

## Chapter 8

# The Illiberal Fabric

### Mapping the Geoculture of Viktor Orbán's Hungary

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#### The Multiple Sources of a Power System

Over the past decade, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and legal scholars have investigated the roots of democratic backsliding in Hungary. The rule of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been labeled as a “hybrid regime,” an “illiberal state,” a “soft despotism,” a “competitive authoritarianism,” “electoral democracy,” or even “ordo-nationalism.”<sup>1</sup> Analyses of the “System of National Cooperation” tend to focus on three partially overlapping levels: a legal, an economic, and a geopolitical one. By forcing through a new Constitution in 2011, the Orbán government implemented a legal appropriation responsible, according to critics, for the emptying out of the rule of law or, according to a less radical interpretation, for the transformation of the rule *of law* into the rule *by law* typical of authoritarian constitutional regimes.<sup>2</sup> With the infiltration of the private economy by the trustees of the party-state in a spiral of “accumulation” dominated by patronage and personal favoritism, the system has perverted market mechanisms. Thus, a semi-corporative economy has been created in the internal circuit, while on the international level Hungary is a full participant in economic globalization, and indeed today presents one of the most “open” economies on the continent, i.e., dependent on Western investment. An empirical analysis of global corporations and big business, primarily German, emerges, free from the anti-Hungarian rhetoric of the international press, as a fundamental underpinning of a system that has gained a reputation for reliability through generous tax breaks and a neoliberal approach to labor rights. This is unrelated to any consideration of the rule of law and respect for civil rights.<sup>3</sup> European cohesion and development

funds, which Orbán's system has been using with apparent efficiency, i.e., with a very high degree of absorption up to their temporary freezing in December 2022, also unintentionally provides additional lifeblood to the system. However, this is only rarely done for the benefit of the community or driven by calculations of economic rationality. The underlying aim is to control their management, excluding political opponents, and to make their own economic oligarchy the privileged beneficiary.<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, with the geopolitical reorientation from "decadent West" towards Russia, China, and Turkey enshrined, rhetorically speaking, in the slogan of opening up to the East coined in 2011, the system led by Orbán has placed Hungary in the position of a "bridge" between a West to which it does not feel it fully belongs and an East, from which it is divided by linguistic, cultural, religious, as well as historical-political codes. The opening to the East, imposed by the prime minister on a reluctant diplomatic apparatus, has, since 1989, progressively transformed foreign policy from a neutral and indeed shared ground for political action to an extension of political action and sovereigntist rhetoric used for internal use.<sup>5</sup>

Political and sociological studies have, thus far, measured the Orbán system in its relation to democratic standards. In this sense, Ágnes Bátorý has described post-2010 Hungary as a "grey zone suspended between liberal democracy and full authoritarianism"<sup>6</sup>; Béla Greskovits has described the mechanisms and painful stations of Hungary's "democratic backwardness" compared to other Central and Eastern European states;<sup>7</sup> previously, a model of guided, "selective,"<sup>8</sup> "and increasingly less competitive democracy, inspired by the Russian Putin model, had been theorized. Following the self-definition given to the system by Viktor Orbán himself in July 2014, scholars of the populist phenomenon have analyzed the country's transformation into a "laboratory of illiberal democracy."<sup>9</sup> An important conceptual innovation is due to András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, who, on the basis of the evolution of power practices since 2010, judge Orbán's system to be a "hybrid" subject, suspended between democracy and dictatorship and characterized by limited authoritarian impulses mitigated by external factors; in particular, membership of the European Union.<sup>10</sup> There is also no lack of more explicitly radical narratives on the "deficit" character of the Hungarian political order, on the "electoral autocracy"<sup>11</sup> imposed on the country in place of a far from perfect but genuine multiparty democracy, and on the Orbán system as an example of a criminal-style conquest of the state by a political force.<sup>12</sup>

As if to signal the difficulty of scholars in approaching an ever-changing system, the doyen of Hungarian political scientists, András Körösnýi repeatedly called the Orbán government a *regime* inextricably linked to the

figure of the founding leader and therefore incapable of evolving into a *system*. In a book published in 2020, Körösényi described on the Weberian model the Orbán system as a “plebiscitary leader democracy,” i.e., a *regime* whose authoritarian elements are produced by a drive endogenous to the mechanisms of modern mass democracy.<sup>13</sup> After much reluctance, the liberal-conservative Körösényi thus espoused the anti-exceptionalist thesis according to which Hungary’s “plebiscitary” democracy based on the undisputed authority of the leader is part of a global drive to twist democratic mechanisms. In this interpretation, Hungary becomes an experimental laboratory of global trends such as the mediatization and extreme personalization of politics of the populist style and, ultimately, of the breakdown of the liberal democratic order and the politics of “post-truth.” Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics’ mighty volume is probably the most ambitious attempt to systematize, thirty years after the political turn of 1989–90, the nature and evolution of political and social systems in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to introducing us into a taxonomic labyrinth that is of more interest to social scientists than to the historian, Magyar and Madlovics offer, starting from the macroscopic Hungarian case, a general model for understanding the slide of liberal democracy into a “patronage-based autocracy.”<sup>14</sup> According to the authors, of all the states in the region, Hungary has probably made the longest and most surprising “trajectory.” The long reform phase, which, firstly in the economic, and later in the political sphere, anticipated the collapse of the communist regime, was followed by a peaceful and mediated transition of power that enabled the country to quickly achieve the status of a functioning democracy. From 2010 onwards, however, the virtuous circle began to break down and the party of Prime Minister Orbán occupied all state apparatuses (*neo-patrimonialism*), and in a few years, transformed an imperfect democracy, defined as *patronage* because of the intertwining of public and private interests that characterizes every post-communist transition, into an autocracy based on the same principle but without any moral brake or legal impediment (*predatory state*). Since 2018, when the ruling party won its third consecutive supermajority in elections characterized by administrative pressure and procedural irregularities, the radicalization of the system has further accelerated, and the fourth consecutive supermajority won by Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz at the 2022 elections seem to show that this system cannot be democratically beaten on its own ground and following its own rules.

