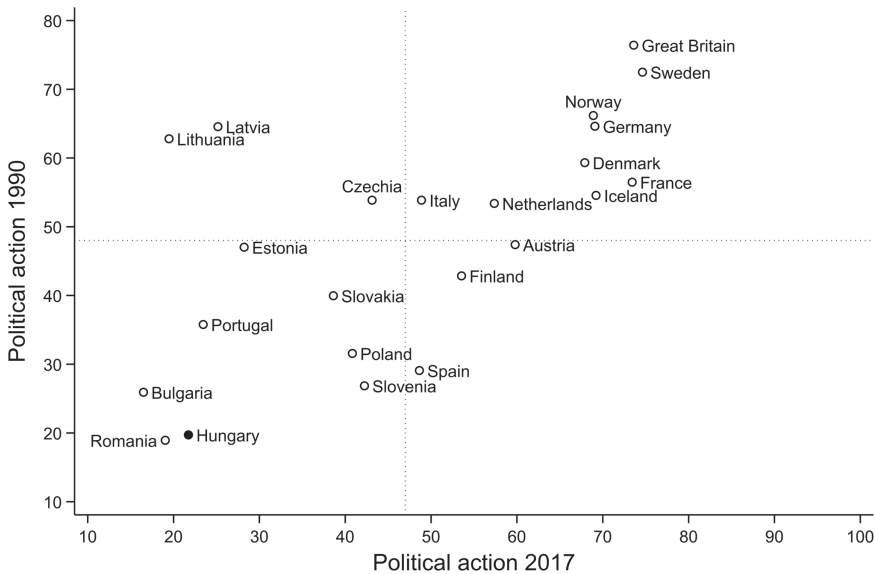
Figure 4.10 Political activism: 1990 and 2017 (percent).

Note: The question was not asked in Romania in 1990. The missing value was replaced by the estimate from EVS round 3, 1999.

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

Political output: Trust in political institutions and life satisfaction

Political trust is both a form of political capital for a society and a measure of how much confidence citizens have in political institutions of their country. A minimum of political trust is needed for a democracy to function legitimately. We expect trust to be highest in the most well-functioning democracies and lower in countries where democratic institutions are contested.

The following question on political trust has been asked in all waves of the EVS (with my scores for the response categories in parentheses): "Please look at this card and tell me, for each item listed, how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal (4), quite a lot (3), not very much (2) or none at all? (1)." The list of institutions shows some variation over the EVS waves, but the four institutions below were found use for in the lists for both 1990 and 2017:

- The police
- Parliament
- Civil services
- The justice system/Courts

This includes the most important institutions with the omission of the government. The scores of 1–4 on the four items were the basis of a summary scale of political confidence. The scale was computed as the mean score for the five items. Thus, the scale may vary from 1 to 4 with high values indicating high levels of political trust. The overall country means had increased weakly from 2.4 in 1990 to 2.5 in 2017.

In the lower-left quadrant, we find countries with below-mean political trust at both points in time (Figure 4.11). Bulgaria stands out here with a political trust score just below the mean of 2.4 in 1990, but with a substantially lower score of 2.0 in 2017. In this group we also find Romania, Slovenia, Czechia, Slovakia, and Italy. Poland stands out with a relatively high political trust of 2.5 in 1990, with a slight drop to about 2.3 in 2017.

The highest levels of political trust are found in the upper-right quadrant with Denmark and Norway at the top, followed by the other Nordic countries, Great Britain, and Austria. These political trust scores were around 3, which corresponds to an average answer of "quite a lot (of confidence)" for the four political institutions. Hungary is found in a cluster close to the overall mean, together with Spain, France, and Portugal. The score of Hungary was 2.5 at both points in time, that is, above the mean in 1990 and at the overall mean for all countries in 2017. A look at the results for all waves, shows that Hungary's political trust score slipped temporarily between 1999 and 2008 (from 2.3 to 2.2) and then returned to the 1990 level in 2017.

The final indicator of political output is life satisfaction. In all waves of the EVS the following question has been included: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please use this card to help you with your answer." The card displayed a numbered line from 1 "Dissatisfied" to 10 "Satisfied." The mean country scores for 1990 and 2017 are displayed in Figure 4.12. Thus, high scores indicate a high level of reported life satisfaction.

78   *Kristen Ringdal*
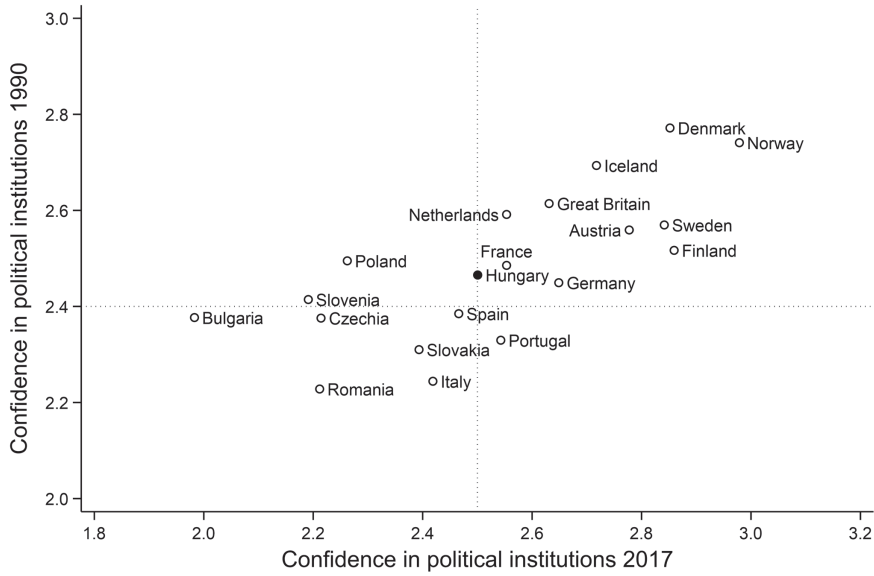
Figure 4.11 Confidence in political institutions: 1990 and 2017.

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.
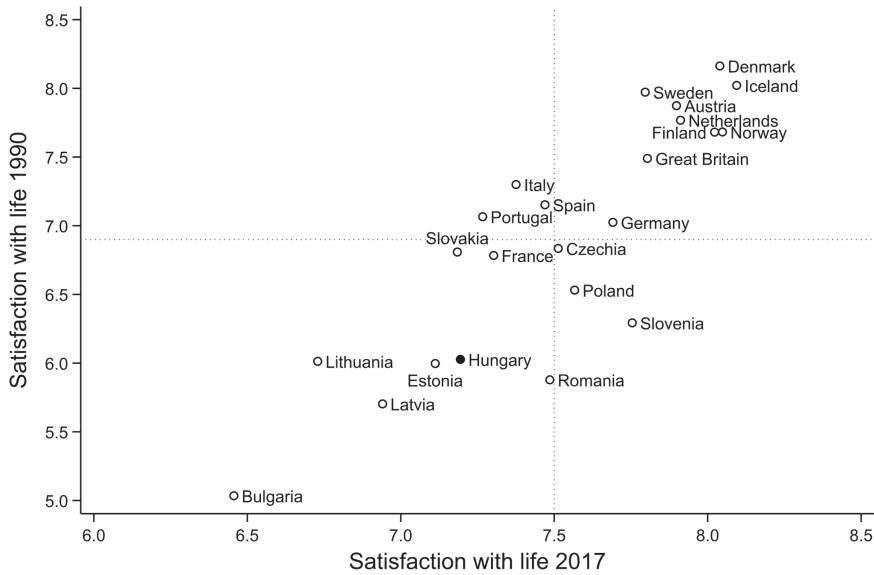
Figure 4.12 Satisfaction with life: 1990 and 2017.

Source: EVS 1990, 2017.

The overall country mean rose from 6.9 in 1990 to 7.5 in 2017. This indicates a relatively high and increasing level of life satisfaction. The pattern of the scatter plot indicates that the relative positions of the countries have been rather stable. Country plots of life satisfaction are normally rather strongly correlated with wealth as measured by the GDP per capita. This is reflected in the top-right quadrant where we find the Scandinavian countries together with Austria, the Netherlands, Austria, and Great Britain. In the middle clustering around the overall means for the two years, we find Czechia, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Slovakia, Germany, and Poland.

Hungary is found in the lower-left quadrant together with countries that have scores below the overall mean for both points in time. Around Hungary we find Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In this quadrant, Bulgaria stands out with the lowest scores on life satisfaction for both years. A closer look reveals that the life satisfaction scores for Hungary declined from 6.5 in 1990 to 6.2 in 1999, but thereafter increased to 7.2 in 2008 and 7.6 in 2017. Slovenia is the country with the largest increase in the life satisfaction scores, increasing from 6.3 in 1990 to 7.8 in 2017.

Summary

Let us start with a summary of the results on the Hungarian civic culture. The results for the first theme, attitudes toward democracy, were based mainly on the EVS 2017. Hungary scored above the overall mean on the importance of democracy and below the mean on the state of democracy in Hungary. This difference amounts to a substantial democratic deficit in Hungary, although there were countries with greater deficits. However, both in 1999 and 2017, Hungarians, like most West Europeans and some East Europeans thought that having a strong leader who could govern alone was a bad idea.

In the EVS 2017, Hungary scored lowest of all countries on whether journalists provide fair coverage of elections, and below the overall mean on how fair elections are carried out in Hungary. The next theme was social capital. On general social trust, Hungary scored below the mean both in 1990 and 2017, that is, similar to a group of mainly East European countries, but which also included France and Portugal. On trust in outgroups, measured in 2017, Hungary scored above the mean, close to Austria, Germany, and France, and above most other East European countries. On the second indicator of social capital, membership in voluntary organizations, Hungary scores below the overall mean in 1990 and more so in 2017. Thus, social capital was relatively weak in Hungary and weakening over the period, but not worse than other East European and South European countries.

On the two-item scale of modern gender roles for 1990 and 2017, Hungary was found in a cluster of East and South European countries below the overall mean in both years. The score of Hungary moved in the modern direction at the same amount as the overall mean. On the seven-item scale for 2017, Hungary scored just below the overall mean, but above the mean for the East European countries.

On ethnic tolerance, Hungary is again found with scores below the overall mean at both timepoints in a cluster of East European countries. Hungary was, however, one of the countries with the largest drop in ethnic tolerance from 61% in 1990 to 41% in 2017, exceeded only by Czechia which registered a drop from 60% to 29%.

The next theme was political activism and political trust. On the former, Hungary together with Romania had the lowest level of political activism with around 20% of its citizens participating in political action as recorded in both 1990 and 2017. On confidence in political institutions, however, Hungary scored higher than the overall mean in 1990 and at the mean in 2017. This is one of the few dimensions where Hungary is found in the cluster of the West European countries.

The last theme was life satisfaction. Hungary is again found in the cluster of countries below the overall mean on both points in time. The score of Hungary, however, increased by 1.2 points from 1990 to 2017, twice as much as the average increase in the life satisfaction score.

In sum, on most aspects of the civic culture included in the empirical part, Hungary was found mainly in the cluster of East European countries with relatively low scores on our measures, sometimes joined by South European countries. On the plus side: Hungary scored high on confidence in political institutions and showed a substantial increase in life satisfaction over the period. On the minus side: Hungary scored consistently very low on political activism and showed a substantial drop in ethnic tolerance between 1990 and 2017.

The picture of a divided Europe on civic culture for the period of 1990 to 2017 with lower values on most aspects of civic culture in Eastern than in Western Europe is consistent with our earlier research and with the other studies presented in the introduction. Coffé and Lippe found the view of citizenship in Hungary to be influenced more by commitment to duty than by engagement. Their interpretation was that Hungarians' view of citizenship still was influenced by the country's communist past.

Marchenko concurred in describing the low level of civic participation in East European countries, which she described as "dispassionate but interested" with a reservoir of latent commitment to political action. However, in societies with a low level of civic activity, very much depends upon the orientation of the media. Hungary and Poland are examples of countries where the traditional media has come under government control. This is reflected in Hungarians' view of the lack of fairness of journalists. As the government control of the media increases, the vulnerability of the public to political propaganda will also increase and weaken the potential for political action.

Janmaat found neither coherence nor stability in civic culture and challenged the meaningfulness of the concept. Considering the consistent differences for the last 30 years described in our study, his standards for consistence and persistence may be too strict, and his advice to drop the concept of civic culture is premature.

Finally, let us go back to the question, whether the drop in the democratic index since about 2010 was reflected in Hungarians' attitudes regarding democracy? The answer must be no, although the best indicators on democratic values were asked only in 2017.

Notes

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5   EU rule-of-law conditionality and uncivic Hungary

Can you buy the rule of law?

*Beáta Bakó**

Introduction: An uncivic business

During the past decade, Hungary has gradually become the black sheep of the European Union: from the coverage of most Western media outlets and the communication of EU institutions, one obtains an image of a blossoming dictatorship unfolding, where the press is no longer free, where homosexuals are persecuted by the national-conservative government, and where one cannot trust even the judiciary. As is usually the case, such criticism has contained some truth, some exaggerations or even lies, and in some matters, it has completely overlooked real and relevant problems or just scratched their surface.[1]

The antagonist of the story is clear: Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who himself declared he was building an "illiberal state."[2] He appears to enjoy the role of the EU's "bad guy," and regularly provokes the EU's liberal mainstream ("Brussels" as he calls it) in the field of identity politics. However, the protagonist is hiding in a rather abstract sphere: it is the mysterious rule of law. The concept with which lawyers and constitutional theorists have been so obsessed, that they filled libraries with discussion about it, now made its way to the headlines of newspapers. Even average people in most European countries have heard that "Orbán poses a threat to the EU because he undermines the rule of law" – whatever the latter is supposed to mean.

The rule of law can best be understood as a counterbalance (and at the same time: a complementary element) to democracy. Democracy is based on the principles of popular sovereignty and majority rule: people (the majority of voters) elect the parliament, and the parliament (the majority of MPs) adopts laws. The rule of law can be grasped as a set of legal principles and counter-majoritarian institutions ensuring that the state (the democratic majority) cannot do anything it wants. So, through the rule of law, people are protected from the majority they elect.

Among the civic virtues identified by Sabrina P. Ramet and Kristen Ringdal,[3] civic engagement is of central importance for both democracy and the rule of law. By voting at elections (ideally based on an informed decision), people create and maintain state authority. Between two elections, the role of civic engagement (again, ideally) turns to the opposite: it should always question that very state

authority and draw the lines beyond which state interference has no business. The COVID pandemic has shown that civic engagement in the latter sense cannot be taken for granted, even in the West.[4] However, societies with the experience of state-socialism in their recent history tend to demonstrate a different approach to democracy and the rule of law than is common in the West.[5]

Hungary serves as a typical post-socialist example of distortions to civic engagement, as I will demonstrate in the second section of this chapter. While there is a strong demand for democratically established state authority after decades of communist rule, the significance for people to control their own democratically legitimized government is not perceived as pivotal. These social attitudes have a central role in the recurring election victories of the Fidesz party since 2010, even if the government indeed has been striving to cement its power through cynical practices and legal reforms.[6]

In this chapter, I will take the debate over the rule of law between Hungary and the EU as an example to illustrate how counterproductive it could be if social reality and public demands are overlooked in such debates. More recently, the EU has started to use financial conditionality to enforce some rule of law-related reforms in Hungary (and to a certain extent, in Poland), which reminds me of a strange and risky purchase contract. In the third section, I will briefly survey the debate over the rule of law between the EU and the Hungarian government. In the next two sections, I will demonstrate how the European Union's rule-of-law conditionality requirements applied against Hungary have been developed and finally extended beyond concrete corruption problems toward more general issues. The politically bundled procedures and bargains resulted in the suspension of 34 billion EUR instead of the originally planned 7.5 billion EUR. As a result of the threat of losing EU money, the Hungarian government was forced to introduce an anti-corruption legal framework and a judiciary reform, but this can hardly be seen as a success.

In the concluding section, I will argue that such punctual institutional reforms may be durable solutions for systemic rule-of-law problems only if they are able to enhance civic consciousness and contribute to establishing a strong and durable demand for the rule of law by society. Based on the experiences of the practical functioning of the enforced reforms through EU financial conditionality so far, I will argue that the EU cannot successfully purchase the rule of law in Hungary.

Hungary: The seller that does not appreciate the subject of the purchase

"We've won a victory that's big enough to be seen from the Moon." These are the words of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán[7] after winning a two-thirds majority in parliament with his national-conservative Fidesz party in April 2022.[8] This was already the fourth time since 2010 that Fidesz gained such an overwhelming majority in parliament that enables the party to make fundamental legal and political changes without compromise (or even substantial debate) with other parties. The relevance of the two-thirds majority is manifold in the Hungarian constitutional system: it is required for constitution making and the adoption of

constitutional amendments, for the election of top public officials who should in principle be independent, and for adopting and changing the so-called cardinal laws. These laws have been present in the Hungarian legal system since the democratic transition: they must be adopted and amended with a two-thirds majority in parliament, and they govern the basic organizational structures of the state (Constitutional Court, ordinary judiciary, prosecutors, police) and the most fundamental rules of the democratic state order (elections, citizenship, local governments, functioning of parties, media laws).

So, before the last victory which was "big enough to be seen from the Moon," Fidesz had already made good use of its two-thirds majority in parliament: Fidesz modified the constitution to serve its daily political interest and to overrule judgments of the Constitutional Court,[9] it filled independent state institutions with its appointees,[10] it built an (officially private) media empire that echoes government propaganda,[11] adopted targeted laws to help its friends or punish its enemies,[12] and out-sourced huge amounts of public money to "public interest asset management foundations" led by its loyalists, in some cases, incumbent ministers.[13] In sum, with its strong two-thirds majority in parliament, Fidesz has controversially built a dysfunctional constitutional system, where constitutional rules might be changed anytime, and they might not be applied consistently by the responsible institutions, some of which have lost even the appearance of independence.[14] Still, even if some details of the election system have been modified,[15] it would be naïve and even undemocratic to deny the electorate's role in the now 13-years-long reign of Fidesz.[16] In fact, it is the people who have re-elected the party with a convincing majority again and again. The election results of 2022 suggest that, even after experiencing 12 years of gradual concentration of power by the Fidesz governments, the decisive majority of the active Hungarian electorate does not prioritize checks and balances and the rule of law.

Of course, Hungarian voters cannot be viewed as a homogeneous bloc: there is still an opposition in the country (even if it is drastically weakened after its latest election defeat), and there are a huge number of passive non-voters. Thanks to the intensified polarization between supporters of the government and the opposition on the one hand, and the disengagement of centrist voters on the other, the main problem is not the tyranny of the majority but the reign of apathy.[17] This is also supported by a recent study which found that the majority (58%) of Hungarians agree with the statement that the government can do whatever it wants.[18] Still, the government is constantly re-elected. The political environment, especially the enormously simplified public discourse, prevents the development of a mature political culture. Such a culture has an important prerequisite: that citizens' demands do not stop at the claim for democratic participation, and that citizens also aim at exercising control over state power between elections – in other words, that citizens are engaged not only in democracy but also in the rule of law. Hungary is very far from that ideal as has been proven in a recent empirical study: in the case of a legal conflict, Hungarians are willing to bring a lawsuit against each other, but they are reluctant to do so if their counterpart is a state institution.[19] They are good at complaining but bad at asserting their rights against the state.

Obviously, desirable civic attitudes could not develop in the society during the four decades of socialist dictatorship. The chance for establishing a self-conscious, well-rooted citizenry was also missed after the democratic transition, which was "much more given to *emulation*, *adoption*, and *installation*, than to *institutional-isation*."[20] Hungary, like other countries in the East Central European region was expected to copy the Western institutional model of liberal democracy without providing the chance for society to internalize those values. This "no-alternative approach" is not only reminiscent of the old state socialism,[21] but it also had a high price: today's "constitutional capture," which is the legacy of the unfulfilled promises of post-1989 and of the demise of the liberal consensus.[22]

The current "illiberal" problems are clearly rooted in the deficiencies of the democratic transition, even if political actors lack any self-reflection on this matter. This was perfectly illustrated in May 2020, on the 30th anniversary of the formation of the first freely elected parliament after the communist dictatorship. On that occasion, the Hungarian parliament adopted a declaration according to which it was entering into force the new Basic Law in 2012 that closed the post-communist period. Post-communism is described in the document as a period, during which there was the chance of backsliding and falling under foreign influence again.[23] This might be a comfortable interpretation of Hungary's most recent history for the governing party, but, in fact, its governance since 2010 has actively contributed to the survival of post-communism by constantly motivating people to behave not as *citizens* but as obedient and grateful dependents. Contrary to this political declaration, Fidesz's governance can be seen precisely as fulfilling and eternalizing the miseries of post-communism.

Still, the declaration's explanation about the meaning of post-communism is something that should be read carefully by those who are concerned about Hungary's "democratic backsliding."[24] The key is the fear of falling under foreign influence again, even if this foreign influence is coming from the EU in the form of pressure to strengthen counter-majoritarian institutions vis-à-vis the government and parliamentary majority. It is exactly the nearly unlimited majoritarian democracy which can be seen in this context as the achievement of freedom, which does not mean primarily freedom from its own elected government (in the form of checks and balances) but rather from oppression by foreign powers,[25] be it either from the East or from the West. Post-socialist societies appreciate their recently regained democratic self-determination so strongly that they are willing to excuse the abuse of power by their elected governments. The current Western constitutional tradition was reinforced by the experience of fascism and Nazism: accordingly, this tradition aims at eliminating internal dangers to democracy and promises to "save people from themselves."[26] The post-communist approach is different: it identifies the main threats to democracy as external; therefore, democracy is understood as national democracy.[27]

Orbán's rhetoric regarding the EU fits perfectly into this logic. He has demonstrated it many times, for instance, in the debate concerning the Sargentini report[28] at the European Parliament plenary, before launching Article 7 of the TEU

sanctioning mechanism against Hungary in September 2018. "Hungary has fought for its freedom and democracy. I stand here now, and I see that Hungary is being arraigned by people who inherited democracy, not needing to assume any personal risk for the pursuit of freedom," he said. The statement is not accurate for several reasons, but the relevance is the message behind it: *we Hungarians appreciate what democracy means, because we have struggled for it, and you, spoiled Western Europeans, you have no idea about that*. It is worth recalling another quote on this point from rapporteur Sargentini, who, in an interview a few days earlier, had said that "for democracy, elections are like the icing on the cake."[29]

The two statements clearly illustrate the extreme absolutization either of democracy (unlimited pure majority rule) or of the rule of law (prioritizing counter-majoritarian institutions and rendering democratic legitimacy secondary). Indeed, limitless majority rule can be harmful. However, prioritizing the rule of law over democratic legitimacy at all costs is not a silver bullet for "illiberal problems" either, especially when the need for stronger checks and balances is not reasoned with the wish of empowering citizenry but with external requirements.

This strong concern over national sovereignty against the EU might seem controversial in light of the fact that the EU's image is particularly positive in Hungary (also among Fidesz voters): an overwhelming majority of Hungarians think that EU membership is beneficial for the country. Still, when it comes to Hungarian interests, the majority does not assume that Hungary is able to assert its interests in the EU effectively.[30]

The governing party knows very well how to make use of these public feelings – not just during election campaigns but in everyday politics as well. For instance, soon after the 2022 election, the Hungarian parliament (called the National Assembly) adopted a decision about the future of the European Union,[31] emphasizing the necessity of leading "the European Union out from the impasse where it [has been] governed by the European Parliament." The National Assembly (more accurately, its Fidesz supermajority) suggests that, instead of the current direct elections, the European Parliament should rather be composed of delegates of national parliaments "to ensure real political legitimacy." It is clearly unrealistic to imagine that this suggestion will be codified into any future treaty change, and the decision of the National Assembly is not normative either: it is a mere suggestion for the government about what view it should represent in the negotiations on a possible treaty change. Still, it illustrates that the government is very clever in provoking the EU and in responding to voters' feelings at the same time, hammering home that real legitimacy may be achieved only at the national level.

The easiest way to uphold voters' negligence vis-à-vis the government's corruption scandals and obvious concentration of power is to show them a bigger danger: another threat of an oppressing foreign power. This will work up to the point where the communist dictatorship is a near and direct experience for the significant part of society. Moreover, the EU does the government a huge favor by voluntarily playing the role of the wannabe "oppressive foreign power."

The EU: The buyer who is reluctant to pay for a dubious product

The EU has been arguing with the Hungarian government over the rule of law for more than a decade. This is not motivated by the desire for oppression but by a practical necessity, the clear self-interest of the EU and all member states: the rule of law is the most essential prerequisite for mutual trust[32] and for the common market.[33] Without mutual trust and a certain level of rule of law, the recognition of administrative acts, judgments, co-operation in justice, and in many other fields would not work within the EU. However, this obvious (and common) interest was not clearly communicated by EU officials (at least publicly): instead they mostly echoed blurry statements about EU values and the rule of law in a didactic tone.

First, the European Commission tried to handle the situation by initiating infringement procedures: but these are limited to cases where a concrete piece of EU legislation is violated by member states. Although Hungary lost almost all rule-of-law-related cases before the European Court of Justice (ECJ), the judgments were often not[34] or not entirely[35] implemented, or the respective legal changes were adopted late and designed in a problematic manner similar to the originally challenged laws.[36]

In launching infringement procedures, the Commission has wide discretion. It is noteworthy that in recent years of the rule-of-law debate with Hungary, the Commission selected cases which were actually gifts for the government's rhetorical goals. When the government was fighting a propagandistic fight against George Soros, the Hungarian-American billionaire, depicting him as the driver of the migration flow, the Commission started infringement procedures because of two laws that were precisely targeting Soros. One of these laws obliged NGOs receiving more than 7.2 million HUF (then approximately 23,000 EUR) in funding from abroad per year to register themselves as "organisations supported from abroad,"[37] clearly addressed to NGOs funded by Soros's Open Society Foundation. The other law suddenly required an international agreement for the further functioning of foreign universities in Hungary, targeting the Soros-founded Central European University.[38] Referring to the infringement procedures, the government went on to spread the message that "Brussels is with Soros." A few years later, when the government found its new enemy in the LGBT and transgender lobby, the Commission picked a law that aimed at preventing children from being exposed to content on homosexuality or transgender issues, either in the media or in school.[39] After the Commission announced the launch of an infringement procedure,[40] the Hungarian government started to claim that "Brussels wants to tell us how to raise our children,"[41] and the Prime Minister called a referendum on "the protection of children."[42]

The selection of infringement cases is just one example of how the EU provided the Hungarian government with a perfect image of an enemy: "Brussels bureaucrats" who intervene into the democratic will of the Hungarian people. The image of an enemy is exactly what the Fidesz government needs in order to win the elections again and again.[43]

Another example is the famous sanctioning procedure under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) which was launched against Hungary by the

European Parliament in September 2018.[44] This mechanism is supposed to safeguard so-called EU values, *inter alia*, democracy, the rule of law, and the respect for fundamental rights, as declared in Article 2 of the TEU. Experience has shown that Article 7 does not function because member states tend to be indulgent toward other member states' governments for pragmatic political reasons.[45] Article 7 of the TEU is a lengthy procedure in three stages, aiming at suspending some rights of the affected member state (such as voting rights) in EU institutions: to reach that third stage, a unanimous decision of the European Council (member states' heads of governments or heads of states) about the "serious and persistent breach" of EU values is a prerequisite in the second stage. The first stage of the procedure is only a forewarning that results in a mere declaration that there is a *clear risk* of a serious breach of EU values (including the rule of law) in the given member state. The procedure against Hungary could not reach even this point, because in the Council of the European Union, member states' governments simply did not put the vote on the agenda. This was resented by the European Parliament, which in September 2022 adopted an updated report about the situation in Hungary, claiming that Hungary was not a democracy any longer but "a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy." The Parliament took the position that by delaying any action on the matter, the Council itself breaches the rule of law principle.[46] Regardless of that non-binding resolution, the Article 7 procedure cannot be expected to proceed further.

Instead, EU institutions found a way to circumvent the too drastic and therefore unusable Article 7 mechanism by introducing another similar procedure with a significantly narrower focus and lower voting thresholds: this is the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism that entered into force in January 2021. Instead of protecting EU values in general, including Article 7, this regulation applies only to those violations of the rule of law which affect "the sound financial management of the Union budget or the protection of the financial interests of the Union *in a sufficiently direct way.*"[47] The regulation concretizes the possible subjects of such rule-of-law violations in a non-exhaustive list with elements such as the proper functioning of the authorities implementing the Union budget or carrying out financial control, safeguarding that the prosecution of fraud, tax fraud, and corruption functions properly, effective judicial review over the aforementioned authorities actions or omissions, effective cooperation with the EU's anti-fraud agency, the OLAF, and so on.[48] The initiative of financial sanctions (primarily, the suspension of EU funds) is up to the Commission, depending on its own assessment based on "relevant information from available sources."[49] After providing the affected member state with the possibility to submit observations and offer remedial measures, it is finally the Council of the European Union (comprising member states' governments) that decides about the suspension of funds.[50]

The exact subject and price of the purchase – in constant change

After Orbán's fourth two-thirds majority victory in April 2022, the Commission immediately announced the launch of the new rule-of-law conditionality mechanism against Hungary. The threat of losing EU funds came during difficult times

for the Hungarian government, which had increased welfare spending in the election campaign, while the general economic situation was apparently bad and was still worsening thanks to the effects of the restrictive measures during the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The Hungarian government, which has repeatedly blamed the EU for any difficulties, started propagandistic campaigns on billboards and media, blaming "Brussels' sanctions" for the high inflation rate and the harsh economic situation. But at the same time, the government showed itself to be as cooperative and ready for compromise with Brussels as never before.

The government promised the Commission to introduce a comprehensive anti-corruption package of 17 elements, which was indeed adopted by the parliament in October 2022. Several parts of the reform are mere cosmetics, such as new asset-declaration rules for certain public offices (which is charmingly naïve in a country awash with beneficial owners); however, there are two core elements.

First, the new so-called Integrity Authority, which is independent according to the letter of the law, was established.[51] The only task of this new authority is to take steps if other authorities, which are normally responsible for the prevention and investigation of corruption and fraud concerning EU funds, did not do their job.[52] But the steps the Integrity Authority might take do not seem to be genuinely deterrent. The Authority mostly prepares annual reports and delivers recommendations regarding public procurements. The strongest power it has is to suspend public procurement procedures if fraud or corruption is suspected, but such a suspension may last for no more than two months. If other authorities failed to do their job in preventing or investigating fraud and corruption, the Integrity Authority might take them to court and wait patiently for the judgment. In principle, the Authority must notify the EU's anti-fraud agency (OLAF) and the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) about the suspected cases. However, this cannot be taken as a guarantee of action, given that OLAF is not authorized to conduct investigations in member states directly, and Hungary has not joined the EPPO which can conduct investigations only in participating countries.

The other important element of the package seeks to address criticism addressed at the prosecution service, which often remained passive or closed investigations surprisingly fast whenever the suspect of corruption occurred in circles close to the government or the Prime Minister himself.[53] This might not be unrelated to the fact that the Prosecutor General is a close ally of the Prime Minister and he used to be a member of the governing Fidesz party. To ensure that corruption and fraud concerning EU money do not remain unprosecuted, a new special procedure has been introduced into the Code of Criminal Procedure[54] for crimes including corruption, bribery, fraud, embezzlement, cartels at public procurements, and abuse of official position. If, in such cases, the prosecution rejects denunciations or terminates the investigation without indictment, anyone can challenge the decision before court, and in the event that the court finds that the termination was ill-grounded, the complainant might indict on his own, instead of the prosecution. However, unlike the prosecution, random complainants do not have the necessary investigative powers, and if the charges are not sufficiently proven, courts would not convict the accused persons, in line with the presumption of innocence.

The practical functioning of the reform package is something that raised concerns from the side of the Commission as well. When submitting its proposal to the Council for the suspension of 65% of cohesion funds (7.5 billion EUR) to Hungary in September 2022, the Commission stated that, although the remedial measures offered by the Hungarian government could in principle address the criticized issues, in order to be effective, they would have to be correctly detailed and be implemented accordingly.[55] By the time the Council voted about the sanctions in December 2022, the remedial measures had been adopted by the parliament and had entered into force. Nonetheless, member states' governments in the Council found the remedial measures mostly inadequate, but appreciating the Hungarian government's cooperative approach, "only" a sum of 6.3 billion EUR instead of the originally planned 7.5 billion EUR was suspended.[56]

To sum up: the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism is not able (or designed) to repair large-scale rule-of-law deficiencies. "It is a mechanism for *protecting the EU budget via the rule of law* rather than *protecting the rule of law via the EU budget*."[57] No wonder that, when refusing the actions for annulment against the mechanism brought by Hungary and Poland, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) emphasized that the aim of the conditionality regulation and that of Article 7 of the TEU were different:[58] the protection of the EU budget in cases of rule-of-law deficiencies and the enforcement of the rule of law, respectively. This legal interpretation, however, does not detract from the fact that the political aim of establishing the conditionality mechanism was clearly the circumvention of Article 7 of the TEU, which could not function in practice – primarily due to the high voting requirements.

With the aforementioned judgment, the ECJ made it clear that the sufficiently direct link between the contested rule-of-law deficiencies and the EU budget cannot be interpreted widely in order to address more general or even systemic rule-of-law problems in the member states; therefore, the Commission had to find another way of putting financial pressure on "renitent" member states. The tool for this was the Next Generation EU package, which included huge amounts of funds (and loans) to the member states, financed from the common debt of the EU, aiming at economic recovery after the restrictions during the COVID pandemic. In order to receive payments from the recovery fund,[59] all member states had to submit a recovery and resilience plan to the Commission. The Commission then decided whether it would recommend the plan for approval in the Council or not – without being bound by deadlines in making this informal approval. In the case of Hungary, 5.8 billion EUR is at stake. The Commission usually made the decisions on approval relatively fast, but it intentionally applied the tactic of delay in the cases of both Poland and Hungary: more than a year had passed, until the recovery plans of these two member states were finally approved in 2022, but the actual start of the payments was subject to fulfilling further rule-of-law criteria (the so-called milestones and super milestones) in both cases. These milestones basically focus on enhancing the independence of the judiciary in both countries. In the case of Hungary, they additionally include the proper implementation of the remedial measures offered within the rule of law conditionality mechanism.

Further, the fulfilment of the super-milestones regarding a judiciary reform was in December 2022 identified as a horizontal enabling condition generally for the payments from the cohesion funds for the period of 2021–2027 in the Partnership Agreement between the Commission and Hungary.[60] This is, in fact, another extremely extensive application of conditionality which, theoretically, may concern the entire 22 billion EUR sum of cohesion funds for Hungary. Beyond that, horizontal enabling conditions were established with regard to certain specific funds because of the aforementioned so-called child protection law, and deficiencies in the field of academic freedom[61] and the right to asylum.[62]

The most important element of the "super-milestones," the legislative package on the judiciary reform, was passed in the Hungarian parliament in May 2023. With this package,[63] the opportunity for public authorities to file a constitutional complaint was abolished.[64] The new judiciary package significantly strengthened the status of the judicial self-governing body, the National Judicial Council vis-à-vis the judiciary administration (National Office for the Judiciary) which is led by an appointee of the parliament.[65] Further, both the appointment procedure of the president of the judiciary administration and the president of the Curia will be more transparent through open calls, even if, finally, both judicial leaders will be elected by a two-thirds majority of the parliament, just like earlier.[66] The government highlighted that the text of the judiciary package was agreed in full consultation with the European Commission.[67]

To sum up: as of early November 2023, Hungary still faces the suspension of 34.1 billion EUR. From this sum, only 6.3 billion EUR is subject to the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, which is supervised by the European Court of Justice and the Council of the European Union, and which relates to concrete corruption problems. The rest (27.8 billion EUR) depends on the discretion of the European Commission alone; moreover, on the Commission's interpretation of certain Hungarian policies, stronger or weaker, related to the rule of law.

