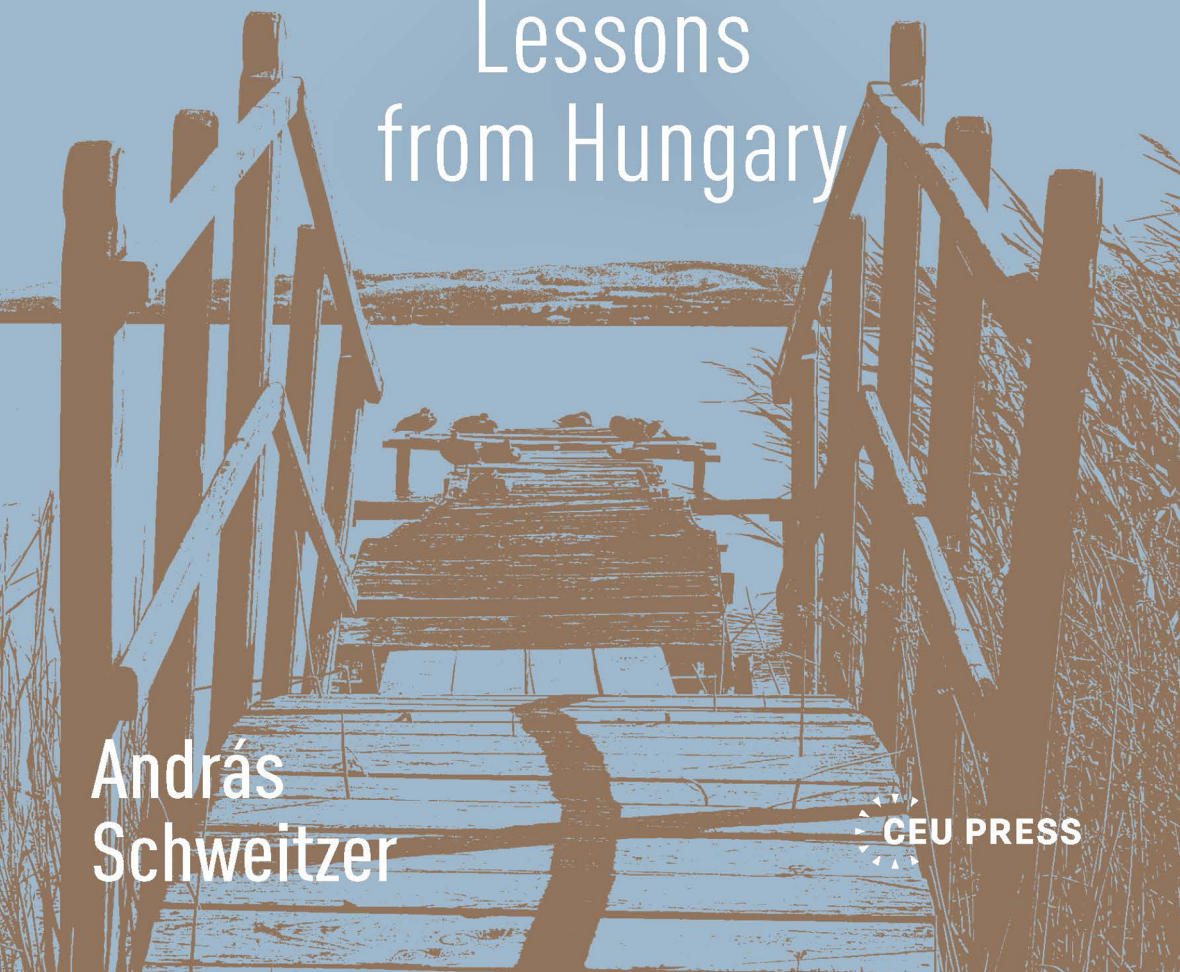
What Makes or Breaks a Democracy

Lessons from Hungary



András Schweitzer

CEU PRESS

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Preface

Abstract: The post-1989 political transformation of Hungary is a topic the author has been dealing with since it began. He studied its aspects at various higher education institutes, reported about it for different outlets, analyzed it for a research institute, taught about it at universities, and lived it as a concerned citizen. The author is grateful to his teachers, colleagues, friends, and family for their ideas, encouragement, and support.

Keywords: professional life, acknowledgments

Revolutions keep recurring periodically in Hungary. One of them just happened in April 2026. It ended the hybrid regime of Viktor Orbán, which called itself the "System of National Cooperation."

This peaceful turnaround, or electoral revolution, is the last of the major milestones in the Hungarian story of democratic ups and downs (which is the topic of this book). In its significance, it is similar to 1989, the annus mirabilis, which brought democracy to Hungary quickly and peacefully, and to 2010, when Orbán came to power with a two-thirds majority and then gradually set about dismantling that democracy.