The many interpretations of the Hungarian democratic backsliding meet on two essential points. First of all, we are talking about a system that is historically unprecedented and very elusive on an analytical level since it oscillates between representative democracy and full authoritarianism, but

above all, it operates on an inclined plane of slow but constant radicalization. It is precisely the latest developments on which I will focus the second part of this essay that have deepened among opponents and independent analysts the awareness, as depressing as it is useful to confront reality, of a government that has now transformed itself into a system of domination with such an economic and social grip that it is impossible to imagine its fall by means of a normal electoral process. In other words, with a decade's delay compared to Russia, which had, since 2000, anticipated the de-liberalization trend. Hungary would definitively end the long post-1989 democratic interlude and return to different political models much more rooted in national history.

In a book on contemporary Hungarian political thought, political scientist Ervin Csizmadia analyzes Orbán's success as the logical and predictable result of the evolution of the Hungarian political system from the long period of peace guaranteed by the Compromise with the Habsburg Monarchy in 1867, to the almost thirty years that followed the post-communist democratic transition. All the long periods of government that ended with a traumatic upheaval were affirmed by sacrificing democratic and progressive impulses on the altar of stability, obtained by the prevailing hegemony of a government bloc over the oppositions, which were increasingly marginalized and discriminated against.<sup>15</sup> The Hungary of the 2000s would mark the ex-post triumph of the paternalistic and authoritarian culture of the Kádarian regime: a *mentality* that settled in the collective mentality to re-emerge powerfully following the crisis of liberal democracy: a crisis that from the beginning of the new millennium was in full incubation but was ignored or underestimated in its scope.<sup>16</sup>

## Rejection of Culture, Culture of Rejection

When faced with such disruptive developments, one has to wonder whether the political capacity of a leader, the demerits of the opposition, the economic difficulties following the economic and financial "crash" of 2008, or the favorable international context can account for such a blunt and fast regressive evolution. At the beginning of this chapter, I listed the three dimensions (legal, economic, geopolitical) through which scholars have so far tried to frame the Hungarian phenomenon. However, the question of the cultural project behind the political domination remains at the margins of analysis. Can we speak of an intellectually crafted "right-wing culture" emanating from the Orbán system? This is a highly controversial question. Many scholars of the Orbán phenomenon, both in Hungary and abroad, deny the system any ideological-cultural dignity. They argue that the only

glue now remains the misappropriation of national resources, a booty the prime minister is understandably unwilling to give up and in the name of which he will not hesitate to further radicalize if his political legitimacy is challenged. Others merely recall for the Hungarian case, following in the footsteps of Jason Stanley and Francis Fukuyama, the echoes of a *reactive* US identity “politics of resentment” compared to the identity politics of the liberal left in recent decades.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the right-wing culture that the system claims to express would be nothing more than a banal and disgusting mixture of populist nativism and a typically East-European vindictive and “ethnic” nationalism.<sup>18</sup>

In the international media outlets Orbán usually appears as the one who *closes* or *conquers* universities, research centers, cultural institutions. A *destroyer of culture*, intent on asserting in the country an updated version of the national kitsch of the regent Horthy’s time: that post-farming *inculture* of his native village of Alcsútdoboz in Kádár’s Hungary. A crude world, which Orbán has never repudiated but which he seemed to distance from at the beginning of his career.<sup>19</sup> In the summer of 2020, the Academy of Theatre and Cinema, long accused of being a liberal (so implicitly an “anti-national”) fortress, was transformed from a state university into a private law entity governed by a foundation and then removed from the “control” of the opposition by the appointment of a compliant board of directors. The new body did not hesitate to appoint as administrative director (*kancellár*), a career military man with no connection to the institution and its disciplines, but charged with putting an end to the student protests that led to the occupation of the university building.<sup>20</sup> A farcical repetition of General Jaruzelski’s coup d’état in Poland in December 1981, as former anti-totalitarian dissident, liberal politician, and Marxist theoretician Gáspár Miklós Tamás bitterly noted.<sup>21</sup>

The Orbán system embodies *an* authentic and ambitious *anti-liberal* cultural project, which is the most neglected and, in my opinion, the most essential dimension for understanding the reasons for the “democratic slide” that led Hungary to become the first EU state to be downgraded to a “partially free,” or *hybrid* regime in the Freedom House annual report for 2021.<sup>22</sup>

The antiliberalism of the governing Hungarian right does not completely overcome the traditional suspicion that most conservative movements have, for the world of culture and the academic sphere, perceived as intrinsically linked to *liberal* culture and therefore hostile, or at least alien. Their judgments and actions are sometimes influenced by the anti-Semitic and xenophobic impulses that were so prevalent in Hungary in the relationship between politics and culture in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, to dismiss as anti-Semitic all the organizational work that is expressed in new

institutions, centers, artistic and cultural *brands*, and international cooperation agreements condemns us to fail to understand the depth of what is happening in Hungary and its regional reverberations across East-Central Europe.