A business between two non bona fide parties

The legality of the Commission's practice with the delayed and conditional approval of recovery plans is highly doubtful considering that the conditionality mechanism, which is designed precisely for such suspensions, was not launched in the context of the recovery funds against either Hungary or Poland. This is not surprising considering the fact that the established milestones are clearly not *sufficiently directly* linked to the use of EU funds,[68] even if enhancing the independence of the judiciary is indeed a relevant factor in the fight against corruption. So, as the prospects of launching the new rule of law conditionality mechanism were not promising enough, the Commission found a new way to apply *de facto* financial conditionality beyond the conditionality regulation.

But the legal basis for the Commission's tactics is very weak, as there are no specific rules on compliance with the rule of law in the regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).[69] Although the regulation about the RRF contains a reference to the consistency with the recommendations within

the European Semester Program[70] (which, in the case of Hungary, includes the strengthening of the independence of the judiciary),[71] this tricky involvement of soft-law recommendations hardly complies with the rule of law. What makes the concerns deeper is that – unlike in the case of the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism, where the Council is involved, and judicial remedy is provided before the ECJ – the Commission alone supervises the *de facto* suspension of huge amounts of funds. The fact that the Commission empowers itself with such a wide discretion regarding extra conditions (beyond the expressly codified policy conditions of the RRF) just by referring to soft law recommendations is particularly noteworthy in the context that the suspended RRF money is covered by the common debt of all EU member states, including of Poland and Hungary.

The extensive use of horizontal enabling conditions in the context of the entire cohesion funds with reference to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights also raises questions. The effective application of the Charter as a horizontal enabling condition for getting support from EU funds was laid down in the Common Provisions Regulation on EU funds from 2021,[72] and judicial independence is indeed crucial to safeguard the right to a fair trial guaranteed by Article 47 of the Charter. However, it is peculiar that the Commission alone concluded that there were serious deficiencies in Hungary in this field because, unlike Poland, Hungary was not repeatedly condemned by the ECJ in cases related to judicial independence.[73] Such a conclusion is also controversial in the context of the child protection law which was at the time subject to an ongoing infringement procedure,[74] without being closed by a judgment.

The *de facto* conditionality applied in the context of rule-of-law issues both in relation to the RRF and to cohesion funds in general through the horizontal enabling conditions sharply raise the question of the circumvention of Article 7 of the TEU sanctioning mechanism. Regarding this point, the ECJ clearly declared that such a circumvention would be illegal.[75]

By applying these tricky strategies, the Commission not only demonstrated that, for its own activity, it does not necessarily take the rule of law seriously, but also presents itself as an imperial actor that exercises mercy when it gives but it takes back arbitrarily as punishment. Moreover, with these legally questionable moves, the Commission sometimes even verified the Hungarian government's mendacious propaganda. For instance, back in 2021, when the regulation on the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism was already in force, but had not yet been launched, the Hungarian government declared that "Brussels wants to punish us because we do not allow LGBT propaganda in our schools." As the scope of conditionality regulation is strictly limited to corruption and irregularities regarding the use of EU funds, this was an obvious lie at the time. However, when, at the end of 2022, the Commission presented the child protection law and LGBT issues as horizontal enabling conditions, it made the government's originally false claims true.

The political context in which this creative extension of rule-of-law conditionality took place is also remarkable, especially considering the war in Ukraine. The Hungarian government often threatened to veto certain sanction-packages against Russia and insisted on easing sanctions at some points. The political context

suggests that, despite the EU's elevated declarations about the importance of the rule of law, the rule of law in fact is just an ordinary tool in the everyday political game. As an answer to veto threats, new and unexpected ways of rule-of-law conditionality appeared, involving significantly larger amounts of funds than originally planned.

A business designed for failure

Just as the Commission does not worry exclusively about the rule of law but is also concerned about the EU's "desirable" political decisions, which are sometimes hindered by the Hungarian government, the Hungarian government is not genuinely committed to restore the rule of law or to enhance the fight against corruption either. This becomes apparent when looking at the practical functioning of the reforms that have been introduced due to EU financial conditionality. As explained above, a large part of these new provisions was apparently mere cosmetics from the very beginning, but some of the new institutions and procedures have had at least a theoretical possibility to improve the situation.

However, experience shows that the theoretical possibility was not realized in practice: although the corruption risk of EU-funded tenders was somewhat reduced, parallelly, the corruption risk of tenders covered by the central budget significantly increased.[76] From its establishment in November 2022 until August 2023, the Integrity Authority used its limited substantial competences only a couple of times. It suspended a single public procurement procedure, made two indictments (one of them concerning the same case as the suspended public procurement), and challenged the prosecution's rejection of indictments twice.[77] Further, the reform of the criminal procedure to enforce the prosecution to make more indictments in corruption cases was not a success either. Until August 2023, the competent court resolved eleven complaints that challenged the rejection of denunciations, and only two of these complaints were accepted.[78] The effects of the judiciary reform that was "agreed in full consultation with the Commission" cannot yet be seen.

Legal reforms that actually remain dead letters not only maintain a dishonest charade in relations with the EU but more importantly: will not contribute to civic consciousness, as citizens are not motivated to make use of the new control instruments if they do not see much chance for success. In light of all this, there is little wonder that, as of early November 2023, no Euro Cent of the suspended funds had been released to Hungary. As the situation stands now, no real reforms could be expected from the government, and what is worse, no wide public demand for the rule of law could be anticipated. This is also illustrated by changes in public opinion. The formerly definitely supportive stance of Hungarians toward the EU was largely due to the funding received,[79] so there is little wonder that, by early 2023, the support for the EU apparently dropped compared to mid-2022, from 51 to 39%.[80] At the same time, the governing party kept its strong public support, despite high inflation and the threat of losing EU funds.

This is bad news for a simple reason: it is not the EU that can or should restore the rule of law in Hungary, but the Hungarian people. But this is possible only if

Hungarian people want their elected government to be controlled. Of course, this argument presupposes that it is a democracy of which we are speaking, so that the will of the people can prevail. The European Parliament already expressed its doubts about Hungary being a democracy.[81] The opinion of the European Parliament is not of decisive importance in this regard; more telling is the Hungarian citizens' opinion regarding their government. According to a post-election poll from 2022, the majority do not believe that Fidesz could be voted out of power democratically any longer, but believe this is possible only by means of violence. Even one-third of Fidesz voters agree with this.[82] This raises a few serious questions. Why do those one-third of Fidesz voters still support the government? Are they happy with a regime which they do not consider a functioning democracy?

Furthermore, the outcome may also provide a minimal reason for optimism regarding the future: if more than half of the Hungarians believe that the current government cannot be voted out democratically, they can probably also see why the effective counterbalances to an elected majority serve their own interest too (and not just that of the EU). This is what the EU should make Hungarian people more aware of, instead of stoking unnecessary conflicts of identity politics which make conservative people feel cruel if they do not support certain trending progressive policies. Further, what should be avoided at all costs is the impression of blackmail, instructions, and other forms of foreign intervention, because what makes civic virtues (and virtues in general) secure is that they are rooted in conviction rather than mere compliance.

Notes

1　*Postdoc researcher, Charles University Prague, Faculty of Law. The results of this LL2106 project have been obtained with the financial support of the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports within the targeted support of the ERC CZ program. The manuscript was closed on 3 November 2023, when all the referred online sources were last accessed.
　　For details see: Beáta Bakó, *Challenges to EU Values in Hungary. How the European Union Misunderstood the Government of Viktor Orbán* (London & New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 80–124.
2　Viktor Orbán's speech at the Tusnádfürdő / Băile Tuşnad Summer University, 26 July 2014. Full transcript in English: https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvan yos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp [last accessed on 27 March 2024].
3　See Ramet's Introduction and Chapter 4.
4　See e.g., Ulrike Guérot, *Wer schweigt, stimmt zu: Über den Zustand unserer Zeit. Und darüber, wie wir leben wollen* (Frankfurt: Westend, 2022).
5　See e.g., Lucia Husenicova, "Disillusionment with liberal democracy in the Visegrad countries," in *UNISCI Journal*, No. 54 (October 2020).
6　See e.g., András Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating. Governance in Illiberal Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
7　The whole speech is available at the official website of the Prime Minister: https://min iszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-the-election-victory-of-fidesz-kdnp/ [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

8 In subsection 2, I am partly building on my earlier working paper: Beáta Bakó, "National Democracy vs European Rule of Law? The lack of public demand for the rule of law in Hungary," *Working Papers, Forum Transregionale Studien* 13/2023, pp. 10–15.

9 For details see e.g., Zoltán Szente, "Challenging the Basic Values – Problems in the Rule of Law in Hungary and the Failure of the EU to Tackle Them," in András Jakab and Dimitry Kochenov (eds.), *The Enforcement of EU Law and Values. Ensuring Member States' Compliance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) pp. 459ff; and Bakó, *Challenges to EU Values in Hungary*, pp. 137ff.

10 For details see e.g., András Jakab and Eszter Bodnár, "The rule of law, democracy and human rights in Hungary: Tendencies from 1989 until 2019," in Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała (eds.), *Rule of Law, Common Values, and Illiberal Constitutionalism. Poland and Hungary within the European Union* (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 112ff.

11 Attila Bátorfy, "Az állam foglyul ejtésétől a piac fogvatartásáig: Orbán Viktor és a kormány médiamodellje 2014 után" [From state capture to market capture: The media model of Viktor Orbán and the government after 2014], in *Médiakutató*, Vol. 18, No 1–2 (Spring-Summer 2017); and Bakó, *Challenges to EU Values in Hungary*, pp. 193ff.

12 Beáta Bakó, "Hungary's Latest Experiences with Article 2 TEU: The Need for «Informed» EU Sanctions," in: Armin von Bogdandy et al. (eds.), *Defending Checks and Balances in EU Member States. Taking Stock of Europe's Actions* (Heidelberg, Berlin: Springer, 2021), pp. 38ff.

13 For details see Beáta Bakó, *"*Governing without being in power: Controversial Promises for a New Transition to the Rule of Law in Hungary," in *Zeitschrift für ausländisches öffentliches Recht und Völkerrecht/Heidelberg Journal of International Law*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2022/1), pp. 250ff.

14 For more details, see András Jakab, "Informal Institutional Elements as Both Preconditions and Consequences of Effective Formal Legal Rules: The Failure of Constitutional Institution Building in Hungary," in *The American Journal of Comparative Law*, Vol. 68, Issue 4 (December 2020), pp. 763–768 and 774–781.

15 The fundamentals of the election system remained unchanged compared to the times before 2010; a little more than half of MPs are elected in constituencies by majority vote and the other half come into parliament from party lists due to proportional voting. However, some tricky details have been introduced to favor the all-time strongest party. For details see Bakó, *Challenges to EU Values in Hungary,* pp. 181ff.

16 Similarly: Joseph H. H. Weiler, "Orbán and the self-asphyxiation of democracy," in *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, Vol. 18, Issue 2 (July 2020).

17 For details see András Bíró-Nagy, Áron Szászi, and Attila Varga, *Széttartó világok: Polarizáció a magyar társadalomban a 2022-es választások után* [Diverging worlds: Polarisation in the Hungarian society after the elections of 2022] (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Policy Solutions, 2022).

18 "Kutatás: A magyarok döntő többsége szerint a hatalmon lévők bármit megtehetnek," in *hvg.hu* (6 March 2023) at: https://hvg.hu/itthon/20230306_Somogyi_Zoltan_kutatas_igy_elunk_hatalommal_visszaeles [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

19 Balázs Fekete et al., "Rights Consciousness in Hungary and Some Comparative Remarks: Could an Increasing Level of Rights Consciousness Challenge the Autocratic Tradition?," in *Review of Central and East European Law*, Vol. 47, Issue 2 (June 2022), p. 229.

20 Martin Krygier, "The challenge of institutionalisation: Post-Communist 'transitions', populism and the rule of law," in *European Constitutional Law Review*, Vol. 15, Issue 3 (September 2019), p. 559. Italics in the original.

21 Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed. A Reckoning* (New York: Penguin, 2019), p. 14.

22 Tomasz Tadeusz Koncewicz, "The Capture of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal and Beyond: Of Institution(s), Fidelities, and the Rule of Law in Flux," in *Review of Central and East European Law,* Vol. 43, Issue 2 (May 2018), pp. 126–127. For empirical evidence see e.g., the field research by Gábor Scheiring in Hungary's rust belt, where the main losers of the democratic transition mostly became right-wing-voters by the 2010s. See Gábor Scheiring, *The retreat of liberal democracy: Authoritarian capitalism and the accumulative state in Hungary* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 188–212.

23 Political declaration of the National Assembly, no. 1/2020 (V. 2), MK [official journal] 2020/97, 2378.

24 See e.g., Bojan Bugarič, "Protecting Democracy inside the EU. On Article 7 TEU and the Hungarian Turn to Authoritarianism," in Carlos Closa and Dimitry Kochenov (eds.), *Reinforcing Rule of Law Oversight in the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 82; Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała*, Illiberal constitutionalism in Poland and Hungary: The deterioration of democracy, misuse of human rights and abuse of the rule of law* (London & New York: Routledge, 2022).

25 For a detailed theoretical argumentation see Peter J. Verovšek, "Caught between 1945 and 1989: collective memory and the rise of illiberal democracy in post-communist Europe," in *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, Issue 6 (2021), pp. 1–9.

26 Signe Rehling Larsen, "Varieties of Constitutionalism in the European Union," in *The Modern Law Review*, Vol. 84, Issue 3 (May 2021), p. 487.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 496.

28 The protocol of the debate is available at: www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20180911+ITEM-011+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN. The English version of Orbán's speech: www.miniszterelnok.hu/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-in-the-debate-on-the-so-called-sargentini-report/ [both URLs last accessed on 27 March 2024].

29 "Judith Sargentini: A Fidesz több módosítóját beemeltem a jelentésbe, nem ör̈ltek neki," in *hvg.hu* (6 September 2018) at: https://hvg.hu/itthon/20180906_judith_sargentini_jelentes_fidesz_orban_europai_parlament_tanacs_bizottsag_interju [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

30 András Bíró-Nagy and Gergely Laki, *15 év után: Az EU és a Magyar társadalom* [After 15 years: EU and the Hungarian society] (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Policy Solutions, 2019), figures 6, 7, 27.

31 Decision no. 32/2022 (VII. 19) of the National Assembly, MK 2022/119, 4575.

32 Carlos Closa, "Monitoring of the Rule of Law: Normative Arguments, Institutional Proposals and the Procedural Limitations," in Closa and Kochenov (eds.), *Reinforcing Rule of Law Oversight*, p. 16. About the interrelatedness of trust and EU values in a broader sense, see also Armin von Bogdandy, "Ways to Frame the European Rule of Law: Rechtsgemeinschaft, Trust, Revolution, and Kantian Peace," in *European Constitutional Law Review*, Vol. 14, Issue 4 (December 2018), pp. 692ff.

33 About EU-values rhetoric and the common market in details see Andrew T. Williams, "Taking values seriously: Towards a philosophy of EU Law," in *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (Autumn 2009), pp. 549–577.

34 Case C-288/12 about the premature termination of the term of office of the data protection ombudsman (due to establishing a new Data Protection Authority instead).

35 C-286/12 about the new retirement rules applying to judges. For details see Bakó, "Hungarys Latest Experiences with Article 2 TEU," pp. 54–55.

36 This was the case with the NGO-law (ECJ case no. C-78/18) and with the "lex-CEU" (ECJ case no. C-66/18). For more detail see Bakó, *Challenges to EU values in Hungary*, pp. 72ff.

37 Act LXXVI. of 2017 on the transparency of civil organizations financed from abroad.

38 Act XXV. of 2017 on the amendment of Act CCIV. of 2011 on the national higher education.

39 Act LXXIX. of 2021 on combatting pedophilia and amending certain laws to protect children.

40 Pending case no. C-769/22.

41 See e.g., Orbán's interview on Kossuth Radio on 3 December 2021: "Orbán Viktor: Ha a gyermekvédelmí törvény nem lenne fontos, akkor Brüsszel nem indítan ekkora támadást," at https://hirado.hu/belfold/belpolitika/cikk/2021/12/03/orban-viktor-ha-a-gyermekvede lmi-torveny-nem-lenne-fontos-akkor-brusszel-nem-inditana-ekkora-tamadast-az-ugy ben [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

42 The overwhelming majority of voters (92%) supported the government's position; however, the referendum was invalid, because the required 50% turnout was not reached.

43 I elaborated on this in more detail in Bakó, *Challenges to EU values in Hungary*, pp. 219–220.

44 European Parliament resolution of 12 September 2018 on a proposal calling on the Council to determine, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded (2017/2131(INL)).

45 In detail see Carlos Closa, "Institutional logics and the EUs limited sanctioning capacity under Article 7 TEU," in *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 42, Issue 4 (September 2021), pp. 510 ff; and Sonja Priebus, "Watering down the 'nuclear option'? The Council and the Article 7 dilemma," in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 44, Issue 7 (2022), pp. 995–1010.

46 European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2022 on the proposal for a Council decision determining, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded (2018/0902R(NLE)).

47 Regulation no. 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget, Article 4 (1). My italics.

48 Id. Article 4 (2).

49 Id. Article 6 (3).

50 Id. Article 6 (5)–(11).

51 The following two paragraphs are based on my analysis, "A Bluff by Orban the EU Appears Unwilling to Call," in *Balkan Insight* (18 October 2022), at https://balkaninsi ght.com/2022/10/18/a-bluff-by-orban-the-eu-appears-unwilling-to-call/ [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

52 Act XXVII of 2022 on controlling the use of EU funds.

53 For instance, the company of the son-in-law of the prime minister won public procurement procedures in several towns and villages for modernizing street lighting. Many of the procurement tenders were directly designed exactly and exclusively for his company. Hungarian investigative portal Átlátszó wrote about the story in detail: https://atlat szo.hu/category/cikkek/eliosaktak/. Detailed report of the OLAF: https://tasz.hu/a/files/ Final_Report_OCM201726804_redacted.pdf.

54 New CV/A Section of Act XC of 2017 on the Criminal Procedure.

55 Proposal for a Council Implementing Decision on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary, COM/ 2022/485 final.

56 Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506 of 15 December 2022 on measures for the protection of the Union budget against breaches of the principles of the rule of law in Hungary.

57 Franca Maria Feisel, "Thinking EU Militant Democracy beyond the Challenge of Backsliding Member States," in *European Constitutional Law Review*, Vol. 18, Issue 4 (December 2022), p. 402.

58 Judgment in case no. C-156/21 (ECLI:EU:C:2022:97), paras 172, 179.

59 See Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

60 Commissions press release (22 December 2022): "EU Cohesion Policy 2021-2027," at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7801 [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

61 See e.g., the case of the so-called lex CEU, C-66/18 (ECLI:EU:C:2020:792), and more recently, the case of several public universities which were taken into the management of "public interest asset foundations" led by government-friendly persons or even ministers. Structural changes within such foundations have also been set as a requirement in the rule of law conditionality mechanism. From early 2023 on, several ministers resigned from the boards of trustees of these universities, but many of these bodies are still filled with government-friendly businessmen or Fidesz mayors. (For a collection see Telex. hu, 27 July 2023: https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/07/27/alapitvanyi-egyetem-kuratorium-tagok-miniszterek-fidesz-kdnp-ner [last accessed on 27 March 2024].) Affected universities have temporarily been excluded from Erasmus+ and Horizon programs.

62 See e.g., ECJ cases no. C-821/19 (ECLI:EU:C:2021:930), C-808/18 (ECLI:EU:C:2020:1029), C-556/17 (ECLI:EU:C:2019:626), joined cases no. C-924/19. PPU and C-925/19. PPU (ECLI:EU:C:2020:367).

63 Act X of 2023 on the amendment of certain laws on judicial matters relating to the Hungarian recovery and Resilience Plan.

64 This possibility was introduced in 2020, in order to safeguard that almost any case can end up before the politically influenced Constitutional Court. See § 27 of Act CLI. of 2011 on the Constitutional Court.

65 There had been an open conflict between the two organizations since 2018, mainly because the former president of the judiciary administration used legal loopholes in the relevant laws to appoint her allies in important judiciary positions. For more detail see: Beáta Bakó, "Judges sitting on the Warsaw-Budapest express train. The independence of Polish and Hungarian judges before the CJEU," in *European Public Law,* Vol. 26, Issue 3 (December 2020) pp. 587 ff.

66 The detailed provisions are laid down in §§ 16–47 of Act X of 2023.

67 See e.g., Telex.hu, 27 July 2023: https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/07/27/a-magyar-kormany-elkuldte-a-szamlat-brusszelnek [last accessed on 27 March 2024].

68 See in this regard ECJ judgment in case C-156/21, paras 111–119, 144–147.

69 Similarly: Isabel Staudinger, "The rise and fall of rule of law conditionality," in *European Papers*, Vol. 7, Issue 2 (2022), pp. 736–737.

70 Article 17 of Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility.

71 Council Recommendation of 12 July 2022 on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Hungary and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Convergence Programme of Hungary (ST/9764/2022/INIT), point 4.

72 Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021; Article 15 and Annex III.

73 The judgment about the early retirement of judges was delivered back in 2012 (C-286/12). Recently, only a rather minor issue was addressed by an ECJ judgment (C-564/19). For the series of Polish cases in detail see e.g., Bakó, *Challenges to EU values in Hungary*, pp. 49–66.

74 Case no. C-769/22.

75 C-156/21, para 167.

76 See the Statistical Flash Report 2023:2 of the Corruption Research Center Budapest: "The New Trends of Corruption Risk in Hungarian Public Procurement from January 1998 to July 2023," online available at: www.crcb.eu/?p=3450 [last accessed on 27 March 2024], p. 7.

77 Information from the Integrity Authority for the authors request for public data on 3 August 2023.

78 Information from the Central District Court of Buda for the authors request for public data on 9 August 2023.

79 See e.g., Tamás Kolosi, Szilvia Hudácskó, "Az Európai Unióval kapcsolatos vélemények nemzetközi összehasonlításban" [Opinions regarding the European Union in international comparison], in: Tamás Kolosi et al. (eds.): *Társadalmi Riport 2020* (Budapest: TÁRKI, 2020), p. 455, and Bíró-Nagy, Laki, *15 év után*, figure 10.

80 The proportion of those who have a positive opinion about the EU decreased from 51 to 39 percent. The drop is especially noteworthy among the young. See: Standard Eurobarometer 98, 2022–2023 Winter, National Report on Hungary, p. 10, figure D 78.

81 Resolution no. 2018/0902R(NLE).

82 Bíró-Nagy, Szászi, Varga, *Széttartó világok*, figure 45.

6 Illiberalism and popular religion in Hungary

State Christianity

László Kürti

Introduction

Church-state relations in the former socialist states are polychromatic and divergent.[1] Religiosity and secularization, together with the roles religious organizations play in the political process and how they relate to political power, are far from uniform. Seeing some of the reorganized national Churches and the increasing roles of the clergy, some researchers even refer to nationalists "hijacking" religion for their illiberal purposes.[2] In a study of three Orthodox Christian countries, Tronike Metreveli argues that, despite their similar dominant religion, Serbia, Ukraine, and Georgia, display "divergent political behavior [under] the influence of religious organizations on the political process."[3] The case of Slovakia, a predominantly Roman Catholic country, is interesting insofar as the Lutheran religious minority, though decreasing in number, figures in Slovak national tradition and identity.[4] In Romania and Bulgaria, both Orthodox and Church-state relations show divergent, albeit less confrontational and hostile attitudes toward homosexuality than in Catholic Slovakia, as well as where interfaith religiosity and human rights are concerned.[5] In Germany, as Pollack and Pickel argue, we are witnessing a more intense and increasing non-Church religiosity interwoven with individualized Christian religiosity.[6] In contrast to Poland, where religious affiliation has been slowly declining along with acceptance of various Church doctrines, and where the political role of the Roman Catholic Church faces persistent criticism,[7] Hungarian secularism in tandem with state Christianity presents an unprecedented development that requires closer scrutiny.[8] The Hungarian constitution recognizes the contribution of Christianity to nation-building and acknowledges freedom of religion as a fundamental right.[9] According to recent statistics, about 43% of the country's population profess Christianity; yet the weight of that religion's dogma and symbolism is ubiquitous and salient in current politics as well as in policies.[10] What is striking is that both those who claim to be Christians and those who have no religious affiliation exhibit the symptoms that have become prevalent among many citizens in the last three decades – vague Christian morality coupled with syncretism and alternative religious beliefs. For instance, nationalist neo-pagans see no problem with combining fundamentalist Christian tenets and illiberalism with Wicca, neo-shamanism, and faith-healing practices.[11] Linking local and national

politics with religious beliefs is one of the reasons why Orbánism maintains a solid social foundation. Just how authentic is the current government's image of Christianity and what are the real reasons behind the popularity of illiberal democracy and Viktor Orbán? Here I analyze this development by highlighting the political transformation in the wake of European Union (EU) accession and how populist politics has led to Viktor Orbán's maintenance of power and the continued dominance of his party reinforcing, once again in 2022, a political culture based on fundamental Christian values and illiberalism.[12]

I highlight what is especially pertinent to the Hungarian case: a rising paradox of secularization since the 1990s on the one hand, and the increasing political significance of religion since the 2000s on the other.[13] As several scholars have already noted, Christian symbols, history, and rituals have been utilized to serve both the communist and post-communist political establishment in Hungary.[14] Political scientists, too, have called attention to the instrumentalization of religion by right-wing populism. As Bozóki and Ádám note: "…radical right-wing populism itself can be understood as a kind of surrogate religion, as for many social conservatives and/or nationalists it provides a sacred subject to worship. Hungarian right-wing populism uses Christianity as a reference, but its political content often appears to [be in] contrast with Christian values. Instead, it advocates an ethno-nationalistic surrogate religion in which the nation itself becomes a sacred entity and national identification carries religious attributes."[15] How and when have populism and illiberalism emerged, and, more importantly, what roles do Churches and religions play in the maintenance of state and right-wing power in Hungary, a country that is one of the most secular states in the European Union? By citing Pakistan, Peru, and the Philippines as prime examples of illiberalism, Fareed Zakaria described the central issue of illiberal democracy in the 1990s: "Democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been reelected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedom."[16] It took a little more than a decade since then for the conditions of illiberalism to take hold openly in an EU member state – in this case Hungary. I argue that by looking at the enormous roles the Churches, religion, and faith-based politics have played in Hungary, we can identify what things remain to be understood in illiberal state-making, which is the raison d'être of this analysis.

The primary theoretical contribution I offer here is illustrated by the secularization-religiosity axis in Hungary, especially how religious morality has been utilized in Viktor Orbán's political agenda. The empirical material consists of an analysis of governmental Church policy and academic research concerning populist nationalism and illiberalism. As the main purpose of the empirical part is to introduce how religion and politics coalesce to form a new discourse of illiberalism, my materials do not provide a complete explanation or a total representative picture of current Hungarian political ideology. Rather, by choosing a range of examples, my analysis is guided by a focus on both pro- and anti-governmental actors and activists who have been at the center of debates, and whose work I have been able to utilize most judiciously. Moreover, as an anthropologist, I have been conducting

multi-sited and field-intensive qualitative research in Hungary, investigating the political transformation since the collapse of the socialist state. My long-term field-work site is my native country and my approach is generally referred to as "anthropology at home."[17] By looking at national policies and their local responses, I have been able to observe and take part in the daily activities of my fellow citizens – participant observation is the proper label, but working in the nation's capital and a regional town while living in the countryside has its advantages and vicissitudes.[18] In addition, I have also conducted archival research and document analysis as well as formal interviews including sustained interactions with key participants. Among the latter, there have been both politicians and, in particular, members and clergy of Churches and religious organizations. In my previous studies, I have looked at post-socialist state formation and how communities reorganize and rejuvenate their local identities in tandem with the economic, political, and religious transformations underway. Here, I proceed as follows: first I discuss the emergence of illiberalism in the early 2000s; then, I outline how it has become a profoundly sympathetic concoction for public consumption inside and outside the borders of Hungary; third, I discuss the issue of secularization and the roles of historic Churches and, by way of giving some specific examples, how governmental policy discriminates between religious communities, favoring political actors, parties, and a divided citizenry to win important votes; and finally, I suggest that the ruling ideology of the Orbán government is unique because it created a central space for Christian fundamentalism and morality, and by so doing successfully captured conservative electoral support – a reason why it remains difficult to compare to other forms of illiberalism elsewhere.

Illiberal state in the making

The failure of liberal democracy in Hungary, however, has been in the making since soon after the collapse of state socialism as the deterioration of heavy industry, botched land privatization, and hasty and improper economic reorganization in the wake of EU accession all contributed to a general socio-economic malaise.[19] In several earlier studies, I have described how Viktor Orbán shifted from his left-liberal and democratic values and how, since 2006, and especially since 2010 when the ruling Alliance of Young Democrats (known by the acronym Fidesz) gained an upper hand in national elections, it has been obvious that Christian fundamentalism and authoritarianism have become firmly entrenched in the ruling government's policies. Gábor Schweitzer notes that the 2010 new constitution (*Alaptörvény*) imposes a Christian ideology on citizens, especially in its preamble with its National Avowal of Faith, and by discriminating against the non-traditional and non-Christian religious organizations.[20] By so doing, the right-wing and nationalist government's basic nationalism and anti-immigration rhetoric have been coupled with a right-wing agenda that has transformed the economy, society, and international relations from the perspective of a self-centered worldview. The election of 3 April 2022 reinforces my earlier premonition that, despite the obvious urban-rural cleavage in voting patterns and a small victory during the 2019 municipal

election in Budapest, the religious and rural population in Hungary voted in increasing numbers for the right-wing ruling coalition and thereby secured its continuance in power.[21] In general, this identification with the right and total rejection of left-liberal views (including the Greens) can be seen as a concurrent backlash against EU liberalization and two decades of governmental mismanaged privatization, centralization, and nepotism resulting in increasing inequality between rich and poor, rural and urban, and labor and capital.

Orbán's attempt at renewing Hungarian society writ large has paid off since his return to power in 2010. He has carved out a name for himself as a self-made populist maverick fashioning a new statehood embodying populist illiberal democracy. He did not, I might stress, invent either populism or illiberal democracy, but he has certainly been a man of his time, starting at the very moment of European integration/disintegration following the collapse of the Eastern bloc. He has continually managed to ride on waves of anti-EU and anti-liberalist sentiments. In 2014, Orbán laid the foundation for his idea of "illiberal democracy" before an ethnic Hungarian audience in Romania, warning about the weaknesses of the Western system, including its allegedly untenable ideology, liberalism, pluralism, and secularism that are all unacceptable in a Christian state. In tandem, he called attention to those internal enemies, mostly civil society activists and the nongovernmental sector, both supported by outside forces working to Europeanize and liberalize Hungary. They work for liberal values which, Orbán claims, undermine Hungarian national interests, while the future of Europe should be in the hands of illiberal states led by strong political leaders.

Hungarian populist nationalism is anchored in one foundational principle: the creation of a successful and purely Hungarian nation-state with the elimination of enemies both foreign and internal.[22] The strong anti-immigrant rhetoric has sustained feelings of insecurity and fear among average citizens, especially the rural underclass. In 2015, fences were erected around the country's southern borders immediately after the influx of migrants began; the regime identified the migrants as external enemies. Associated with this is a profoundly more sinister argument: African, Middle Eastern, and Asian migrants are allegedly encouraged by Western powers (often framed in nationalist rhetoric as "*háttérhatalom*," an international conspiracy or cabal), identified as consisting of the US, Brussels, and George Soros. Vilified out of proportion, the latter is a Hungarian-born billionaire recognized for his philanthropy, liberal principles, and his role as founder of Central European University.

There is, however, an even more decisive factor that underpins the illiberal worldview: Christian religious fundamentalism with the traditional family at its core, an institution allegedly under attack. Since the early 2000s, Orbán's narrative was framed around the keywords "people" (*nép*) and "citizens" (*polgárok*), and from 2010 increasingly around the "nation" (*nemzet*), and the "Hungarian families" (*magyar családok*) as the most important tropes of his speeches and governmental posters. The fact that in 2018 Orbán redefined illiberal democracy as Christian democracy is very telling about the increased significance of the state-church connection:

> Let us confidently declare that Christian democracy is not liberal. Liberal democracy is liberal, while Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal…Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept.[23]

This statement can be compared to what Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of the Law and Justice party, said during a parliamentary campaign in 2015 at the Catholic pilgrimage site of Częstochowa: "There is no moral teaching in Poland other than the one professed by the [Roman Catholic] Church. Even if some people have doubts as nonbelievers but are Polish patriots, they have to accept it – they have to accept [that] there is no Poland without the Church, there is no Poland without this foundation which has lasted for more than one thousand years."[24] Fundamentally differing from Kaczyński, however, is Orbán's vision of illiberal Christian democracy which, for him, is the raison d'être of the state. The uniformly decreasing trend in fertility is a general problem for European societies, and Hungary is no exception.[25] Since the formation of the first post-socialist state in 1990, all governments have prioritized family welfare policies and programs encouraging births to counter the continuing aging of society and low fertility.[26] Viktor Orbán – a "model" figure himself, fathering five children – had radical ideas in implementing sweeping and drastic pronatalist changes, steps largely missed by several analyses of Hungary.[27] Upholding the Constitution that promotes his views, he has touted the family as a primordial institution preserving Christian values by cementing the traditional heterosexual family model, a program that closely approximates that of Poland.[28] This orthodox and anti-gender, family-centered model has remained the sacrosanct political message that has met with the approval of the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches of Hungary, especially among clergy in the more conservative countryside.[29] Far more essential than any other policy, however, the National Human Reproduction Program of 2019 (*Nemzeti Humán Reprodukciós Program*) has been a daring departure not only in Hungary but across Europe more broadly.[30] What makes the Hungarian case especially worthy of attention is the radical departure from the original goals of the program. By allocating a large sum (of more than 4 billion HUF), the government-sponsored assisted reproduction scheme offered couples a fresh start to have children, with fertility clinics gaining new possibilities to extend their programs. For the moment, the strong partnership between radical-right clergy and Prime Minister Orbán seemed irreparably damaged; but both Roman Catholic and Protestant leaders conceded defeat by withdrawing their staunch opposition to assisted reproductive technology. What revealed the superior position of the prime minister was one daring move: in 2020, the government announced the whole-scale nationalization of private clinics offering assisted reproduction.[31] The person who was responsible for organizing

and supervising the government take-over of fertility clinics was the agile young state secretary Katalin Novák, a confidante of Viktor Orbán who – not surprisingly – was unanimously elected as the country's first female president in March 2022. One of her first international engagements was a private audience with Pope Francis; as a gesture, she presented him with a stole embroidered with Hungarian flowers that had been blessed by Hungarian Cardinal Péter Erdő. In 2023, she met with Pope Francis twice more.