The 2026 miracle means a lot to Hungary, to me personally, and to this book, too. For Hungary, it promises to bring back democracy, and there are indeed good signs that it will. For me, it means the hope that I will not have to feel ashamed of the words and actions of my government gobbling up everything valuable in the country while attacking the vulnerable inside and out. I will not have to go to demonstrations regularly without much hope that they can achieve anything, and I will not have to constantly prepare for where I would go when the last islands of normalcy (e.g., my workplace) melt away.

For this book, the change means an unexpected opportunity. It deals with the post-1989 Hungarian political course. It analyzes causes of the downturn with the aim of drawing lessons about how to make and maintain

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a democracy. I thought they would be useful for many places around the world, but not yet here. The peer-reviewed manuscript was already with the editors when the miracle of the 2026 election happened—and the content suddenly became relevant for Hungary after all. The lessons I gathered can come home.

This stroke of luck parallels an earlier moment in my life. I consider it a great gift that I reached adulthood just before 1989. I witnessed how Hungary, together with other nations in the region, embarked on a profound transformation from a Soviet-occupied communist dictatorship toward becoming an independent country with a democratic political system, a free-market economy, and an open society. My passion for the topic of political transformation is therefore as old as my engagement with the subject itself.

I was also lucky that I could engage with the matter in so many ways, both professionally and personally, and that I met so many great people on the journey. I owe them a lot, and they are all in this book.

I have been *studying* Hungary's transformation. In 1989, the university I entered was transforming along with the country. It soon changed its name from Karl Marx University to the Budapest University of Economic Sciences—and, by the time I got my PhD, it had become Corvinus University of Budapest. We still had courses on "planning the people's economy" (*népgazdasági tervezés*), but a group of professors had already started to teach microeconomics from a brand-new book whose content could have been used in Chicago or London. I also took courses in political science at Széchenyi Szakkollégium, a special higher education institute for advanced studies, and I studied contemporary Hungarian history at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University and at the Central European University (CEU). I am indebted forever to a long list of professors I encountered at those institutions, including Zoltán Balázs, János Gyurgyák, Ignác Romsics, Balázs Trencsényi, and, above all, János M. Rainer.

I have been *reporting* about Hungary's political, economic, and social developments as a journalist for a long time. My first article from early 1990 was published in *Közgazdász* (Economist), the official university magazine, written together with my long-time friend, József Martin (now head of Transparency International, Hungary). From 1991, I worked as a freelance journalist for dailies (*Világgazdaság*, *Magyar Hírlap*, *Népszabadság*) and weeklies (*Magyar Narancs*, *Budapest Week*, *HVG*). I stayed with the last of these, the highest-circulation political weekly, often dubbed "*The Economist* of Hungary," and I worked there for a decade and a half. I covered political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the transformation of Hungary in news articles, feature stories, and interviews—and I edited many more

written by other journalists. I learned a lot from friends and colleagues: Gábor Murányi, Balázs Illényi, Zsuzsanna Balázs, Pál Réti, and many others. I also talked to wonderful people and eminent experts along the way, like András Bozóki, Erzsébet Szalai, Zsolt Enyedi, and leading American academics such as Mark Kramer and Timothy Snyder.

I have been *researching* Hungary's transformation. Describing and evaluating different modes of privatization was the topic of my first university term paper in the early 1990s, when the process had hardly begun. Two decades later, at CEU, I learned a lot from participating in a comparative research project by Kirk Hawkins on East-Central European populism. I then became involved in a multiyear project of one of the most prestigious Hungarian contemporary history research organizations, the 1956 Institute. The topic was the reemergence of the right-wing tradition in 1989. I analyzed the relevant Czech story and compared it to that of Hungary. I also conducted life-story interviews with former Hungarian conservative politicians, like Péter Ákos Bod, for the oral history archive.

I have been *teaching* courses about the contemporary politics of Hungary. I taught a seminar at Széchenyi Szakkollégium on contemporary political ideologies before I became a professor at the Institute of Political and International Studies of ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in the autumn of 2016. I soon started to teach classes as a visiting professor at Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia. I gave lectures, presented at conferences, spoke at workshops in many places, and got feedback from many wonderful people. Special thanks to Ákos Kopper and Andrew Ryder.

I have also been *living* the changes as a concerned citizen. Hungary's transformation in both directions has been a living experience for me, a sort of "deep hanging out."[1] I participated in an endless number of demonstrations, from an environmentalist opposition gathering in Nagymaros in late 1988 to the extraordinary Budapest Pride carnival in 2025. I was an election observer in 1994. I was vice chair of the Hungarian Europe Society (HES), collaborating with István Hegedűs, Zsuzsanna Végh, and Györgyi Kocsis. I met many dedicated activists at the coordination meeting of NGOs that were legally attacked by the government.