In my twenty years of academic life mostly spent in Hungary, I have met numerous intellectuals, professionals, thinkers, and ordinary citizens who shared an increasingly crystallized rejection of notions such as multiculturalism and “liberal” democracy. For the most part, they were educated, individually tolerant people who did not adhere to hate speech and verbal violence. Why do they support the nationalist policies of the Orbán system? The rejection of the *liberal* post-communist geoculture based on ‘imitation’ of Western models, evoked in the latest essay by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, may be a conceptual starting point.<sup>23</sup> Let us briefly explore the layers of memory and cultural codes that the Orbán system has reactivated to build its project of conservative cultural hegemony.

### Predatory State and Decomposed Memories

In his empirical research on the post-1989 transformations in Hungary, sociologist and political economist Gábor Scheiring identifies the roots of the post-2010 illiberal and authoritarian twist in the internal contradictions of post-Communist capitalism around an unsustainable dependence from global capital ideological impulses. The Orbanian “accumulative state” intercepted domestic and international economic resources (investments of global companies; European structural and development funds; privileged relations with China and Russia), “captured” the state machine using it parasitically for its own purposes, and used the fiscal lever to promote social policies that were both welfare and harshly neoliberal.

Cultural neoliberalism can be defined as the meeting point of predatory state mentality and nationalism. Starting from 2019, the government has been outsourcing and de facto privatizing the Hungarian public university system by transferring the institutional resources and tasks of the higher education centers to foundations created ad hoc. These brand-new bodies are governed by boards of directors whose members are appointed for life by the current government. Presented to the Hungarian public as an opportunity to improve the country’s scientific competitiveness, the seizure of power in the search for foundations linked to the Orbán system is characterized as an expropriation of public assets intended to create an informal and prosperous pro-government network of pundits and experts.

To what extent can we ascribe these actions, which outline a long-term strategy and a high degree of political rationality, to “populism” or the

often invoked “ethnocentric nationalism” that inform the rhetoric of the Orbán system regarding migration, the relationship between Christianity and Islam, or multiculturalism as theory and practice? Rogers Brubaker captured an essential point on the link between populism and nationalism when he described the asynchrony that dominates the mutual perceptions between the “West” and the “East” of Europe. While in the West the populist movements mourn the disappearance of a supposed French, British, or German “national state” and the nationalist discourse tries to reclaim concepts such as sovereignty, independence, and distinctive cultural traits, in the Eastern peripheries the national state appears to be a creature still in fieri, and national-populist governments represent a creative and ideologically open laboratory.<sup>24</sup> According to Siniša Malešević, the author of a perceptive book on the resilience of nationalism as historical phenomenon, nationalism should not be dismissed as an intellectually fragile idea, and least of all a historical abnormality and temporal irritation. Nationalism is rather the dominant form of modern subjectivity as the straight product of Western Enlightenment. Nationalism for Malešević is a “historically grounded and constantly evolving phenomenon,” defined by his “organizational capacity, his aptitude for articulating tempting ideological narratives at the popular level,” and his “ability to connect larger ideological projects with the universe emotional and moral of personal interaction.”<sup>25</sup>

Reckoning modern nationalism as a flexible, highly pragmatic, and rational ideological mindset helps us understand how the Hungarian cultural sovereigntism is not in contradiction with the Hungarian participation in the economic globalization and the Euro-Atlantic project.

The cultural policy of the Orbán system stems from the long journey that led a dissident of liberal and libertarian orientation to embrace neo-conservative anticommunism from 1993, and then discreetly internalize the collective memory of a society that had long identified with János Kádár without loving him. The unexpected electoral defeat suffered in 2002 at the hands of a socialist party that had operated heavily on the nostalgia factor served as a blunt reminder to the then-young former prime minister. Orbán had promised capitalism and prosperity with his Fidesz party, renamed “civic” and “bourgeois” in 1995. He had to confront an uncomfortable reality for the entire post-communist ruling class: the majority of the population did not trust capitalism and no longer believed in the fast coming of Western prosperity. On the contrary, they had learned to live with Kádarian neo-patrimonialism and moral nihilism by exploiting what the sociologist József Böröcz described as the widespread culture at every institutional and societal level of *informality and discretionary decision-making*.<sup>26</sup> Surveys conducted over the last twenty years regularly reveal a society

disappointed, or rather disillusioned, with the post-communist reality. A recent sociological survey on a large sample of Hungarians has not only shown that the absolute majority of Hungarians feel widespread nostalgia for the economic and social stability guaranteed by Kádár's socialism but, to the surprise of the researchers themselves, it has also shown that regret for the past regime cuts across all strata of society, bringing together voters of Fidesz and the opposition parties of both the left and the right. And the most nostalgic are precisely the most marginal classes, from social pensioners to the Roma, from the unemployed to the many who survive on starvation wages. Disillusionment with the West, fueled today by government rhetoric, is thus grafted onto a substratum of previous mistrust.<sup>27</sup> As an important empirical study on the social stratification and related cultural values of the population has just shown, the main losers of a system proudly placed in the semi-periphery of economic globalization are concentrated in the last third of the Hungarian social pyramid: exactly where nostalgia for a past that will not return reigns, and where in the 2018 general, 2019 local, and even more, the 2022 general elections, the government party raked in most of its votes.<sup>28</sup>

Trapped in their self-representation of custodians of the values of Enlightenment and progress, Hungarian cultural elites have taken for granted what was not at all: that the population shared their enthusiasm for democratic consolidation. In April 2019, the social anthropologist Chris Hann, director of the Max Planck Institute in Halle, with a knowledge and insight of rural Hungary, such as the small-sized Southern town of Kiskunhalas, issued a harsh warning to his liberal Hungarian friends and colleagues, who continued to regard Orbán as an annoying alien they could get rid of without intellectual engagement.