How has Orbán managed to garner wholehearted support in the countryside? Among the most important steps to win rural dwellers were economic, social, educational, and cultural policies. The Fidesz programs, first in 1998–2002, and especially since 2010, have continually targeted the countryside and rural families by offering farmers tax breaks, arable land, seeds, fertilizers, and machinery through flexible and advantageous bank loans. What finally sealed the fate of Hungarian citizens, of whom more than 60% live in small towns and settlements, and who felt the ups-and-downs of agricultural reorganizations, state subsidies, and land allocation and production quotas since 1990, was a sweeping program known as the rural development strategy (*vidékfejlesztési stratégia*). At its center is the effort to foster the emergence of new products and land allocation programs that create a mobile and subservient middle class, especially a new agrarian bourgeoisie.[32] Moreover, as Kim Lane Scheppele astutely observes, Orbán's National Public Employment Program managed to replace unemployment and social welfare benefits with public-sector jobs, "with about 223,000 people dependent on local (Fidesz) mayors for discretionarily awarded jobs."[33]

The governmental plans in tandem with the cultural rejuvenation policy of the countryside worked smoothly and successfully by popularizing the ruling party's credo and anti-liberalism. After the left-liberal victory in parliamentary elections in 2002, he managed systematically to build local organizations and cultural associations across the country. Known as "civic circles" (*polgári körök*), the activities of these local cells were less political and more moralist, religious, and cultural; for instance, the government offered prizes to towns and villages that created new local customs, organized touristic events, and staged revivals of earlier peasant traditions. To conquer civil society, as Greskovits argues, "the circles played a crucial role in re-organizing, extending and connecting the right's grassroots networks, associations, hierarchical organizations, and media; rediscovering and reinventing its everyday lifestyles, holidays, symbols, and heroes; and mobilizing their members in innovative ways for participation in cultural, educational, charity, leisure, and contentious activities."[34] The invention of two novel concepts, treasure trove or repository and "Hungaricum" (*értéktár, Hungarikum*), has ignited even more attention and action on the part of local governments and associations. State funding has facilitated the organization of sumptuous heritage festivals – local dishes are the main temptation and the presence of Viktor Orbán and the members of his inner sanctum has often been the main attraction at these concerts, with weekend family revelries with major emphasis being placed on topics such as nation, local and Christian traditions, religiosity, family, and Hungarian unity.[35] The festivalization and Disneyfication of the Hungarian countryside have been an

extremely successful move that could not have been achieved without the enthusiastic assistance of Churches, religious congregations, and local governments.[36] What has been a constant element in these local events has been the presence of not only mayors, and local and regional politicians, but more importantly also Christian clergymen whose blessing of a new park, school, or statue has been indispensable. Naturally, such municipal rituals have followed national and governmental choreographies with major political and religious figures, among them Transylvanian clergymen (the former Protestant Bishop László Tőkés, or the celebrated Franciscan monk, Csaba Böjte) who have often been among the invited dignitaries.[37] Against such a backdrop, anti-communist, religious fundamentalist Christian doctrine, and ethnicization of national unity provide the natural ingredients for nationalist discursive practices.[38]

Those who belong and those who do not

Illiberalism is not only about rejecting liberal democracy and liberal values such as political egalitarianism, upholding equality before the law, respect for human rights, consent of the governed, rule of law, and tolerance.[39] Inherent in illiberalism is the maintenance of inegalitarianism and discrimination by upholding a rigid and uncompromising stance of religious adherence, and fundamental Christian ethics.[40] By relying on religious fundamentalism and nationalist populism, nationhood, and national unity, illiberal ideology has become a profoundly sympathetic concoction for public consumption not only within the borders of Hungary but outside as well. Hungarians in neighboring states are being singled out as not only carriers of the most important national traditions and tangible Hungarian heritage but also those who stand at the center of the raison d'être of illiberal state ideology.[41] After the victory in the election of 2010, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz-Christian Democratic party alliance created a legal precedent with the law of 2011 completely changing the religious tapestry of Hungary. This law allows only fourteen Churches, to operate legally and places more than one hundred into the category of Church-like organizations or associations.[42] One of the main justifications for changing the earlier law was distrust of so-called for-profit Churches, such as Scientology, which is to say religious groups that did not comply with the Church Establishment Act IV of 1990 by abusing the generous conditions of state funds for private benefits.[43] Especially problematic in this argument is that there are no known cases in which clergy or members of religious organizations or alternative religious groups have been charged with embezzlement.[44]

The Council of Europe, the European Union, and the United States acted swiftly in condemning the 2011 legal attack on religious organizations, especially the conspicuous favoring of the large historic congregations and the unfair and discrepant treatment accorded to smaller and newer ones.[45] As several court cases ensued and the country's Constitutional Court found the 2011 law unconstitutional, the Hungarian parliament was forced to redress flagrant human rights violations and in 2018 a reworked law on religion was passed. However, as Baer argues: "To sum up the obvious, Hungary's new church law treats religious communities in a

completely arbitrary manner by assigning rights and privileges based on state dis-
cretion. The transitional provisions reproduce the legal situation created by the first
law, and hence repeat rather than correct the human rights violations identified by
the European Court of Human Rights."[46]

The 2018 law extends the two 1990 categories (historical Churches, referred to
as established *történelmi egyházak*) and registered (*nyilvántartott egyházak*), by
creating a more complex four-tier classification. Religious communities must now
be registered as: (1) "established" Churches (*bevett egyházak*); (2) "incorporated"
or "registered Churches" (*bejegyzett egyház*); (3) listed Churches (*nyilvántartásba
vett egyház*); or (4) "religious associations" (*vallásos egyesületek*).[47] Accordingly,
what confuses this legal terminology is that any of the religious communities may
use the term "Church" (*egyház*) as their official designation but under the new law
it has become extremely difficult to obtain legal recognition as an "established
Church." Even more problematic is the fact that the law requires a two-thirds
vote in the parliament as well as information concerning the number of registered
members, and years of operation in Hungary and/or 100 years of existence else-
where (internationally) to claim Church status. For all the other categories,
legal recognition is a simple court proceeding at the Budapest Regional Court.
Registered religious communities have legal protection and enjoy the right to own
property and operate schools and humanitarian social services. As of today, there
are 32 so-called established (*bevett*)-historic Churches (among them three Jewish,
one Muslim, one Chinese, three Buddhist) alongside 235 religious associations
(*vallási egyesületek*). A few of the Churches are also ethnonational institutions (the
Serbian, Russian, Chinese, and Transylvanian Churches, and the Islamic Church of
Bosniaks in Hungary).[48] For instance, the Serbian Orthodox Diocese operates three
parishes and two monasteries in Hungary; among the historic Churches, there are
four Buddhist and three Jewish denominations. Interestingly, but not unexpectedly,
among the latter only one has been a close ally of the current government (*Egységes
Magyarországi Izraelita Hitközség* [Statusquo Ante], or EMIH for short). It is the
Chabad-affiliated EMIH that has received the right to manage the House of Fate
(*Sorsok Háza*), the new holocaust museum to be opened in the Józsefváros district
of Budapest.[49] The largest Jewish group (MAZSIHISZ) declined to be affiliated
with this museum. Both groups, however, receive state subsidies and are legally
recognized as trustees of an "accepted" religion. In 2022, EMIH also received
22 million Euros from the government to operate and manage its Milton Freedman
University; MAZSIHISZ too can maintain its Jewish Theological Seminary
because of state funding.[50]

Secularization and Churches

In Hungary, secularization and religiosity are strange bedfellows. In the 2001
census, questions did not distinguish between religious affiliation and individual
religiosity. Exactly 11% of respondents refused to answer the question on religion;
in addition, almost 15% of respondents indicated they do not belong to any reli-
gious community or denomination. Three-quarters of the total population adhere to

a religious denomination but there has been a significant increase in the number and proportion of respondents who did not answer the questionnaire at all or refused to identify themselves as belonging to any specific religion or denomination. A total of 96% of religious respondents reported their identification with one or another of the four major historical denominations.[51] As is well-known, the rural population is still more religious than its urban counterpart, and the countryside has seen major alterations and economic deprivation that force citizens to seek state support and jobs provided by local and county administrations.[52] In their ranks, there are more aging women than men with two notable exceptions: men are overrepresented in the Jewish religious communities, and younger followers flock to the affluent charismatic Pentecostal Faith Church-Community (*Hit Gyülekezete*), one of the recognized (*bevett*) new megachurches.[53]

In tandem with neoliberalism, secularization is a continuing process that erodes the traditional denominational base – the historic Christian Churches lost about half of their followers between 2001 and 2022.[54] In these two decades, the number of people professing Roman Catholicism dropped from 5.5 million to 2.8 million, and those of the Protestant faith fell from 1.9 million to 1.1 million.[55] At the same time, a slight increase can be seen in the membership of alternative Christian (Evangelical, Pentecostal), Islamic, and Dharmic religions. At this point, Hungary is one of the least religious countries in Europe with about 40% of the population refusing to declare their religious affiliation, compared, for example, to Poland where the majority of the population is still religious.[56] As a friend puts it: "I believe, but I do not belong," a salient idea that seems to support earlier Western secularization theories, particularly of Grace Davie.[57] Hungarian scholars have also argued for a similar value among Hungarian citizens who believe "without moralizing."[58]

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, it is significant that spirituality and inter-faith religiosity have not subsided. Hungarian citizens are willing to support not only the established Churches (mostly the Christian ones) but also the religious charities and denominational or parochial schools established since 1990.[59] One aspect of this social engineering concerns the educational system which is still state-controlled, albeit illiberal, but quite distinct from the educational systems of formerly state-socialist neighbors.[60] Of the 6,500 elementary and secondary schools in Hungary, 625 or about 11% are denominational schools, and at present, about 15% of all Hungarian students study in elementary and vocational secondary schools belonging to Churches and other religious associations, a figure corresponding to the number of faithful Church members.[61] What indicates the changing religious dynamism of the past ten years, however, is the rising number of liberal arts high-school students who are enrolled in schools operated by religious organizations, their number is almost 30%.[62] Relatedly, the foster parents' program, previously completely state-controlled, has also been transferred to the Roman Catholic and Hungarian Protestant (Reformed) Churches in 2021.[63]

This bracketing is not only about legal recognition; it is also economic. It is well-known that the Roman Catholic Church, together with the Reformed and Jewish

religious communities, has received generous state funding. Since Churches have a special legal status in Hungary, their management remains completely hidden from the public. For example, there is no legal requirement to disclose the annual financial statements of Churches or to make them available for public scrutiny, even though some have done so voluntarily in the past. From 2011 to 2020, the total state subsidy for the Churches grew from 46 to a whopping 99 billion HUF.[64] However, there were years – for instance, 2016 and 2018, when this amount reached well over 160 billion or 120 billion HUF, respectively. The recognized/incorporated Churches receive state funding in addition to pledges by members and citizens who can offer to donate 1% of their income tax (*SZJA 1% felajánlás*). It is no small amount: about 4.5 million Hungarian citizens offer their 1% (amounting to 4.1 billion forints each year) to congregations. Considering the 2011 and subsequently the 2018 amendment, it is no coincidence that the Roman Catholic Church receives 52.7% of this sum, while about 29.5% goes to the Hungarian Reformed Church, with smaller amounts to the Lutheran and Evangelical Churches.[65] Moreover, a discretionary budget is also set aside to support Churches and clergy outside of Hungary, a large percentage of it is distributed to Roman Catholic and Protestant congregations in Transylvania, Romania. This policy follows the 2010 law on dual citizenship which paved the way for Hungarian co-nationals in neighboring states to vote in Hungarian national elections. As has been shown in previous elections, the ruling right-wing government of Viktor Orbán has assured its control of the votes of the majority of Hungarians in Romania.[66]

In contrast to such developments, state support for minor religious communities in Hungary is sporadic and hardly democratic. As a result of the 2011 and subsequent 2018 laws, more than 150 small churches lost their legal status and all their state subsidies. Several, such as the Anabaptist Mission and the Hungarian Mennonite Church, faced liquidation and eventual oblivion.[67] The Mennonite Church was founded by the Romanian-Hungarian Izsák-Baciu Jeremiás, who put up a courageous fight by turning to the European Parliament and the Council of Europe. However, when he realized that his options were running out, the minister staged a hunger strike. These actions notwithstanding, with meager donations in the offing, the Church went bankrupt and was liquidated.[68] Unsurprisingly, the Roman Catholic and Protestant clergy have been unequivocally supportive of the ruling government in condemning alternative and minor denominations. As one local clergyman asked me, "Why should a Christian government support cults and sects, those who siphon off national wealth and celebrate gay marriages?" This stereotypical statement reveals how illiberal governmental propaganda has wholeheartedly been accepted by mainstream Churches and consequently internalized by their followers. Fundamentalist Church leaders not only preached to their congregation how they should vote, but they also prayed for the health of the prime minister during the months leading up to election day.

Others, such as the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (*Magyar Evangéliumi Testvérközösség*, or MET for short), a Protestant congregation active in Hungary since 1981, have continually faced harassment and legal persecution.[69] The Church is led by the agile and outspoken Iványi Gábor, who inherited this position from his

father, and who was an active member of the liberal opposition in socialist Hungary in the 1980s. Originally, Iványi, a follower of the teachings of the Anglican John Wesley, had an amicable relationship with the then-liberal Viktor Orbán. Iványi consecrated Orbán's marriage in 1986 and baptized the couple's first two children. Their contact was severed when Iványi broke free from the left-liberal party (SZDSZ), while Orbán became its MP in 1990–1994 and again in 1998–2002. From the start of his political career in the parliament, Iványi has been an outspoken critic of government programs and the negligent treatment of the Roma minority, championing minority rights. A no-nonsense leader of his congregation, Iványi set up humanitarian and educational institutions across the country, founded the Wesleyan Seminary, the "Oltalom Charity Association," and many shelters for the homeless as well as three senior citizens' homes.[70]

However, since the 2011 change in the Church's status, state funding has been drastically cut, making it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain these institutions.[71] For example, out of the five elderly homes operated by the MET in the past, only three are functioning today; and of the 20 kindergartens, elementary, and high schools operating earlier 16 are defunct.[72] Iványi was selected as the candidate to be nominated to run for president by the united opposition, but it soon became clear that the government had its own candidate, who was subsequently successfully inaugurated as the new president of Hungary. This development only confirmed the fact that the MET is facing serious pressure: on 21 February 2022, the National Tax Office raided MET headquarters and confiscated records and computers, an act Iványi called "an armed operation."[73] The source of the contention between the MET and the National Tax Office concerns tax fraud and embezzlement. Iványi has been charged with owing billions in taxes since 2011, a charge he vehemently denies, claiming that the 1% income tax revenues long overdue and withheld by the state made it impossible for the MET to operate soundly. As he expressed it recently, this was a "calamity" for Iványi who sees his Church's future as extremely precarious, resting his only hope in the courts both in Hungary and at the European level.[74] The escalating conflict between the outspoken minister and the government can be seen in a recent interview in which Iványi called openly for more direct assistance from the Hungarian government in the escalating Russo-Ukrainian war, referring to Viktor Orbán's policies as "hypocritical" and "insolent."[75] On a more positive note, it must be emphasized that popular support of Iványi's tenacity paid off: in 2022 more taxpayers opted to donate 1% of their income tax to the MET than in previous years.[76]

Conclusion

With overwhelming secularization underway, together with a profoundly ideologically driven religious state in Hungary, we are witnessing a unique phenomenon that needs serious scholarly analysis. It is inadequate to observe simply that "ethno-nationalism" and a "politicized understanding of Christianity" can account for the current functioning of the state and its authoritarian leadership as some have done.[77] True, nationalists can and do rely on religion to furnish ideas

and ideals and help ardent believers cherish its symbols, myths, and memory, as Anthony Smith remarks.[78] But neither nationalism nor Christianity operates in a homogeneous and unitary way – national and local specificities generate ubiquitous and salient differences.[79] Hungary today is not what the country was 20–25 years ago when, for instance, Olaf Müller could compare the country with Slovenia and Latvia as states "in which religion, culture and national identity are not as strongly mixed or not mixed at all."[80] The electoral victory of Fidesz on 3 April 2022 highlights one of the most incontrovertible paradoxes of post-socialist Hungary: popular secularization and governmental mediatized ideology based on political state Christianity.[81]

This construction has been in the making since the early 2000s when the right-wing government successfully subverted (both economically and culturally) mainstream historic Churches. A crucial step backward from what Church-state relations were at the dawn of the new era starting with 1989–1990, this development provides an answer to the question as to why Church members together with secularized believers are so integral to illiberal politics.[82] Julia Mink, for instance, argues that, in return for state support and financial assistance, "historic churches play an important role in legitimizing the state and have huge potentials to mobilize their adherents through Church institutions and forums, especially during election campaigns."[83] This does not entail, fortunately, that Churches and Church functions are not important in other ways to clergy, members, and followers. They are, but these are different concerns from the recent overt politicization and ideological stance that override and overwhelm more traditional parochial affairs and humanitarian and social services. Unlike in Poland, where Roman Catholic parties attempt to influence the state, in Hungary, the state colonized not only the media but also the historic Churches and their institutions – schools, social services, and ethnic co-nationals – what Zsolt Enyedi calls the "political resurrection of Christianity,"[84] a transformation which, in turn, brought a significant number of votes for the government of Viktor Orbán. I have shown above that the Hungarian case is complex but contrary to the strictly economic argument for the root cause of illiberalism,[85] I argue that we must view illiberalism as a combined political, cultural, and economic transformation that creates the nation-state anew. Most Hungarians, who believe and do not openly belong, "consider the presence of churches to be significant for ensuring peace, democracy, economic growth and the acceptance of social responsibility by the State."[86] This idea, as Bulcsu Bognár suggests, has reinforced the acceptance of an authoritarian leader or a "leader cult" of Viktor Orbán.[87] In this new social engineering, illiberal Christianity has met its strange bedmate, illiberal populism, one that "brings [back] into public discourse references to religion in otherwise secular Hungarian society."[88] This aptly summarizes popular discontent by most conservative voters with the left-liberal and Europeanist worldview in Hungary and the unequivocal support for the current government. By forging a new constitution and turning the republic into a Christian nation-state, Orbán has revealed the single most important key for the successful maintenance of illiberal ideology: total control and reliance on the conservative rural population

adhering to the moral economy of the historic Churches/religions. Not only does the twenty-first century belong to God, but religion has also been incorporated by the state.[89] As the recent election victory of the Hungarian nationalist right wing demonstrates, political state Christianity has returned and is a formidable force that cannot be ignored.

Notes

1 A preliminary version of this chapter was delivered at the panel "Explaining Orbán's Hungary" at the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies conference, Cambridge University, UK, on 7–9 April 2022. I would like to thank Nigel Swain and Chris Hann for their effort in organizing this special panel and for their help in finalizing my talk for publication. I also would like to thank Sabrina Ramet for her assistance in copy-editing this manuscript.

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64 Tamás Lőrincz, *Egyházak finanszírozása: tíz év alatt ezermilliárd felett* (3 August 2021), at https://hang.hu/belfold/egyhazak-finanszirozasa-tiz-ev-alatt-ezermilliard-felett-128586 [accessed on 23 January 2024].

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7 Antiminority prejudice in Hungary

Gypsy business – Roma politics

László Kürti

Introduction

"I have christened Hungary as Orbánana Republic, while some refer to it simply as Absurdistan. For today, my native county is a dilapidated, corrupt, and worthless banana republic." This whimsical statement by Aladár Horváth, president of the independent civil rights association, the Roma Parliament, aptly summarizes how embittered some Roma civil leaders are at the moment. This is especially true for those, who have not, as Horváth, kowtowed to the illiberal ideology of the ruling government filled, as it is, with ethnonational promises and misguided policies. "Some" needs to be emphasized for those who have for most of the post-collapse period, between 1990 and 2023, accommodated and conceded the majority government's Gypsy/Roma policy. In my chapter, I will peel back the onion by investigating how minority policies in the past decades have altered the situation of the Roma and their civic engagement in Hungary. I am especially interested in delving into those political and popular values that have created the sorry state of Orbánana Republic.[1] Here I examine and dismantle some of the underlying causes of systemic oppression faced by the Roma/Gypsy community by addressing the roots of exploitation. It is my hope that my analysis works toward, if not a resolution, at least a better understanding of where we are at the moment and what should be done to get out of this quagmire.

Political antigypsyism

Broadly speaking, I argue that to address antigypsyism, we must first understand it as a phenomenon that is not a one-time occurrence, but a continuously transmitted and constantly rejuvenated belief system. It is a form of ethnic prejudice, similar to anti-Semitism, although those who adhere to it may harbor hatred toward Gypsies as well as other groups. I believe that the foundation of popular antigypsyism lies in a systemic deep-rooted racism, which perpetuates the belief in genetic differences and the inferiority of the Roma. The rejection of the marginalized, poor, and destitute Roma by the majority in society is specifically tied to the rejection of Roma as a whole. The survey conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center reveals a disconcerting level of disdain toward minorities, Hungarians are "much more likely

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than other Europeans to hold negative views of various minority groups. Nearly three-quarters hold an unfavorable view of Muslims in their country, and more than six-in-ten see Roma in a negative light. About a third express an unfavorable opinion of Jews – double the European median."[2]

Such antigypsyism is a racialized discourse nurtured by historical and political discrimination and stigmatization against the Roma.[3] In politics, it prevents Roma from obtaining autonomy and access to positions of power, both national and local; in the economy, it creates a hierarchical mode of production in which non-Roma (gadjo) workers and producers are advantaged while the Roma are exploited. In public life, Roma also have to fight antigypsyism as they are prevented, both economically and symbolically, from practising their civic and citizenship duties. In all, antigypsyism is built into the very socio-political framework of the Hungarian state that creates and widens the gap between those who are in and those who remain outside mainstream society, the majority and the Roma minority. This means that volumes can be written, as have been in the past 40–50 years, about the disadvantages Roma face every day in the labor market, educational, health, media, and cultural institutions.

The political career of Horváth speaks volumes about the complete disarray plaguing Roma politics since the collapse of the socialist state. In 1990, he was one of the first Roma elected as an MP on the left-liberal ticket representing the Free Democrats party. However, this symbiotic relationship was short-lived as Horváth declined to support the new minority law of 1993. For the next two parliamentary elections, he ran, unsuccessfully, as an independent candidate. In the 2014 election, he organized the ethnic-based Gypsy Party (Magyarországi Cigánypárt) but only managed to gather a few thousand votes. This surprising lack of interest was repeated in 2018. Additionally, Horváth made the decision not to join forces with another independent Roma movement, the Roma Coalition of Hungarian Gypsy Organizations (Magyarországi Cigányszervezetek Fóruma Roma Összefogás Párt), led by Kolompár Orbán, which participated in the 2006 and 2010 parliamentary elections. In retrospect, it is clear that the divided and fractionalized Roma politics were doomed to fail. None of the candidates from these organizations were able to secure enough votes to gain parliamentary seats.

After a dismal failure, partly due to governmental mismanaged minority policy, which further polarized the already divided Roma organizations, there seemed to be a positive change in the campaign to alter the course of majority anti-Roma politics for good. This change came in the form of a new ethnic-based Roma political group called Phralipe (Independent and National Phralipe Association), which emerged in the early 2000s. In its program, autonomy and independence were the main criteria with the obvious goal of entering both local and national politics. Phralipe's debut aimed to unite Roma people regardless of linguistic, regional, and gender divisions. This was a novel departure from mainstream political culture that emerged after 1990. Traditionally, political parties would select a token Roma individual to campaign with them during elections, using this as a smokescreen to hide the hierarchical division within Roma elites. In 2019, the National Election Commission allowed Phralipe to participate in the parliamentary election with 32

candidates nationwide.[4] Despite campaigning vigorously for the ruling party, the alternative Roma party encountered insurmountable challenges, primarily due to the racialized approach to Roma politics adopted by the majority. As a result, rural Roma did not budge and the national elections were an utter failure for Phralipe.[5] This outcome has devastated most of Roma civil society. Furthermore, not conforming to state directives, Roma elites launched a last-ditch effort during the 2022 national elections through the alternative unified ethnic-based One Hungary movement. However, since most Roma were affiliated with the party Lungo Drom, or its opposition, the ORÖ (National Roma Self-Government), and the more radical civil groups kept a distance, the One Hungary movement collapsed similarly to Phralipe earlier. With individual Roma coopted into mainstream parliamentary parties as token Gypsy or Roma representatives most Gypsies see this as the only avenue for entering mainstream politics. As the Roma writer Ágnes Daróczy expresses it:

> We still lack institutions, leaving us virtually no influence over our affairs. The minority self-government system has resulted in the creation of a Roma social class that is carefully selected, easily manipulated, and even susceptible to blackmail. This group can be quickly mobilized during an election, serving as a manipulated privileged group upon which major political parties, not just Fidesz, rely for support. At the same time, these minority self-governments are operating without any viable options. The problem is that we are still considered a national security issue. Meanwhile, the extremists are allowed to stir up hatred without any obstacles. On the one hand, the so-called Roma issue serves as a way to release social tensions, on the other hand, the extremists exploit this hatred to gain money, power, and votes.[6]

Blunt as it may be, Daróczi's statement reveals that Roma intellectuals are aware of a somber truth: since the collapse of state socialism in 1989, the Roma in Hungary have never been able to establish major political representation aside from a few institutions. They have not even been able to elect a single Roma member of Parliament on a minority ticket, a privilege that has been granted to a candidate from the German minority. According to Freedom House, the Roma "have long been underrepresented in politics and government and have been the target of derogatory rhetoric from Fidesz members in recent years."[7] Facing enormous obstacles, most Roma are content with the existence of the nationality governing bodies (Országos Nemzetiségi Önkormányzat, National Minority Governments). There are currently 1,139 of these bodies operating locally, although they are closely monitored by mayoral offices or the leaders of the ruling local coalitions of the Fidesz and Christian Democratic parties.[8] However, it is important to note that local Roma governments are not fully autonomous bodies and do not act solely on behalf of the Roma community.

It needs to be emphasized that, since the introduction of the 2011 law on nationalities (Law CLXXIX on the Rights of Nationalities) and the establishment of the minority self-governments, the Roma have entered a new age of anxiety. Roma

politics have remained in limbo oscillating between the Scylla of extreme majority nationalism and the Charybdis of segregated ethnolinguistic culturalism. Yet, despite the elevation of individual Roma into the national popular culture limelight, nobody can turn a blind eye to the destruction and suffering of Roma. If the scale of the crisis and economic deprivation is not enough, in mainstream and local politics, Roma are doubly if not triply disadvantaged. First, most Roma are appointed from above by the party leadership to support minority rights, either to have a token Roma/Gypsy or because they are committed to ethnic quotas. Secondly, appreciation of civic values, that is feelings and attitudes of political culture and citizenship in addition to contributing to the common good, has not, I have to admit, been inculcated into the majority of Roma people – a matter that undermines the trust and comradeship of these token individuals as gold diggers. Party affiliation, in general, causes friction and low civic engagement among the Roma population as Roma attach negative connotations to both majority and minority politics, a situation evident even among a large part of Hungarian citizens.[9] This is understandable for the past 100 years of state policies have been for the most part a complete disaster for Roma communities and families. But there is an equally strong countervailing force opposing Roma's political activity as no politicians in mainstream Hungarian politics will be keen to have this elephant in the room. Thirdly, charismatic and strong-willed Roma activists are simply not welcomed by major political parties, right or left. The past 25 years of Roma politics underlie this: almost all radical Roma activists have left or were sidetracked by mainstream political life as many of them have faced complete marginalization, or even outright silencing (Ágnes Osztolykán, Jenő Zsigó or Jenő Setét [1972–2022]), while others decided to emigrate (Jakab László Orsós, Viktória Mohácsi, József Kamarás). Alternative voices of Roma activists outside mainstream discourse are few and far between, relegated to academic ivory towers (Angéle Kóczé), partisan media (Aladár Horváth), and foreign jobs. In tandem with such intellectual endeavors, there have been in the past several programs organized by non-Roma outsiders attempting to defuse social tensions or create viable alternative economic and educational alternatives in rural Gypsy communities. Most of these interventionist programs, however, soon faced insurmountable difficulties and failed.[10]

So one of the fundamental questions concerning Roma issues is who can represent various Roma communities, or, in the words of Aidan McGarry, who are their legitimate representatives?[11] Today there are indeed four Roma MPs in the Hungarian Parliament, facing the extreme right Our Home Party (Mi Hazánk), a party that organized a demonstration in August 2023 calling for an end to "Gypsy criminality."[12] The ruling Fidesz has its own selected Roma in the parliament and even sent one to the EU Parliament (Lívia Járóka). Born in 1974, Járóka is the first female Roma politician in the EUP, elected in 2004. Trained in sociology and social anthropology, Járóka was "discovered" in 2003 by a Fidesz MP, actually by the disgraced József Szájer, and has been promoted to become a female representative on Roma issues on behalf of Fidesz. Despite having a Ph.D. from a British University and a liberal social science program, Járóka is quite capable of representing Viktor Orbán's illiberal program in the EU, furthering the deep

division within majority and minority communities. As a half-hearted window-dressing program, the government also initiated a Thematic Study Group for Roma Issues (Romaügykért Felelős Tematikus Munkacsoport), an umbrella of two dozen Roma civic groups that meet occasionally but without real results aside from organizing some cultural programs.[13] If the past few years are any indication, such groups will serve to legitimize governmental policies but are a far cry from addressing and promulgating the real issues of Roma societal problems.

The killing field: Criminality and the Roma

The late 1990s and early 2000s were tumultuous times for the Roma. During this period, there was a significant increase in both real and symbolic atrocities against this minority group. With the complete collapse of the industrial and agricultural sectors, tens of thousands of Roma lost their jobs and found themselves, once again, marginalized in society. Some Roma had to find ways to survive by any means necessary, while others chose to migrate or emigrate. One of the most enduring stereotypes of Gypsies is that they are averse to work and instead, engage in deviant lifestyles and criminal activities.[14] Since the 1990s, the most politically charged phrase in Hungarian politics has been "*cigánybűnözés*" or, Gypsy crime, which not only refers to those individuals who commit crimes but also stigmatizes the entire Roma population.[15] Discrimination and ethnic profiling are deeply ingrained in Hungarian prejudice against the Roma, within both society at large and the police force.[16] Hate crimes against Roma individuals and families escalated following the sensationalized murder in Tiszavasvári of Lajos Szögi, a teacher who drove his car into a Roma girl in October 2006 while traveling in a Roma community. From 2008 to 2012, over 60 acts of violence were perpetrated.[17]

In 2008 and 2009, a four-man death squad carried out a series of attacks on the Roma community in various locations across Hungary.[18] The burning down of houses, and shooting at helpless victims resulted in six deaths, including that of a four-year-old boy.[19] The low-skilled offenders working as bouncers were known for subscribing to neo-Nazi ideology as members of the skinhead movement in Debrecen. The botched police investigation finally came to fruition after a year and a half when the four men were identified, arrested, and charged with the homicides. In August 2013, the Budapest District Court handed down sentences for the murders, with three of the perpetrators receiving life in jail with no possibility of parole. The fourth person, who had served as the driver, was sentenced to 13 years and has already been released.

This atrocious crime and the brutal attack on Lajos Szögi highlight the social divide between the majority and the minority. It also exposes the deep-seated animosity toward the Roma community, and the government's failure to effectively address the vigilante actions against the Roma population. The discrimination on the part of the police also illustrates that hidden racism has been at the root of the problem. There have been some small advances in addressing this burning issue, particularly in the communication between regional authorities and leaders of the Roma community.[20] However, the antagonism has been exacerbated by years of

mismanagement by the government in dealing with Roma-related matters. What is incomprehensible, and should be addressed, is why the government allows and promotes organizations and media that incite hatred and extreme nationalistic ideas to exist. For instance, the Hungarian Self-Defense Movement (Magyar Önvédelmi Mozgalom), The Outlaw Arms (Betyársereg), and Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk) are the most widely recognized extreme right organizations with anti-Roma agendas.[21] Surpassing the five percent threshold, Our Homeland secured six seats in the Parliament on the compensatory list. Antisemitism, nationalist populism, pro-Russian views, and antigypsyism are the common factors that unite these organizations. Our Homeland identifies itself as a "third road" movement and a direct successor of the extremist far-right party of MIÉP which was led by the writer István Csurka in the 1990s. According to Our Homeland's leader, MP László Toroczkai, "We are carrying on the legacy of MIÉP, despite the changing world. In the past, there was no COVID, and the number of Gypsies was much lower than it is today. Additionally, the dominant influence in the world, particularly in the Western world, is not held by Jews but rather by the LGBTQ lobby. It is worth noting, of course, that these two often overlap."[22] Our Homeland openly argues that, "With the increasing population of the Roma, there is also a rise in Gypsy ethnic and subcultural criminality. Several characteristic crimes are exclusively committed by Gypsies."[23]

The Outlaw Army, known for organizing large-scale demonstrations in the early 2000s, has now refrained from such activity and instead renamed its actions as "district improvement walks" (*körzetjavító séta*). The group does not hide its militant ideology. One of the walks in downtown Budapest last Christmas aimed to clear the Blaha Lujza square from "Gypsies conducting their usual business," which referred to the widespread drug and prostitution issues in the capital's downtown area.[24]

These are not the only organizations propagating images of Gypsy criminality, the far-right media also do the same, describing some of these crimes as atrocious acts committed against Magyars.[25] Since collecting police statistics on crimes committed by Roma is illegal, it is only conjecture as to which crimes are committed by this group. The only possibility is to analyze the regional distribution of crime and the residency of the Roma population. According to most surveys, and sociological fieldwork, the concentration of Roma in specific regions suggests a potential correlation between these factors.[26]

Facing such difficulties, fearing for their life, and escaping from poverty, the late 1990s saw an unprecedented flow of Roma families traveling to France and Canada seeking refugee status. Between 1998 and 2010, about 20,000 Roma from Hungary arrived in Canada, a number roughly equal to those from the Czech and Slovak Republics who had arrived a few years earlier.[27] The large number of Hungarian Roma applications for refugee status in Canada made both national and international headlines.[28] Because of these large numbers, and the crimes in which some Roma were involved, the Canadian government introduced visa restrictions in 2000, a move assisted, no doubt, by both the Hungarian government and Roma leaders, who both rejected the charge of racism and discrimination existing in

Hungary. Nevertheless, facing international pressure, the Canadian government revoked the restrictions in 2008. While some of the emigrants found opportunities in their new homeland, some were refused residency for various reasons. Many claims of refugee status were rejected because of unscrupulous lawyers (most of Hungarian origin) and illegal human trafficking.[29]

Road to nowhere: Public work program

A new government initiative, The Road to the World of Labor (Az Út a Munka Világába) was a program fully funded by the European Union (Social Fund). It had a budget of approximately 7.5 billion HUF (roughly 20 million Euros) and aimed to promote the social integration of the Roma community. The program focused on providing employment opportunities, social education, and skills policies to underdeveloped areas and marginalized minority communities. Out of this, a one-billion euro scheme was inaugurated in 2007, called "Bridge to the World of Labor" (Híd a munka világába); soon an additional 3 million Euros was given to Lungo Drom, the largest Roma party in Hungary, to set up a framework of special co-operatives for the training and job opportunities of Roma. This governmental initiative was in line with the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, aptly titled Decade of Roma Integration (Roma Integráció Évtizede Program), adopted in 2011. All member states developed specific strategies to demonstrate the common political will to attack discrimination and prejudice faced by Roma. Hailed originally as a major European-wide development to deal with the destitute situation of the Roma, Hungary's largest minority, the newly created Ministry of Social Development and Employment (Szociális és Munkaügyi Minisztériuem) supervised and managed the distribution of EU funds. This included about a million euros set aside for an office of the International Secretariat for the Decade of Roma Integration.[30] A similar amount was targeted for the "Homes of Prospects" (Esélyek Házai) program facilitating social integration of disadvantaged people, the elderly, the Roma, the disabled, the unemployed, and children of poor families.