Finally, I have been *formulating my own ideas* about the changes. My first analyses remained unpublished as typewritten manuscripts. In a 1993 essay, which won me my first color TV in a democracy essay competition, I

1 A term coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz; a participant observation technique of gaining knowledge by immersing oneself in a social experience on an informal level for an extended time period.

claimed that a triangular arrangement of the political ideologies of socialism, liberalism, and nationalism better explains the Hungarian political field than the usual left–right scale, and that a national and a social minimum alongside a liberal one is needed for democracy to exist. I also typed out two opinion pieces about the political dangers facing Hungary. One argued that the extreme, toxic, *longue durée* political-cultural polarization of Hungarian society has had a devastating effect and has hampered social progress (Schweitzer, 1993). In the other, I suggested that the overly majoritarian electoral system of Hungary should be changed to a more proportional one because otherwise a future winner could introduce an undemocratic constitution (Schweitzer, 1994).[2] It took years before my writings appeared in *HVG* and decades until they got into *The Guardian*. The essay in which I first explained Hungarian democratic backsliding was prepared for the excellent contemporary historiography seminar of János M. Rainer. It was later published as "The Revolving Door—Seven Reasons for Hungary's Autocratic Turn" (Schweitzer, 2014a) and then, in a condensed version, as "Factors That Made Hungary a Borderline Democracy (and Are Likely to Stay)" (Schweitzer, 2014c). I again received invaluable feedback from people like Charles Gati and Kim Lane Scheppele.

This book builds on all these experiences. Further research changed my mind on some of my earlier ideas and, at the same time, confirmed others. For example, I now believe that I exaggerated culturalist explanations. They are important, but less so than I thought. Nevertheless, I found myself circling back to my ideas on how dangerous political-ideological polarization and a disproportional electoral system can be, and how a socialism–liberalism–nationalism triad—especially with conservatism as a fourth pole—explains the ideational basis of democracy. This unpolished and unpublished idea—now more than three decades old—is the core argument of this book.

And so, I feel a bit like the protagonist of a short story by Frigyes Karinthy. It is about a kid who composes a soulful melody for the violin and would like to play it for an audience in the circus. But he has to spend decades learning how to be an acrobat, until he is finally allowed to go on stage, construct a

2 In 2010, it turned out that the warning about the Hungarian electoral system was quite accurate, although I missed the date by 12 years when a party would be able to abuse the system after securing a supermajority. As for my other unpublished piece, titled "The Hungarian Foucault's Pendulum," leading Hungarian philosopher János Kis 20 years later described the same detrimental *longue durée* oscillation and polarization in detail and called it Hungary's "hundred years' war" (Kis, 2013). This might be the result of the same inspiration from István Bibó, probably the greatest 20th-century Hungarian political thinker.

towering stack of a pole, a table, and chairs, and balance his way to the top in front of the terrified audience, so that finally he can pull out his violin and play that old childhood melody (Karinthy, 2012).

For helping me along the journey that led to this book, I am grateful to a long list of people. Besides the ones already mentioned, these include my excellent high school teachers (especially Katalin Balassa and Péter Bihari), my wonderful high school and university friends (Gyuri László, Gábor Bartha, Ildikó Kádár, Zoltán Török, Petra Kovács, Vera Messing, and many more), and a long list of academic colleagues with whom I discussed aspects of the work, or who commented on a draft: Andrew Arato, Vratislav Havlík, Vít Hloušek, Kriszta Kovács, Zsolt Körtvélyesi, Zoltán Gábor Szűcs, and Edit Zgut-Przybylska. A doctoral student, Daniel Ternyik, diligently helped to collect resources for the book. Careful editors of CEU Press helped to shape and sharpen it professionally.

Above all, I am immensely grateful to my family, who made my childhood happy and who taught me most of what I know; my loving grandparents; my caring and kindhearted mother; my dedicated and wise father; my uncle and my cousin for ice-skating in winter and for playful summers in Szeged; my wonderful kids, who helped me all the way with inspirational ideas and with technical support. Finally, I express my most heartfelt gratitude to the nice, smart, and cheerful Babszi for her insightful thoughts, constant encouragement, and love.

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Introduction: Democracy, Hungary, Explanations

Abstract: The central question of the book is: Why was the successful democratization of Hungary followed by deep democratic backsliding? The path of democratization followed by Hungary after 1989 can be illustrated by a playground slide: a steep upward "ladder" in 1989–1990, then a long plateau until 2010, and then a continuous downslide. Lots of explanations have been offered for de-democratization in general and for the Hungarian process in particular—but the factors can be essentially narrowed down to seven. Analyzing them comparatively is the focus of this book: comparing each factor's effect between the democratization and the autocratization phase, and between Hungary and elsewhere in the region.

Keywords: democratization, democratic backsliding, Hungary, narrative, causality

No matter how I try, my story about post-1989 Hungary will not be as entertaining, funny, or straightforward as the Aesopian fable about Orbán's necktie.