Viktor Orbán's populist messages are generally well received in Kiskunhalas. Liberal intellectuals in Budapest may sneer at these developments, deplore their fellow countrymen in the provinces, and insist on the moral superiority of their *urbánus* (cosmopolitan) views. Orbán's policies have undermined liberalism, but the elitism displayed by self-styled liberal intellectuals who are incapable of establishing any "cultural chemistry" with their compatriots in places like Kiskunhalas is destructive of democracy itself. Beyond the ranks of those who became professional politicians, the humanities and social science intelligentsia must bear some responsibility for where Hungary stands today. It took János Kornai a long time to grasp that decentralization brought about by privatization and the dominance of the market principle is no guarantee for a decent, democratic society. George Soros was perceptive in warning earlier than most of the dangers of "market fundamentalism." However, recent events have demonstrated

that slogans such as “open society” or “civil society” are no solution, if in practice they mean the proliferation of elitist NGOs of liberal orientation, communicating with foreign activists in English.<sup>29</sup>

We have reached the very core of our argument. The defeat of Western-style liberal democracy in post-communist Hungary can be best analyzed and explained in its cultural dimension. To understand the regression of Hungarian democratic culture in the last decade, it is necessary to examine, on the one hand, the responsibilities of the liberal elites in a process that has seen their rapid (self-)destruction, and, on the other, the *pars construens* of the project explicitly based of the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony.<sup>30</sup> This is what differentiates the pragmatic populist Orbán from his unpalatable epigones from Western Europe, whose cultural limitedness shines through at every governmental experience, and from his politically fragile Central European associates. The Hungarian prime minister has started the conscious and systematic creation of what Immanuel Wallerstein called a *geoculture*. In the theory of world-systems, by geocultures we mean the transformation of ideologies, which in turn were born as a reaction to the French revolution, into *systems*. From the early nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century, the global political thinking was dominated by the continuous clash between conservatism, as the expression of a counter-revolutionary sensibility inspired by trust in structures and hierarchy, and liberalism. The latter recognized natural hierarchies as the legitimate basis of authority while rejecting inherited hierarchies in the name of greater inclusion. Socialist radicalism wedged itself between these primordial geocultures, and the temporary winner of the competition would be that large “liberal centre,” which managed to integrate elements of both cultures into a dominant political project until its crisis of legitimacy starting in 1968. According to Wallerstein, the crisis of this project also marked the beginning of the crisis of the liberal world-system. As a reaction to the demands of 1968 and the universal affirmation of a new left-wing anti-discriminatory identity regarding notions such as race, ethnicity, and sexual identity, a “cultural counter-revolution” was launched that was fiercely opposed to these developments. The right/left fracture line thus shifted from the material conditions of society to the debate, or rather clash over values. As Wallerstein concludes, the center abandoned the theme of developmentalism as a way of overcoming global polarization and replaced it with that of globalization.<sup>31</sup> This paved the way for “neo-liberalism” as an economic theory, the “Washington consensus” as a policy direction and the egregious acronym TINA (*There Is No Alternative*) as a discouraging warning to potential opponents.

## Cultural Hegemony and the Decolonization of Conservative Identity

The rejection of the existing, specifically the rejection of a worldview shared by the cultural and academic establishment, does not automatically generate any new culture. Breaking out of the identity ghetto, the “decolonization of conservative identity”<sup>32</sup> requires a project and a vision. For a quarter of a century, and with particular intensity and success in the last decade, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has devoted enormous intellectual energies, administrative tools, and economic resources to achieving the goal of a radical change in the country’s ruling class and cultural elites. Since the mid-1990s, Viktor Orbán has embraced the critique of 1989 as a *revolution that had failed*, or at least remained *unfulfilled*. This argument was already dominant in the circles of the former Polish opposition coagulated around the Law and Justice party (Pis), which first came to power in 2005, well after Orbán’s illiberal turn. The starting point for the alternative interpretation of recent European historical events became, in Orbán, the conservative system change carried out by the old communist elites with the complicity of liberal dissidents and the Western world. The latter regarded post-communist Europe as a market of consumers but continues to ignore its demands. In this reading, 1989, deprived of any cathartic effect, is transformed into a *non-event*, a mass of betrayed hopes.<sup>33</sup>

Starting from this criticism, Orbán began to build in his originally liberal party a peculiar *geoculture*, a mixture of cultural sovereignty and acceptance of the rules of the game of economic globalization. Contrary to his Italian, French, or German counterparts, Orbán did not limit himself to protesting against the liberal “fake culture,” but set himself the goal of forging his own organic intellectuals and using them precisely as the European communist parties had done until the 1960s: as transmission belts between political impulses and the cultural sphere. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is essential to understand the sinister appeal of the occupation of cultural and academic “casemates.” In the fall of 1987, the future prime minister graduated *summa cum laude* with a thesis with the anodyne title “Social self-organisation movements in political systems: the Polish case”: a text dense with philosophical and sociological references devoted entirely to the analysis of the Solidarity experience.<sup>34</sup> Among the most frequently cited authors is Antonio Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* had long been a reference point for the reformist currents of the Hungarian left. Few would have imagined, however, that a logical leap and decades of political practice would have led the author of a thesis on the self-determination of civil society with respect to the

authoritarian state to claim full *sovereignty for* that same state over “intermediate bodies,” from trade unions to cultural institutions. All this using the Gramscian notion of hegemony as a compulsory cultural reference for the political strategy of Hungarian opposition movements to the communist regime. Viktor Orbán has applied to the letter the Gramscian precept concerning the occupation of “casemates” and has accompanied the extension of political power with the progressive occupation of cultural spaces.