As previously demonstrated, the public works program has not been a feasible option for the inclusion of Roma individuals, particularly men, in educational training programs or stable salaried employment.[31] While the program could offer immediate assistance to numerous struggling Gypsy families, it also perpetuates the existing disparities between the employed majority and the periodically employed minority Roma. Simultaneously, it reinforces second-class citizen status.[32] Moreover, menial jobs in the public works program are reserved for Roma, which further exacerbates their already peripheral social standing.[33] However, having such a job, and the opportunity to earn some money has been seen by many Roma as a means of economic survival, if not a path to success. It enables them to scrape by and perpetuate their impoverished way of life. In my previous analysis of Hungarian illiberalism, I cited the words of a Roma father regarding his endorsement of the public works program: "When the meat factory shut down in our town, many of us were laid off, I remained unemployed

for nearly seven years. However, with the introduction of this new 'public works program' (*közmunka*), I have found employment once again. Although the wages are lower than what I used to earn, I am grateful to have a job."[34] Undoubtedly, the potential for involvement in this economy may be a crucial factor in the Roma community's political alignment and support for illiberal government policies. Since the early 2000s, Viktor Orbán, who has cultivated a strong personality cult, has consistently garnered the majority of Roma votes, enabling his party and himself to maintain their hold on power.[35]

With all the fanfare and brouhaha, the Bridge program became a recipe for disaster. The National Roma Self-Government (ORÖ) was the only partner in this new initiative headed by MP Flórián Farkas, a trusted ally of Viktor Orbán and elected on the Fidesz list in 2002. The ORÖ received almost one billion HUF, but it soon became apparent that these strategies failed to address the root causes of prejudice, discrimination, and negative attitudes toward Roma. Adding to its fiasco, was the fact that the money's superficial appearance led to no real progress, and within a few years Farkas experienced the ignominy of his life when investigators started questioning his misuse of funds. Both the national tax office (National Internal Revenue, or NAV in Hungarian), and the EU (including OLAF) investigated the use of funds, the former in 2015, and the latter in 2018. It soon became obvious that Farkas' programs and grand plans to eliminate poverty primarily through the creation of jobs via small family cooperatives, as well as providing training and educational opportunities for Roma youth, were mismanaged.[36] In the end, the NAV requested reimbursement of 1.5 billion HUF from ORÖ but, instead of pressing charges, identifying the culprits, and exposing the complex criminal network involving Roma and various ministries, the government chose to reorganize ministries and offices. Additionally, they shut down most of the complicit programs.[37] Similarly, the various Homes of Prospects were either disbanded or simply renamed as general health and local governmental social service agencies to offer drug rehabilitation programs or assistance to people with disabilities. However, these changes continue to highlight the existing health inequality between the majority and Roma minority. Instead of adopting a comprehensive strategy to address disparities in education, employment, and social services, the government utilized a simplistic plan to integrate the Roma community into the labor force. This involved providing inadequate funding for a work program that lacked commitment. As a result, politically motivated support was given to specific organizations and Roma individuals, many of whom lacked proper training and were solely driven by financial incentives.[38]

One important question that needs to be answered is why Viktor Orbán considered the President of Lungo Drom, Florián Farkas, to be so important. Orbán decided to take over the liabilities of the ORÖ and paid the requested charges into the state treasury. Eventually, he ordered the closure of all investigations concerning Farkas.[39] The only indisputable answer is: to secure Roma votes. Despite the fact that Farkas was prosecuted in 1998 for embezzlement of funds as president of both Lungo Drom and OCKÖ/ORÖ (National Gypsy Minority Association, later ORÖ, National Roma Self-Government), he was able to secure minority votes for Fidesz

and Viktor Orbán in every national election.[40] It is no secret that for almost a decade and a half Farkas maintained his grip on the majority of the nation's Roma for two reasons. First, he received a presidential pardon from President Árpád Göncz in 1998, which symbolically projected his untouchable status to the Roma, thanks to high-level governmental connections. Second, there were the consistently received government and EU funds associated with his name and office during the early 2010s. This latter point is important because the funds distributed to ORÖ and Lungo Drom provided a real monetary basis for the promise of creating tens of thousands of jobs for Roma individuals who had been seeking employment opportunities since 2011. Their only option for participating in the labor force had been through the highly selective and mismanaged National Public Work Scheme.

The mayhem caused by Flórián Farkas's Bridge program is just one of the latest scandals that rocked the ORÖ. Former presidents Orbán Kolompár and János Balogh were also convicted of financial misconduct. Kolompár and his associates embezzled nearly 150 million forints, while Balogh attempted to cover up the disappearance of 80 million forints using fictitious contracts.[41] As if that wasn't enough, János Agócs, the subsequent president of ORÖ from 2019 to 2022, was sentenced to four years in prison for bribery in November 2023.[42]

I do not want to dismiss any of the political and cultural achievements that indicate a positive direction toward progressive development and harmonious coexistence between the majority and minority groups. It is worth noting that there are many mayors of Roma ethnicity, particularly in small settlements where the Roma population is either the majority or significantly represented. Simply put: these mayors are essentially the extensions of the national government and the ruling Fidesz-Christian Democratic coalition, leaving no room for any alternative political action focused on the Roma community. Furthermore, the Association of Roma Mayors, which was established in 2015, is now defunct.

Education

Education is a crucial factor in promoting opportunities and advancements for the Roma community, as well as promoting civic values and coexistence between the majority and minority populations. Since the collapse of the socialist state, governments have consistently prioritized these areas. However, in both areas, there are still obstacles to achieving lasting and effective change due to the existence of misconceptions, misguided programs, and pervasive stereotypes. Segregation of Roma pupils in state, private, and parochial schools is pervasive in Hungary. This is one of the reasons why Roma civil rights organizations have decided to sue local governments, which they have done successfully.[43] However, private and parochial educational institutions may create obstacles for Roma parents based on social status, fees, and grades. This can result in both visible and hidden barriers. While more Roma pupils are entering high schools today than three decades ago, approximately fifty percent of them drop out and do not receive diplomas.[44]

Facing pressure from Roma organizations and EU activists, in the 2010s, four schools were given to the ORÖ. However, shortly after, two of these schools

(Szolnok and Budapest) ceased to exist. Only two regional elementary schools (Tiszapüspöki and Szirák) remained open, but they too were eventually taken into state management due to financial difficulties.[45] There were several risk factors involved. Entrusting educational institutions to enthusiastic yet inexperienced, politically motivated, and overconfident minority leaders proved to be a recipe for disaster. The mismanagement and embezzlement under ORÖ leadership led to the downfall of these four schools, depriving hundreds of Roma pupils and adults of the opportunity for vocational training and a better life. In other schools, such as the case of the Tiszabura community, the Order of Malta has taken charge of developing a viable education program for Roma children; another example can be seen in the neighboring town of Tiszabő, where local strongmen – commonly known as the "Gypsy mafia" – instill fear within the community.[46] These instances highlight the challenges faced in rebuilding the community and implementing effective education practices. Balancing this dismal picture are the few specific institutions such as the so-called "tanoda," that cater to disadvantaged, poor, and Roma children.[47] Yet, they face uphill battles due to non-existent or minimal funding, a considerable drop-out rate among Roma pupils, and rampant reorganization and central monitoring.[48] As in any society, the future lies in our children. The question of how these programs will contribute to the development of a new Gypsy élite soon is uncertain, but their success is paramount for future citizenship development. Undoubtedly, progress has been made and we can point to several successful educational institutions such as the Gandhi High School in Pécs, which was founded in 1994. Additionally, there is the Kaly Jag Roma Minority Grade School, and the Snétberger Foundation, a special music mentoring program, both located in Budapest.[49] The Ministry of Internal Affairs, through its General Directorate for Social Opportunity (Társadalmi Esélyteremtési Főigazgatóság), offers special grants to pupils who declare their Roma identity and wish to study as long as they can maintain above-average grades.[50] It is evident that education, both at the primary and secondary levels, will be crucial in developing civic values and fostering political socialization among children and youth. If this system fails in the future, the only alternative will be through informal channels, where family values and age cohorts have significant influence.

In Europe, Romany families have long been marginalized and confined to ghettoes, resulting in a second-class background and a vulnerable community existence. This disadvantage is also faced by the Gypsies in Hungary.[51] According to national surveys and scholarly analyses, it is estimated that 7–8% of Hungary's 9.6 million citizens belong to the Roma minority. However, it should be noted that this figure is not universally accepted, as many Gypsies do not identify themselves ethnically. Alarming figures from the last two demographic censuses show that in 2022, only 209,909 individuals declared themselves as Roma. This is a decrease of 100,000 compared to 2011. Furthermore, only about 10% of them use Romany (or Romanian) as their mother tongue.[52] What could be the reason for this significant discrepancy?[53] Since the collapse of the communist state, opportunities for Roma to find paid work have dramatically decreased. Statistics from the early 2010s indicate that more than 50% of Roma men have

132 *László Kürti*

been unemployed, while the figure rises to nearly 80% among Roma women.[54] Their second-class status is further exacerbated by the meager social security benefits and the botched work-program assistance to which they are entitled. In terms of educational advancement, data compiled by the EU present a similarly distressing picture: "Only half (53%) of Roma children between the ages of 4 and 6 (or the starting age of compulsory primary education) participate in early childhood education, and 18% of Roma children aged between 6 and 24 attend an educational level lower than that corresponding to their age and the number of Roma early school-leavers is disproportionately high compared with the general EU population."[55] These inequalities contribute not only to the low self-esteem of the Roma but to the difficulties those youth face who have been able to advance to secondary and higher educational institutes as their second-class status accompanies them even to the labor market.[56]

These international statistics are even more obvious when viewed with national educational policy concerning the classification of school children with learning difficulties. As it turns out, about 30% of pupils in Hungary have been classified by the educational system as children having difficulty with comprehension and learning, a figure roughly corresponding to the national average. Schools are prone to classify most Roma children in primary schools as belonging to categories of specific learning disorders (SLD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These classifications have unfailingly been linked not only to parents' lack of basic education, unemployed status, and extreme poverty on the fringes of Hungarian society but also to the one-sided governmental educational policies. Facilitating the secondary education of Roma, there is state funding by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the so-called Package for Scholarship (Útravaló Ösztöndíjprogram), a monetary incentive available to pupils declaring their ethnic Roma identity.[57] This process is managed by the National Roma Self-Government or its respective local affiliate, the agency responsible for issuing an official Recommendation of Roma Identity (Ajánlás Cigány/Roma származásról történő önkéntes nyilatkozattal).

This point brings us to one of the most salient features of Roma's disintegration into the majority society. The minimal or in some regions non-existent participation in the official labor market has led to a significant misappropriation of national wealth contributing to the reproduction of social inequality. It is true that Roma in Hungary, as in most states of Eastern Europe, make up less than 10% of the country's labor force. However, their lack of education, existence in ghettoes, declining health, and discrimination by the majority population leave them permanently vulnerable and deprived.[58]

In addition to family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, and general discrimination by the majority, the Roma minority of Hungary live in hostile racialized environments. These can be found in schools, workplaces, social services, and state and local administration. Unfortunately, these environments increase the likelihood of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder for the Roma minority.[59] Participation in the public works programs, originally hailed as a major step forward, proved to provide only meager income for select Roma families. This has trapped them

in a perpetual precarious patron-client limbo where they are forced to rely on the government's benefits and remain inseparably tied to the whims of municipal bureaucracies, including corrupt Roma leaders. They eagerly await inclusion in low-prestige menial public work further exacerbating their precarious situation.[60]

Culture and media: Banal antigypsyism

A banal form of antigypsyism arises not only from political propaganda but also from popular culture and the media. Roma intellectuals perpetuate romanticized notions of their folk culture by showcasing it in media and stage productions. Meanwhile, in rural Roma settlements, the social structure has deteriorated. This issue is not unique to popular culture but is particularly prevalent in Hungarian elitist culture, as it embraces both perspectives. On one hand, it maintains virulent attitudes toward issues of race, ethnicity, and religion. On the other hand, it promotes majority and minority stereotypes promoting hate, bigotry, and majoritarian superiority. Misleading visual representations of Roma have been constant tropes since the nineteenth century, such as in Niklaus Lenau's morose poem *The Three Gypsies* (*Die drei Zigeuner*). After the liberalization, and subsequent re-nationalization of the media, public broadcasting has been given the freedom to create programs that are either stereotypical or, even worse, explicitly anti-Roma. This is evident in television, the internet, and films, where depictions of both criminal Roma individuals and the good Roma coexist. Sociologist Annabel Tremlett refers to reality television programs and sitcoms focusing on Roma as both "demotic and demonic."[61] Hungarians will be familiar with one of the most ridiculous examples: *The Győzike Show*, a sitcom that first aired in 2005 and lasted until 2010 on the channel RTL Klub.[62] The sitcom features Győzike (Győző Gáspár), a butcher-singer turned actor. It highlights the scandalous actions and day-to-day conflicts of Győzike's family members providing entertainment for the majority of Hungarians who enjoy laughing at them. For many Hungarians, the flat jokes, constant arguments, and rampant sexism in Győzike and his male buddies' conversations seem both hilarious and sadly accurate. What signals the appetite of consumerist media is the fact that in the subsequent almost two decades Győzike and his family have been elevated to the national limelight. His daughter has become an influencer, and his wife has been advertised as a master chef who has written several cookbooks. Similarly, popular music channels, like Muzsika TV and Slager TV, as well as Roma music programs aired on DIKHTV and DIKH radio, all owned and produced by István Szilvási, showcase a mix of traditional and modern fusion music that perpetuate stereotypes. Regrettably, these portrayals of Roma musicians and singers only reinforce the biased views of the prejudiced majority, who see them as representatives of a carefree Gypsy lifestyle.[63]

There's a very fine line between symbolic, or banal antigypsyism, and verbal and actual atrocities, such as the burning down of Roma houses or the killing of families. Popular Hungarian anti-Roma sentiments have never lost their hold and one of the reasons for this is the mismanaged minority policy. As long as the state allows various forms of discrimination to thrive, it is clear to me that the rejection

of Roma and their way of life will continue to fuel bigotry and remain a prominent feature of racist ideology. Racialization and the dehumanization of the Roma, as well as branding them as a degraded and unwanted group in Hungary, are prevalent issues. It is important to note that governments may not explicitly endorse anti-Roma slogans or rhetoric but they may still support individuals who openly embrace nationalist, racist, and populist ideologies that align with the ruling illiberal value system.[64]

One of the mainstays of antigypsyism survives in populist neo-folk music, which is a strange concoction of authentic and world music genres. Earlier, Anthony Smith realized how populist nationalism, "seeks inspiration from the communal past to link the past, present, and the future together."[65] This reification of Roma culture and history puts neo-folk music and dance house cultures in a precarious position. It aims to connect a national community with a distorted view of the past, by highlighting certain aspects of a mythologized Roma culture. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences of transnational migrant Roma families while downplaying the suffering inflicted on them by the majority in society. This is not without its stereotyped and hierarchical notions of us and them, pitting peasants against others, particularly minorities like the Roma or the Jews.

The situation becomes more flexible and polychromatic when it comes to indigenous arts and culture. The Roma Cultural House (Romano Kher), which opened in 2023 in Budapest's eighth district, and the statue erected in memory of the renowned writer József Choli Daróczi (1939–2018) in the town of Kiskőrös in the same year, are both excellent examples. However, such examples are few and far between. Also, the prevailing media portrayal of Hungary's Gypsies continues to reinforce age-old stereotypes that create division rather than unity among citizens, Roma and non-Roma alike. The constant sensationalization and media coverage of the luxurious Roma lifestyles and culture have significantly contributed to confusion and discord among citizens. Today, a significant portion of Roma music, often referred to as traditional, is relatively new. Artists have been leaning toward experimentation such as Balkan, Indian, and Spanish (flamenco) fusion while still maintaining the essence of Hungarian sounds. With such a diverse array, Roma intellectuals and artists have gained national and international recognition. Musicians (like Ferenc Snétberger), film and theater actors and directors (such as Oszkár Nyári, Sándor Csányi), writers (like Károly Bari and Béla Osztojkán), bands (like Kalyi Jag, Szilvási Gypsy Folk Band, Parno Graszt, EtnoRom, Karaván Family, Romengo, and Khamoro Budapest Band), painters (like Mara Oláh), and dancers (like Katesz Balogh, Gusztáv Balázs), exemplify this. However, while Western scholars flock to Hungary in awe to study authenticity within the folk revival,[66] some Roma artists themselves often downplay their ethnocultural identity, fearing repercussions from the majority.[67] The increasing visibility of Roma singers and musicians in popular media often reinforces stereotypes that Roma people are not interested in working, as if they only want to sing and dance. However, the reality of the Roma popular music industry is far from glamorous. This can be seen in the case of Lajos Galambos, a well-known artist and entrepreneur, who was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for the theft of public utilities.[68]

Yet, Roma arts, including literature, music, dance, and painting, are often wrongly dismissed by the majority as naïve, uneducated, and merely colorful, making them appear as a marginal contribution to national art. However, this perception fails to recognize the exciting, diversified, and game-changing nature of Roma arts. Moreover, it overlooks the subversive cultural statement they make about race, hierarchy, and precariousness which challenges and undermines the pervasive stereotypes held by the majority about Gypsy life, history, and culture.

Conclusion: Quo vadis Hungary?

Scholars studying Hungary have long recognized the disadvantaged and precarious situation of the Roma. Here, I highlight some examples the Roma face in Hungary and attempt to answer why there is such a huge gap in the social relationship between Gypsies and non-Gypsies, why Hungarians refuse comradeship with and empathy toward their minority fellow citizens, and how state policies contributed to these negative consequences? These are deep questions and there is no silver bullet. As always, there are two sides to every story: the discriminatory majority attitude has been well-known and documented in previous studies, and Gypsies today also need to confront reality and find a balance between outrage and optimism. As co-nationals, we must be willing to engage in mutual understanding and work toward shared standards to build civil society and a better future together.

I do not want to conclude this chapter on the present-day situation of Roma in Hungary and antigypsyism in general without addressing some key points that hinder the development of a unified democratic platform in Roma politics. These points include the lack of unity, solidarity, and common goals across age groups, regions, genders, and cultural backgrounds. I have no qualms about acknowledging my own bias but am concerned about trepidation regarding the fact that most pro-Roma research and publications are produced by non-Roma intellectuals, like myself. However, unless there is a significant increase in active participation from Roma community leaders and scholars, it is unlikely that Roma issues will be adequately addressed in all areas, including human rights, education, labor relations, and health. In such a scenario, marginalization and condescending treatment will continue to prevail. Despite the deep division and toxic relationship between the majority of Hungarians and Roma society, I would like to believe that it is not all doom and gloom. The numbers of entrepreneurs, scholars, and artists of Roma ethnicity are increasing, and we can be cautiously optimistic about the future.[69] Yet, when it comes to civic engagement and advocacy, a complex question arises: What specific policies and actions have the historically privileged Churches in Hungary, such as the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches, implemented to support the civic program of the Roma community? While it is true that some of these Churches, as well as newer religious groups such as the Krishnas, have provided humanitarian and aid programs for the Roma, it is becoming evident that the charismatic and Evangelical Churches are attracting and involving more Roma individuals. This trend suggests that the wealthy historical Churches are aligning themselves with

illiberal state ideology and, as a result, avoiding discussion of the conflicting issues between the Roma minority, the majority population, and the state.[70]

There is also a burning question as to how members of the Gypsy elites position themselves vis-à-vis other Gypsies living in poverty and rural ghettos. If we add, as we should, the issue of anti-Roma sentiments to the many negative images of destitute Roma, the statistics of alcohol and drug abuse, and criminality plaguing their communities, the questions become overwhelmingly complicated. This is because most of the discourses are generated within the majority society with little or no serious insights from the Roma participants themselves. As a note of caution: I should add that not only members of the majority, but also members of the Roma community as well, are culpable of presenting diverse, and often contradictory images of themselves. Internal hostilities within the Roma community do arise, often resulting in hypocrisy or rejection of one another. This pattern is based on traditional tribalism, as well as linguistic and regional identity differences. Cold-headed and well-informed perspectives from Roma intellectuals are rare, and even when they do exist, they are often marginalized or disregarded as subjective and extreme. These views, which should be considered crucial, reach only a limited audience of minor political influencers, further hindering their impact on governmental policies and prevailing social standards. Moreover, many alternative social and political actors, such as gender or LGBTQ activists, have been labeled as agents of foreign interests working to undermine national unity.

It is indeed true, as Lídia Balogh claims, that Roma women face discrimination from the majority of society. They are often accused of contributing to the growth of an ethnic minority through having multiple children, but not to the overall economic development of society.[71] Nevertheless, Roma women incrementally suffer from paternalistic and gender-based discrimination and violence by male relatives. Male kin often force them into criminal activities such as petty theft, smuggling, and engaging in both national and transnational prostitution.[72] Gender hierarchy, spousal abuse, and male chauvinism are just as prevalent in the world of the Roma as they are in mainstream Hungarian society. Balogh's argument which suggests that discrimination against Roma originates solely from the majority of society overlooks the other side of the problem. The existence of toxic masculinity and gender bias among husbands and male relatives, coupled with the conservative and traditional perspectives on family and reproductive roles held by Roma women, are pressing issues that demand immediate attention in Roma society.[73]

The origin and nature of criminality, and alcohol and drug abuse are constant sources of conflict between majority and minority activists. While the former often point to these as ethnic-specific traits, the latter claim, and rightfully so, that lawlessness is not genetic. Yet, Gypsy elites have largely been unable to tackle these problems rampant in certain Roma communities and their regional ghettoized enclaves. The majority of society has frequently criticized the Roma elites for their inaction and inability to address these issues and promote education among "bad Roma."[74]

Complicating the situation are the media images produced in state television and major film studios, which perpetuate the portrayal of Gypsies as either good or

bad. As I mentioned before, these stereotypical images of Roma "are interpreted by majority viewers as no more than an extended joke on their lifestyles."[75] Mysticism and romanticized ideals of traditional occupations, the nomadic way of life, and Gypsy folklore are frequently exaggerated as emblematic traits of Gypsy culture. Artists draw inspiration not only from scholarly works on the Roma community and history as a whole but also from their nostalgic recollections of their childhood and rural upbringing. The combination of these elements tends to sustain solid references and creative force in their work. However, is that sufficient? Whether in film, literature, or visual narratives, the portrayal of Roma poverty, crime, and overall vulnerability by the elite has failed to bridge the divide between those who possess the resources and influence to create such art. There is also the problem of belligerent and hostile attitudes from different Gypsy group leaders and political puppets toward each other, which have not diminished in the past thirty years. There are indeed numerous studies available on the discrimination faced by Gypsies and the exceptional talent of Roma artists, but there is a significant lack of research on the aforementioned questions.

In conclusion, I am confident in stating that during this pervasive illiberal moment, the majority of Roma in Hungary are victims, while a small minority of them, primarily artists and those involved in politics, benefit from the dominant Orbánana hybrid regime. By institutionalizing discrimination, marginalization, and national hierarchy as fundamental aspects of law and state policies, Hungarian illiberalism and antigypsyism are further reinforced. It is not only openly condoned but, on the contrary, rather encouraged through institutionalized projects and governmental media channels. This is based on the belief that national culture, essentialized national heritage, and peasant traditions should not be lost to foreign influences. The state has utilized fundamentalist Christian nationalism to win over a significant portion of the Roma citizenry aiming to strengthen its power base. Often, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-EU ideas are fostered through a chaotic and loosely articulated illiberal rhetoric. This narrative serves to uphold an unsustainable Roma cultural policy. These harmful ideologies are camouflaged by tokenism and a distorted popular culture, which is supported by a submissive and compliant Roma elite. Whether knowingly or unknowingly they inadvertently validate the ideology of state racism.

This is a tragic tale. Sadly, the Roma majority, confined to a marginalized second-class status, observe and appreciate the media-hyped Roma productions as unattainable ideals. Despite the enthusiastic pledges made during 1989–1990 regarding democracy, liberal values, and modest and even capitalistic advancement, Hungary has largely failed. I want to emphasize that achieving normalization requires numerous political, scholarly, and artistic initiatives that aim to address various forms of prejudice and racism. These efforts demand a collective and rigorous approach. Merely replacing terms like Zigeunerschnitzel with Balkan Schnitzel, in Germany, or renaming local Gypsy authorities as National Minority Self-Governments as I describe here for Hungary, is insufficient. As it stands, however, the Roma's single official representative body has never been granted any effective political power to negotiate with the majority. Without any influence, the

role of the ORÖ as a national and local government becomes meaningless. Those who still aspire to a political career within the ORÖ have consistently demonstrated their incompetence and lack of leadership qualities. What the Hungarian case demonstrates is that tokenism of a few individuals, or civil organizations, only leads to superficial makeovers, avoiding the crucial task of addressing and eradicating poverty and discrimination in society.

Finally, I must stress, that Gypsies, regardless of their cultural and historical background, are regular people just like you and I. Throughout my encounters with them in Hungary and Romania, I have come to know many individuals – young and old, men and women, intellectuals, artists, as well as those who are unemployed and vagrant. From these experiences, I have learned that to truly connect with them, we must overcome both psychological and social barriers. Most importantly, I have also learned that mysticism and stereotypes aside, they try their best to navigate life in this complex world, ours and theirs. Some navigate skillfully, while others struggle. When we look at the past thirty or even 100 years of development, or rather retrogression, in majority and minority relations, it becomes clear that there is no holy grail when it comes to Roma education and labor participation. As much of the Roma civic society has been destroyed, I am disheartened to stress that we in Hungary are just at the beginning of confronting racism, discrimination, and anti-minority policies. The government of Hungary must face the truth: there is only one race in the world today, the human race. Well, we find ourselves in yet another race, the relentless pursuit of money and power. As we bear witness to the unpredictable ebbs and flows of this evolutionary marathon in Orbán's illiberalist nightmare, it becomes evident that the Hungarian state is on a path toward destruction. Unless unforeseen circumstances emerge in the next decade, we can expect a surge of hungry, impoverished, and unemployed, and not only the Roma, flooding the streets of Hungary, steadfastly refusing to succumb to defeat.

Notes

1 I utilize the ethnonyms Roma and Gypsy interchangeably, knowing well that lately even in Hungary the former has taken precedence over the latter. While politically, Roma may sound like the preferred and politically correct form, Gypsy and its Hungarian variant *Cigány* has been used as a term of reference and only in specific contexts is imbued with racist, xenophobic, and negative meaning. So, too, Roma can be used, as has been, both in a democratic and politically correct context and, also as an ethnic slur.
2 Pew Research Center, "Hungarians share Europe's embrace of democratic principles but are less tolerant of refugees, minorities," 30 September 2016, at www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/09/30/hungarians-share-europes-embrace-of-democratic-principles-but-are-less-tolerant-of-refugees-minorities/ [accessed on 8 February 2024].
3 For a cogent discussion of antigypsyism in Europe, see y Ismael Cortés Gómez and Markus End (eds.), *Dimensions of Antigypsyism in Europe* (Brussels: European Network Against Racism and Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, 2019), at https://antigypsyism.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Dimensions-of-Antigypsyism-in-Europe.pdf [accessed 20 November 2023].

4 Nemzeti Választási Bizottság, Decision 344/2019, at www.valasztas.hu/hatarozat-megj elenito/-/hatarozat/344-2019-nvb-hatarozat-a-phralipe-fuggetlen-cigany-szervezet-orszagos-szervezete-kozponti-szervezet-jelolo-szervezet-altal-a-roma-orszagos-nemz etisegi [accessed on 15 January 2024].

5 Martin Kovats, "Roma Politics and Policy in Hungary 1999–2003," in *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online,* Vol. 2. Issue 1 (2002), pp. 73–93.

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Scriptures and lends Dado some money to buy back his leather jacket. In the clip's final seconds, the singer returns to his family and happily hugs his three children. I leave it to the reader to make sense of the message of this music video, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfGdQ4s-LD8 [accessed 4 February 2024]. Romanticized narratives are ubiquitous in clips of other popular Roma musicians and singers such as Ham Ko Ham, LL Junior, Balogh Trio, Caramel, Joci Pápai, Kis Grófo, Notár Mary, and others.

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8 Orbán and Vučić

From disparate beginnings to shared values

Vujo Ilić[1]

Introduction

For over a decade, there has been a trend of gradual erosion of democratic attributes, transforming democracies into hybrid regimes.[2] Hungary and Serbia have stood out globally, showcasing a process of gradual autocratization.[3] By the close of the 2010s, both countries had transitioned from democratic systems to competitive authoritarian regimes.[4]

During this transformative period, Hungary and Serbia experienced a shift in their political landscapes and forged a robust partnership. This partnership materialized institutionally through the Agreement on Good Neighborly Relations and Strategic Partnership in 2021, complemented by the establishment of a Strategic Cooperation Council in 2023.[5] The two authoritarian leaders, Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić, were the drivers of this heightened cooperation, and their relationship flourished with their respective countries' increasing proximity. Their frequent meetings have been characterized by expressions of mutual trust, friendship, and shared values, as such statements regarding the European Union increasingly fell short.

However, the literature on Serbian–Hungarian relations during the 2010s is notably scarce. While several works have explored this relationship,[6] their quantity remained markedly lower than the extensive scholarly output focusing on more renowned pairs in comparative research, such as Hungary and Poland.[7] Orbán's leadership was compared with Jarosław Kaczyński's or Silvio Berlusconi's but not to that of Vučić.[8] Even though Orbán and Vučić had related trajectories of autocratization, a thorough examination of their interactions has been lacking.

Illiberal regimes emerge from democratic elections but subsequently transgress constitutional limits and encroach upon citizens' rights and freedoms.[9] In the cases of Hungary and Serbia, autocratization has been manifested primarily through the concentration of power in the executive branch, given its pivotal role in maintaining regime stability.[10] However, the ascent of the "culture of illiberalism," particularly in government dealings with ethnic minorities, migrants, independent media, and civil society organizations, remained less conspicuous.[11] Consequently, the distinct dynamics and outcomes in Hungary and Serbia's parallel autocratization processes

can shed light on mechanisms employed by authoritarian leaders in advancing illiberal projects and the role of internal and external constraints.

This chapter examines the evolving normative commitments and policies of Orbán and Vučić, evaluating the extent of value diffusion evident in their increased cooperation and how these leaders instrumentalized ideological discourse to rationalize their collaboration. The argument posits that the deepening cooperation and policy convergence between Vučić and Orbán results from their shared challenges during autocratization, particularly concerning their regimes' domestic and international legitimation. Value diffusion occurred through this cooperation and, to some degree, as a means to justify and fortify it.

The early years

Orbán and Vučić are part of a generation of politicians that emerged around the collapse of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe. Both leaders spent time in England in the late 1980s. A young Viktor received an Open Society fellowship and spent several months at Oxford, while Aleksandar worked in a hardware store in London.[12] Vučić emphasized this during his charm offensive in the United Kingdom in 2014. However, when Orbán initiated a campaign against Soros in 2015, he may have preferred to downplay this experience.[13]

They entered politics early during their student years, but their political party activation diverged significantly. Orbán returned to Hungary and established himself as the leader of the radically liberal, anti-communist Alliance of Young Democrats – Fidesz. He became a Member of Parliament after the 1990 elections. In contrast, while still a law student, Vučić joined the extreme-right, anti-Western Serbian Radical Party in 1993 and was elected a Member of Parliament the same year.[14]

After their initial period as opposition MPs, Orbán and Vučić assumed their first roles in government nearly simultaneously. Orbán served as Hungary's Prime Minister from 1998 to 2002, while Vučić held the position of Minister of Information in the Serbian government from 1998 to 2000. However, their political stances during this period exhibited stark contrasts.

Throughout the 1990s, Orbán steered his party away from radically liberal positions toward the populist right. This transformation came to a resolution in the Fidesz shift from the Liberal International to European People's Party membership in 2000. Although Orbán led Hungary into NATO membership and closer to the EU, he displayed disdain for political pluralism in domestic affairs. However, these positions were still distant from his later illiberal turn in the 2010s.

By contrast, Vučić's illiberal peak was in the late 1990s when his party formed a government coalition with Slobodan Milošević's Socialist Party of Serbia. As the information minister, Vučić played a crucial role in one of Europe's most severe cases of media repression. He introduced direct government censorship and imposed harsh penalties that led to the closure of numerous outlets critical of the government.[15]

Despite Orbán's earlier shift toward the populist right, a substantial ideological gap persisted between him and the virulently illiberal, anti-Western Vučić. This gap endured during their time in opposition throughout the 2000s. Their political positions, particularly in foreign policy, remained divergent as late as 2007. In response to the ruling Socialists' ties with Russia in 2007, Orbán asserted, "Oil might come from the East, but freedom always comes from the West."[16] Meanwhile, Vučić, adhering to the radically anti-Western and illiberal stance of the Serbian Radical Party, declared in the same year, "Only a mentally ill person and a political masochist can be in favor of joining the European Union," blaming the EU for supporting Kosovo's independence from Serbia.[17]

The 2008 economic crisis marked a significant turning point for both leaders. Until then, Orbán and Vučić had been ideologically distant, but the aftermath of the crisis propelled their parties to power, primarily on a populist basis.[18] Crucially, they initiated a period of autocratization, each influenced by domestic and external constraints. However, these processes did not have the same dynamics.

The economic crisis and autocratization

The global financial crisis and its aftermath significantly impacted both the Hungarian and Serbian economies in 2008, with subsequent years characterized by negative or modest economic growth.[19] Orbán and Vučić rose to power in the early 2010s, spearheading populist campaigns against incumbents and linking them to domestic oligarchs.

On Election Day in 2010, which secured Fidesz a two-thirds super-majority in parliament and Orbán a second nonconsecutive term as prime minister, he declared, "The Hungarian people today have ousted the regime of oligarchs who misused their power and established a new regime of national unity."[20] In Serbia, the newly formed Serbian Progressive Party achieved an upset victory in the 2012 elections, elevating Vučić to the position of powerful deputy prime minister and the head of the largest party in the government. In the campaign, the party emphasized the need to combat corruption and criminality, dismantle political oligarchy, and seek allies globally.[21] Vučić's power move came later that year with the arrest of Miroslav Mišković, an influential businessman closely associated with the incumbent party elites.[22]

On the international stage, both leaders reevaluated their stances toward the West after 2008, and despite reaching different conclusions, this brought them closer together. Orbán interpreted the 2008 crisis as indicative of a broader malaise within the global liberal order, prompting him to explore openings with Eastern powers.[23] Vučić, on the other hand, broke with his former political party and turned toward EU integration and liberal values, with a central aim of securing recognition from the West.[24]

In practice, both leaders engaged in similar balancing acts with the EU. However, their differing positions – one as the leader of an EU member state and the other as the leader of a candidate state – resulted in distinct maneuvering spaces that shaped these changes.[25] Lacking robust domestic forces to curtail autocratization, Hungary

and Serbia evolved into hybrid regimes primarily constrained externally by the EU.[26] Paradoxically, it was in these circumstances that the cooperation between the two countries became opportune.

The political ascent of Orbán and Vučić aligns with Scheppele's account of charismatic new leaders ascending through transformative elections, fueled by their respective electorates' growing impatience and a desire to challenge established power structures.[27] The upset victory over establishment forces marked the onset of democratic decline, yet the processes unfolded differently in Hungary and Serbia. Orbán orchestrated a swift "constitutional revolution," steering policies toward social conservatism and distancing Hungary from the West, while Vučić's transformation of Serbia was more gradual than Orbán's.

Similarities and differences

Following the 2010 election, Orbán served as Hungary's Prime Minister in four consecutive governments. After the 2012 elections in Serbia, Vučić swiftly consolidated power. In the Serbian semi-presidential system, he was elected Prime Minister after snap parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2016. He later assumed the position of President of the Republic after regular elections in 2017 and 2022.

The dynamics of autocratization in this period exhibited surprising variations between Hungary and Serbia. Although both leaders diminished the rule of law, won unfair elections, and concentrated power in the executive, they did so at different paces. Orbán's pace was notably faster, introducing a new Fundamental Law within a year of forming the government, reshaping the Constitutional Court,[28] and gaining control of almost the entire media market through affiliated businesses.[29]

By contrast, Vučić's autocratization was more gradual, with institutional redesigns occurring much later – with changes to the electoral law in 2020 and constitutional amendments in 2021. Unlike Hungary, Vučić did not pack the Constitutional Court, opting to appoint a new majority when justices' terms ended. Although the media landscape underwent dramatic changes under Vučić, pockets of critical media remained more substantial than in Hungary.[30]

The leaders also diverged in their approaches to the respect of citizens' rights and freedoms. Orbán has headed an illiberal movement in Europe, explicitly stating in his July 29, 2014 Tusnádfürdő speech that he was building "an illiberal state."[31] He articulated a distinct vision of a society where individual rights relate differently to the collective compared to liberal democracies, impacting policies on family, culture, minority rights, and migration.[32] By contrast, Vučić did not prioritize such a wide-ranging social transformation. Although he suppressed organized civil society,[33] he also showcased advancements in civil rights, such as the annual organization of Pride parades in Belgrade. He increased gender quotas through electoral law changes. In 2017, he appointed Ana Brnabić, the first woman and openly LGBT person, Prime Minister.[34]

In foreign relations, Orbán stood against EU institutions, adopting an increasingly Eurosceptic tone and directing overt public campaigns against the European

Commission.[35] The rapporteurs for Hungary of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, Tavares (2013), Sargentini (2018), and Delbos-Corfield (2022) pointed to a trend toward a serious breach of the values on which the Union is founded.[36]

By contrast, Vučić never confronted the EU directly in the same way as Orbán. Instead, Serbia's EU accession stalled over the years,[37] and Vučić maintained an ambiguous and EU-skeptical narrative domestically while adopting a nonconfrontational attitude vis-à-vis Brussels on the international stage.[38]

Both leaders employed nativist appeals and nationalist rhetoric, engaging in ethno-politics and mobilizing ethnic kin abroad while being critical of globalism and internationalism. However, in 2015, Orbán made opposition to migration central to his politics, framing the Open Society Foundation and George Soros, perhaps the most ardent non-state promoters of liberal values in the region, as arch-enemies.[39] Vučić initially took the opposite position, welcoming migrants personally and advocating for deeper engagement of the Open Society Foundation in Serbia, even as it was exiting Hungary.[40]

Comparing the autocratization of Hungary and Serbia in the 2010s reveals a similarity in the general direction and several differences in the extent and dynamics of changes. Orbán and Vučić established comparable hybrid regimes domestically and navigated balancing acts internationally. However, due to different starting positions, Vučić faced more external constraints. While Orbán could pursue an illiberal path in the EU and resist the political opposition from abroad, Vučić intentionally projected a liberal image to the West for acceptance. However, as their balancing acts became less tenable toward the turn of the decade, both leaders increasingly relied on each other for external and domestic legitimation.