That anecdote has many versions, but they all go something like this: At the dawn of Hungarian democracy, members of the new political elite were coming together for some ceremonial event (a reception, or the reburial of Imre Nagy, or the opening session of the first democratic parliament). There, a middle-aged liberal politician, Miklós Haraszti, approached the young radical Viktor Orbán and condescendingly corrected his necktie. Orbán was a sensitive politician. He was representing Fidesz, a party consisting mostly of youngsters from the countryside. Originally, Fidesz was a natural ally of the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, hereafter SZDSZ), which was dominated by liberal intellectuals from Budapest, like Haraszti. This gesture changed everything for good. Under Orbán, Fidesz

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gradually started a drift toward becoming a conservative and then a right-wing populist organization. At the same time, it emerged as a rival, then an opponent, and eventually an enemy of SZDSZ and liberalism. And so, in the end, Orbán turned Hungary into a populist autocracy.

Clear and concise, the story has been told in endless different ways (see, for example, the newly published "mini-memoir" by none other than Haraszti [2025]). It was turned into a poem. It was mentioned in political essays by top analysts. It appeared in articles in newspapers from *Der Spiegel* to *The Wall Street Journal*. In a 2017 article in *Die Zeit*, even the condescending words are recorded ("Viktorchen, das lernen wir noch"—roughly: "Viktor boy, this will need to be learned") (Randow, 2017). A bestselling book, *The Light That Failed*, coauthored by the prominent Bulgarian political scientist, author, and public intellectual Ivan Krastev, claimed that "everyone present remembers that Orbán blushed and was visibly flustered" (Krastev & Holmes, 2020, p. 65). However, as Haraszti himself stated, the interaction never happened this way (Haraszti, 2025). Instead, it took place at an unofficial meeting of opposition figures and representatives of international NGOs in the spring of 1989. There he greeted Orbán by touching his necktie as a friendly and acknowledging gesture. There were no words of criticism nor of condescension.

If so, another account is needed to understand Hungary, which "died for an incomprehensible reason" (according to the first line of the above-mentioned poem of István Kemény; see Haraszti, 2025, p. 27). One that is less anecdotic, symbolic, and perhaps a little bit more complex. On the positive side: it might be applicable to other contexts, outside of Hungary, and might even offer some lessons. This is my aim.

The general question about what happened to Hungary is this: After two decades of global democratic surge, a similarly long democratic decline followed. Why?

Political analysts have long abandoned the general post-1989 view (connected to the historicist "end of history" assertion of Francis Fukuyama and labeled the "transitology approach") that states which leave behind their dictatorial past will sooner or later end up as liberal democracies. Yet, the inherent mainstream assumption still seems to be that democracy is the normal state that should and would prevail … unless a deviation occurs. So, it is the deviation that needs to be explained.

The research that led to this book also began with this assumption. When, in 2012, I collected potential causes for the Hungarian democratic downturn, I implicitly accepted that democracy was the rule and that all other types of regimes are abnormal and require explaining. I now think

that another approach is equally well founded. One can assume—as the Greek philosopher Plato did—that the corruption of democracy is completely natural and to be expected. So, perhaps the anomaly is not the current worldwide decay, but the fact that democracy had survived for so long in the Western world.

After some hesitation, I decided that I would still focus on the reasons for the downturn and the decline, but in such a way that I could also flip a coin, turn the results upside down, and, using the same factors, explain what keeps democracies alive. If, for example, an amoral political personality or the spread of disinformation turn out to be the primary drivers of autocratization, then politicians with democratic morals and reliable communication channels are essential for creating and sustaining democracy.

Hungary is a perfect candidate for such a case study. There are plenty of examples of democratic backsliding, but Hungary is a very special case. Within a relatively short period of time, it turned from a dictatorship to a democracy, then back to a hybrid regime.[1]

By revisiting these developments and focusing on the potential causes, I do not intend to provide another detailed description of the events that occurred in Hungary over the recent decades. The overall aim is to contribute to the study of global democratic backsliding and of the conditions in which democracy can be made more resilient. This is presented in light of recent political events that are unfolding globally and in Hungary.

First, I will explain what I mean by democracy and democratic backsliding. Next, I describe the specific course that Hungary took since 1989, as opposed to many others in the region. Finally, I explain the methodology I followed in this book to identify the causes of Hungary's backsliding.

Demarcating Democracy

Democracy, as its Greek etymology tells us, is a political system which is based on the rule (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*). It is less a technical description than a political principle. It means that the people are the ultimate source of political power.

1 According to the V-Dem Institute, Hungary is a negative global top performer: in 2024, it ranked first "among all 42 ongoing episodes of autocratization in terms of the magnitude of change" (V-Dem Institute, 2024, p. 25). It cannot yet be known for sure how the April election of this year (2026) will affect Hungary's political course, but so far the signs are good. I will briefly analyze that prospects in the Epilogue of this book.

Historically, the main way in which the *demos* decided on issues of public interest has been by engaging in common deliberation and by voting. In the ancient polis of Athens, the *demos* meant male citizens, and the voting was usually done by raised hands, or with the use of colored (black or white) pebbles dropped in a jar. In a contemporary representative democracy this process is usually done by voting machines in parliaments by representatives of the people, who themselves are elected at the ballot boxes.