After forty years of communist rule and subsequent left-wing formal and informal dominance over the cultural sphere, this plea required the creation of a parallel media system and an organic (para)academic and cultural circuit. The latter was not intended as merely contiguous to the party and its leader, but on permanent duty and willing to do anything to prevent external attacks and ideological backlash. In this neo-rightist culture that is both open to the world (especially to postcolonial theory) and hopelessly closed in on itself, internal discussions rarely emerge in the public sphere. While the Gramscian hegemony has served as a strategic guiding light in Orbán’s party, an extreme vertical centralism has dominated tactics. Intellectuals invested with public functions within the system are aware that the role entrusted to them is not a mere work assignment but a mission driven by a *higher national and party interest*.

In the sovereignist geoculture of Viktor Orbán’s system, the past and collective historical memory play a key role. In the last decade, the main passages of recent Hungarian history (1848; 1918–20; 1944–45; 1956) have received enormous attention from the regime.<sup>35</sup> 1848 became the occasion to mark a criticism of the Habsburg Empire, accused of Austrian imperialism, borrowed from populist intellectuals and right-wing publicity of the first half of the twentieth century. The 1920 Trianon peace treaty receives a complex mnemonic treatment: on the one hand, the injustice is emphasized and a painful and vindictive memory is perpetuated; on the other hand, a *conciliatory* discourse with the neighbors is articulated, emphasizing common roots and interests. Hungarian participation in the deportation of the Jews in 1944 is not denied, but rather framed in an anti-German context that assumes the turning point of the Nazi occupation of 19 March in relation to the anti-Jewish policies of Miklós Horthy’s regime.<sup>36</sup> The 1956 revolution is stripped of the fundamental contribution of the communist reformists led by Prime Minister Imre Nagy, reinterpreted in an anti-communist key or even—as during the celebrations for the sixtieth anniversary in 2016—reduced to a gesture of anti-ideological and pre-political generational revolt by the only remaining heroes: the “boys of Pest.” In recent years, any reference to the Soviet Union has also disappeared from the official narrative. The pervasive use of history by the Hungarian right after 1989 thus gives way, in the public

narrative of the Orbán system's past, to a highly selective and pragmatic use of events, characters, and themes. Evidence of this is the fact that the plethora of new historical and memory institutes created since 2014 (*Veritas* dedicated to the study of the period 1867–1944; the *Commission for National Remembrance* in charge of examining the communist regime; the *Institute for the Study of the Change of System*, created to study the transformations of 1989) have, on the whole, failed to undermine the prestige of the academic historiography headed by the main universities (Budapest ELTE, Szeged, Pécs, Debrecen) and the research network managed until 2019 by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.<sup>37</sup>

However, it is not academic prestige and scientific reliability that determine the success of a geoculture, but rather its ability to penetrate the general public, emerging from cultural niches and “intellectual bubbles.”<sup>38</sup> Orbán's system has perhaps conquered less than feared “high” culture, which is less permeable to political exploitation and the brutalization of public discourse. Instead, through an impressive array of tightly controlled public and private media, it dominates widespread popular culture and manipulates through the “virtual politics” of technologists (from the statistical and social research consortium *Századvég* to thematic think-tanks on migration, foreign, and security policy) the drives and desires of citizen-voters.<sup>39</sup> The average Hungarian citizen has been living in a world dominated by the messages and cultural sensibilities transmitted and mediated by political power. The (neo)conservative thinking that has inspired Orbán's party for decades now is transformed into political technology aimed at the maximum extension of power in a Schmittian sense.

The primordialist turn of postcolonial theory in Orbán's Hungary perfectly illustrates how a sovereign geoculture like the Hungarian one inserts itself into the academic debate at the cost of bending it to its own political goals.<sup>40</sup> Some ten years ago, the Marxist sociologist József Böröcz, a disciple of Wallerstein and a distinguished scholar of subaltern globalization, published a socio-historical analysis of post-1989 changes in which he took up Wallerstein's concept of semi-periphery to describe the dependence of post-communist Central and Eastern Europe on global capitalism. According to Böröcz, who clashed on this at length with his liberal colleagues, the European Union was using neo-colonial practices in the process of “enlargement,” incorporating without any introspection the notions of “empire” already developed in its major states and “coloniality” towards a smaller Europe to be “civilized”.<sup>41</sup>

A few years later, this critique from an academic on the radical left would unwittingly inspire the emergence of a post-colonial strand in the ideological rivulets of the Orbán system. Developing the critique of the Western

academic establishment initiated in the 1990s by the historian and ideologist Mária Schmidt, the “young Turks” of the cultural apparatus gathered around the monthly *Kommentár* and the weekly *Mandiner* have elaborated a self-standing identitarian vision. The main task of the new culture promoted by the system would be the liberation of conservative identity from the moral stigmatization, the constraints of political correctness, and the (self-) restraint imposed on right-wing and conservative views after the Second World War. On the basis of Yoram Hazony’s manifesto-book,<sup>42</sup> the historian of ideas Békés Márton recently called the “natives” (i.e., Hungarians who are proud of their country) to the rejection of liberal cultural imperialism and to the cognitive battle for the recognition of *national* sovereignty against *supranational* interests.<sup>43</sup>