Evolving interactions

By the decade's close, Hungary and Serbia encountered heightened criticism from the liberal West concerning their domestic and foreign policies. In response to these circumstances, Orbán and Vučić intensified their cooperation, leading to illiberal value diffusion with repercussions on policies.

Orbán and Vučić have established a noteworthy pattern of frequent visits and meetings over five years, which stands out in a comparative perspective.[41] Throughout the years since 2014, during which both leaders have held executive positions in their respective countries, Orbán and Vučić convened 47 times (Figure 8.1).[42] This encompasses all formal and informal, in-person and online meetings, and phone talks communicated through the media or official channels in Hungary or Serbia.[43]

The frequency of interactions between Orbán and Vučić changed over time. During their initial five years as heads of government (2014–2018), they met 12 times, averaging twice per year. Then just in 2023, they met 11 times, thus almost monthly. What explains this acceleration?

The interaction between Orbán and Vučić appeared to increase during heightened isolation from the West. The first surge occurred after 2019 when Fidesz faced
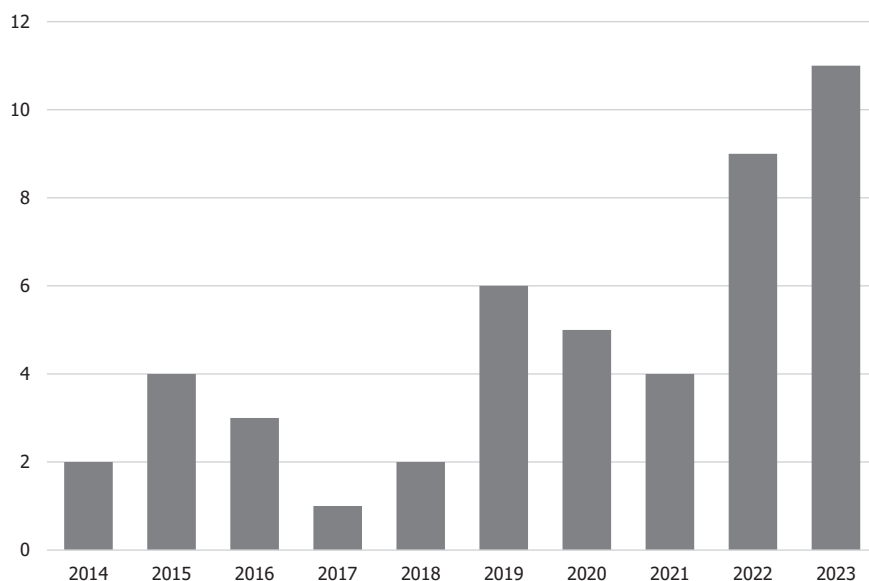
Figure 8.1 Number of meetings between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić.

Source: Publicly available information on formal and informal in-person meetings and online/tele-phone talks.

suspension from the European People's Party (EPP).[44] Simultaneously, Serbia attracted attention due to an institutional crisis, and EU accession progress stalled.[45] The second surge followed the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both countries sought to maintain equidistance from the West and Russia, condemning the invasion but refraining from joining sanctions, leading to political isolation within the EU.[46] Notably, in the aftermath of the European Parliament's Resolution condemning Hungary's violation of EU values in 2022, Vučić bestowed upon Orbán the highest state order of Serbia just one day later.[47]

The increased cooperation between Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić since 2019 has resulted in multiple benefits for both leaders and their respective countries. In this period, the need for inter-national and domestic legitimation, setting a precedent for similar regimes, and promoting economic interests, contributed to a multifaceted partnership between Hungary and Serbia.

Benefits of cooperation

This increased cooperation yielded international gains for the two leaders. Leveraging heightened influence in Serbia, Orbán showcased to the West his ability to "stabilize the Balkans." An instance of such behavior was his June 2023 visit to

Serbia, where he urged the Serbian leadership to release captured members of the security force from Kosovo.[48] Vučić, in turn, secured an ally within the EU that can mitigate heightened criticism. An example is the European Parliament expressing concerns that Olivér Várhelyi, Hungary's Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, downplayed the importance of democratic and rule-of-law reforms in the accession process.[49]

The collaboration between Orbán and Vučić also carried a potent message for domestic audiences. Particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Orbán's connections with traditional allies such as Poland fractured due to divergent views on the war.[50] By maintaining ties with Vučić, Orbán could signal to his voters that he retains influence abroad. Simultaneously, this relationship mitigated the impact of Vučić's growing isolation from the West for his domestic audiences. In the aftermath of the 2023 Serbian elections, criticized by international and domestic observers, Viktor Orbán's congratulations stood out as the sole acknowledgment from an EU member state leader.[51]

The deepened cooperation between these two authoritarian leaders, representing an EU member state and a candidate, also influenced the external legitimation of competitive autocracies. Firstly, it conveyed the message that similar regimes can find a place within the EU.[52] Despite setbacks, the long-term aspiration of forming an illiberal alliance rests on demonstrating the benefits of collaboration between such regimes.[53] Additionally, it served as a blueprint for cooperation, enticing other leaders to join the building of the alliance.[54] This "authoritarian solidarity" has tangible effects, exemplified by the case of the former Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, finding asylum in Hungary through Serbia.[55]

The bedrock of the cooperation between Orbán and Vučić is their shared substantial economic interests. Hungary emerged as one of Serbia's primary trade partners, with a trade volume exceeding €3.5 billion in 2022.[56] The most prominent Hungarian investments have concentrated in the energy (MOL, oil and gas) and financial sectors (OTP Bank). Joint ventures in infrastructure and energy encompassed the construction of a China-sponsored railway link connecting Belgrade and Budapest, the completion of the Turkstream pipeline in 2021, facilitating Russian gas transportation to Serbia and Hungary via Turkey,[57] the establishment of a joint gas company, and announced investments in electricity production.[58]

These economic arrangements have also been intertwined with patronage and clientelistic networks. Orbán's family members have continued to engage in business deals within Serbia.[59] Hungarian subsidies flowing to the Serbian province of Vojvodina strengthened the Fidesz voting base among the Hungarian minority.[60] Simultaneously, political representatives of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians have supported Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party's governments since 2014. Previously a buffer in, at times, uneasy relations between the two countries,[61] the Hungarian minority party in Serbia started reaping the rewards of having the backing of both governments.

Value diffusion and policy shifts

The deepening cooperation and Vučić's reliance on support from the neighboring government have influenced the diffusion of values, with a discernible direction of influence from Orbán toward Vučić. Meetings with Orbán and shared attendance at events correlated with significant alterations in Vučić's rhetoric.

In his 2019 speech at the Demographic Summit in Budapest, Vučić embraced Orbán's central theme of family values as crucial to national survival and directly attributed nations' dissolution to individual selfishness, demographic challenges from Asia and Africa, and Western values.[62] In a stark departure from his previous rhetoric, Vučić directly attributed negative demographic trends to "liberal political Marxism" and Western liberal elites, framing their influence as a "jihad" against disobedient countries. He praised Orbán for leading by example, stating that Serbia was already emulating some Hungarian measures.[63]

After the shift in rhetoric, policy changes ensued in Serbia. In 2020, a Ministry for Family Care and Demography was established, led by a conservative minister from the right-wing junior coalition partner.[64] In May 2021, Vučić announced his refusal to sign the draft law on same-sex unions proposed by his party's government.[65] In August 2022, he canceled the EuroPride parade in Belgrade despite earlier promises of full support from Prime Minister Ana Brnabić during the bidding process.[66]

The authoritarian cooperation between Orbán and Vučić, driven by necessity, had tangible effects on adapting rhetoric and policies. Nonetheless, there have also been obstacles to their collaboration, and the two leaders have navigated these challenges to narrow the gap between them. The two significant disputes in the relations between Orbán and Vučić were the 2015 migrant crisis and the NATO intervention in 1999. Even though Orbán and Vučić were on opposing sides in these complex crises that involved the two countries, they overcame these conflicts, transformed discourses about them, and ultimately became closer.

Reconciling stances: The migrant crisis

During the onset of the European migrant crisis in 2015, Orbán and Vučić held disparate positions. Orbán staunchly opposed accepting migrants as refugees, leveraging the fear of migration for political gain.[67] By contrast, Vučić treated the crisis as a humanitarian issue, allowing migrants to pass through Serbia.[68] However, a decisive shift in Serbia's stance aligned the country more closely with Hungary over the next few years.

In the crisis's early days, then-Prime Minister Vučić and Minister Aleksandar Vulin, responsible for social affairs, staged a PR stunt by personally welcoming migrants in downtown Belgrade. Vučić expressed emotional sentiments, welcoming migrants and thanking Serbian citizens and organizations for their assistance, stating, "I am proud that Serbia, on their way to the EU, is the best refuge and the safest place for them."[69]

Initially, the only vocal opponents of migration in Serbia were the Hungarian minority party, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, and a few fringe right-wing parties.[70] Minister Vulin responded to the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians Vice-President Balint Pastor's demands to stall migration, emphasizing the impossibility of preventing migrants from entering Serbia without infringing on their human rights.[71]

In July 2015, Hungary unilaterally began erecting a razor-wire fence to stop migrants at its borders, leading to protests from official Belgrade.[72] Initially shocked by the idea,[73] Vučić compared the barbed-wire fences to concentration camps,[74] criticizing Hungary and asserting, "This makes us more European than some member states. We do not build fences."[75] Tensions escalated in September as the border closed, when Hungarian police used tear gas and water cannons to push migrants back into Serbia, an action deemed unacceptable by Serbian authorities.[76]

Nevertheless, as pro-migration sentiments waned in Europe, Serbia increased cooperation with Hungary and Austria to control migrant routes. Belgrade transitioned from open to more restrictive policies, diverting the migrant issue from Vienna and Budapest southward, toward North Macedonia and Bulgaria, and enhancing its border-closure capabilities.[77]

In subsequent years, Serbia reportedly engaged in illegal pushbacks of migrants to Bulgaria since 2017[78] and initiated the construction of a border fence with North Macedonia in 2020, mirroring Hungary's actions.[79] By 2021, reports surfaced of harsher treatment of migrants by authorities and emerging vigilante groups.[80]

Serbia also altered its rhetoric on migration. Minister Vulin, present during the 2015 pushbacks by Hungarian border police, personally led nighttime raids in 2021, arresting thousands of migrants in Belgrade. Initially asserting that migrants could not be stopped from entering the country, Vulin's role evolved to prevent Serbia from becoming a "parking lot for migrants."[81] President Vučić shifted from boasting about welcoming migrants to emphasizing how many migrants Serbia prevented from crossing the border.[82] Orbán explained this new level of cooperation in grandiose terms: "The two countries have agreed to rebuild Central Europe," protecting it from new waves of migration.[83] Despite changing circumstances in Europe, Vučić's transformation from a "humanitarian" to a "protector of Europe" was influenced by Orbán's hard line.

Reframing history: The NATO intervention

Hungary and Serbia experienced tumultuous relations throughout the twentieth century, and in the early 2010s, the two countries made several conciliatory steps dealing especially with memories of the Second World War.[84] These events opened the door to dealing with a more recent conflict – the 1999 NATO intervention. At that time, Vučić served as a government minister during the conflict with Hungary led by PM Orbán. To move past this troubled history, Orbán and Vučić had to redefine their roles in the war and change the prevailing narrative.

Hungary became a NATO member on 12 March 1999, just before the commencement of NATO bombing on 24 March. Being geographically isolated

within NATO and the sole member bordering the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Hungary was crucial in planning the potential land invasion.[85] Surveys conducted in Hungary indicated low support for deploying Hungarian troops in a ground invasion. However, over half the population favored the war, and support for NATO membership increased compared to pre-bombing levels.[86]

Prime Minister Orbán declared that NATO intervention had a solid moral foundation, emphasizing the alliance's commitment to values.[87] Foreign Minister János Martonyi stated, "This is the NATO we aspired to join ten years ago, one that stands for a specific set of values."[88] Despite Hungary's reluctance to engage in ground warfare, it permitted NATO to conduct bombing missions from its territory, with Orbán endorsing NATO's bombing of the bridges of Novi Sad.[89]

Nevertheless, in recent years, Vučić has asserted on multiple occasions, especially during commemorations of the 1999 intervention, the critical role Orbán had in obstructing the NATO land invasion. In this version of events, Vučić portrayed Orbán as defying the West by refusing to attack Serbia from the north, as urged by the United States and the United Kingdom.[90] While Orbán had previously discussed these events as one of his "first confrontations with Western politics," Vučić presented it as a revelation, widely disseminating it in pro-government media in Serbia as evidence of persistent friendship with Orbán.[91]

However, a closer examination of their positions in 1999 shows that Prime Minister Orbán viewed the government in which Vučić served with concern. Orbán's primary worry regarding a land invasion from the north was the safety of ethnic Hungarians in Serbia. In a parliamentary speech, he warned, "Over 300,000 ethnic Hungarians live in a country whose government systematically exterminates national minorities."[92] In 1999, Orbán perceived the government with Vučić as a threat to the Hungarian minority in Serbia.[93]

Orbán's support for NATO's intervention was aimed at the protection of the Albanian minority in Serbia, and his opposition to a northern land invasion stemmed from fear of the Serbian government's potential actions against the Hungarian minority. This crucial aspect of the war – minority protection – started being omitted from the revised narrative about the 1999 war. As cooperation between Hungary and Serbia deepened, a need arose to reframe this historical conflict and identify the West as a common adversary instead.

Similar to the shift in the discourse on migrants after 2015, a change of rhetoric was followed with policy adjustments, this time on the Hungarian side. Despite Hungary's early recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008, in 2023, Hungary voted against Kosovo's membership in the Council of Europe. Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó stated that Hungary would oppose Kosovo's accession to all European organizations until a deal with Serbia was reached.[94]

Conclusion

Orbán and Vučić have exhibited similar traits, increasingly adopting populist, illiberal, and anti-Western rhetoric and policies. While their enhanced cooperation may initially seem rooted in ideological proximity, this chapter contends the

opposite – their collaboration, given their divergent starting positions, presented a challenging case that required investments and maintenance.

The catalyst for the intensified collaboration between Vučić and Orbán lies in their parallel challenges, the escalating tensions with the European Union since 2019, particularly accentuated in 2022. Before that, the EU had an enabling role in Hungary and Serbia's gradual autocratization. The EU espoused accommodative behavior and did not consistently promote democracy, especially when the European People's Party was the leading political force.[95]

In the decade following the 2008 economic crisis, the European Union was ill-prepared for two significant developments. Firstly, some member states began to oppose the Union's values and norms,[96] and there was a lack of effective post-accession sanctioning mechanisms applicable to Hungary's case.[97] Secondly, the effects of Europeanization weakened, and the transformative power of the EU membership perspective waned in the Western Balkan candidate countries.[98] In Serbia's case, security and geopolitical concerns took precedence over democratization.[99] In both cases, a linear transformation of these countries into liberal democracies was reversed, contrasting the prevailing logic underpinning the enlargement criteria and the EU's internal political mechanisms.

Tracing these developments helps one to understand the effects and determinants of convergence among autocratizing countries. While the policy preferences of key democracy promoters shifted, and Western support for democratization remained modest at best,[100] authoritarian regimes adapted and learned to resist the promotion of democracy, fostering cooperation among themselves.[101] In Hungary and Serbia, authoritarianism was promoted through deliberate attempts to influence the other regime and the less intentional diffusion of authoritarian values, models, and institutions.[102]

The logic of authoritarian cooperation and the diffusion of values holds broader implications for at least two reasons. Firstly, Central and Southeastern Europe has witnessed the emergence of several authoritarian leaders who have forged alliances with their cross-border counterparts over the last decade. While populist leaders including Janez Janša in Slovenia, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, and Andrej Babiš in Czechia are now in opposition, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, and Robert Fico in Slovakia are in government. From their perspective, having a reliably autocratic neighborhood enhances regime survival.[103] As long as authoritarian governments hold power, they are strongly motivated to support their allies, suggesting that authoritarian cooperation in Central and Southeastern Europe will likely persist.

Secondly, it can be argued that these illiberal shifts represent pragmatic rhetoric, with leaders emulating certain positions to garner favors. Orbán and Vučić, for example, have adeptly navigated the international stage by making concessions on one issue to the EU while advancing destructive policies on another. In the ever-changing political landscape, where positions are constantly in flux, it becomes challenging to assert that any changes are value-driven; instead, there is a growing tendency to view them as instrumental to regime survival. However, irrespective of the motivation behind rhetorical changes, they have tangible impacts on societies.

This chapter has argued that ideological diffusion occurred through heightened international cooperation and manifested in countries' policies. The transformation extends beyond mere changes in narratives; it encompasses shifts in policies concerning ethnic and sexual minorities, women, migrants, civil society, and media. The trajectories of these illiberal shifts hinge on the constraints and opportunities confronting authoritarian leaders in different countries, but the direction is set.

Vučić's shift toward illiberal policies contrasts starkly with his actions only a couple of years earlier, a change challenging to explain without considering his increased isolation from the West and dependence on Orbán. While there was some convergence between Vučić and Orbán in that process, it was not far-reaching. Nevertheless, the potential export of an "illiberal revolution" could have profound implications in Serbia and other cases in the region in the future.

Notes

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9   Reconstructionist religions in Hungary

In the shadow of threats

Réka Szilárdi

Introduction: The phenomenon[1]

In the last few decades, researchers who have followed the development of religious phenomena in Western societies have witnessed strange events. As a result of the great "spiritual boom" of the 1960s and 1970s, alongside the countless modern movements with doctrines adapted to the times, an exciting trend emerged which aimed at reviving certain archaic religious forms. These groups date back to a wide variety of traditions: there are adherents of the cult of Mithras, others go back to the nature religions of prehistoric times, and there are also followers of the great ancient religious cultures.

The academic literature began to use the term neo-paganism to describe these movements, which can now be found everywhere from the United States to East European countries. Initially, these movements were defined in a rather diverse way: while some identified them as ancient nature religions whose continuity was unquestioned,[2] others referred to them as descendants of magical groups,[3] or even labeled them as New Age and esoteric new religious movements,[4] while still others attribute their emergence to 19th-century religious studies.[5] In fact, Michael York has even called neo-paganism the sixth great world religion, including folk religions indigenous to China, Shinto, Siberian shamanism, or tribal religions of primitive peoples, and neo-pagan trends in Western societies.[6] All this shows that, at the turn of the millennium, the terminology of neo-paganism and the theories associated with it were still very much in their infancy, even for the study of religions.

On the use of the word "pagan"

In order to clarify and interpret the term, we should first look at it historically and etymologically. The term "pagan" comes from the Latin *paganus* (village, village-dweller, rural) and its meaning is linked to the early phase of Christianity, when the new religious tradition first spread among the urban population (the *urbanus*), while the followers of traditional religions – the Greek and Roman state religions or the mystery religions – were relegated to the countryside. From the 5th century

onwards, Christian terminology used the word "pagan" to describe those who were not adherents of either Christianity or Judaism, and the term was further extended in the following centuries to mean idolaters, followers of false gods, or even godless people. In today's vernacular, "pagan" is used as a slur to refer to atheist and agnostic individuals and groups, as well as to those who are non-Christian or follow a different religious tradition *within* Christianity. The use of the term thus carries radically different meanings and, as a catch-all term for religious traditions other than Christianity, can be understood only in the historical and cultural context of Western societies, as it reflects a strong Christian theological influence.

It is precisely in order to avoid these theological "spill-overs" that the broader religious studies literature has begun to use the terms neo-pagan, contemporary paganism, and reconstructionist religion to refer to polytheistic, nature-centered magical groups whose followers typically aim to reconstruct pre-Christian cults, usually practising their faith in small groups.

It is now clear that the trends that emerged in the 1960s were not without precedent. Religious studies research traces the roots of modern paganism back to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and attributes three fundamental features to it: the glorification of nature and the rediscovery of ancient pagan gods in the Romantic era; the influence of the proliferation of anthropological and ethno-religious research; and the mass interest in popular cultural history and traditional knowledge. It is precisely for this reason that these movements are in fact linked to the actual pagan past only in a few respects, because the lack of information in the historical-ethnological research on the cults in question means that we can speak of a reconstructionist *intention* and not of actual reconstruction or genuine continuity.

In general, modern religious studies understand neo-paganism as heterogeneous religious systems that are (1) pre-Christian European belief systems (Druidic religion or cults of Germanic myths); (2) pre-Christian non-European cults (e.g., the cult of Mithras or Isis); and (3) the religions of non-European peoples and tribal societies (e.g., Siberian shamanic or African and Latin American tribes and cultures) that are understood as attempting a conscious and specific revival of earlier religions.[7]

Today, such new pagan trends in the public mind include the followers of Wicca; modern Druids with Celtic traditions or Asatru based on the Germanic mythology; and groups that worship the numerous manifestations of the "Goddess" and societies that practice magic.

Common features

Although the contemporary pagan scene is almost impenetrably diverse, with an extremely large number of archaic (or seemingly archaic) religious formations worldwide, there are nevertheless some basic characteristics that are common to all movements. Most modern pagans, for example, generally accept the ethical principle of "Do what you will, as long as it harms none," as an ethical minimal. Many groups' religious practices reflect their closeness to nature, but this can also

be explained by the fact that a significant number of pagan groups have a belief system that is essentially based on some kind of nature religion.[8]

In contrast to some monotheistic religions, these movements tend to be polytheistic or duotheistic, and often central to this is the acceptance of gender equality, expressed in the complementary worship of a god and a goddess. Related to this, there is also a substantial emphasis on liberal approaches to sexuality. The idea of tolerance (especially religious tolerance) is also strong, as is the absence of dogmatic thinking. Several trends emphasize the continuity of its history. Many are grouped in small covens, usually with no central Church organization and thus no or very little hierarchical structure.[9]

Post-socialist versions

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, among the religions of Western or even Far Eastern origin that discovered East European countries as missionary destinations were the contemporary pagan trends, and although Wiccan, Asatru, and Celtic traditions could not take root in these societies, contemporary pagan groups linked to certain local "ancestral" religious traditions quickly gained popularity. A comparison of the history and belief systems of the groups that emerged reveals a number of similarities: most of them appear to be descendants of communities that emerged in the early 20th century, they are linked by a historical thread to the brutal persecutions under the Soviet regime, and their formation and revival coincide with the end of the communist era.

Based on the familiar Western schema, these movements have worked to reconstruct archaic religious traditions, but what should be highlighted as an important difference between West and East European groups is that the latter have seemed from the outset to place greater emphasis on the issue of national identity and less on magical practices. These communities have stressed the need for a return to pre-Christian traditions, and in the process of national-tribal ancestral-religious reconstruction, blood descent and nationalist ideas were more closely linked to the revival of traditions.

Around the 1990s, the activity of such regional neo-pagan groups can be seen across the entire horizon of the post-socialist territory. In the Baltic region, for example, one finds the Romuva organization in Lithuania, the Dievturi Church in Latvia,[10] and the Tőlet Club in Estonia.[11] In the Slavic region, there are Zadruga in Poland, Rodnover and Krug Peruna in Slovakia, Yarna in Russia, and Pravoslavja in Ukraine.[12]

Hungarian neo-paganism

In Hungary, too, these trends appear in the context of interpreting religious diversity after the regime change. Apart from the few "imported" pagan groups,[13] in the case of Hungarian reconstructionist organizations, as elsewhere in the region, the revival of national ancestral religion in the 1990s and 2000s placed a strong emphasis on linguistic nationalism, national historical narratives, their

symbols, prominent figures, and objects. The orientations to be found in the reconstruction of Hungarian ancestral religion seek to build primarily on the history and way of life of the Hungarian people who settled in Hungary, on the sacral origins of Hungarianism, and on the traditions of the so-called *táltos*, who (like the shaman) is the guardian of ethnic consciousness, sacrificial priest, spiritual guide, prophet, healer, poet, and singer. The táltos culture, on the other hand, according to the narratives of religious leaders, usually represents a morality that takes responsibility for the nation, extends the locality of its community to the borders of the nation, and the prayers and individual actions often aim at reviving the nation, awakening national consciousness, and awakening self-awareness.[14]

If we wish to explore the roots of Hungarian contemporary pagan movements, the first essential node is to be found in the attempts at language reconstruction in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the beginning of ethnographic research in this context. One of the main motivations for the theories developed in this period was the feverish ambition triggered by Herder's vision in 1774 of the death of the nation.[15] This brought with it the results of the investigation of national tradition and mythology with a rather immature methodological background. As a consequence, numerous works emerged in which theories about the origins of the Hungarians were based on romantic ideas such as Hungarian-Persian and Hungarian-Egyptian kinship. This was probably due to the fact that the idea of descent from glorious ancient cultures became much more prominent than the "fishy" Finno-Ugric kinship, and provided a much stronger and more secure national identity for Hungarians living in the Habsburg Empire. During the period, a vivid scientific debate developed about the possibilities of Uralic and other (Altaic, Sumerian, etc.) affinities, and despite systematic comparative linguistics proving the Finno-Ugric linguistic affinity, various unrealistic theories persisted even into the 20th century.

It is almost impossible to list the various amateur linguistic doctrines, but what seems certain is that from the very beginning of linguistics we have witnessed a kind of dilettante linguistic reconstruction continuum, which was initially formed with scientific pretensions, but later lived a separate life detached from the scientific. The underlying arguments have remained practically the same: the introduction of Finno-Ugric linguistic identity, the Austrian and later Soviet attempt to uproot the Hungarian people, the Habsburg rule, especially the Bach era, and later the Finno-Ugric linguistic identity imposed by the Soviet regime, all led Hungarian science astray and made Hungarians forget their glorious past.

The research of ethnographers, linguists, and enthusiasts in the 18th and 19th centuries can now be considered obsolete at the academic level; the analytical ethnographic works that ignored the source material, as well as the linguistic writings that appeared as a result of ethnonymization, are now considered to be of cultural and scientific interest. Nevertheless, there is still a strong opposition to the official, academic linguistic position in the ancient Hungarian reconstructionist movement, one of the central arguments of which is the conspiracy of foreign powers against the Hungarian nation.

The nature of the ancient Hungarian religious reconstruction

What can be said about the natural history of the revival of the ancient Hungarian religious traditions is the result of roughly 15 years of research, the detailed theoretical and empirical results of which I have presented in several smaller studies and in a separate monograph.[16] In the present chapter, I will present a brief summary of the results and explanatory models of the characteristics of the Hungarian contemporary paganism, while in a broader sense, I will give some impressions of the more general perspective of the traits of Hungarian collective identity.

Groups and trends

In the last decade, the CCVI Church Law of 2011 (together with stormy attempts to amend it since then) has made it very difficult to count the presence of modern pagan groups in Hungary, as the change in the law has resulted in the disappearance of some 250–300 religious organizations from the official list of religious associations. According to the list of registered Churches and the latest research by the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Szeged, eight national groups and six groups based on Western traditions were operating as official Churches until 2013. Among these, the Celtic Wiccan Church and the Sodalitas Mithraica Church were registered communities, while among the ancient Hungarian religious groups, there were the Traditional Church of the Order of Árpád, the Hungarian Religious Community, the Ancient Hungarian Church, and the Yotengrit Church.[17]

The image of the gods of the ancient Hungarian religious movements is diverse, one reason for this is that there are no written sources available on the mythology of the Hungarian settlers, and this lack was filled by folk fantasy and the aforementioned initial research. In the past few decades eclectic orientations of contemporary Hungarian paganism can be grouped around a few emblematic figures, and these form the religious mosaic from which modern Hungarian contemporary Paganism draws its inspiration, and to which he refers as sources in his religious views.

There are ideas linked to Central Asian polytheism and shamanism, in which the arch-god *Tengri*, the Lord of the Sky, is the creator. The god *Mag* is one of the characters in this pantheon, and some groups treat him as a prominent figure, but there is also the worship of the *Boldogasszony* (Blessed Woman) as a goddess figure. However, there is a branch of Hungarian neo-paganism which believes that Christianity itself is of Hungarian origin, and that Jesus was therefore an ancient Hungarian táltos.[18]

The religious activities of these movements are also extremely heterogeneous: there are ceremonies in the Pilis Mountains, drum rituals and fire-walks in the forest, larger traditional events, and for the last 10 years there has been a permanent presence of neopagan groups even at the Hungarian Everness spiritual festival. As previously mentioned, contemporary paganism became tangible in Hungary after the regime change, and what was striking almost from the first

moment was that the local versions were not characterized by a Western value approach, but quite the opposite. Instead of a tolerant and liberal attitude, closed, nationalist religious tendencies have emerged, which proclaim linguistic and ethnic primacy and which often assume external oppression and hostile intentions on the part of the surrounding countries. At the same time, national-religious superiority and experiences of historical loss are highlighted, and political preferences have very often tended to shift to the extreme right. In the meantime the right-wing political field was observed to respond to this content, often using the narratives of the ancestral Hungarian groups as a point of reference.[19]

In the research, my initial impression had first to be empiricized, and then the reasons for which local variants of neo-paganism result in such constellations had to be found. Accordingly, in the first phase, the press products of two reconstructionist movements were analyzed, and already in these preliminary studies it became apparent that, within the religious content, the national-ethnic dimensions were strongly emphasized, both in terms of the origins, history, and traditions of the Hungarian people, and in terms of their ancient, all-embracing wisdom. The modern, globalized world is constantly being presented in a context that consciously threatens the traditional worldview; academic knowledge and its representatives are the weapons of this threat, and the religious elements are consistently subordinated to this bipolar worldview.

The second phase of the research consisted of five years of fieldwork attending the religious events of these groups, while the third phase involved content analysis of approximately 60,000-word text corpora compiled from the websites of Hungarian neo-pagan groups using various methodologies ranging from hermeneutic field analysis to scientific narrative psychological content analysis.

Narrative approaches

It is worth devoting a few paragraphs here to the considerations and methodology of narrative psychology. Narrative psychology, as one of the new paradigms of Soft Synthesis,[20] views the human being in a dual field of power: it considers him as both a causally determined and at the same time an interpreting being. One of its central insights is that people communicate their own experiences, thoughts, emotions, and interpretations of the world in narratives that are at first rudimentary and then, over time, increasingly complex. These narratives are capable of representing the complex social, historical, and cultural context of the individual, and are thus inseparable from the notion of identity.[21] In other words, identity is essentially narrative in nature, that is, it is articulated and unfolded in the process of narration.[22]

In line with this idea, just as individual identity can be expressed in terms of life history, so group history becomes relevant for collective identity, i.e., the patterns that emerge in the group's narratives constitute the information about the nature of social identity. According to Assmann,[23] the strength of collective identity always depends on the extent to which it is alive in the consciousness of its members,

and the most important role in this, as László[24] points out, is played by collective memory and group narratives.

Going further, the idea of the narrative organization of history has been emphasized in the last few decades in historiography and later in social psychology.[25] History, in this interpretative framework, is now not only a series of events but also a narrative that gives meaning to facts. These meanings also contain the basic rules of the group's functioning and the starting points of its relational system, and can thus form the basis for interpretative strategies for the events that occur.

Thus, as in the case of personal narratives, the group's memory constructs a field of reference beyond the narrated facts, which provides a plausibility structure for the present and the future, defines the group's reference points, regulates the possibilities for interpersonal and intergroup behavior, and structures the interpretation of events.[26] Past events and the emotional patterns associated with them are embedded and perpetuated in representations, thus becoming the bearers of a kind of enduring emotional orientation. In other words, group narratives cumulatively contain the emotional patterns that group members relate to themselves and represent toward other groups; therefore, the study of group history and the pattern of meanings that can be extracted from it provides an opportunity to understand the social identity of the group. In recent decades, a number of international and Hungarian empirical studies have confirmed this assumption.[27]

Empirical results

To summarize the results, on the one hand, it has been widely confirmed that the identity of Hungarian pagan trends is focused mainly on ethnic, linguistic, and historical issues. Religious texts are located in the historical-national narrative fields, and ancient religious beliefs are only related to them in a complementary, secondary fashion. In the narratives of the groups, a picture of national representation emerges in which the role of the Hungarian nation, its origins, language, history, and specific national characteristics are sacralized, and are also associated with elements expressing external and internal threats.

The results show that the narratives simultaneously idealize the past and glorify the golden age, while at the same time they fail to deal with historical grievances and the marked victimhood of the Hungarian people, who are the victims of conspiracies, grievances, and foreign powers. The collective identity is one of self-aggrandizement and depressive self-promotion, of the experience of grievances and fear. All this indicates a low level of processing and psychological elaboration of historical events and the concept of identity threat, and thus the psychological nature of national identity is characterized by unstable and defensive traits.

It is important to note that, while the analysis of the Hungarian contemporary pagan groups was in progress, other researchers from the Narrative Research Group of the University of Pécs and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences were also conducting research with a similar focus, but on the texts of Hungarian history books.

A wide range of these studies have demonstrated that collective victimhood is an integral part of Hungarian national identity.[28] Both qualitative information and quantitative data show a historical self-representation that reveals elements of unelaborated historical trauma – overwhelmed by grievances, passivity, deflected responsibility, one-sided, biased perspectives, and extreme emotional reactions. In the case of Hungary, there are stagnations in the processing of the pain and losses suffered.[29]

The results I obtained in the analyses I conducted matched the previous ones almost perfectly, with the difference that the narratives of the recontructionist Hungarian religious groups emphasized even more strongly the indicators of identity threat. While the corpus of texts in history books also clearly shows a low degree of processing of historical grievances, this was even more pronounced in religious communities.

Explanatory models

In order to interpret such data of these religious groups (and by extension the whole collective national identity), it was worthwhile to apply a multi-layered theoretical approach that could explain the aforementioned identity threat and the exclusive role of victimization. These approaches could be contextualized from the transdisciplinary fields of religious studies, social psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and political science, and within these, four partially coherent theoretical models eventually became suitable for interpretation: (1) The issue of divergent nationalisms that focus on divergent national development, (2) theories of the erosive effects of communism that reckon with the consequences of a shattered and silenced history, (3) ideas of the entrenchment of transgenerational fears, and (4) interpretations of collective trauma and national grievances.

Theories of nationality and divergent nationalisms

The triad (premodern, modernist, and ethnosymbolist) of theories on the formation of the nation in the modern sense is well known, which divide according to where in time the nation was created,[30] and the literature also shows dilemmas along these fractures with regard to national identity. Within this, what can be related to regional divergences in reconstructionist religions is the paradigm of divergent nationalisms, whose starting point is that the development of nations does not occur simultaneously, in parallel.

Hans Kohn adopted and contextualized the Meineckean dichotomy of the different concept of national development: according to him, Western-style nationalism, based on the Enlightenment, represents pluralism and democracy, while its Eastern "counterpart" is irrational, ethnic, and cultural. The Western type is a civic, voluntary construct, while the Eastern type is the ethno-cultural expression of a historical community. The same distinction is used by John Plamenatz, among others: while civic/civil nationalism is essentially characterized by culturally advanced nations, ethnic nationalism is irrational, mystical, ethnocentric,

based on emotional patterns of primitive peoples, motivated essentially by a sense of inferiority.[31]

Because of the value judgments inherent in the idea, the theory advocated by Kohn and Plamenatz has been the subject of much criticism, but there is no doubt that more social scientists have argued and continue to argue for differences in nationalist tendencies, now taking into account the specific historical and social situation and abandoning these judgments.