Thinkers including Alexis de Tocqueville, Joseph Schumpeter, Robert Dahl, and Samuel Huntington have identified the defining characteristic of democracy as the selection of leaders through competitive elections. According to the philosopher Karl Popper, democracy is simply the type of government that can be removed without violence.

However, as an important lesson of the past decades, it has been pointed out that this minimalist, procedural definition is problematic. The "fallacy of electoralism" overlooked the fact that the institutions that enable free and fair elections do not protect democracy from becoming hollowed out. Besides, competitive elections can easily propel undemocratic leaders to power. "Popper's definition of democracy does not help … if those removed from power believe in democracy, whereas those who replace them do not.… What, in other words, if the 'wrong' people are elected?" (Dahrendorf, 2004).

If one wants to save elections as the basis and starting point for defining democracy, then there are two logical options. One is to stick with the minimalist definition and accept that democracy is not necessarily the ideal system for the people. As Huntington put it:

> Elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non. Governments produced by elections may be inefficient, corrupt, shortsighted, irresponsible, dominated by special interests, and incapable of adopting policies demanded by the public good. These qualities make such governments undesirable but they do not make them undemocratic. (Huntington, 1991b, pp. 9–10)

The political commentator Fareed Zakaria defined those problematic systems that still employ democratic elections as "illiberal democracies." He writes: "[T]o go beyond this minimalist definition and label a country democratic only if it guarantees a comprehensive catalog of social, political, economic, and religious rights turns the word democracy into a badge of honor rather than a descriptive category" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 25).

The other option is to defy Zakaria and, indeed, opt for a more complex definition. One can still keep the role of elections as a foundation stone of

defining democracy, but still add a further basic requirement. According to Ralf Dahrendorf, the solution is to define democracy as "elections plus." Dahrendorf determined that the "plus" should be the rule of law:

> At the risk of offending many friends of a democratic persuasion, I have now concluded that the rule of law should come first when constitutionalism is brought to an ex-dictatorship, and democracy second. Incorrupt independent judges are even more influential than politicians elected with massive majorities. (Dahrendorf, 2004)

I will choose a different method and opt for a more substantive, outcome-focused definition. It will not be based on the primacy of democratic elections, but rather on the original Greek meaning of democracy (the rule of the *demos*), and an allusion to Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address from 1863. So, for the purpose of this book, democracy will be understood as a system of governance which is "by the people" and "for the people"—as many of the people and as much "by" and "for" them as possible. Decision-making is as inclusive as possible, and so is the allocation of the benefits of governance.

There is a need for further refinement. The "by the people" formula will not necessarily imply direct democracy, but the popular will has to be present in all decision-making processes. Modern democracies are representative democracies, so a complex set of mechanisms needs to be in place to ensure that the popular will is adequately represented. Thus, democracy defined in this way requires transparency, accountability, inclusive governance, and checks and balances—all to prevent overly centralized decision-making. The "for the people" part is equally important. It means that the benefits of governance should be spread out as much as possible to as many people as possible.

There is a certain conflict between "as much as possible" and "to as many as possible." This can be interpreted to mean the difference between a majoritarian and a consensual democracy. It is hard to give preference to either of them. Majoritarian democracies show greater satisfaction to winners of elections, but consensual ones do the same with the losers (Anderson & Guillory, 1997; Bernauer & Vatter, 2012).

It must be also noted that the suggested basic definition of democracy is two-dimensional. The rule "by the people" does not necessarily mean rule "for the people" and vice versa. Both mixed situations, when only one is present, are theoretically possible. A benevolent sovereign can rule for the public good, even if power is completely centralized. Similarly, a democratic

government may introduce policies that only benefit a small circle of people. However, these combinations are unlikely to succeed in the long run. The first, because power corrupts. The second, because a government that serves the interests of only a few is bound to lose elections—at least in theory.

Do I mean by democracy what political scientists call "liberal democracy"? Essentially, I do. I certainly mean more than a system that is based on popular sovereignty where the formal criteria of free and fair elections are kept. As I said, I also find constitutionalism, rule of law, and the protection of minorities (and minority opinion) important.

I believe that the "liberal" element does not need to be spelled out. First, it is unnecessary, because I believe there can't be a proper democracy (again: a system "for the people and by the people") where individual and civic rights are protected only up to a certain degree. Second, it is seriously misleading. This is because for many, including Zakaria or the Hungarian prime minister, the term "liberal democracy" implies that there can also be an "illiberal democracy," which is democratic but not at all liberal. In contrast, I believe that without a liberal minimum a political system cannot be democratic.