One might object that this is intellectual gibberish, but this is precisely the point where the rational core of the system intervenes, transforming the most abstract elucubrations into cultural hegemony. In the summer of 2020, in the midst of the post-Covid recession, the government of Budapest injected the astounding sum of 300 billion forints (almost 800 million dollars), in the form of a stake in two major Hungarian stocks, the energy company MOL and the pharmaceutical giant Richter, into the *Mathias Corvinus Collegium* (MCC), which has been operating since 1996 as a college of excellence for talented college students without means.<sup>44</sup> What can be expected from the *Mathias Corvinus* in return for this generous donation? MCC already supports the education of more than ten thousand young talents in Hungary and has also opened individual mentoring and study support branches in the overseas regions of Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine with large Hungarian communities. It should be pointed out that MCC was previously famous for its professionalism, which guaranteed a stimulating intellectual environment for those working or studying there. From the forge of MCC, a new state apparatus and also a new model of “organic intellectual” seems to emerge in contemporary Hungary. An intellectual insofar as it is trained in qualified and selective schools, in a context that is not at all provincial but on the contrary rich in transnational stimulus (MCC regularly invites important foreign scholars to give lectures and seminars restricted to members of the colleges of excellence). In the provinces and beyond the Hungarian borders, MCC offers thousands of young high school and university freshmen a unique opportunity to integrate into the system, acting as a transmission belt and making them superspreaders of the official nationalist ideology. At the same time, MCC is ready to repay the favor granted to it by the party-state. Between 2020 and 2021, MCC was successfully coopted into *Libri Bookline*, with a strategic share of 25 percent and a say in its editorial lines.<sup>45</sup>

As the market leader in the domestic online and offline book selling, *Libri Bookline* is an outstanding cultural asset for shaping educated public opinion. With this step, Orbán's party grants itself informal control of the whole domestic publishing market through a formally private body such as the *Mathias Corvinus Foundation*, whose president is none other than the 36-year-old undersecretary of the presidency of the Council for Strategic Affairs, Balázs Orbán. This young and intellectually engaging graduate in law and political science and former scientific director of a government think-tank recently emerged as the key figure in the construction of a new conservative geoculture. In June 2023 the *Mathias Corvinus Foundation* stake in the leading publishing house increased to 98 percent of the stock, and political pressure on the market began with a law requiring bookstores to hide literature from "gender nonconforming" content. The circle seems to be closing.

The sovereignist geoculture of Viktor Orbán's system has,, over the last decade, become a complex mixture of the archaic and the modern; past and future; Western tools and anti-Western visions. It feeds on the myth of a West regenerated precisely in Central and Eastern Europe, the cradle of a more traditionalist variant of Western civilization, from the rubble of a "decadent society" that fell victim to its own global success and liberal identity drift.<sup>46</sup> While roughly a third of the Hungarian population keeps on living a life of hardship without any prospect of social advancement, the system exploits its own failure in integrating a fragmented society to feed the myth of the construction of a "new Europe": no longer the misunderstood semi-periphery of the Western world but the new pole of attraction of culturally pride and sovereign nations.

### Elephant in the Room? Orbán's Hungary and the European Integration Project

Viktor Orbán's notion of sovereignism as supreme expression of "national," self-standing politics comes from his Schmittian view of politics as perennial conflict. Although he has long been almost unlimited domestic power, Orbán continues to conceive the political agon as a battlefield on which ideas, values, alternative, and mutually incompatible visions of the world collide. There is much debate whether the ideology Orbán imposes on his country and proposes to the rest of Europe can be regarded as the fruit of genuine intellectual spin or if it is rather a political marketing product conceived over the last decades by right-wing global spin doctors of the caliber of the recently deceased Arthur Finkelstein. For him, Orbán's Hungary represented the last and the most intellectually challenging project.<sup>47</sup>

Should we conclude that the power system built up by Orbán is intimately “anti-European”? Does Hungary pose any real risks to the European integration process? In the last part of this chapter, I will argue that despite making an instrumental use of political-philosophical categories such as nation and sovereignty and demonizing and dehumanizing real or alleged liberal opponents, Orbán aims to present himself not as an “anti-European” maverick but rather as the informal leader of a post-liberal alternative Europe.

Orbán’s thesis is that two philosophical visions collide in today’s Europe. The first is based on the idea of “becoming,” in which Europe is permanently transformed by its own choice through the reshaping of political structures and identity cultures. Although this process does not imply the overcome of national markers, it requires European citizens to be willing to give up increasing shares of their specific (national, religious, cultural) identity. According to this transformative vision, Europe is on the way to becoming an open continent; a society not only transnational but also post-national, a melting-pot experiment “by invitation,” as the first-generation Europeans are more or less explicitly asked to guarantee the demographic reproduction of the continent.

As Timothy Snyder—an advocate of the fast Europeanization of the Eastern peripheries—claimed in 2015 right after the first Russian aggression to Ukraine, the European Union as envisioned under the Lisbon Treaty signed in 2007 could be best understood as a “post-imperial economic project” led by democratic and multicultural Germany, a country that after dramatically losing its own ideologically driven empire in 1945 was more prepared than any other European power to undertake a paradigm shift. This deeply emotional factor destined the European Union to become an “empire by invitation,” reluctant to grow but continuously forced by external events to do so, and this makes the European Union so attractive to candidate countries, despite all negative news coming about the union’s internal life. According to this view, the European Union could represent a solution to the problems posed by last century’s wars and as a way of solving the “decolonization problem,” that is to say, the persistent social inequalities within Europe.<sup>48</sup>