In contrasting East and West, one cannot ignore the fact that the formation of nations in Western Europe is the result of an earlier process, and that national organization itself began in a different context: while in the West it developed within the framework of the state, in Eastern Europe the nation emerged earlier than the state. The consequences of this divergent development are obvious and, as Schöpflin points out,[32] the reasons for the difference are to be found primarily in the spontaneous rather than the non-spontaneous developmental path of the nation. In the East European states, nation-building was motivated by fear and pressure from developed Western states on the one hand, and on the other hand, the factors necessary for development were not present, i.e., nation-building took a different type of path. Whereas the economic, political, and administrative organization of the monarchies that emerged in modern Europe, combined with cultural homogenization, proved to be the ideal catalyst for the emergence of nation-states, in the eastern region this process was the opposite: it was not the state that created the nation, but the nation that was driven to create the state. Thus, in the societies of the 19th-century imperial societies of Central and South-Eastern Europe, without independent historical traditions or a proper upper class, nationhood and statehood did not coincide.[33]

The historical and nationalist representations of neo-pagan groups sharply illustrate this difference, and the thought processes and critical considerations of divergent nationalisms can therefore serve as explanatory models for the points of rupture within contemporary paganism.

The socialist past and the post-socialist vacuum

After the dilemmas arising from divergent national development, the traits of further Central-Eastern European aspects were also examined. The theories used here now not only take account of the different contexts of state/national development, but also emphasize that the consequences of decades of communist dictatorship also left a heavy mark on the region's otherness, primarily by destroying traditional social structures and major points of social identification.[34]

Reflecting both the national development in Eastern Europe and the post-socialist condition, terms have emerged in recent decades that have become established in both public discourse and scholarship. One such term in public discourse is the "post-socialist vacuum," which on the one hand focuses on the eroded moral values of the socialist system and on the other hand seeks to denote the vacuum created by the encounter between the collapsed communist ideology and the influx of value pluralism from the Western world. There have been many criticisms of this idea,

especially in Eastern Europe, and several factors are criticized by authors on the subject.

For example, according to Hoppenbrouwers, the vacuum theory is an inadequate model for understanding the processes in Central and Eastern Europe because the underlying idea is that the Eastern European citizen is a simple, unreflective, child-like individual. Instead, he argues that there is really only one factor to focus on, and that is the building of a democratic society without the experience of democratic structures.[35]

Among the critical approaches, Péter Niedermüller's study[36] deserves attention, according to which the re-emergence of the nation as a political and social reference point is not a self-evident event and cannot be linked to the term vacuum. In order to make sense of this emergence, it is necessary to take account of the mechanisms that played a role in this process.

One of these mechanisms is the extensive discourse that thematizes and debates certain issues of the historical and political ideals of the nation-state, national culture and identity, the self and the other, history, memory, and the historical past in the context of post-socialism, and through this, outlines the cultural concepts and symbolic frameworks of a new social order. The symbolic arena of post-socialist societies in which the struggle for political power is conducted through culturally patterned concepts is called the discourse of the "national." This discourse can be seen as a complex system that transcends the classical East–West nationalism dichotomy. At its center is a cultural representation of the past, rooted in regime change, and starting from the deliberately distorted historiography of the socialist dictatorship. The main aim of this discourse is to recover, reproduce, and contextualize a national history that has been destroyed on ideological grounds. Accordingly, three interrelated strategies can be developed: the strategy of restoration, the strategy of reconstruction, and the strategy of nationalization of history.

Since the fictitious narratives of socialism destroyed history, it must be recovered, restored from the remaining fragments, and this is necessary from a political, moral, and scientific point of view. Such symbolic reconstruction of history is always the result of a conscious selection: it involves the selection of past events that represent the past according to the political-ideological space and purposes of the present. As a consequence of this process, the network of the temporal horizon of the new society is altered, so that, in the end, the reconstruction of history always begins and ends with demythologization and remythologization.

The process of nationalization seeks to place this re-constructed history in a broader political and ideological context and to create myths of origins that can justify and ground post-socialist societies in their own existence. These origin myths represent the origins of the nation, mythologize socio-cultural concepts of social order, and play a role in outlining the cultural horizon of the new social order.

The myth of national origins uses stories of ancestral people and ancestral homelands, and aims at a fictional continuity in which national self-esteem becomes intense and solid. National identity thus becomes a function of historical consciousness, and this consciousness is reproduced and can be politically

instrumentalized at any time. The myth of social origins is also an essential element in the political space: by emblematizing certain culturally defined categories of social history, these categories can be given political content. In post-socialist countries, this is typically the case with the category of citizenship, where the myth also incorporates the horizon of political ancestry and seeks to legitimize the future social/political order through continuity. The focal point of cultural myths of origins is the authenticity and continuity of archaic culture; from this they construct the set of symbols and rites of cultural heritage to which national identity is represented. The mythical image of ancient culture transforms the nation into a homogeneous community, thus locating the national normative system in the historical past and, from the vision of a unified culture, unifying political and social goals.

Niedermüller considers the question of narrative abbreviations to be particularly important in the discussion of national discourse. Abbreviations are stories embedded in language that appear in the process of communication not as stories to be told, but as recorded interpretations that have already been told. These fixed schemas refer to events central to the understanding of the past of a given period, i.e., they are based on selection. Such narrative abbreviations can be names of prominent places (e.g., Trianon, Pilis), dates (e.g., 1956), concepts, or persons (e.g., Horthy), which are given plausible content by the national discourse. National abbreviations are thus (ideologically motivated) "invocations" that contain pre-recorded and interpreted histories that can elicit strong political or cultural emotional responses and that reflect upon themselves as exclusive representations.

The actors in political and social life all seek to assert their own abbreviations and thus mobilize social groups politically, which is why the representation of history in post-socialist countries often takes on a political color in which the boundaries between the present and the past are blurred. The abbreviations created within the same interpretative framework are linked together to present a coherent historical picture, which is then presented by politics as "national memory." This national memory is in any case identity-forming, and the metaphors and contents it contains precisely articulate the self-image of the nation for itself and others, and appear as symbolic constructs that represent the substance of the nation.

In Niedermüller's argument, in the case of the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe, this national discourse has become the focus of political space, and in this context, "real" history represents continuity and freedom, while "falsified" history represents discontinuity and historical deadlock. The resulting "us-versus-them" (or "own–foreign") division is saturated with real political content in Eastern Europe; the own group is represented by the "national" middle class, aristocracy, or peasantry, the "foreign" group by communists, Russians, Jews, or, more recently, the Brussels bureaucrats.

Community hysteria and transgenerational history

The multi-level approach to the above ideas is perhaps most aptly illustrated in the argument of István Bibó,[37] who claims that the historical memories of the presence of foreign power and the nationalist reaction against it in Eastern Europe have led

to a juxtaposition of the concepts of democracy and nationalism. The advantage of the social order of the Western states now seemed impregnable and, more importantly, the attempts to overcome the disadvantage were left with no other option than to assert a system of cultural symbols. The key to the harmonious development of nations is the balance between democratism and nationalism, the disruption of which can lead to serious disruption. One such disturbance or consequence is the state of fear for existence, or the politicization of culture, or the apt term applied to social processes, community hysteria.

Bibó stresses that community hysteria is passed on from generation to generation, with another generation experiencing the experience, another evaluating it, and finally a new generation reacting hysterically. As far as the analysis of the domestic situation is concerned, the elements of Hungarian hysteria include, in particular, the selective processing of information, unrealistic territorial attachment, the fixation and the development of a state of fear resulting from the uncertainty of national frames, and the presence of strong ambivalent feelings of self-blame and self-aggrandizement. According to Bibó, in order to understand the community character, it is necessary to research and keep track of the political and ideological constructions in which the shocks, situations, and demands of the given social environment were formulated, interpreted, and objectified.

The question to what extent we can consider this conceptual proposition as an explanatory model is well answered by the results of the above-mentioned narrative social psychology research series, but also by the data on collective victimhood in the international literature.[38]

Historical losses and theories of collective trauma

The theme of historical experiences of loss also requires a discussion of psychological theories of trauma as explanatory models. Theorists dealing with collective trauma[39] focus on the similarities and differences between individual and collective trauma, reflecting on the fact that collective trauma seeps into the community more imperceptibly and can persist across generations. Emphasizing the category of national trauma, Erős[40] discusses how the persistent and fundamental existential threat that has a strong negative impact on the identity of several generations is manifested. The lack of narrative (narrativity) resulting from an event's destructiveness leads to a stalling of the processing process; the traumatic experience is repeated in a compelling way, without being given a form of representation. After a trauma has been reflected in social discourses, the narratives created by the group become embedded in the collective memory of the nation over time, and thus the study of these narratives provides an opportunity to understand the state of identity.

The concept of identity prosthesis, introduced by Iván Lust in the context of adolescent identity issues, may offer another interesting perspective on the process and mechanisms of trauma and stuckness. The concept builds on the argument that the state of arousal that accompanies trauma hinders the integration and linguistic processing of the experience. The user of the prosthesis is struggling with some

developmental process, which is why he or she builds the prosthetic image. The lack of reflection of the traumatic experience replaces the "missing internal symbolism" with a narrative (whether political views, ideologies) or consumer goods (e.g., current fashions) mediated by the culture, and thus offers the opportunity for the individual, who is stuck at a certain developmental level, to integrate into some kind of normality, a contemporary group, the wider culture. Such "conventional behaviour and social roles based on a traumatic past may include, for example, political activism with its symbols, ideology and rituals, or adoration of pop music bands, sportsmen, religious or political leaders."[41] The use of the identity prosthesis can have benefits in terms of facilitating the development of adult identity and mediating between intra-psychic processes and socio-political-economic processes. At the same time, by increasing integration, it can become a permanent feature and a carrier of certain character traits, thus creating an additional barrier to personal development.

If we extend the theory of identity prostheses to the role of historical losses in the self-definition of a group, we can assume that these national traumas occupy a central role in the transmission medium which may hinder the processing of events, and that different identity prostheses may emerge as a result of the blockage. In the case of the groups studied, perhaps such a prosthesis can be identified as a specific religious interpretation of national identity, in the course of which transcendent, explanatory elements are substituted for processing.

If we apply this model to neo-pagan organizations, we can say that the stagnation in the processing of national losses finds in the religious substitute the prosthesis necessary for the affirmation of identity. The construction of the prosthesis constitutes an interpretative framework whose elements are very close to the criteria formulated by Bibó (sacral origin of the nation, polemical representations of historical events, the threat of oppression from external groups in terms of historical losses, political content, and ambivalent feelings about the nation).

Summary

What can we conclude about the past 30 years of Hungarian neo-paganism? For the groups that emerged among the reconstructionist tendencies in the post-change of regime religious turbulence, the most important sustaining force is national identity. In this self-definition, there is a strong sacral-ethnic origin content, a textual and tendentious sense of threat and victimization, which emphasizes the perpetrators of external foreign powers. Victimization is of a competitive type, with a low level of psychological elaboration of historical experiences.

This is probably explained by the geographical and historical antecedents and the social processes that followed. The East-Central European states, the experience of being wedged between empires, the delayed national development, and later Soviet repression appear as givens in late 20th-century Hungarian society. And the socio-political processes after the regime change, the narrative mechanisms of collective identity construction, and the transgenerational transmission of

collective grievances make not only Hungary but in fact the entire region a state of woundedness. A striking example of this is local neo-paganism, in which the "pathologies" of national identity are manifested in a highly characteristic way.

New(er) trends

Although the narrative research on Hungarian neo-paganism was completed in 2016, and in the last few years it seems that some of the Hungarian táltos/shamanic discourses and groups are becoming less and less exclusionary, there are also more and more broad references to tribal religious traditions of other cultures (e.g., North American shamans). For example, since 2015, the annual Sun Deer festival has been held, with a number of international invited speakers from Latin America to India giving lectures and ceremonies. It can also be seen that neo-pagan groups attending other spiritual events and festivals no longer necessarily see the ancient Hungarian traditions as the only and truest religion, but imagine them as an entity that is organically linked to the archaic flow of the world's natural peoples and religions. There are fewer and fewer references to national and linguistic origins, and more and more references to natural religion.

The reasons for this opening up are manifold, but the fact that, following the collapse of the socialist system, the need to redefine national identity has faded over time, and that in Hungary political and national discourse has increasingly found and continues to find its reference in Christianity, has become increasingly pointless. However, this does not mean that we should stop interpreting and understanding the social and collective psychological processes of the past decades. As far as the national, religious, and political context after the regime change is concerned, the theoretical and practical considerations outlined above may all be relevant for the collective identity of the Hungarian neo-paganry and, by extension, of society as a whole.

Moreover, contemporary paganism ultimately runs parallel to the religious trends that characterize non-churched, non-institutionalized religiosity as a whole. These trends increasingly show the incorporation and religious thematization of self-awareness themes, bodily-mental healing, the inclusion of environmental and climate considerations, and the incorporation of communal rituals, ceremonies, and initiatory experiences. Perhaps the teachings of the spiritual leaders of contemporary pagan movements reach a faithful population driven by curiosity for archaic knowledge and wisdom and a desire to return to religious roots in the technological and ideological confusion of the post- or metamodern world.

Notes

1 This is based on the author's previous works: Tamás Szilágyi, Réka Szilárdi, *Istenek ébredése. A neopogányság vallástudományi vizsgálata* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2007); Réka Szilárdi, "A magyar kortárs pogány narratívumok nemzeti identitáskonstrukciói," in Povedák István and Szilárdi Réka (eds.), *Sámán sámán hátán. A kortárs pogányság multidiszciplináris vizsgálata* (Szeged: SZTE BTK Néprajzi és Kulturális Antropológiai

Tanszék, 2014), pp. 11–24; Réka Szilárdi, *Az újpogány vallási diskurzus narratív mintázatai* (Budapest: L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017) – see there for detailed references. The chapter was produced with the support of the HUN-REN-SZTE "Convivence" Religious Pluralism Research Group.

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Part 3

Culture, gender, and history textbooks

10 Representations of post-communist illiberalism in *Coyote*

Civic values in an illiberal state?

György Kalmár

Introduction: Three notes on social values and the importance of media studies for understanding them

Social values are not simply abstract concepts or lofty ideals of human behavior that people profess. Though they often appear in ideological statements, as in political speeches and journalism, they cannot be reduced merely to ideas (ἰδέα) or linguistic utterances, words, and discourse (λόγος). Values are always lived, practised, materialized, ritualized, and mediatized, and can only be understood through these processes.

First, values are as much practised as they are believed. Our values appear in the ways we do what we do, and not only in the spectacular examples of high dramatic value, as in the "to be or not to be" situations that literature and film cherish so much: they may shape the tiniest and most ordinary of our actions. They not only manifest how we resolve our conflicts (whether we do that peacefully or violently, in ethical or unethical ways), but also how we engage in seemingly ordinary practices, such as having coffee in the morning (whether we do that together or alone), our means of daily transport (whether we cycle, drive, or take public transport), or our eating habits (whether we cook or order food, whether we eat in front of the TV or around a table, whether we share food or not). As Michel de Certeau demonstrates in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, exploring these material practices is essential to our understanding of any given society, individual, socio-cultural formation, or system of value and power.[1]

Second, values are not necessarily transparent to those who practise them. I may be aware of the ethical considerations and value judgments behind my choice of cycling to work, but I am certainly not aware of the values behind a myriad of tiny things that I do every day. If one accepts the premise that value systems are inscribed in larger cultural systems, that values are part of culture, understood as a whole way of life,[2] then it becomes obvious that value judgments, whether we are aware of them or not, are part of everything we do, from our daily routines of bodily hygiene to our behaviors as parents or spouses. These are mostly learned unconsciously, picked up from our parents and peers during one's process of socialization, together with everything else that we call culture. These large cultural systems, including our value systems, if one is to believe the basic lesson

learned from structuralism and semiotics, are coded in the invisible, non-material structures underlying human action, from political and institutional structures to those of kinship and narrative.

Thirdly, and finally, values tend to be ritualized and mediatized. It is enough to think of Clifford Geertz's "thick" description of Balinese cockfights, or Roland Barthes' analysis of the image of a black soldier saluting the French tricolor to realize that our value systems are usually encoded in complex rituals. These anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies suggest that communities and their shared beliefs and values are usually practised, maintained, and expressed in well-regulated rituals: from family rituals (like the Sunday meal), to religious rituals (such as baptism or circumcision), to national ones (such as the typical Independence Day celebrations in the US, or the customary military parade to commemorate Victory Day in Russia), or media rituals (watching one's favorite TV show together with family or friends, going to the movies on Saturdays, or watching football at Thanksgiving).

Media products play a crucial and complex role in all the above-mentioned aspects of the materialization of cultural values. Films, for example, can depict whole life worlds in detail, including the kinds of material practices discussed by Certeau, or behavior patterns of deep symbolic significance such as the ones analyzed by Barthes in *Mythologies*. The underlying structure of different genres, or the narrative patterns and character types seen in films, can reveal deeply held, but often unacknowledged views and value judgments.

Coyote and the state of insecurity in real-existing capitalism

If one wishes to understand post-communist illiberal Hungary of the 2010s through cinematic representations, *Coyote* (*Kojot*, Márk Kostyál, 2017) is one of the best films to start with. It captures the kind of post-communist disillusionment and resentment that drives so many voters to Orbán's illiberal populist party, it depicts the backwards, autocratic, and corrupt social formations that thrive under 21st-century illiberalism, and through the conflicts of its protagonist it encourages its spectator to think critically about the kinds of life choices one can make, the state of civic values in Hungary, and the possibilities for individual action under such social and political conditions. *Coyote* tells the story of Miklós Bicsérdi (usually called Misi), a young man in his thirties, living in contemporary Hungary, who one day inherits his grandfather's old, rural house with a little piece of land. Misi has a seemingly decent life in Budapest, he is married and works at a bank, yet he finds his life unsatisfying and frustrating. So he decides to accept his patriarchal heritage and renovate the shabby and smelly house, hoping to escape from his problems and start anew. However, life in the village of Tűzkő (literally: Firestone) proves to be more challenging than he expected, as the local oligarch is trying to get all the land in the valley for the sake of a shady business venture with a Swedish company. For the first time in his life, Misi decides to stand up for himself and protect his property, but the ensuing conflicts prove to be costly, endangering not only his physical health, but also his relationship with his spouse, Eszter.

The story of the production and distribution of *Coyote*, also referred to as "the Coyote-affair" in Hungarian media, is as telling as its narrative or symbolism. The film was supported by the Hungarian government's National Film Fund (Nemzeti Filmalap), led at the time by Andy Vajna, the Hungarian-born former Hollywood producer. Though Vajna was personally appointed by prime minister Viktor Orbán, the films made under his leadership between 2011 and 2019 were much more liberal in their stylistic or ideological approaches than most of the cultural industries under the increasingly illiberal, populist, and authoritarian Orbán governments. Vajna initiated the tax incentives that made Hungary the European center of big-budget American filmmaking, and he tried to bring the kind of technical professionalism that he had learned in Hollywood into the Hungarian filmmaking scene. It seems that his personal reputation and friendship with Viktor Orbán, as well as his international renown as a producer protected him from the regime's blood-thirsty propagandists, those third-rate (semi-)intellectuals that led an ideologically based, well-coordinated media campaign against him and his producers in 2018 for not producing enough patriotic content. And although Vajna and the National Film Fund was also often criticized by liberals too, such outstanding films of this era as the Oscar-winning Holocaust drama *Son of Saul* (László Nemes, 2015), the Golden Bear winner romantic drama *Of Body and Soul* (Enyedi Ildikó, 2017), the drama of a gay footballer in rural Hungary, *Land of Storms* (Ádám Császi, 2014), and such emphatic accounts of international migration as *Jupiter's Moon* (Kornél Mundruczó, 2017) and *The Citizen* (Roland Vranik, 2016) are not aligned at all with the official ideological doctrines of the Hungarian political establishment.[3]

In line with the three-stage script development program, the Fund assigned two of its staff members to help Kostyál with the writing of *Coyote'*s script. The interviews given by director-screenwriter Kostyál Márk suggest that this institutional help (or intervention) had no ideological edge to it, but rather aimed at technical perfection, that is, to align the script with the rules of screenwriting as practised in American genre cinema. According to insiders' accounts of the filmmaking process, director Kostyál and Vajna had only one dispute, about one of the final shots of the film, where the corn-field on Misi's land (now sold to the Swedish investors) is dry and dead, which Vajna found too pessimistic and perhaps too ideologically problematic. According to these insiders' accounts, Vajna threatened Kostyál that if he did not remove the problematic shot, he would never make another film while Vajna was alive, but Kostyál still refused to do so. Perhaps it was due to this incident and the last-minute political blacklisting of the film that led to its miserable distribution. *Coyote*, in spite of obvious financial interest of the distribution company (Megafilm), was not properly advertised, was shown in only 22 cinemas in Hungary, and was suddenly removed from even these cinemas. Moreover, its nomination to the annual Film Week (the most important Hungarian film festival at the time) was also withdrawn by its distributor. Later, the head of Megafilm, Gábor Kálomista, who was also one of the film's producers, seemed to change his mind, and the film was shared on YouTube, and was made available to cinemas again.

Coyote is a film with several layers of meaning. It can be regarded as a coming-of-age story, as a critical evaluation of the social conditions of post-communist illiberal Hungary, as a commentary on the possible problems of 21st-century masculinities, and it can also be described as a narrative experiment testing the viability of various conducts of behavior as well as their underlying social models and value systems. Though such a cluster of complex themes is usually associated with art-house cinema, *Coyote* appropriates a whole set of patterns from genre cinema, mostly the Western and the action film, in order to handle the material. These genres also influenced the film language and the ways psychological, social, or political situations are explored: in the film these issues are depicted through bodies, spaces, landscapes, physical action, and potent visual symbols.

With this generic twist, *Coyote* not only appropriates the cinematic mythology of the Western for the exploration of East European social anomie, but (as importantly) also combines the seemingly distant approaches of arthouse cinema (and its social criticism) with genre cinema (and its visual pleasures). The resulting midcult film is thus built on a cinematic paradox, a combination of seemingly different trends, which can be recognized as one of the key characteristic features of the cultural policies of the illiberal Orbán governments. In the hands of director Márk Kostyál, these generic choices seem to work surprisingly well. The theme of a solitary male hero standing up against a corrupt local landlord, the spatial figurations of the lawless frontier, the mythology of resilient, heroic masculinity and individualism, or explorations of moral standards and social values through a narrative of violent action are such well-established parts of the Western genre that can be easily applied to the world of post-communist illiberal capitalism.[4] Furthermore, the film proves that the classical American Western's combination of social allegory with spectacular action and amazing landscapes can be easily appropriated to depict the East European borderlands, the EU's Eastern frontier, in order to explore some of the key questions of our times.

The film's opening scenes quickly introduce the spectator to the harsh realities of East European "real-existing capitalism." I am using this phrase to allude to "real-existing socialism," a phrase often used in the state-socialist regime before 1989, so as to distinguish (often ironically or sarcastically) the admittedly less than ideal conditions under state-socialism from the idealistic pictures painted by Marxist-Leninist ideology. Thus, in a similar manner, I use the expression "real-existing capitalism" to distinguish the admittedly less than ideal conditions under post-1989 East European capitalism from the idealistic fantasies about the West that the region's population tended to have before the collapse of the Soviet bloc. "Real-existing capitalism" as a term thus marks a crucial (and often painful) difference between political fantasy and lived experience, between the professed ideals of neoliberal capitalism and its actual local manifestations, and therefore encapsulates the sense of disappointment and disenchantment so characteristic of the former Soviet bloc countries. As I will elaborate later in more detail, the disappointment that many East Europeans have experienced when real-existing neoliberal venture-capitalism was unleashed in a region already suffering from political and ideological disenchantment clearly contributed to the decline of public

trust and civic values, as well as to the rise of paternalistic illiberal regimes.[5] The fact that in *Coyote* the local oligarch is trying to get all the land in the valley in order to sell it to a Swedish investor is a telling example of the sad demise of civic values in Hungary, where Western venture capitalists did as much to erode civic values as their shady local business partners.

The film's introductory scenes take the spectator to this land of lawless and ruthless pursuit of material gains, to a land where idealism, moral behavior, or civic solidarity have all been forgotten, bracketed, and put on the ever-increasing list of painful collateral losses. In this introduction to the Eastern frontier, we see a society that only pretends to care about civic values or the law, while its inhabitants ruthlessly pursue individual goals and profit. The village of Tűzkő is an allegorical place, in which it is hard not to recognize the East European kind of nepotistic nationalist capitalism built by the consecutive Orbán governments. As one of the characters exclaims during the last fistfight, "This is not Europe, it has never been. Everybody is just pretending." It is a land not ruled by law, but by local oligarchs who control everything, including the mayor and the village administration (so that Misi cannot get a building permit from the mayor's office), the local businesses (Misi cannot get building materials from the local store), and the police who plainly refuse to protect ordinary citizens against the mafia-like landowners. The painful irony hardly escapes the Hungarian spectator, when the "civil guard" of the village turn out to be a bunch of thugs working for the local oligarch (Szojka): the so-called civil guard are made up of aggressive bullies, who never had any idea of what civil society is, what civic values are, and regularly beat up the civilians they were meant to guard. The film's representation of abusers cynically posing as protectors is a familiar image for most critiques of post-communist illiberal regimes,[6] most expressive of the Stockholm-syndrome-like situation in which the local population is kept by paternalistic leaders.

According to *Coyote*, however, this kind of post-communist social anomie is characteristic not only of the backward countryside. Though the local oligarchs of Tűzkő often resort to physical violence, they bend the law and use the corrupt local police, while at Misi's bank in Budapest all the employees are properly dressed and polite, both deprive whole families of their homes for the sake of profit. The difference between the first bloody action sequence (when a family is forcefully evicted in Tűzkő) and the later introduction of Misi's job at the bank are different only in their environment, their styles, and manners: essentially, they depict the same cynical pretended adherence to the letter of the law, while pursuing profit in clearly immoral ways. This picture of faking certain civic values such as respect for individual rights, equality in front of the law, or what Sabrina Ramet calls the harm principle,[7] is much in line with the evaluation of Ivan Krastev, who once remarked that most post-communist elites "found faking democracy perfectly natural since they had been faking communism for at least two decades before 1991."[8] According to Krastev, this attitude of double think includes a self-reflexive, ironic, or even cynical act of playing according to the script of dominant powers (here, that of the European Union), while secretly disrespecting or even despising it, and corrupting it at every turn.

The land depicted by *Coyote* is barren in this metaphorical sense: it lacks such basic ingredients of democratic societies as trust, solidarity, or shared belief in civic values, which are only imitated cynically. What Western accounts are often missing from this peculiar Eastern European imitation game is the set of traumatic local historical memories of disappointing situations in which the West did not live up to its own professed values to its East European citizens.[9] In Hungarian cultural memory one such example revolves around 1956, when the West did not help the uprising against the Soviets, and did not intervene when it was ruthlessly crushed. Another similar, more recent example is the way privatization after the 1989 fall of the Soviet empire made Hungary vulnerable to venture capitalists from the West, who often bought factories only to close them down and thus get rid of potential competition. In *White but not quite*, Ivan Kalmar also points out the importance of this post-communist disillusionment with Western politics in driving the region away from liberal values toward illiberalism. According to Kalmar, the eastern extension of the European Union was mostly motivated by the logic of capitalism "to create groups and regions destined to provide cheap labour and to become a captive market for goods,"[10] which was experienced as a disappointment on the part of the local populations, who believed liberals (East and West) and imagined that their transition from communism to market capitalism and their "return to Europe" (as it was called at the time in Hungary) would mean being accepted as equals and sharing the same white privilege as the West Europeans.[11] According to Kalmar "such was never meant to be the case,"[12] which greatly contributed to the loss of credibility of the liberal narrative, and effectively killed off liberal parties in Hungary. This process is well demonstrated by the shrinking popularity of Hungary's most important liberal party, Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége (Free Democrats' Association), which was the second most popular party in the country's first free elections in 1990, gaining 21% of the votes, but lost most of its support during the disappointing first decade of early capitalism, gradually shrinking to 5% by 2002, and then completely disappearing.

The weakness of civic values in post-communist Hungary, and the bleak social imaginary of *Coyote* can be understood only in this historical context. Indeed, as Krastev argues, "populism's political rise cannot be explained without taking account of widespread resentment at the way (imposed) no-alternative Soviet communism, after 1989, was replaced by (invited) no-alternative Western liberalism."[13] Without this historical context, one has little chance of understanding the decline of liberalism and civic values in the region. As Krastev notes,

> in the first years after 1989, liberalism was generally associated with the ideals of individual opportunity, freedom to move and to travel, unpunished dissent, access to justice, and government responsiveness to public demands. By 2010 the Central and East European versions of liberalism had been indelibly tainted by two decades of rising social inequality, pervasive corruption, and the morally arbitrary redistribution of public property into the hands of a few. The economic crisis of 2008 had bred a deep distrust of business elites and the casino capitalism that, writ large, almost destroyed the world financial order. Liberalism's reputation in the region never recovered from 2008.[14]

Coyote's opening sequence references this state of insecurity and disillusionment, which is both the result and the cause of the present state of the region, and thus functions as an important starting point for both Misi's psychological changes (remasculinization) and the film's critique of post-communist illiberal capitalism. It describes a world in which ordinary citizens are constantly in danger of being exploited and abused by the more powerful. While the motif of disillusionment connects the narrative with the post-communist crisis of grand narratives and the ensuing crisis of social values, the scenes of violence, dispossession, and humiliation which are depicted evoke the 21st-century state of insecurity. The precarious life portrayed by *Coyote* may seem familiar for both East European and Western audiences: since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which may be taken as a symbolic historical turning point, governments as well as academics and public intellectuals tend to define the new historical period as a "state of crisis"[15] or "state of insecurity,"[16] where human life is once again seen as precarious and in need of protection.[17] Be it terrorist threat, climate catastrophe, unregulated neoliberal capitalism, the greediness of banks, a pandemic, the decline of liberal democracy, or war, human life is constantly perceived as in danger, threatened, vulnerable. The opening scenes of *Coyote*, therefore, may not only remind the viewer of post-communist jungle capitalism or the twisted and uneasy alliance of neoliberal capitalism and illiberal neoconservatism in post-2010 Hungary, but also recall the war on terror, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the 2007–2008 global economic crisis, the American housing crisis (when thousands of Americans lost their homes), or the heated debates over the limitation of personal rights in the name of a health crisis during the COVID pandemic. According to Isabell Lorey, "precarization is not an exception, it is rather the rule. It is spreading even to those areas that were long considered secure. It has become an instrument of governing and, at the same time, a basis for capitalist accumulation that services social regulation and control."[18] In the light of Lorey's conceptualization of 21st-century precarity, one is invited to see

> 'precarization' as a process that produces not only subjects, but also 'insecurity' as the central preoccupation of the subject. This particular form of power lays the groundwork for establishing the need for security as the ultimate political ideal, one that works to amass power within the state and corporate institutions at the same time that it produces a new kind of subject. In the place of critique and resistance, populations are now defined by their need to be alleviated from insecurity, valorizing forms of police and state control.[19]

In this sense, the main difference between the American situation and the East European one that *Coyote* depicts lies not so much in this sense of precariousness and insecurity, but rather in the ideological and political responses given to that experience. One of the defining characteristics of the consecutive Orbán governments after 2010 has been the rhetoric of war, and a political ideology that sees the nation as always under threat and in need of defense. Besides the usual suspects well known in the West as well (such as illegal immigration, greedy

banks, or terrorism), the Orbán governments' political communication also created a whole set of other dangerous enemies, such as liberals, NGOs, György Soros and his organizations, "the gender lobby," EU bureaucrats, or simply "Brussels," all conspiring to undermine the sovereignty, traditions, religious faith, and moral backbone of the Hungarian nation. In a manner very similar to Vladimir Putin's self-portrayal as the last bastion of conservative values against a militantly secular global elite,[20] the political ads overflowing all media outlets in present-day Hungary present Viktor Orbán, his Fidesz party, and the strong state they have built as messianistic protectors of the Hungarian people, their traditional values, and ways of life.[21]

Needless to say, in this neoconservative conceptualization of the threatened national community, the nation is not imagined in civic terms, as in most Western democracies, as a community of people of various ethnic backgrounds and identities with certain shared values and principles, a community based on democratic participation in common political institutions. In illiberal neoconservative discourse, the nation is rather imagined in ethnic terms, as a community of people bound together by their shared ethnic, cultural, linguistic, historical, and religious heritage.[22] In this political imaginary the answer to a state of crisis or insecurity is not more civic values, not more solidarity, compassion, care, or voluntary help, but rather the production of enemies to fight, a strict regime of antagonistic in- and outgroups, a militant habit of scapegoating Others, the (almost religious) cult of the supreme leader, and the decline of individual political and ethical responsibility, including, ironically, the decline of Christian values of love and compassion.[23]

The Eastern European frontier

The way *Coyote* employs the iconography and cultural mythology of the Western is most revealing of the state of social values in post-communist illiberal Hungary. In *Coyote*, rural Hungary is presented as a lawless frontier, where politically well-connected local landlords exercise the powers that are supposed to be practised by the state in modern-day democracies. This looks like a "mafia-state"[24] in which it takes a hero to stand up against the new tyrants and their moral corruption. The genre of the Western seems a perfect fit for narrating such a conflict of individual heroes and greedy criminals in this kind of social setting where law and order are easily corrupted.

Director-screenwriter Márk Kostyál's idea to evoke the genre of the Western may seem surprising for some spectators; yet *Coyote* is far from being the only film attempting to appropriate the Western's generic conventions to the Eastern context. According to Piotr Skurowski, for example, "the myth of the 'Wild East'" is a defining characteristic of Polish identity,[25] and Poland's eastern and western frontiers (the so-called "Kresy" and the so-called "Recovered Territories") have often appeared in Polish films in ways that evoke the Western, so as to depict the conflict between righteousness and corruption, law and lawlessness, heroes and villains in stories of individual male heroism. Skurowski's most notable example, Skórzewski's *The Law and the Fist* (*Prawo i pięść*, 1964), similarly to *Coyote*,

also tells about the action-packed conflict between an individual hero and a gang of criminals who try to steal people's land during a period of socio-political trans-formation.[26] More recent examples, such as Piotr Mularuk's *Yuma* (2012), reveal that the familiar tropes of the Western are employed in Poland too so as to depict the criminality and other social issues brought about by post-communist capit-alism.[27] Other notable examples outside the Polish context are the Hungarian *Kút* (*Well*, Attila Gigor, 2016) or the Romanian-Bulgarian *Caini* (*Dogs*, Bogdan Mirica, 2016).[28]

The Western, therefore, as well as its eastern appropriations, the so-called "Easterns"[29] can be regarded as genres with a potentially allegorical edge: the small town where the action takes place may stand for society in general, the clash of virtue and crime can be seen as an exploration of social values at times of crisis, the frontier situation (and the role of spectacular landscapes that frame human action) may refer to the larger-than-human (metaphysical, religious, pastoral, or even eco-logical) frameworks of understanding; thus these seemingly simple films can also often be interpreted as exercises in social theory in the wolf-skin of "violent, kin-etic spectacle."[30] In the case of *Coyote*, the main question explored concerns the possible choices of a man, who finds himself dispossessed, emasculated, and mor-ally corrupted by a socio-political formation that does not respect traditional civic values, but exploits ordinary citizens so as to serve the interest of the powerful. The paradox of this situation lies in the fact that the heroic individualism and vio-lent action that these films typically present as a (last, bitter) solution to social problems, can be regarded as the result of the decline of civic values; however, the fact that the films present these as possible, veritable solutions may also further contribute to that decline.

Coyote's engagement with the genre of the Western (and the "Eastern") and its social implications become clearer when compared to classic Westerns. The film that seems to have had the most influence on *Coyote* is *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1954). This formative classic of the genre tells the story of a small town marshal, Will Kane (Gary Cooper), who is just about to retire in order to start a peaceful new life with his young wife (Grace Kelly), when he learns that Frank Miller, the criminal he once arrested for murder, is returning to town with the noon train, together with his gang, in order to take revenge and take back the town. Kane and Misi face similar dilemmas with serious social, political, and eth-ical consequences: should they face and fight the criminals, risking everything they have, or flee as cowards? This choice is already spelled out by the theme song of *High Noon*, played first at the opening sequence of the film; thus, the moral, social, and political stakes of the action are made clear from the very beginning. Besides this conflict between outlaws and an individual hero, the motifs of heritage and legacy also connect the two films: in *High Noon* it is Kane's past work of clearing the town of criminals that induces him to stay, in order to preserve his legacy, while in *Coyote* it is the grandfather's legacy (his property and tough, traditional mascu-linity) that induces the protagonist to stay and stand up for his rights.