Next, this implies that democracy has a special relation with liberalism (e.g., liberal constitutionalism, protection of human rights), whereas I believe that it also has the same intimate relation to nationalism (the support of a "horizontal comradeship" as a sovereign national community) and to socialism (based on the support for the equality of members of that community). The political system that we celebrate in the West as a "liberal democracy" (because of the protection of individual rights and liberties) is actually a "liberal-social-national democracy" (social, as it employs a robust system of redistribution for social solidarity, and national, as it exists in a nation-state). So, just as there is a need for a liberal minimum, a social and a national minimum is also a basic requirement.[2]

Democratic backsliding is generally understood to be "a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance occurring through a discontinuous series of incremental actions" (Lust & Waldner, 2018). According to the theoretical literature, it can involve problems of the two main democratic elements that Robert Dahl argued for: contestation and

2 As for another characterization—which nevertheless also shows the multidimensionality of democracy—there is V-Dem Institute, which decided to separately measure the following five different aspects of it: deliberative democracy, egalitarian democracy, electoral democracy, liberal democracy, and participatory democracy. Sovereign democracy could be a sixth one, suggested frequently by illiberal regimes. I find this idea—without a political agenda—logical and justified.

participation (Dahl, 1971). In this logic, "backsliding occurs if any institution or norm that promotes or protects contestation or participation erodes" (Druckman, 2024). Others add more elements to the two foundational ones, for example, "loosening constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment" (Lust & Waldner, 2018).

The literature on the different aspects, potential meanings, and usual steps of autocratization and democratic backsliding is vast. Based on how profound the process is, it can be applied to the deconsolidation of a liberal democracy to a defective democracy, or crossing the boundary from democracy to a hybrid regime, or the broad process of a liberal democracy transforming into a closed autocracy (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024, pp. 18–19). I use democratic decline, autocratization, and de-democratization interchangeably to mean the corruption of either of my suggested two dimensions of democracy: the "by the people" and/or the "for the people" aspects. As for the former (related to the system of governance), it means the centralization of decision-making (versus rule by the people), and as for the output of governance, it means a decrease in the number of beneficiaries (versus rule for the people). Most of the time, including in the Hungarian case, both are affected in democratic backsliding. This means that the centralization of decision-making is taking place in parallel with a growing inequality in accessing the public goods and benefits of governance.

Democratic backsliding is different from how democratic regimes typically collapsed a hundred years ago. The usual mode back then was sudden putsch by an armed group of people, and then the introduction of a regime that employed large-scale terror against rival political groups and the general population. In more recent times it starts with an election victory by a seemingly ordinary political party or coalition, then a gradual process leading to political and economic centralization.

It is important to note that democratic backsliding may be accompanied by—but is not equivalent to—phenomena like populism, illiberalism, anti-Western rhetoric or foreign policy moves, or ideological swings on a left–right scale. The contemporary ideological zeitgeist mainly involves a liberalism–nationalism shift. Its relationship to the political left–right spatial metaphor and the question of democracy seems to cause serious confusion. I will deal with this topic in Chapter 6.

How far can the process go? As the mainstream literature indicates, a country experiencing democratic backsliding can still remain a democracy, even if it is less functional. Or it can slip further to become a hybrid regime of electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006) or competitive authoritarianism

(Levitsky & Way, 2010).[3] Or it could sink even further into totalitarian autocracy.

The Hungarian Course: Ladder, Plateau, and Slope

"For one who flies above, this land is merely a map,"[4] wrote Hungarian poet Miklós Radnóti, contrasting a foreigner's view of Hungary to that of someone who knows and cares for the country. A mere chart visualizing aggregate democracy scores is a very rough picture that lacks crucial nuances. Let's start with a bird's-eye view, nevertheless.

According to the preeminent economist János Kornai, the late professor emeritus of Harvard University and Corvinus University of Budapest:

> For two decades Hungary, like the other Eastern European countries, followed a general policy of establishing and strengthening the institutions of democracy, the rule of law, and the market economy based on private property. However, since the election in 2010, when Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party came to power, Hungary has made a dramatic U-turn. (Kornai, 2015, p. 2)

So, as a first approximation, the political course that Hungary has run since 1989 can be visualized as an inverted U-shape: after a democratization (upward) side, there was a turnaround in 2010, when Fidesz won the parliamentary elections and Viktor Orbán formed a government. This was followed by the democratic backsliding (downward) side.

This graph can be further refined based on the democracy indices of relevant think tanks. Based on a timeline by the independent research institute V-Dem, the corresponding graph resembles a playground slide with three sections: ladder, plateau, and slope. In 1989 there was a very steep ascent in the quality of democracy (ladder). This was followed by a horizontal segment at a relatively high level in 1990–2010 (plateau). Then came a mild gradual descent (slope) that lasted until today. The historical dataset of other analysts (Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit) produce a similarly shaped course.

3 A hybrid regime is not a rare type at all, as Carothers observed: "What is often thought of as an uneasy, precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of countries in the developing world and the postcommunist world" (Carothers, 2002, p. 18).