On the contrary, the European vision of Orbán hinges on the concepts of political stability and ethnic cohesion. Orbán’s explanation of European history of the last millennium highlights three fundamental moments: the expansion of Christian civilization in the Middle Ages, the successful defense of Central Europe from the civilizational threat of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and finally the peaceful overcoming of the East-West conflicts after 1989. In Orbán’s view, the old continent’s history not only explains its past but also determines its future. Putting

aside all internal cleavages, Orbán considers the continent a historical-cultural *koiné* based on the Judeo-Christian heritage: the idea of the “West,” in Orbán’s thinking, is strongly supremacist and culturally exclusive. The West in which Orbán believes acts in the name of its citizens, without opening the doors to those immigrants who might destabilize it from within. If Western Europe—as the Hungarian Prime Minister has repeatedly declared—abdicates its task of protecting Europe from catastrophe, this salvific role must be assumed by Central-Eastern Europe; that is, by those countries that have emerged from a long series of foreign domination (from the Ottoman to the Soviet empire). These countries may well act as a new barrier of both moral values and material civilization that Western Europe has appeared to give up. The main controversial target here is, of course Islam, but in Orbán’s discourses on Europe, we also find a series of ethical questions that find a common thread in the demographic challenge: from the rights of same-sex couples to the legalization of euthanasia, from abortion to tax benefits for large families to the detriment of singles or couples without children.

Orbán’s bitter criticism of the “collective West” echoes the paranoid tirades of the Russian state propaganda, but the two phenomena are not to be confused. As the longest serving prime minister of the whole European Union, Orbán enjoys the privileged status of being a deep *insider* within the European Union’s internal debate. Over the past two decades, Orbán and other “illiberal” political leaders of the region have acquired expertise of mechanisms of the European Union. His assertiveness is motivated by the premise that the countries of the region, like Hungary, have finally rejoined the West they have always belonged to, and they have the right to speak from a “Western” standpoint without being forced to take political and moral lessons from anyone. Orbán believes that living in a multipolar era of global diplomacy and of internal power relations in the European Union, should encourage the Central and Eastern European elites to stand up to “imperial Brussels” for their particular interests. As one of most prominent “organic” intellectuals devoted to Orbán’s cause, the recently passed political scientist George Schöpflin stated in one of his latest writings, “the West no longer has a monopoly in defining democracy. This development is decidedly unpopular in the left-liberal West, which continues to insist on its being the monopoly owner of democracy, and that democracy is automatically liberal. A moment’s thought will show that liberalism is not a necessary condition of democracy and that democracy is not a necessary condition of liberalism.”<sup>49</sup>

Until recent times, the carrot and stick approach of the EU Commission towards Hungary—intended as a combination of strategic/economic appeasement via cohesion funds and ineffective moral stigmatization of illiberal practices—has proved wrong and even counterproductive. Those who

threatened sanctions in the name of “European values,” without starting a conversation about the future of Europe, unwillingly legitimized Orbán’s criticism of “double standards” of the European liberal establishment. In fact, Orbán’s reasoning on Europe is not the product of a fringe delirium, nor can it be classified as a mere proxy of a Russian anti-Western and anti-European disinformation campaign. It is rather a rationally expressed political and cultural alternative to the European federal project, based on the faith in the long-standing supremacy of the national factor in global politics.

The complex power system of Orbán’s Hungary has such a strong grip on the internal narrative any alternative platform would fail to overcome it from within. The legal framework and the informal networks established by the system at every level of the Hungarian society make Orbán’s triumphant victories unavoidable. In this context, the external pressure—mostly coming from the European Union—might become a critical factor. On 27 April 2022, several weeks after the Hungarian general elections and twelve years since Viktor Orbán’s first parliamentary supermajority, the European Commission activated the budget conditionality procedure against Hungary. This unprecedented step makes it possible to subordinate any further distribution of EU financial support to member states to the respect of the rule of law and fundamental rights.<sup>50</sup> It remains to be seen whether external factors, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine and the now concrete trigger to deprive the country of European cohesion and recovery funds will force the “elephant in the room” Orbán to retreat from illiberal geoculture to avoid losing power.

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## Notes

1. The notion of ordo-nationalism underlines the interplay between cultural nationalism, social order, and neoliberal economic policies in Viktor Orbán’s attempt to establish a long-standing authoritarian hegemony. Geva, “Orbán’s Ordonationalism as Post-Neoliberal Hegemony”, 71–83.