The small settlements are allegorical places in both films, where different social dynamisms, behavior patterns, and value systems can be tested. Both films are

explorations of social philosophy, political theory, and ethics, wrapped up in gen-eric clichés. Most of the screen time of *High Noon* is not taken up by gunfights or fist-fights, but by psychological drama, pondering over moral dilemmas and personal choices that affect the life and future of a whole town and all those living in it. The local judge, who decides to flee from town, refers to the situation as "a lesson in civics," a lesson that calls attention to the general corruptibility of social order due to human weakness, selfishness, and cowardice. When the Judge refers to historical examples in which citizens abandoned and betrayed their past saviors and welcomed tyrants and criminals because of fear or hope of financial gains, it is not only Kane's idealism that is shaken: 21st-century spectators, including many Hungarians, may recognize this lesson as timely and valid, an apt metaphor for their present social problems. Misi's conversation with local townspeople, such as the secretary working for the corrupt major, echo Kane's conversations with the men of the town, all of whom have their own reasons for not helping him in his fight. Time and again, the protagonists are encouraged to leave the place and the conflicts: "This is a dirty little village in the middle of nowhere. Just get out!" says the judge to Kane, and his words are repeated by several characters in *Coyote*, advising Misi not to risk his life for the little piece of land and the shabby house. Both films suggest that, on the frontiers (or margins) of civilization and democracy, the law and pro-social values are fragile, always easily corrupted, local communi-ties easily become complicit, and the protection of these values is hopeless without heroic action. It is always easier to run, as the Judge or the saloon owner Helen Ramirez do in *High Noon*, or Misi's father does in *Coyote*, or as the hundreds of thousands of young Hungarians did who left Hungary since the country's illiberal turn.[31] Such spatial movements, as Andrea Vrirginás also points out, are highly symbolic in these Westerns and Eastern European "pseudo-Westerns," where not leaving means staying in touch with one's heritage, and putting up a fight "in a world defined by small-town bullies"[32] means refusing to give over one's heritage to small-time criminals.

Thus, *Coyote* can also be regarded as a 21st-century East European "remake" of *High Noon*: it follows the same basic concept of exploring social issues within an entertaining and popular generic pattern, it revolves around the same dilemmas, such as the decline of civic values in frontier situations, the chances of social solidarity in a place overtaken by bullies, or the role of individual heroism and heroic masculinity when basic rights and dignity are endangered. These issues often appear in both films, and indeed many Westerns and "Easterns," as a conflict between private happiness (understood in both films as heterosexual romance) and public or moral duty. Both Kane's newly wed wife and Misi's partner Eszter try their best to take their men away from danger and confrontation, and they fail in both films. Furthermore, both women leave their partners for a while, not being ready to face the damage the conflict may cause to their loved ones; yet both return in the end to stand by them in the final scenes.

It is noteworthy that both films end with spectacular showdowns (gunfight in *High Noon* and fistfights in *Coyote*), that bring about the demise of the main villain in each case. In *High Noon*, Kane, with the help of his wife, Amy, kills

all the bandits, while in *Coyote*, Szojka Senior gets killed by the bull that he wanted to use to threaten Misi. These events never appear in these films as victories: during the conflicts the protagonists lose their faith in the social values for which they had fought, and they also lose faith in the communities that they rid of their tyrannical bullies. Kane throws his badge in the dust before getting on the carriage with Amy to leave the "dirty little village in the middle of nowhere," and Misi decides to sell his heritage to the Swedish company and move back to Budapest with Eszter. These is a sense of disappointment and disillusionment in both films: though the protagonists fought hard, and the main villains are gone, the two settlements and their communities seem hopeless and beyond salvation. In the last scenes of *Coyote* the corn-field next to Misi's demolished house is dead, and the valley he leaves to the Swedish investors to build their factory in seems doomed.

There is one more interest that these two films share: formations of masculinity, and the behavior patterns and social values with which these are associated. Both Kane and Misi have to choose between two kinds of masculinities, a more urban, more civilized, more domesticated, and less violent type (encouraged by their spouses and much of their social environment), and a more traditional, tough, uncompromising, violent, and potentially heroic one, which they nevertheless feel obliged to adopt, at least for a time. Both films suggest that these men have to identify with the latter model, go through a rough period like a rite of passage, where they face their outer enemies and inner demons, before they are ready to choose the first, more civilized masculinity, urban lifestyle, heterosexual romance, and family life.

Illiberal masculinities

The foregoing examples call attention to the ways various constructions of masculinity are used to carry out social criticism in certain specific cinematic traditions. This is especially prevalent in such relatively conservative cinematic contexts as that of the classic Western or Hungarian cinema in general, where public affairs, power struggles, and social issues are more often played out as conflicts between different kinds of men.[33] Generally speaking, gender can be regarded as one of the cultural constructs (or systems of meaning) where social values are inscribed, materialized and literally embodied. *Coyote* can be regarded as a cinematic experiment with different personal and social responses to the experience of post-communist precarity, and the film's explorations of various social values and behavior types are also represented in terms of gender. In *Coyote*, the protagonist's decision to break away from his urban life and embrace his rural, patriarchal heritage is triggered by a set of crisis situations that he interprets as a crisis of his masculinity: Misi finds his job morally compromising, he is regularly overcome by women at the Judo training, he is verbally abused by a motorcyclist while caught in the traffic jam, and his wife even suffers a miscarriage. Thus, when his grandfather's will states that he inherits the old house and land in order to get a chance to "finally develop balls," he says yes. This yes, of course, is not only an

acceptance of the property, but also the acceptance of a well-definable mythology of traditional masculinity and individual dignity, according to which being a man entails owning a house and land, protecting one's property, having self-respect, zero tolerance for abuse and humiliation, and "developing balls," that is, being always ready to put up a fight for one's rights, property, or a woman.

As the foregoing analysis of the film's appropriation of the Western has also demonstrated, social crisis situations, or even times of accelerated historical change, often pose questions regarding existing norms about gender, which cinematic narratives readily explore. The emerging questions about normative masculinity often appear in such action-oriented genres as the Western or the action film. One could argue that *Coyote* offers an exploration of masculinities in the face of the precariousness presented by 20th-century post-communist illiberalism, as *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, Clint Eastwood, 1971) did in the face of 1970s urban crime, or as *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) did in that of late 20th-century American consumerism.

The relatively more conservative cinema cultures of Eastern Europe tend to favor stories about men; therefore male figures also tend to stand for the community or the nation in general.[34] In *Coyote*, Misi's problems can be read on both levels, as a general critique of the conditions on Europe's eastern frontiers, and as a more specific cinematic exploration of the crisis of masculinity under post-communist illiberalism. Here, as before, the individual narrative of frustration and violent overcompensation may have allegorical overtones, commenting on wider sociocultural tendencies. Indeed, as Krastev remarks, "the wave of anti-liberalism sweeping over Central Europe reflects widespread popular resentment at the perceived slights to national and personal dignity…"[35] In other words, both the individual and the social conflicts presented in *Coyote* are set in a situation where one is frustrated, resentful, and intolerant due to (real or perceived) previous slights against one's dignity. Misi's embrace of violent traditional masculinity, as well as his return to his local, rural roots gain their full significance in this historical and ideological context. The widely circulated images of Putin doing Judo, playing hockey, or riding horses half-naked in natural surroundings, or images of Orbán drinking pálinka at pig-killings all play into this reactionary mythology of down-to-earth, no-nonsense masculinity, in which values such as tolerance, kindness, or openness to other viewpoints are seen as effeminate, disingenuous characteristics of a declining, over-civilized, weak West. These political propaganda images, as well as films like *Coyote* or *Dogs* present Eastern Europe as a rough, wild land, where only tough, hard-boiled men can defend their rights, property, or heritage. The Orbán-regime's media industry, like that of Putin, mobilizes this cultural mythology to fashion these male leaders as heroic guardians of national heritage and traditional Christian values against the forces of Western decadence, enforced multiculturalism, or the business interests of corporate capitalism.

Misi's experimentation with such a masculinity becomes especially informative and revealing when seen against this wider social, political, and cultural backdrop. It is closely tied to a number of social and historical factors, and therefore has wider

socio-cultural implications. At this point, it may be useful to distinguish between a wider and a more local context, between cultural phenomena characteristic of the whole Global North, and ones specific to Eastern Europe and Hungary. Misi's initial experience of loss of dignity in his urban environment, or his dissatisfaction with early 21st-century white-collar urban masculinity has a wider, international context too. The loss of agency, dignity, and self-worth within corporate capitalism and its effect on masculinities are well-documented phenomena that appear in hundreds of films and novels, as Robert Schultz demonstrates in *Soured on the System: Disaffected Men in 20th Century American Film* (2012). These issues need no detailed analysis here, as the exploitation and cruelty inherent in contemporary socio-economic formations of the Global North have been convincingly analyzed in such formative works as Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2019), Byung-Chul Han's *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2017), or Soshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). Needless to say, such general problems of the Global North may very well fuel populist politics, and (albeit in much simplified forms) often feature in contemporary populist rhetoric. When exploring the social, cultural, political factors behind the crisis of liberalism and the rise of populism in the United States, Francis Fukuyama also calls attention to processes similar to those that make Misi embrace a more conservative kind of masculinity for a while in *Coyote.*

The opening sequence of *Coyote* makes references to several issues that these cultural critics analyze as drawbacks of our current socio-economic formations, issues that contributed to what Fukuyama calls the crisis of the global liberal order, the trend responsible for the early 21st-century ideological vacuum, which played no small part in the rise of populism and authoritarianism in various parts of the world.

In *Coyote* these general trends are connected with a set of local issues, and the foregoing text analyzed the specifically post-communist sense of precarity. In the more specifically East European context, his backlash against civilized, urban, educated, white-collar masculinity and its civic values can very well be read as a commentary on the "delayed backlash against the several decades of identity-denial politics, otherwise known as Westernization, which began in 1989. Overheated particularism is a natural reaction to an overselling of the innocence of universalism."[36] Misi's return to the land of his grandfather expresses a disavowal of Westernized urban life, and clearly rhymes with the Orbán governments' efforts to depict Western liberal democracies as being in steep decline, to fashion themselves as the true (Christian, white) Europeans, and to convince Hungarians living and working in the West to come back home.[37]

Although *Coyote* reveals the problems of contemporary city life in the age of neoliberal capitalism, its damaging effects on Misi's mental health and on his sense of agency and dignity, it presents the emerging conservative constructions of masculinity as ambiguous, flawed, and potentially destructive. In this way, the film also offers a critical commentary on the 21st-century populist backlash, on its social and psychological dynamics, as well as on the ways it necessarily leads to the erosion of civic values. The film suggests that right-wing populism is dangerous

not only because it leads to the return of the old tyrannical patriarch in the figure of the corrupt local oligarch, but also because it may make resentful citizens choose similar retrograde paths.

Misi's problematic patriarchal heritage is mostly symbolized in the film by the grandfather's land and his leather belt. First, Misi's return to his ancestral land is not joyful at all. Though the land around the house is often represented as idyllic and peaceful, the house is in bad shape and smelly, and soon after moving there Misi gets beaten by the (so-called) civil guards. Having returned to the mythical land of his grandfather with high hopes, now Misi is thrown down and knocked down to taste its real qualities. "What kind of fucked-up place is this, where you get beaten up on your own land?!" he asks bitterly after the fight. Thus, in *Coyote*, one can see a gradual resignification of the land as understood within the mythology of patriarchal heritage: as Misi learns, the sacred ancestral land is also simple, profane, material dust (that you can easily bite), and it can drag you down as easily as it may lift you up. Perhaps it is not by accident that one of the official posters of the film shows Misi lying flat on the ground, having just fallen during a fist-fight, with Kispali, the son of the local oligarch on top of him. This deeply symbolic image of the film was shot with the camera turned 90 degrees, so that we see the three of them (the land, Misi, and Kispali) vertically, thereby distancing the spectator from the referentiality of the image and highlighting its symbolic meanings. In this shot the land seems to be swallowing or engulfing Misi, who struggles in pain.

This ambiguity of the ancestral land has deep roots in Hungarian culture. Its most prominent expression is probably Endre Ady's poem "A föl-földobott kő" ("The tossed stone," 1909), one of the most well-known poems in Hungary that a considerable percentage of the population learn by heart in high school. Ady's poem compares the son of the Hungarian land to a stone tossed up into the air time and time again, only to fall back to the dust from which it was born. In the poem, being tossed up, being in the air, and flying stand for moving away from the homeland in an attempt to escape the dire conditions. The poem was published in the most famous Hungarian literary journal of the time, *Nyugat*, meaning West, which clearly shows the direction in which Ady and his fellow poets sought inspiration and socio-cultural ideals to follow. The melancholy poem, however, shows the speaker's resignation: these escapes, fueled by one's desires and high hopes, can be only temporary. One returns to the dusty, backwards homeland as inevitably as a tossed-up stone falls back to the ground. Misi's fights with the local oligarch for the inherited land, therefore, tie into a deeply symbolic, historical mythology of the homeland, where one's relation to it is understood as a passionate but toxic love–hate relationship.

The other key metaphor that provides the physical action with symbolic overtones and cultural commentary is the grandfather's leather belt, which Misi inherits together with the house and piece of land. As we learn, the grandfather, who is described by Szojka as "the old coyote" was "not an easy" man. The characters usually refer to him as a morally ambiguous, but almost mythological figure,

embodying an old kind of masculinity. As Lajos, an elderly, local helper of Misi, former friend of the grandfather, says, he was "the kind of man that is not born into this world any more," and he says it as a compliment. For the grandfather's descendants, however, especially Misi's father, the grandfather is a controversial figure, an embodiment of a tyrannical, violent, and toxic kind of masculinity. As Misi's father explains when he notices that Misi started wearing the old leather belt, the grandfather used to beat him with that belt, "just so that I don't forget that I am his son." Thus, in *Coyote*, the belt symbolizes an old kind of masculinity and patriarchal heritage, a kind that involves physical violence, cruelty, toughness, stubbornness, and lacks such values as kindness, understanding, tolerance, or compassion. Misi is named after this grandfather, and he has the potential to become like him. When he first introduces himself to Szojka, as "Mihány Bicsérdy," Szojka looks at him and says "Like his grandfather," without explaining whether he meant only the name or the character too.

From this point of view, the film can be seen as an experiment with various kinds of masculinities that are aligned with different value-systems and understandings of society. Misi is represented as a frustrated and confused 21st-century man who is desperately looking for viable models of behavior in a crisis situation where social norms and moral standards seems to be disappearing.

Conclusions: The ambiguities of patriarchal heritage at the Eastern frontier

The symbolic details discussed above are crucial for one's understanding of the ending of the film, where Misi decides to sell his land to the Swedish investors and gives his belt to Lajos. This handling over of the belt takes place in a hospital, after the final showdown, where everybody gets badly injured, hospitalized, and arrested. The two wounded men sit together in the hospital corridor by the window, and Misi gives the belt to Lajos, saying "You are the only man I know who deserves it" – to which the badly bruised Lajos answers "I don't know if I should take that as a compliment." The scene represents the belt as an important but controversial object symbolizing patriarchal heritage, an object that played a key role in Misi's development (get grounded, "growing balls"), but has no more place in his life.

This ambiguity of Misi's patriarchal heritage makes the film's ending complex in ways reminiscent of that of *High Noon.* It seems that Misi's learning process has gone full circle: he left Budapest, lived in the village of Tűzkő, and now he returns to Budapest as a different person. He wished to live the idealized fantasies he had about the idyllic countryside where "real men" live close to nature, but experienced its degrading effects and saw the all-pervasive dust and dirt behind the fantasy of the ancestral land. So now he can return to the "Westernized" city. He disavowed his urban, civilized, Westernized masculinity, embraced his patriarchal heritage and lived like his grandfather for a while, learned what he had to learn, saw its values and damaging aspects too, and is now ready to move on.

Through this dynamic, dialectical movement, *Coyote* manages to paint a complex picture according to which neither the city, nor the village farmhouse have absolute value, neither the "Westernized" urban lifestyle of 21st-century neoliberal capitalism, nor the rural oligarchy are viable social models. In this somewhat disenchanted view of the post-crisis East European borderlands, neither "Western" civic virtues nor the strongmen's dog-eat-dog world presumably held by one's "tough" forefathers have absolute value. This ambiguity and complexity is also expressed by the fact that Eszter gets pregnant while they live in Tűzkő, in a violent sex scene that verges on spousal rape. However, when she tells the bruised and redeemed Misi the news at the end of the film, Misi says that he hopes it is a girl. The film started by him losing a baby and gaining a piece of land, and it ends by him selling his land and gaining a new life with a new baby. His remark indicates his view that the local troubles that come with the land mostly affect (and challenge and compromise) men.

It is at the end of the film that the spectator understands that introducing the grandfather with a lower angle shot showing his porch and land from behind his ankles was not just an empty trope evoking the iconography of the Western. The image implies that the grandfather, as controversial as he was, stood with both feet on the ground, was well grounded (connected to the ground in the sense of both land and dust), which the film presents as a prerequisite of any kind of authentic masculinity. However, this masculinity, which involves "growing balls" too, is not glamorized or lionized by the film, but rather shown as a heavy, problematic burden that men have to work through in order to grow up. According to *Coyote*, at the eastern frontier there is no easy way out, there are no painless or uncompromising solutions or clear moral guidelines, and such stories do not have simple happy endings. According to the picture painted by the film about Hungarian illiberalism, due to the ideological confusion left by the demise of history's grand narratives (such as Fascism, Communism, and perhaps also capitalism and liberalism), finding one's value system, code of behavior, and relation to society can be a challenging, controversial process with many pitfalls.

Notes

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3 Dávid Klág, "Andy Vajna ellophatta volna a magyar filmet de nem tette," in *Index*, 22 January, 2019. https://index.hu/kultur/cinematrix/2019/01/22/vajna_filmalap_utod_halal_filmipar_kulturharc_havas_agnes/ [last accessed on 28 March 2024].
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7 Sabrina P. Ramet, "The Czech Republic: A Flawed Democracy – An Introduction," in Sabrina P. Ramet, Vladimir Đorđevic, and Christine M. Hassenstab (eds.), *Civic and Uncivic Values in the Czech Republic: Value Transformation, Politics, Education, and Gender Equality* (Basingstoke and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 14; see also Sabrina P. Ramet's "Introduction" to the present volume.

8 Krastev and Holmes, *The Light that Failed,* p. 15.

9 *Ibid.*

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11 *Ibid.,* pp. 4–5.

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20 See Iván Szelényi, *Tanulmányok az illiberális posztkommunista kapitalizmusról* (Budapest: Corvina, 2019), pp. 144–145; and Kalmar, *White, but not Quite.*

21 *Ibid.,* pp. 150–155.

22 *Ibid.,* p. 149.

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25 Piotr Skurowski, "Dances with Western in Poland's Borderlands," in *European Journal of American Studies*, 13-3. 2018. pp. 1–17, 1.

26 *Ibid.*

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31 Beke Károly, "Öt éve nem lépett le ennyi Magyar – Megint elindul a tömeges kivándorlás?," in *Portfolio*, 9. April, 2023 at www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20230409/ot-eve-nem-lepett-le-ennyi-magyar-megint-elindul-a-tomeges-kivandorlas-607468 [last accessed on 28 March 2024].

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34 Anikó, *Identity Games,* p. 168; and Ewa Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech and Slovak Cinema* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2008), p. 74.
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11 Polarized society in an illiberal polypore state

Values and attitudes among Hungarian women voters

Balázs Böcskei and Andrea Pető

Introduction

Starting in 2010, the Fidesz-KDNP built a successful and resilient structure that delivered three consecutive electoral victories. The explanations follow an analysis of political discourses or identifying new forms of state or changing voting patterns – typically institutionalist approaches. This chapter explains this by connecting the study of illiberal states with gendered voting patterns and attitudes and polarization studies to argue that two Hungarys exist.

Political scientists are still arguing over whether the current ruling system should be characterized as "autocratic legalism,"[1] the "illiberal state,"[2] "plebiscitary leader democracy,"[3] or a "mafia state."[4] Together with the Polish sociologist Weronika Grzebalska, Andrea Pető has suggested applying the term "polypore state."[5]

The polypore is a parasitic pore fungus that lives on wood and produces nothing but further polypores. Our chapter defines three functional characteristics of the polypore state, all of which are gendered. All three are of key importance in understanding Fidesz's third electoral victory, following a campaign during which the opposition could barely reach voters outside of Budapest; nor did their messages respond to the electorate's everyday problems. Secondly, they help to explain the reasons behind the desperate activities typical of Hungarian opposition politics today, exemplified by virtual actions, such as interviews and Facebook posts. Third, they aid us in comprehending why the opposition remains incapable of processing the real reasons behind their electoral defeat; instead, they resort to blaming misled and manipulated voters.

The first crucial feature of the polypore state involves the establishment of parallel institutions and the hijacking of previous institutional structures or values. The second characteristic of the polypore state involves familism, or the replacement of gender politics with family politics, based on a normative model limited exclusively to heterosexual married couples, who are supported by state social policies. The rhetoric of familism took off from a women's rights framework but replaced women with the family as its key focus. In the ideological conception of familism, women are seen as caregivers: wives, mothers, and rarely part-time workers. From this perspective, it is crucial to investigate whether female Fidesz

voters identify with this conservative set of values and whether they exhibit more noticeable differences compared to women in other political and social groups in this regard.

The third characteristic of the polypore state is, specifically, its utilization of security discourse. The Fidesz government regularly presents policy-related questions as national security issues. According to this rhetoric, the vigilant government is working to defeat the threats posed by Brussels, the migrants, György Soros, and recently, his son, Alex Soros, et al. According to government propaganda, NGOs, especially women's rights organizations, are likewise threatening and subverting the traditional family model, using foreign funding, and following foreign orders.[6] Therefore, it is also reasonable to answer the question as to whether women who vote for Fidesz can also identify with the opponent-constructing frames in the case of explicitly party-political issues.

When it comes to researching Hungary, there is a widespread perception that the country stands out as one of the most polarized nations in Europe. This polarization extends beyond mere ideological differences, encompassing a party-political divide as well.[7] This political schism is notably pronounced in two-party systems characterized by profound ideological disparities among competing factions, sides, or blocs.

Nevertheless, the concept of partisan polarization transcends mere political affiliation. Veronika Patkós employs the term to describe a cognitive mechanism rooted in political identity, leading to the distortion of political thought based on existing commitments.[8] Consequently, partisan polarization can be comprehended not solely as party allegiance but also as a manifestation of social identity.[9] In the context of political systems such as Hungary's, this phenomenon fosters mechanisms of outward hostility and inward unconditional loyalty.

Furthermore, the discourse on regime classification interpretations for Hungary is often characterized as "illiberal" in certain literature. The opposing parties explicitly perceive each other as threats to their existence, way of life, and values.

This distinctive Hungarian characteristic becomes particularly apparent in the realm of gender issues and concerns. The gender gap in politics, particularly concerning far-right parties, has been a subject of discussion in academic literature. Immerzeel, Coffé, and van der Lippe conducted a study across 12 European countries, revealing that in these nations, more men than women vote for far-right parties. They highlight the persistence of a "gender gap," signifying significant differences in voting patterns between men and women.[10] However, Mayer emphasized the need to examine this "gender gap critically," citing the example of France where, since 2012, Marine Le Pen has garnered support from almost equal numbers of men and women.[11]

Various studies contribute to the understanding of gender dynamics within far-right parties and political contexts. Akkermann delves into gender issues in the family policies of six far-right parties in Europe. Additionally, research explores the participation of women in extreme-right contexts in different countries, such as Italy, France,[12] Hungary, and Greece.[13] These academic works lay the groundwork for country-specific case studies, shedding light on the complex interplay between

gender, political ideologies, and voting behavior within the context of far-right movements across Europe.[14]

The significance of this research is underscored by the scarcity of comparative, descriptive studies specifically targeting women voters within the political-sociological framework of Hungarian data. It is important to note that research on women's issues is deeply embedded in systematic studies of welfare policies and regimes,[15] explorations of women's socio-political and social realities,[16] investigations into anti-gender right-wing mobilization strategies,[17] and examinations of the link between de-democratization processes and anti-gender campaigns.[18] However, research on voting behavior over time or with a larger dataset, offering insights on women voters, remains limited.[19]

Therefore, our study will undertake a comparative descriptive analysis of Fidesz and non-Fidesz voters. We aim to investigate whether polarization, a characteristic often observed in society regarding the preferences of certain voters, is also prevalent within the context of women's political participation. In this phase of our research, we specifically compare women Fidesz-KDNP voters with women who do not support either of those parties. While the former explicitly identify with a national, Christian-conservative party, the latter either support different parties or have no explicit party preference. Thus, it is valuable to analyze the extent to which female Fidesz-KDNP voters differ from the "majority" concerning the issues under examination and in what ways they exhibit distinct characteristics – due to the disproportionality of the electoral system, Fidesz-KDNP has a mandate of about 3 million votes.

We will explore differences and similarities in values and attitudes, commencing with traditional sociodemographic comparisons and progressing to inquiries about the political system, state involvement, national commitment, and other relevant factors. Additionally, we will delve into perceptions of support mechanisms for reproduction and credit construction targeted at women and families. Before drawing our conclusions, we will further investigate attitudinal differences among women voters on a specific partisan public policy theme, specifically the perception of teachers and teacher protests.[20]

Research question

This chapter, however, does not deal with women's issues such as reproductive rights, quotas, etc., exploring perceptions among opposing camps. Rather, it is a descriptive study of two specific public policy issues, further attitudinal and value-descriptive, comparing women who support the Fidesz-KDNP coalition with women outside the ruling party voter camp. Our objective is to investigate whether, despite the varying stratification and fragmentation within women's society, there exists a certain degree of homogenization and polarization among women voters. In the initial phase of our examination of Hungarian women's voting behavior, we employed descriptive data to address the question of whether the set of values and public policies embraced by female Fidesz voters aligned with the *modus operandi* of the illiberal polypore state mentioned above. This helps establish a connection

between women's values and policy preferences, allowing us to comprehend gendered policy cleavages.

In the subsequent discussion, we won't delve extensively into the partisanship dimension, as our study mainly divides participants into Fidesz-KDNP voters on one side and non-Fidesz-KDNP voters and undecideds on the other. Our preliminary assumption posits that the former group constitutes a more strongly committed segment of female voters, while the latter group is more heterogeneous, less active, and weaker in commitment. The latter test segment encompasses women who might vote for one of the parties in the 2022 six-party opposition coalition, comprising liberal, left-wing, right-wing, and eco-political parties. Additionally, we included the political class-critical Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party, and supporters of the radical right-wing Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) among non-Fidesz women voters aligned with the anti-establishment group. It's important to note that the data, whether aggregated over multiple months or single months, are slightly distorted by the female voters of Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland), due to that party's lower support, resulting in a smaller sample size in terms of their absolute numbers. Most of this group consists of undecided voters.

In the third quarter of 2023, the party preferences of non-Fidesz-KDNP women are split in such a way that the self-defined social democratic, Democratic Coalition (18%) has a higher support than the others. The left-wing party is followed by the liberal Momentum Movement (6%), then Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) and the Two-Tailed Dog Party (5–5%). At the same time, 56% of women who do not vote for Fidesz have no party affiliation.

As a result, we find it particularly worthwhile to investigate how the latter group of women, characterized by heterogeneity in engagement, activity, and party choice, differs from female Fidesz-KDNP voters. Given the reasons mentioned earlier, it is valuable to explore the extent to which patterns of polarization emerge when comparing a presumably diverse right-wing plurality in terms of values and attitudes with a presumably homogeneous right-wing plurality that remains consistent in terms of values. While partisan-polarized countries often exhibit "two Hungarys," representing "two types of Hungarian women," our study focuses less on the existence of a unified female Hungary and more on understanding the similarities and differences between female Fidesz-KDNP voters and the "others" in terms of values and public policy preferences.

Empirical data

For our research, we used data from the IDEA Institute, an independent think tank, based on a nationally representative, large-sample questionnaire survey, which explores the processes in Hungarian society on a monthly basis (omnibus survey). Data collection is conducted monthly, and by analyzing aggregated databases over several months, we aimed to obtain a more reliable depiction of women's preferences.

The IDEA Institute collected data starting in January 2023 through a social media-based questionnaire. The data collection across the Hungarian web and

social media is facilitated through a self-completion online questionnaire employing survey software. Standard categories employed in traditional mainstream academic research and most comparative studies may not always be the most effective for examining the developments in Hungary. Consequently, the questions related to public policy issues must also align substantively with the "illiberal" conditions in which preferences are embedded and from which they derive reinforcement.

The final survey results are representative of the adult population of the country in terms of gender, education, age, type of municipality, and region. In the weighting process, different Internet and Facebook usage patterns are accounted for, complementing the procedures to ensure representativeness.

An advantage of the online survey method was the ability to reach respondents who were less routine and burnt-out, as recruitment was entirely web-based. This allowed us to capture the perspectives of women, who tend to be less active than men in terms of political activity and participation. Advertisements on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were also employed to reach otherwise harder-to-reach target groups effectively, including young women. Additionally, online data collection offered the advantage of eliminating compliance bias, as respondents could complete the survey anonymously online, providing more honest answers at their own pace compared to face-to-face interviews. This will further decrease the incidence of norm-referencing responses. In instances involving more sensitive social or political issues, respondents may succumb to "social" pressure, conforming to expected answers. Online data collection minimizes these occurrences more effectively than other data collection methods, a crucial consideration given the Hungarian context.

When addressing specific questions, the comparison of voter blocs involves varying sample sizes. In some cases, cumulative data sets are referenced to explore sociodemographic and value characteristics, while in others, monthly omnibus results for a particular public policy issue are used. The former aids in examining sociodemographic and value characteristics, while the latter helps us to explore perceptions related to specific political and public policy agendas.

Sociodemographic differences

Across the entire Hungarian population, Fidesz-KDNP enjoys support from 22% of women, making it the most popular bloc among women voters. However, the largest political bloc among women consists of the undecided ("don't say" or "don't know" regarding their voting preference for an election ["If the election would be on this Sunday, which faction would you vote for?"]), constituting 44% of women. This group comprises 56% of the non-Fidesz female segment. Unlike the Fidesz-KDNP voter camp, there is no similar gender gap, as the right-wing camp tends to have more male sympathizers. In the overall population, 31% of men support Fidesz.

Among other parties in the Hungarian political system with significant support (i.e., surpassing the 5% electoral threshold), only the Democratic Coalition has more female supporters (13%) than male supporters (10%). When segmenting

society into Fidesz-KDNP women, non-Fidesz-KDNP women, and men, the proportion of women supporters in the governing party is 12%, which means approximately 900,000 to 1 million female supporters in the total population of 8.2 million eligible voters. Nearly 1 million women supporting Fidesz-KDNP are notably well-off, constituting at least 18% of those "doing particularly well in their jobs" and 15% of those without financial problems. A similar proportion of the latter are aged 50 and over 60, while only 5% of women government supporters fall within the age group of 18–29.

Examining the internal composition of the right-wing women's camp by age, 33% are aged between 50 and 59, and 42% are over 60. Similar proportions for the non-party bloc are 23% and 34%, respectively, with significant differences in the youngest age groups. The educational background shows no significant differences between the two blocs, with the highest proportions of primary school graduates in both blocs (Fidesz-KDNP voters: 41%, non-party: 43%) and 22% of those with tertiary education in both blocs.

When considering differences by place of residence, there is a 5-percentage point difference between villages and the county seat. In the former, it favors right-wing women, while in the latter, it favors non-government women (31% vs. 26%; 19% vs. 24%).

Value and self-classifications

Compared to non-government female voters, Fidesz-KDNP supporters have a distinct political contour. In terms of self-identification, 85 percent of the latter consider themselves more right-wing, only 4 percent left-wing, and just over 10 percent (11%) more centrist. In comparison, the not pro-government crowd is much more heterogeneous, with a majority (53%) of women who consider themselves centrist and only 16% of those who consider themselves more right-wing.

A similar pattern emerged when respondents were asked to define themselves in terms of a conservative-liberal self-classification. A total of 83 percent of Fidesz-KDNP-sympathetic women (rather) see themselves as conservative, another 15 percent as centrist, and only 2 percent (rather) see themselves as liberal. The proportion of the latter is 32 percent among women who do not support the governing party, the majority of whom see themselves as centrist (51 percent) and 17 percent as conservative or more conservative.

It is clear from these data that the pro-government women's community is a right-wing community of values, with a clear right-wing self-identification. As expected, women outside the governing party camp have a heterogeneous pattern, one sign of which is that most of them consider themselves to be in the middle of the ideological spectrum.

The conservative values of Fidesz-KDNP women were explicitly shown in the free-word question "What do you think of the term 'liberal'?." Our questioning was motivated by the fact that the term "liberal" is a label used in government party communication in a particularly frequent and intensive way, and mainly with negative connotations and stigma. In a wide variety of domestic and foreign policy

conflicts, right-wing critics are described as "liberal" by pro-government politicians and the public, and we had reason to believe that this influence is also evident in the opinions of pro-government women. As expected, the terms and associations that received the highest number of mentions in response to the question were "gay," and "LGBTQ," and "propaganda," and "rainbow," "permissive" and "lying," "acceptance of others" and "chaos" were also common mentions. For women outside the governing party, on the other hand, "freethought" and "freedom" were the most frequent mentions, as well as "tolerance," "acceptance," and "free thinking." In their case, essentially most of the terms are positive or related to the self-definition of liberalism.

The difference in values can also be seen in public policy attitudes. In total, 47% of female Fidesz-KDNP voters agree with the statement that "the main task of politicians and parties is to preserve national traditions and to cherish national cultural values, and that this is more important than economic development," while 31% of non-government voters agree. Some 43 percent of the former think that "which social groups belong to the leading social strata is determined by the historical, national traditions of countries, and therefore social and material inequalities are inevitable and must be accepted." Only 20% of women who are not in government parties think so. Nearly the same proportion think that "the most important task of political parties and politicians is to protect the rights of social minorities and disadvantaged people" (Fidesz-KDNP: 44%; non-government 47%).

At the same time, attitudes are different when it comes to the role of the state. The statement that "the most important thing for politicians and political parties is to reduce social inequalities and the gap in living standards and opportunities between the poor and the better off" was agreed by 50% of those who voted for the governing party, compared to 33% of women who did not. There is also disagreement that "the state should intervene as little as possible in the economy and let the economy operate as much as possible according to market rules." This is the view of 28% of female Fidesz-KDNP supporters, compared with 47% of other women. All these response rates are not unrelated to the fact that the right-wing government, despite its ideologically hybrid social and economic policies, presents and reinforces the image of a strong proactive state.

Based on ideological and value attitudes and self-classifications, women in government thus form a right-wing conservative camp with a strong ideological outline, emphasizing the importance of active state involvement, national values, and representation, compared to women not in government.

Reproductive public policy issues

The illiberal polypore state is centered around familism.[21] Therefore, the data collection was also focused on one of the flagship reproductive policies of the illiberal Hungarian government. Continuing our data analysis, we focus on the Baby Expecting Loan (BEL), introduced in 2019. This loan is available to couples committed to having at least one child within five years, granting them a free, interest-free personal loan. The maximum loan amount was initially set at HUF

10 million. If the couple has a second child, 30% of the debt would be forgiven, and for a third child, the state would cover the entire amount. This measure was a prominent component of the government's Family Action Plan, recognized as a flagship family policy initiative. In June 2023, the Orbán government announced changes to the rules for claiming the BEL starting in 2024. While the maximum loan amount would increase to HUF 11 million, only married couples with female members under age 30 would be eligible. The July 2023 research on the BEL is well-known among Hungarian women surveyed, with 82% of Fidesz-KDNP voters having a broad understanding of how the loan scheme operates, compared to 66% among non-Fidesz-KDNP supporters.