4 Translation by Gina Gönczi.

Now, let's focus on what actually changed as a result of the decline. Kornai details the following main elements: "[T]he executive and legislative branches are no longer separate" (both are effectively controlled by Viktor Orbán); the basic institutions of the rule of law have been abolished or significantly weakened ("the holders of power are able to elevate any decision to the status of law quickly and without hindrance"); the ruling political group makes attempts to take control of the courts while the prosecution works suspiciously more effectively against people in the opposition; "private property has become the target of frequent legal economic and ideological attacks"; the tendencies of centralization affect almost all spheres of society; civil society is harassed and the concerns of the people expressed through declarations or demonstrations are disregarded (Kornai, 2015, pp. 4–6).

The shape of the slide captures a peculiar history. In earlier decades around the globe both democratization and autocratization used to run a different course. Democratization typically lasted for long periods or even decades of gradual reforms; whereas the end of democratic systems was often abrupt, marked by a political putsch, a military coup, or a foreign invasion. But this time in Hungary, the political transformation from dictatorship to parliamentary democracy lasted barely a year. In February, 1989, the Central Committee of the incumbent Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) agreed to a multiparty system, in June it entered into negotiations with the new parties, and as a result of the parliamentary elections in the following spring a new coalition government took power. The Hungarian autocratization phase, in turn, was slow and gradual, so much so that people struggle to identify when it crossed the line (and which one) to become a nondemocracy.

A former member of the Constitutional Court, Géza Kilényi, declared in an interview in late 2010 that Hungary was no longer a *Rechtsstaat*—a state where the rule of law applied and where the power of the government was constrained by a constitution and other institutions (Lencsés & Nagy, 2010). János Kornai was another critic who cried wolf very early: in an opinion piece in 2011 he announced that Hungary is no longer a democracy but an autocracy (Kornai, 2011). Political scientists continued to wait before passing judgment, even though a series of important and undemocratic laws were unilaterally passed in 2011, including a new constitution (the Fundamental Law) and a new election law. Some constitutional lawyers, who tended to be cautious, declared that it was the fourth amendment of Fidesz's own constitution in 2013 which meant that Hungary was no longer a country that followed the rule of law. Another milestone was the election of 2014, an election that was, for the first time since 1989, free but not fair.

Some political scientists gradually started to use the term "hybrid regime" to describe Orbánism. According to them, one of the crucial steps in the establishment of Orbánism was the coming into effect of the Fidesz-drafted new constitution on the first day of 2012 (Enyedi & Krekó, 2018, p. 40).

The change was legally acknowledged at a high level in the European Union in 2018, when the European Parliament triggered the Article 7 procedure against Hungary for its possible violation of the EU's fundamental values. In 2022, a European Parliament report contained the following extraordinary words:

> [The European Parliament] expresses deep regret that the lack of decisive EU action has contributed to a breakdown in democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary, turning the country into a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy, according to the relevant indices. (Committee on Civil Liberties, 2022)

The democratic backsliding had been detected by major relevant think tanks, including Freedom House, the V-Dem Institute, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, but they were not in agreement on how far the process has progressed. They also used different terminology to describe what they saw: "transitional or hybrid regime," "electoral autocracy," "flawed democracy."[5]

In this book, I will not delve into the question of categorization, as my concern is not labeling the current state of the regime, but rather to analyze the reasons that led to the backsliding. Following the definition of democracy that I suggested and will use in this book (which, I feel, is the closest to what V-Dem uses), what matters here is that this new system is seriously lacking in being "by the people" or "for the people." The problem can be

5 For Freedom House, Hungary is in the "transitional or hybrid regime" category (between semi-consolidated democracy and semi-consolidated authoritarian regime), alone among EU member countries. Seven aspects are evaluated: national democratic governance, electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption (Freedom House, 2024). For the V-Dem Institute, Hungary is an "electoral autocracy" (that is, between electoral democracy and closed autocracy), again alone in the EU. The index is made up of electoral, liberal, egalitarian, participatory, and deliberative components (V-Dem, 2024). According to the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2024, Hungary is a "flawed democracy" and not a hybrid regime (but very close by its score). The grade is made up of five elements: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties (EIU, 2024). This British think tank is an outlier. In its ranking, Romania scores lower than Hungary or Serbia and has slipped back to being a hybrid regime, whereas Czechia and Estonia have risen from flawed democracy to full democracy, alone among the post-communist countries.

clearly detected on both sides of the equation. Instead of the "by the people" principle there is an incredible centralization of power. Instead of the "for the people" principle an extraordinary concentration of economic wealth and incomes is happening.

Fidesz was in government from 2010 till this year's election (2026), and ruled with a two-thirds majority almost without interruption. Technically, Fidesz (or, to give its full name, Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance) has a simple majority in the parliament, and it has a two-thirds majority only with its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party. In practice, however, the two parties have formed one inseparable block since 2010—during the elections and in government. Christian Democrat members of the parliament are deeply dependent on Fidesz to get into parliament, and, in the same way, Fidesz members are also dependent on the party leaders. Viktor Orbán is not only the prime minister of the country since 2010; he is also president of Fidesz since 1993. Indeed, the party leadership is directly responsible for appointing the party's election candidates.