2. A general framework in Tushnet, "Authoritarian Constitutionalism," 391–461. Reference to the Hungarian case at 433–35.
3. An outstanding analysis of the political economy of the Orbán system as a case of an abnormal response to the crisis of the liberal model of an open semi-peripheral economy dependent on external stimuli in Scheiring, *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy*.
4. Szabolcs Panyi, *How Orbán Played Germany, Europe's Great Power*, in <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/a-magyar-nemet-kapcsolatok-rejtett-tortenete/>, 18 September 2020, last accessed 28 September 2020.
5. Hettyei, "The Europeanization of Hungarian Foreign Policy and the Hungarianization of European Foreign Policy," 125–38.
6. Batory, "Populists in Government?" 283–303.
7. Greskovits, "The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe," 28–37.
8. Varga and Freyberg-Inan, "The Threat of Selective Democracy," 349–72.
9. Enyedi and Krekó, "Explaining Eastern Europe," 39–51.
10. Hegedűs and Bozóki, "An Externally Constrained Hybrid Regime," 1173–89.
11. Ágh, *The Transformation of the Hungarian Party System*, 201–222.
12. Magyar, *Post-communist Mafia State*.
13. Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai, *The Orbán Regime*, 2020.
14. Magyar and Madlovics, *The Anatomy of Post-Communist Regimes*, in particular 653–56.
15. Csizmadia, *A magyar politikai fejlődés logikája*, 363.
16. For a detailed account of the roots of the democratic crisis, I refer to my book *Orbán*, 99–148.
17. Stanley, *Us against Them*, in particular Ch. 3 on anti-illectualism; Fukuyama, *Identity*, in particular ch. 11 on the phenomenon of anti-liberal identitarianism.
18. See Hans Kohn's seminal research, *The Idea of Nationalism*, which inspired many subsequent reflections on the nationalist phenomenon.
19. For the biographical context I would refer to my biography of the Hungarian prime minister: *Orbán*, 19–22.
20. See on this [https://insighthungary.444.hu/2020/10/01/military-colonel-appointed-chancellor-of-budapests-university-of-theatre-and-film-arts?fbclid=IwAR2nf3oeLV4Zhnta0tBXGBtgoF\\_t3rRP\\_A8aoUu9yKuwfFxHsg-QwBsJBNE](https://insighthungary.444.hu/2020/10/01/military-colonel-appointed-chancellor-of-budapests-university-of-theatre-and-film-arts?fbclid=IwAR2nf3oeLV4Zhnta0tBXGBtgoF_t3rRP_A8aoUu9yKuwfFxHsg-QwBsJBNE), last accessed 2 October 2020.
21. Gáspár Miklós Tamás, *Mini-Jaruzelski a próbaszínpadon*, at <https://444.hu/2020/10/01/tgm-mini-jaruzelski-a-probaszinpadon>, last accessed 2 October 2020.
22. See the report *Nations in Transit 2022*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2022/from-democratic-decline-to-authoritarian-aggression>, last accessed 21 April 2022.
23. Krastev and Holmes, *The Light That Failed*.
24. Brubaker, "Populism and Nationalism," 44–66.
25. Malešević, *Grounded Nationalism*, 8.

26. Böröcz, "Informality Rules," 348–80.
27. The result of the research in the volume edited by András Bíró-Nagy, *Orbán 10. Az elmúlt évtized a magyar társadalom szemével*, Budapest, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung—Policy Solutions, 2020, downloadable at [https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/306/orban10\\_final.pdf](https://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/306/orban10_final.pdf), last accessed 16 September 2020.
28. Éber, *A csepp*.
29. Chris Hann, *A Betrayal by the Intellectuals*, 8 April 2019, at <https://www.eurozine.com/betrayal-liberal-intellectuals/>, last accessed 13 September 2020.
30. The most ambitious attempt to take conservative possession of Gramsci is in Békés, *Kulturális hadviselés*.
31. Wallerstein, *Understanding the World*, 130.
32. Czopf, "A konzervatív tudat dekolonizációja," 7–9.
33. The crisis of the liberal narrative of 1989 as turning point of global history in Central and Eastern Europe has been thoroughly analyzed in Mark, Iacob, Rupprecht, Spavkovska eds., *1989. A Global History of Eastern Europe*, 22–24.
34. Bottoni, *Orbán*, 27–28.
35. See a nimble introduction to Orbánian memory politics in Benazzo, "Not All the Past Needs To Be Used," 198–221.
36. Mária Schmidt, *És az én érzékenységem nem számít?* Népszabadság, 12 July 2014. Link [http://nol.hu/belfold/schmidt-maria-es-az-en-erzenyensegem-nem-szamt-1473777?utm\\_source=mandiner&utm\\_medium=link&utm\\_campaign=mandiner\\_202204](http://nol.hu/belfold/schmidt-maria-es-az-en-erzenyensegem-nem-szamt-1473777?utm_source=mandiner&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=mandiner_202204) last accessed 28 April 2022.
37. On the institutional transformations in Hungarian academia and their impact for freedom of research and expression I refer to Bottoni, "War on the Academy," 8–13.
38. On the role of media and social networks see Péter Krekó, "How Authoritarians Inflate Their Image."
39. The interpretative framework of the phenomenon is in Wilson, *Virtual Politics*.
40. Conrad, *Storia globale*, 57–64.
41. Böröcz, *The European Union and Global Social Change*.
42. Hazony, *le virtù del nazionalismo*.
43. Békés, "Mi, bennszülöttek."
44. [https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/06/19/megkapta\\_az\\_allami\\_reszvenyeket\\_a\\_mathias\\_corvinus\\_collegium/](https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/06/19/megkapta_az_allami_reszvenyeket_a_mathias_corvinus_collegium/), last accessed 18 August 2020.
45. See on this, <https://litera.hu/magazin/osszeallitas/belathatatlan-kovetkezmenyei-lesznek-libri-kontra-mcc.html>, last accessed 23 November 2023.
46. Douthat, *The Decadent Society*.
47. The most comprehensive portrait of this outstanding conservative campaign strategist in Hannes Grassegger, "Die Finkelstein Formel."
48. Timothy Snyder, "Integration and Disintegration."
49. György Schöpflin, "'Il liberalism' Is Not Anti-Liberal," in <http://heretica.com.hr/interview-gyorgy-schopflin-illiberalism-is-not-anti-liberal/?fbclid=I->

- wAR2xOWYejA9BfIZ2k7Wv0x0LBRI3qeDLK2uHg9V0itWBi-yivr3VgL-Rx2U, last accessed 20 April 2022.
50. Eszter Zalán, “EU Starts Unprecedented Rule-of-Law Probe Against Hungary,” in *Euobserver*, 27 April 2022. Link <https://euobserver.com/rule-of-law/154810> last accessed 28 April 2022.

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