Examining the sample, it is noteworthy that many women are aware of the BEL. However, individuals over 40 years of age, those with higher education, residents of larger settlements, and those who perceive themselves as financially secure and capable of managing their income are better informed than the average population. While 43% of the adult population is acquainted with individuals who have utilized the BEL, a significant 63% of female Fidesz-KDNP voters are directly or indirectly affected, including 23% through family ties. By contrast, among non-Fidesz-KDNP voters, the proportion is lower, with 31% directly or indirectly affected, including 14% through family connections. There is a significant overlap between the beneficiaries of the Family Housing Support Program (FHSP) and the BEL described earlier; in more than half of the cases, those who have used the FHSP or have some form of family involvement have also utilized the BEL.[22]

The FHSP is another crucial family support instrument provided by the illiberal government, along with the BEL. The non-refundable support amount under the FHSP is contingent on two factors: whether the applicant is using it for a new or second-hand property and the number of children. In June 2023, the government announced changes to the rules and conditions for FHSP eligibility starting in 2024. Notably, people residing in settlements with more than 5,000 inhabitants will no longer be eligible, while positive changes are anticipated for villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, with the FHSP amount set to increase by at least 50%. Data indicate that, overall, 81% of the Fidesz female adult population is familiar with the Family Homebuyer's Allowance, its purpose, and how it functions, compared to 61% of women outside the Fidesz-KDNP female population.

To understand the potential impact of these changes on different groups of women, one can examine the number of people who have taken up the FHSP by mid-July 2023. It is worth considering both direct and indirect impacts, as financing the co-payment of FHSP-subsidized investments may often extend to the entire family, or even friends and close acquaintances. For the population, the results reveal that the use of FHSP is more common among those in better-than-average circumstances than among individuals facing financial difficulties or significant deprivation. Some 69% of female voters in the governing parties are affected in some way, including 31% with families. The direct or indirect involvement of non-Fidesz female supporters is considerably lower at 32%, with family involvement being the case for only 13% of these women.

A highly politicized teachers' strike as a litmus test

To continue our comparison, we turn our attention to a public policy issue, the recurring teachers' strike during 2023, which received significant media coverage and had a strong social impact. As the illiberal polypore state operates with threats and dangers it is particularly telling how this threat was manifested in the attitudes concerning the most visible and most popular anti-government movement of recent years.

Throughout 2023, there were ongoing and varied demonstrations by groups of teachers and students advocating for improvements in the education system. Some media outlets paid relatively high attention to these demonstrations and associated events. During the late spring 2023 data collection period, approximately three-quarters of adults were roughly aware of the problems and demands raised by the protesting teachers and students, while an additional fifth had heard only about the demonstrations without being aware of specific demands and objectives. The primary organizers and participants of these protests were mainly secondary school teachers and students. The high visibility of these events was not due only to media coverage but also to the feeling among broad sections of society that they were directly or indirectly affected, with half of the adult population having family members (either themselves or others) who either teach or study in a secondary school.

Despite the widespread awareness of the protests, there is a significant divergence in opinions based on political affiliation. While a large majority of non-Fidesz women (86%) believe that secondary school teachers are in a difficult situation and are right to protest, only 21% of pro-government voters share this view. Similar disparities exist concerning the perception that students are joining teachers' actions because they perceive the challenges in Hungary's education system. Additionally, 91% of non-Fidesz female adults view the teachers' and students' solidarity as a good example for society, highlighting the importance of uniting and standing up for each other's rights. By contrast, only 12% of women in government parties share this perspective.

Examining responses to other questions, female Fidesz-KDNP voters' express dissatisfaction with the work of teachers. Despite acknowledging the challenging situation teachers face, 81% find their protests outrageous. More than half (57%) believe that teachers do not prioritize imparting useful knowledge, and a substantial majority (73%) agree that protest actions by teachers make things only more challenging for students. By contrast, a significant majority of non-Fidesz female respondents reject these positions, indicating a significant polarization of viewpoints.

Regarding the suggestion that teachers should make their demands more emphatic by refusing to participate in oral exams, 70% of women in Fidesz think that anyone who takes part should be severely punished, whereas only 7% of non-Fidesz women share this view. Additionally, 43% of non-Fidesz women explicitly agree with the legitimacy of such protests, while only 2% of women who voted for Fidesz-KDNP hold the same opinion.

Conclusions

The initial phase of our analysis of women voters relied on descriptive data to address the question of whether signs of (partisan) polarization are evident and necessary among women voters. The unequivocal answer is yes, as our findings indicate that, concerning the whole society, women voters inhabit a different Hungary – there are, at the very least, two distinct groups of female Hungarians. We stress the term "at least" because Hungarians beyond the ruling party exhibits much more diversity in values and public policy preferences than Hungarians aligned with the present ruling illiberal party. To navigate between these differences the Fidesz successfully applies the modus operandi of the illiberal polypore states, offering without content and consequences of that content the target group to hold together as its electoral base.

While the identity, values, and preferences of Fidesz voters align closely with those of their party, creating a consistent and homogeneous camp of women, those who identify as non-Fidesz voters or remain undecided are still diverse, despite the contrast with the former. Consequently, further research is imperative to explore additional political and value differences within the non-Fidesz-KDNP women voters examined in this study. We firmly believe that without a profound understanding of these differences, establishing electoral coalitions of women even to challenge the illiberal government in the upcoming election would be a very challenging endeavor.

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12   Changing interpretations in history teaching and history textbooks

Csaba Fazekas

Introduction

About history textbooks and politics – in general

What can we learn from history textbooks?

The answer to this question today is hardly "everything" or "everything that is important about the past." There is a large literature on the analysis of history textbooks, which suggests that history textbooks have never had an exclusive role in shaping society's knowledge of the past. This role will clearly diminish or be transformed in the 21st century, while it will never completely disappear. Politicians may be tempted to believe that through school education (especially textbooks) a complete comprehensive view of the past can be developed in the growing (school-age) generation. This is certainly true to a large extent, but school education is only one source of information, and this is obviously true of all scientific knowledge, including the science of history. In the 20th century, historical films, television, and radio programs had already significantly challenged the dominant character of school education, and this is particularly true of the digitization that has accelerated since the turn of the millennium, not to mention the simple fact that, while the textbook is an important factor in school education, it is not the only one. Put simply, history can be taught well with bad textbooks, and generations of schoolchildren did not previously regard the textbooks as the exclusive "canon." To use a simple example: in the socialist regimes of Eastern Europe before 1989, there was everywhere a kind of ideologically committed history textbook. It would be easy to think that the age groups graduating from school at that time uniformly, or at least for the most part, adopted this one view of history – this is clearly not true, and it became obvious after 1990.

In 2010, György Gyarmati, a Hungarian historian, offered an interesting observation about the factors that most influence the structure, content, and assessment of a person's knowledge of the past at different stages of life.[1] Specifically, he was interested in which sources were used by students for their knowledge of the past, and to what extent these sources varied in importance across generations (see Table 12.1)

Table 12.1 Textbooks used in schools, by percentage

	Textbooks/ science	*Family socialization (including friendly circles)*	*Other sources*
Before school age (0–8 years old)	0	80	20
At school age (9–19 years old)	30	40	30
After school, in adulthood (after 19 years old)	5	25	70

Of course, Gyarmati's data are not exact figures but estimates, and it is possible that in some categories his numbers are too strict. However, the relative proportions are food for thought, and it is certainly plausible to speculate that for some people, even at school age, the acquisition of historical knowledge is based less on scientifically based textbooks than on information acquired through personal contacts or through the media (internet).

Textbooks should not be seen as the sole source of knowledge, especially on historical issues that are divisive in society, controversial, or have a current political relevance.[2] Their role should not be underestimated, but they are clearly not suitable for judging the shaping of society's consciousness in themselves.

It would be too much to simply chant "down with textbooks!,"[3] but traditional history teaching, based on rote learning and memorization, clearly cannot achieve its goal. If the history textbook is the only one tool used in history teaching in schools, one of the most important pedagogical aims (to arouse the interest of students and to develop their ability to form their own opinions) is hardly achieved.

This observation on the role of textbooks is confirmed by recent case studies dealing with the issue at a theoretical level. The role of the textbook is not only to be studied as a repository of dates, historical persons, and place names, but also to be used to develop the ability of "historical thinking": "The ability to think history includes the ability to interpret historical events, the ability to [understand] causality, the ability to interpret or capture the moral dimension of each event, and the three-dimensional ability of time, namely analyzing the past, for present life and interpreting the future."[4]

Based on the literature on textbook analysis, there are several possible answers to the question in the title of this section ("What can we learn from history textbooks?"), but one (and perhaps the most important) is: History textbooks always present an "official" view of history, or what the "ordering" of the textbook wants society to know about the past. The "ordering" is the state (or its authority, i.e., the Ministry for Educational Affairs) in every case, not only in the form of prescribing the content of the curriculum and the framework for teaching in public schools. But, in addition, the Ministry enforces its interpretation of history, for example, not only by having the textbooks written by the "ordering," but also by having their content checked by means of various approval procedures (proofreading). That is why the history textbook accurately reflects the authorities' expectations of the

past, whether the political intentions are stronger or weaker. The journal *Visegrad Insight* devoted a special issue in 2013 to the common historical knowledge and history teaching of Central European countries and to the theme "my hero – your enemy" phenomena. Its introduction points out: "History textbooks are controlled by the state everywhere in the world. History is an extension of official ideology (democratic or authoritarian) designed to shape common memory about the past and serve as the root of collective identification."[5] Political preferences are usually closely linked to judgments about history, therefore, the diversity of views and interpretations in democratic regimes is much better captured.

Trends and values in history textbook analysis

Textbook analysis has a real historiography, and some studies examine textbooks from a pedagogical point of view, others from the point of view of narratives of memory politics. There are two main points of interest: (1) What do our textbooks say about our national past? (This is a particularly important aspect, especially in the case of nations where certain events of the historical past have become highly divisive, illustrations and expressions of values and political ideologies.[6]) (2) What do others' textbooks say about us? Divisions, differences of opinion, and historical discourses can develop within a country or between different countries (peoples, regions, civilizations).

In the case of Hungary, even before the transition of 1989–90, there was a strong demand to revise and modernize the content of textbooks, to stimulate interest in history instead of ideological education.[7] Later, two important general analytical situations concerning history textbooks also seemed to prevail:

1. The so-called "post" situation: History teaching must also reflect a new situation and try to place recent events in historical context after major political changes, revolutions, regime changes or wars. ("Post-revolutionary," "post-dictatorship," "post-transition" periods of history.)
2. The so-called "image of the others": This is a particular challenge for history teaching in countries with a conflict-ridden common past. In the case of Hungary, for example, it is of particular importance in relation to the neighboring nations that constituted ethnic minorities in Hungary until the end of the First World War, and, after 1920, thousands of Hungarians became minorities under the new nation-state framework (Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, renamed Yugoslavia in 1929).[8] In the case of Slovakia and Hungary, there have been several attempts to develop a common history textbook, which is made particularly difficult by the fact that "both Hungarian and Slovak nation-based societies have used contemporary romantic and nationalist historiography to trace their national historical narrative."[9] Debates about the interpretation of the historical past have sometimes reached the highest political level, especially in relation to the arguments of opposing nationalisms from the past.[10] Divisions within a country (nation) can lead to a situation where "the others" are not a

neighboring country, but a national or religious minority within the country; and attempts to represent distant cultures and civilizations are also important, and there are also examples of this in Hungary.[11]

Since the early 2000s, alongside the topics of "post situations" and "images of others," a third important value related to history teaching has emerged in the European Union, to which history textbooks in different countries have addressed in diverse ways, usually depending on their relationship with the European Union: Do we include national histories in the processes of some kind of common European history? If yes, how and to what extent? More generally, to what extent is "our" history only that of a particular national community, to what extent are we, alongside our nation (country), also citizens of Europe?

Falk Pingel in his summary of 2000 was still optimistic about the three levels of historical knowledge (nation – Europe – world): "A general, positive result, European relations are no longer neglected in the textbooks we analysed. The connection between national and general history is often pointed out, particularly in the chapters dealing with the 20th century."[12] With regard to the textbooks used in most European countries, he found that the authors were looking for a link to how they could place national history in the context of European or world history, even if in many cases this was only to show parallels. According to Markus J. Prutsch's study of the 2016, this positive trend has not continued to the extent desired: we cannot speak of the emergence and deepening of a "common European memory."[13] The textbooks do not yet really approach national histories from the perspective of a common Europe, but the continent through a national perspective. As the relevant analysis shows that in our textbooks Europe is mostly presented as a place of old conflicts and not as a place of common values, although in the current situation there is a potential for positive developments: "As for now, Europe is still largely concerned with narrating a story about itself *ex negativo*, with the horrors of the past serving as an adverse origin myth that, while providing a strong sense of purpose for the 'European Project', might also invite political passiveness in the present."[14]

About textbooks and politics – in current Hungary

Background: memorial policy of the Hungarian illiberal system

Undoubtedly, from the 1970s–80s we can talk about the phenomenon of a "memory boom,"[15] the general intensification of political confrontation with the historical past, which has had an impact on the public life of each country. Interest in "memorial/remembrance policy" has increased among public intellectuals and in society in general. The historical past has led to clarifying debates and reassessments, particularly in sensitive periods, on issues of the present, for example, countries' involvement in the Second World War, confronting the dictatorships of the past after democratic changes, civil wars, etc.

In the case of Hungary, as the other post-Soviet countries, the early 1990s saw the eradication of the remnants of the communist view of history. This was not accompanied by much debate, since all public figures and political parties were aware of the falsehoods of the ideology of the communist party-state and the untenability of the Marxist terminology. It was agreed to remove from public spaces statues related to the communist past, placing them in a statue park on the outskirts of Budapest (Memento Park), to rename streets named after Marx, Lenin, and Hungarian communists, and to begin a rapid revision of history textbooks. Historians could deal without ideological constraints with the historical events that formed the ideological basis of the communist party state, so that their previous assessment was extremely biased or even taboo. The Hungarian Revolution of 1956, i.e., the armed uprising against the Soviet Union, was a prominent topic, but the research into the past behavior of the Churches also started within new frames. Among the defining, shared values of this era, we must highlight the freedom that came with regime change.[16]

At the same time, the divisions represented by political parties in the interpretation of the historical past were already emerging. Even then, the conservative right, which formed the first democratic government in 1990, consciously addressed historical issues that were not acceptable to the liberals and socialists who formed the opposition or were incompatible with the values of the modern democratic rule of law.

In the 1990s, a divisive interpretation of the memory of the 1956 revolution also began, as to who were the "real" heroes of the revolutionary and anti-Soviet events. In the eyes of the conservative right, the heroes of 1956 were the members of the armed resistance, but they did not consider the role of the reformist communist Prime Minister Imre Nagy, who was pro-revolution, and executed in 1958.

The place of history textbooks in an illiberal state: From 2010 to the present

After 1990, there were several occasions when a textbook or part of a textbook provoked a public debate or even a scandal, if a textbook or teaching material did not get sufficient pre-publicationreviews and was somehow published. Some of the wording of textbook authors with a right-wing commitment provoked protests from many. One may cite the example of an ethics textbook that presented negative stereotypes about Roma and Jews, conducted anti-abortion propaganda, etc.[17] Until the 2010s these cases, however, could be attributed to individual action, overzealousness, or some kind of mission-consciousness on the part of a right-wing conservative author. It is also very important that schools were able to choose from a variety of textbooks in the past. The Orbán regime has sought to transform the system of history teaching along two ways, in line with the new doctrine of memorial policy: the nationalization of the textbook market, and reorganizing the content and elements of history teaching.

As regards the first, as a result of the free choice of textbooks in the 1990s, a number of publishers started to distribute textbooks. In 2000, there were more

than 180 textbook publishers. (Of course, not all of them published textbooks on every subject or for every school type.[18]) In December 2013, the government issued regulations on the nationalization of the textbook market without any public debate, and in a matter of days entrusted the publishing and distribution of textbooks to a single (state) institution.[19] Textbook publishers protested and launched lawsuits for damages, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg ruled in their favor, but the Hungarian government did not change its monopoly on the supply of textbooks and continues to maintain it. Some private publishers have started to decline year by year, and more and more pedagogical and quality problems have been raised in regard to the new state textbooks. The government tried to offset the effects of the measure by making textbooks free.[20] The nationalization and reallocation of the textbook market not only was important for school education, but also fit into the economic restructuring efforts of the first period of the Orbán regime.[21]

Hungary's educational system is not fundamentally different from the structure of the education system in most European countries.[22] The National Core Curriculum is the most important central regulating institution for the content of education ("nemzeti alaptanterv," NCC), and the supplementary rules in the General or Framework Curricula ("kerettanterv" GC). These regulations set out exactly what the state expects from history teaching. The content and approach of history textbooks must at all times strictly follow the NCC and GC standards.[23]

The illiberal turn in the memorial policy in relation to history teaching can therefore best be studied on the basis of the NCC and GC.[24] The Orbán regime made the first conversion of the NCC in 2012, on this basis, new "experimental" textbooks were published. As it later turned out, this was only the beginning of a transitional period toward full centralization of public education, which meant a "key to this process and like regimes of the past, both communist and authoritarian, controlling the historical narrative is intimately linked to political legitimacy."[25] Already then, the emphasis was clearly shifting toward a new history curriculum whose nodes pointed toward an exaggerated emphasis on elements of the glorious national past, the marginalization of the role of 19th-century liberalism, and relativizing the 20th-century Horthy regime.[26] As Benziger has written, "the success of Orbán's revised narrative of the interwar years is thwarted by an embedded dissonance found within the triumphal story of Hungary presented in curriculum and in text. There is unquestionably a disjuncture between the ideals of liberal revolution and the idea of the strong state."[27] The turnaround in new textbooks supported by the state raised concerns in schools, but – as it turned out later – these were only a transition to later amendments. It was noticeable, for example, that not only the person of Viktor Orbán was given a particularly positive mention in secondary school textbooks,[28] but also the political topics he favored at the time, such as migration, were given new emphasis within the framework of the political narrative presented by the regime.[29]

The latest NCC and GC were introduced in January 2020, also without significant professional and social debate. They continued and clarified the turn in the

memorial policy that the state expected of history teaching. While the earlier NCCs and GCs had clearly placed the development of competences at the center of history teaching, as opposed to content teaching,[30] this approach was reversed. In addition, it is striking that content has been reduced compared to previous requirements, and its internal proportions changed completely. The new content requirements are clearly stated in the NCC and GC texts themselves. For example: "The learning of history in schools is based on the study of history science and of the stories, facts, people, events, processes and phenomena that tradition has recognized as the most important." In other words, the NCC equates history science with "tradition," regardless of the fact that historical knowledge based on sources can obviously be at odds with traditions due to various biases.[31] The basic objective of history teaching in Hungary was defined as "strengthening national identity" and learning about the "basic values of our culture." The exclusive national perspective is openly stated instead of the European or universal perspective:

> One of the guiding principles of history teaching is to treat Hungarian history in its continuity, and European and universal history in an island-like way. The history curriculum focuses on the history of the Hungarian nation and Hungary. This is reflected not only in the proportion of topics and the level of detail of each topic, but also in the fact that several general European phenomena are presented through specific Hungarian examples.[32]

In other words, universal and European history should be studied as background knowledge or illustrations of Hungarian history, learning about national history has become a self-target, which is underlined by the fact that the purpose of history learning is the achievement of a "realistic and positive national conscience."[33]

Detailed analysis of the 2020 NCC highlights the most new and problematic aspects of the legislation:[34] It is not a question of memory policy, but it is very characteristic that the NCC does not respond to the modern challenges of education, as it considers the acquisition of knowledge important for the system, and does not place any emphasis on the acquisition of competences that can be developed through the learning of history. Analysts have also noticed that an exclusive national perspective can lead to distortions such as treating the legends of Hungarian prehistory as historical facts, the disproportionate framing of the role of Christianity, the emphasis on "national greatness," or the portrayal of Hungary as a victim in the Trianon Peace Treaty.

The Association of History Teachers in Hungary ("Történelemtanárok Egylete"/TTE) objected to theoretical aspects in the form of detailed criticism and proposals, and also highlighted the points of knowledge focus and the new ideological commitment.[35] The fact that the NCC has barely addressed the role of modern IT tools in historical cognition was identified as a serious problem ("this clearly marks a step back, to an outdated methodological universe"), NCC does not deal with source-critical methods, but places great emphasis on a rigid, chronological approach and on norm-following behavior and the ideological education. The Association of History Teachers in Hungary called the attention to specific points,

for example, the NCC speaks only of "victorious battles" in the context of the medieval Hungarian state, the Horthy regime appears in the text only as "the age of recovery" – it sends only "positive" messages, etc.[36] Education experts and political parties have also spoken of their concerns about the ideological shift in the NCC, but the government did not address the criticisms in any meaningful way.[37]

A few months after the publication of NCC, the first, new-approach textbooks were produced in a very short time. As regards textbooks covering the period from prehistory to the early modern period, history teachers have described as a serious mistake the fact that, although a textbook may be short, it is expected to cover a huge amount of information, and in a highly disproportionate structure, for example, ancient civilizations are covered in just two lessons.[38] A secondary school teacher said: "The book practically falsifies history at several points. In many cases, myths and legends are used as primary, historically credible sources, or disputable theories are presented as facts, while important, accepted facts are not mentioned."[39] On Hungarian prehistory, for example, textbooks presented a theory in line with the notion of a "glorious past," according to which Hungarians are descendants of the Huns and are not related to the other Finno-Ugric nations.[40] One of the textbook's authors defended the textbook's position in a public debate, calling its "innovations" in the history teaching a desirable direction for the changing Hungarian view of history.[41]

For many teachers, the new textbooks published after 2020 are simply not usable in the classroom, not only because of their ideological commitment, but also because of their outdated pedagogical methods. Krisztián Ungváry, a Hungarian historian who has analyzed recent textbooks, concludes that the Hungarian state history textbooks of the 2020s "are more like propaganda materials, and do not contribute to the understanding of historical events, but rather to the adoption of the National Cooperation System."[42]

In the political debates on textbooks, two periods have been particularly important: Hungarian prehistory and 20th-century history. It is therefore worth briefly illustrating how the representation of these periods has changed in the light of a sample textbook used in the 1990s and textbooks published after 2020.

Students of grade 9 in secondary schools learn history from the very beginning. Under the 2020 NCC, major and significant structural changes have taken place. In the 1990s, history was taught in 45 lessons, while in 2020 it will be taught in only 16 lessons,[43] and the proportion of subjects has changed significantly (see Table 12.2).

The previous history teaching placed a strong emphasis on knowledge of ancient civilizations, which accounted for 80% of the material of textbooks, but in 2020 this proportion was reduced to around 43%. The number of lessons on medieval world history and the beginnings of Hungarian history has not changed significantly (5 and 6, 4 and 3 lessons, respectively), but their proportion of the total curriculum has changed significantly. (In the case of medieval world history from about 11% to 37%, in the case of Hungarian history from about 9% to 19%.) In the case of Hungarian prehistory, the 1990s textbook stated that the Hungarian language belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family, but did not take a position on

Table 12.2 History textbooks used in the 1990s and after 2020

	Textbook used in 1990s	Textbook based on 2020 NCC	Textbook used in 1990s	Textbook based on 2020 NCC
	Number of lessons		*Proportion of lessons*	
Prehistory	3	0	6.67%	0.00%
Ancient history				
Ancient East	6	1	13.33%	6.25%
Ancient Hellas	12	2	26.67%	12.50%
Ancient Rome	15	2	33.33%	12.50%
Religions		2	*	12.50%
Middle Age until 11th century	5	4	11.11%	25.00%
Empires		2	**	12.50%
History of Hungarians and Hungary until 11th century	4	3	8.89%	18,75%
Total	**45**	**16**	**100.00%**	**100.00%**

Notes:
*   In the 1990s textbook, there are separate chapters on the Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman religions, in the 2020 textbook these are covered in one chapter. The history of Ancient Christianity is a separate lesson in both of them.
** The 2020 textbook discusses empires separately in the context of medieval universal history, with a lesson on the Hun Empire and a common lesson on Charlemagne's Frankish Empire and Islam.

the ethnic origin of the Hungarian nation.[44] Based on written sources and archeological finds, it tried to present in a factual manner the migration and settlement of the Hungarian people from Asia into the Carpathian Basin. The 2020 textbook gives equal status to the Finno-Ugric and Hun-Turkic theories on the origins of Hungarians,[45] with the latter more in line with the traditional view of the "glorious past." The authors of the textbook were clearly sympathetic to this view, if only because, despite the small number of lessons, they devoted a separate chapter to the 5th-century Hun Empire.[46] The authors regard the Hun Empire as a conquering empire of world historical significance. The earlier textbook barely mentioned the temporary success of Attila the Hun against the Roman Empire.[47] The situation is similar with the 10th-century campaigns launched by Hungarians settled in the Carpathian Basin against Western Europe. The old textbook acknowledged that these ventures were violent and "predator campaigns."[48] The authors of the 2020 textbook have tried to be "sympathetic" to these actions: They acknowledged that robberies had taken place, but focused more on the successes of the Hungarians in battle and their prominence in Europe.[49]

After the transition of 1990, there was a particular revival of interest in the history of the 20th century. Several textbooks with a new approach were published, of which perhaps the most popular was the textbook written by historian Konrád Salamon.[50] If we compare the chapters of this textbook dealing with the 20th century (1914 to the present) with the textbooks based on the 2020 NCC,[51] it can

Table 12.3 Subjects covered in history textbooks in the 1990s

	Textbook used in 1990s			Proportion of Hungarian history
	World history	*History of Hungary*	*Mixed lessons*	
First World War and consequences (1914–1920)	4	5	1	55.00%
Interwar period (1920–1939)	10	6		37.50%
Second World War (1939–1945)			4	50.00%
1914–1945	*14*	*11*	*5*	*45.00%*
History (1945–1988)	13	11		45.83%
From transitions to the present (1989–)	2	2		50.00%
1945–	*15*	*13*	*0*	*46.43%*
Total	**29**	**24**	**5**	**45.67%**

	Textbooks based on 2020 NCC			Proportion of Hungarian history
	World history	*History of Hungary*	*Mixed lessons*	
First World War and consequences (1914–1920)	5	4		44.45%
Interwar period (1920–1939)	3	3		50.00%
Second World War (1939–1945)	3	2	1	41.67%
1914–1945	*11*	*9*	*1*	*45.24%*
History (1945–1988)	6	7		53.85%
From transitions to the present (1989–)	2	8		80.00%
1945–	*8*	*15*		*65.22%*
Total	**19**	**24**	**1**	**55.68%**

be seen that the number of lessons dedicated to the history curriculum has also decreased significantly for 20th-century history. For changes in the structure of the 20th-century history curriculum and the number of lessons on each topic see Table 12.3.

For the periods from 1914 to the present, 58 lessons were intended in the 1990s, but in today's textbook this number is only 44, in addition, under the new NCC, history is taught in the last (12th) grade of secondary school from 1945, with the earlier period being covered in to the 11th grade. For the history of 1914–1945, the overall proportion of Hungarian history lessons did not change (about 45%), but in the post-1945 era, the rate is over 65%. In other words, it enforces the NCC's requirement that the teaching of Hungarian history should dominate, and lessons on other countries and international processes should be relegated to the background. In the case of post-1989 history, only two lessons deal with global knowledge and eight with Hungary. (The disproportion cannot be explained by the fact that in the textbooks of the 1990s there was less knowledge to share, as history was "shorter.")

It is also in line with the new NCC's approach that the textbook of 2022 is more "understanding" of the right-wing authoritarian regime of interwar Hungary. Just one illustration: The first anti-Semitic law in Europe after the First World War was passed by the Hungarian Parliament in September 1920. The so-called "numerus clausus" law enforced the "rate by nationality" for university admissions, it meant that members of national communities can be admitted to higher education only in proportion to their national share. The law was clearly directed against the Jewish people. The 1993 history textbook briefly but concisely explained the content of the law and its anti-Semitic character.[52] The 2022 textbook, on the other hand, provided a detailed explanation, in which it actually sought to make the 1920 adoption of numerus clausus "understandable."[53] (For example, there were too many intellectuals after the world war and Trianon peace treaty; there were too many Jews among the leaders of the communist dictatorship in 1919, and this increased anti-Semitism; a very high proportion of Jews were intellectuals; and in other countries there were also restrictions on university education for members of religious or ethnic minorities.)

The textbook, based on the 2020 NCC, is clearly more positive in its praise of right-conservative governments for the post-1990 era and more negative in its praise of left-liberal coalitions.[54] In the post-2010 period, certain passages accurately reflect the current communication of Viktor Orbán's government. On the current situation in the European Union, for example, it writes that the management of migration and the COVID epidemic has been effective only "between national frames," not at the European level and threatens to "further increase Brussels bureaucracy" and "damage the sovereignty of nations."[55] Elsewhere, again in line with the government's political narrative, it says that it is "a fact that the EU's central bodies and some member states (e.g., Hungary or Poland) have given different political answers on a number of issues … [and that this] is a source of serious tension," as these countries became victims of unfair attacks.[56]

Final thoughts: Case study from 2023 – illustration of the political importance of history textbooks

It is no coincidence that the textbook's text has provoked considerable responses in Hungary.[57] The 1956 revolution was indeed a pro-freedom and pro-independence movement supported by the masses of the Hungarian people, and the pre-1945 "fascist" elements did not play any serious role in it. Calling the revolution "regrettable events" and the Soviet invasion "legitimate" not only is a false narrative of history, but also echoes the language of the former communist dictatorship. Moreover, the 1956 revolution in Hungary was also the most important historical antecedent and foundation of the 1989–90 democratic transition.[58] In other words, anyone who questions the fundamental nature of the revolution is questioning the legitimacy of the democratic transition in Hungary.

In view of the above, it is extremely difficult to draw a firm conclusion, because the process of changing the memorial policy, which can be studied through history textbooks, has not yet been completed, despite the replacement of the core

curriculum and textbooks in the early 2020s. Hungary is currently at the stage of developing this process. Although there are unlikely to be any substantial changes in the short term, a radical overhaul of the framework for history teaching could lead to a process that could branch out in a number of directions later on. An illiberal interpretation of the past can be a way of gaining acceptance in society at large (in parallel with the popularity of Fidesz), but it can also provoke a strong rejection of it, especially from young intellectuals in bigger towns. Another possible consequence is that ideologically driven textbooks (especially among the less educated) promote a lack of interest in real historical problems, the loss of respect for science, and vulnerability to pseudoscience.

Notes

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Part 4

Conclusion

13 The Wild Wild East

A conclusion

Sabrina P. Ramet

The Wild Wild West in Hungary

Civic values are the mainstay of democracy, the foundation of political and social stability, and a precondition for domestic and international peace. Rooted in the Enlightenment-era writings of Benedictus de Spinoza, John Locke, Samuel von Pufendorf, and Immanuel Kant, among others, the chief civic values are also articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Charter of the European Union. The chief civic values are: the rule of law; toleration of religious, sexual, ethnic, and racial minorities; equality; respect for the harm principle; individual rights (and duties); and neutrality of the state in matters of religion (which is to say, freedom of religion and conscience). This volume has considered in what ways and to what extent post-communist Hungary, especially since Viktor Orbán's return to the prime minister's office in 2010, reflects or shows contempt for these universal values.

Perhaps the first thing to be noted here is that, under Orbán, the Hungarian political and economic system has functioned as a kleptocracy, in which foreign interests and local entrepreneurs not part of Fidesz's network were forced, over and over again, to sell their stock to Fidesz insiders. Chapters 1 and 2 both draw attention to the way in which the regime uses elections to legitimate its rule. The result, to use the term applied by András Bozóki and István Benedek in this volume, is a species of *electoral autocracy* or *competitive authoritarianism,* as Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have termed this phenomenon.[1] The keys to Fidesz's repeated success at the polls are the regime's conquest of the public mediascape and its flooding of Facebook with pro-regime propaganda, as noted by Attila Bátorfy in Chapter 3. Even so, Hungarian media are still classified as "partly free," with Freedom House reporting in 2023 that Hungary's "[p]ublic media continued to fail in fulfilling their public service function."[2] As Bátorfy notes, Fidesz set the conquest of the public media as one of its highest priorities, using both legal and semi-legal means to gain control.[3]

But bringing the most influential media under the control of Fidesz's circle was not Orbán's only priority. On the contrary, as Bozóki and Benedek explain, Orbán, the self-proclaimed "radical and conservative," also set out to tame and limit the capacity of the Constitutional Court, to amend the civil code, even to extend his

regime's influence into the cultural and educational sectors. These undertakings, and especially the corruption of the legal-judicial sphere, the shrinkage of media freedom, and the regime's assault on the rights previously enjoyed by sexual minorities brought Budapest into conflict with the European Union and the European Commission which, in April 2022, threatened to withhold funds already earmarked for Hungary unless certain reforms were adopted. Details are provided in Beáta Bakó's contribution to this volume.

Control of historical memory is of fundamental importance to any authoritarian regime or, if one prefers, hybrid regime. Thus, as Csaba Fazekas' chapter recounts, soon after returning to power in 2010, Orbán and Fidesz arranged for streets and public squares to be renamed, for new public sculptures to be erected, and for history textbooks to be rewritten.

The Catholic and Reformed Churches have figured as crucial allies for Fidesz. Without their support, Orbán could scarcely present himself as a defender of traditional values. Thus, after proclaiming in 2014 that he was constructing an illiberal system in Hungary, Orbán returned to this theme in 2018 to underline his equation of *illiberal democracy* with *Christian democracy.* Further, as László Kürti notes in his chapter on state Christianity, the leader of Fidesz "has touted the family as a primordial institution preserving Christian values," in particular giving his blessing to "the traditional heterosexual family model." The contraction of the rights of sexual minorities figured in this strategy. So too did the reduction of the number of legally recognized religious associations in 2011. How Hungarian women have responded to Orbán's allegedly "pro-family" policies and neo-traditionalism is the subject of the chapter contributed by Balázs Böcksei and Andrea Pető.

Neo-paganism, which has strengthened its presence in Hungary in recent decades, challenges the regime's model of religio-political symbiosis. Although neo-pagan groups in Hungary are polytheist, they are nonetheless "extremely heterogeneous," as Réka Szilárdi argues in her chapter for this volume. Of course, neo-pagans are a distinct minority in Hungary (as elsewhere), but they represent a symbolic challenge to the regime's religious model and at least implicitly to the "traditional" values championed by the regime.

Kristen Ringdal takes up the results of the most recent European Values Study in his chapter and points out, among other things, that Hungary was among the five least tolerant nations in 2017 when it came to ethnic diversity and was also recorded as figuring among the nations subscribing to more conservative values as regards gender roles. Ringdal also notes that, among the 36 countries surveyed, Hungarians registered the *least* trust in the fairness of the public media and the third lowest degree of political activism, with only Bulgarians and Romanians recording lower levels of political activism. Significantly, Ringdal points out that Hungarian values changed between 1990 and 2017, with Hungarians becoming less tolerant of other ethnic groups and less trusting of out-groups, but more satisfied with life in the course of the three decades between the two European Values Studies considered here.

Finally, in his reflections on the 2017 film *Coyote*, directed by Márk Kostyál, György Kalmár suggests that the film challenges its viewers "to think critically

about the kinds of life choices one can make, the state of civic values in Hungary, and the possibilities for individual action under such social and political conditions" as prevail in Hungary today. As Kalmár tells it, *Coyote* bears comparison with the 1954 Hollywood classic *High Noon*, in which the local marshal, played by Gary Cooper, postpones his retirement in order to confront a criminal returning to his town. The underlying values highlighted in *High Noon* are integrity, courage, and moral commitment to one's community. The same values are played out in Kostyál's "Eastern" (a play on the noun "Western"), with once again a solitary (male) hero making a stand – in the case of *Coyote*, to face down a corrupt land-lord. The film offered, rather transparently, an allegorical reflection of features of Hungary's backward countryside and the "post-communist jungle capitalism" – what one might call "the Wild Wild East." As in *High Noon*, the final showdown (in a brutal fist-fight in *Coyote*) ends with the death of the principal villain.

The record of Hungary's political evolution since 1989 and especially since 2010 reminds us that values can evolve over time and that ambitious elites can even change the dominant values of a society. It also serves as a reminder of Kant's advice (in *Perpetual Peace*) that governments can shape the values of a nation, whether for better or for worse.

Notes

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