Fidesz's supermajority also enables it to govern without constraint. This amounts to a shift from the democratic "rule of law" principle to a "rule by law" system. In the first year after the 2010 victory, Fidesz used its supermajority to unilaterally enact the new fundamental laws as well as a new media law. More recently, in 2025, it passed the "Stop Pride" act, a legal amendment to Hungary's law of assembly that effectively banned LGBTQ+ public events, and it enacted a law, allegedly to further public transparency, to disadvantage foreign-supported organizations whose actions influence the public (thereby, the government holds, "endangering the sovereignty of the country").

Meddling with the electoral law made the situation self-perpetuating. The parliamentary majority has repeatedly altered the rules in such a way that an overwhelming Fidesz victory was the result in 2014, 2018, and 2022.

The two-thirds majority was also used to fill the country's top political positions with party loyalists. Besides the president of the country, "Fidesz loyalists are entrenched in every corner of the state—from the Constitutional Court, Budget Council, and National Judicial Office to the State Audit Office, Public Prosecutor's Office, and National Bank" (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012).

The centralization of power in Hungary hasn't stopped with the all-powerful supermajority. In 2016, the government declared—and the parliament approved—a "state of crisis" because of mass immigration—and it has been extended every six months ever since. Later, in 2020, a "state of danger" was declared because of the coronavirus pandemic, and then again in 2022

because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A series of authorization acts have also been adopted to enable the government to take extraordinary measures (within limits), suspend the application of certain acts, and rule by decree (as long as the "state of danger" is in place), all without parliamentary oversight.

The deviation from the principle of "for the people" is also significant. Inequality has considerably risen during the last 15 years. As an article appearing on the Hungarian financial portal Portfolio recently reported, using a series of Eurostat figures (Süle-Szigeti, 2025), Hungary is a perfectly typical European country measured by the net financial assets of households per GDP. (The spread is high; the Hungarian figure of 116% is less than half of the Danish or the Swedish, but more than twice the Romanian or the Slovak figures.) The 25.6% growth of those assets during the 2014–2024 period is well above the EU average. When it comes to who actually owns those assets, however, Hungary is an outlier in the EU. The ratio of the richest top 10% in having those savings is the third highest (after Croatia and Lithuania), and the ratio of the lower half of the population is the third lowest (after Italy and Croatia).

This has not been only the "natural" working of a market economy. Through shady procurement procedures and other financial practices made possible by state capture (or, according to some, political capture), an exorbitant amount of resources have been diverted to a small circle around the prime minister.

Despite serious disadvantages to independent media, the story is surprisingly well-documented. This summary provides a detailed account of the extraordinary aggrandizement of the Orbán family:

> By the 15th year of the Orbán regime, the prime minister's son-in-law became one of the richest people in Hungary. István Tiborcz built an empire of luxury real estate [and] financial and logistic companies. His wife, the prime minister's oldest child, Ráhel Orbán, takes part in managing certain companies of the group. Mr. and Mrs. Tiborcz claim that they achieved all this on their own. Reality, however, is different. (Direkt36, 2025)

Another, more recently published documentary collected the episodes of what seems to be "one of the biggest central bank plunders of the world" during the 12 years while György Matolcsy had been governor of the institution until spring 2025. The Hungarian National Bank established foundations and then funneled money mostly to members and friends of the Matolcsy family through dubious investments, overpriced procurements, and asset

transfers (Telex, 2025). Although independent journalists and members of the parliament questioned the rationale, the legality, and the actual operations of the National Bank, the State Audit Office only started an enquiry into the allegations after Matolcsy's two terms as governor of the bank ended. The money that was missing totaled hundreds of billions of forints (about a billion euros) (Telex, 2025).

The nature of corruption in Hungary is characteristically different from that in other European or Western states: it is at a systemic level. Popular modes (like tax fraud, bribing policemen, gratuities to doctors) were either pushed back significantly or they became part of the centralized corruption, which is the dominant form (Martin, 2025). It is so remarkable that sociologist (and former government minister) Bálint Magyar has been talking of a postcommunist mafia state, as a completely new type of system (patronal and informal) that should not be described as being a defective democracy nor as a form of governance that lies somewhere in the middle on the democracy–autocracy axis (Magyar, 2016).

Hungary was officially marketed with the term "illiberal," so, for an analysis of democratic backsliding, it is important not to confuse antidemocratic phenomena with anti-liberal ones. While a certain amount of liberalism is necessary to uphold democracy, I believe that there is a degree of illiberalism that can still fit within the boundaries of democracy. Where to find the boundary between granting individual rights versus national security, or versus traditional norms, or versus social cohesion and solidarity, is a question for deliberation in every democracy.

Here are a few political positions and measures which are anti-liberal (or illiberal) but which do not go completely counter to a democratic framework:

- Preference for direct democracy (e.g., referenda) versus liberal constitutionalism of checks and balances
- Promotion of the religious cultural heritage in symbolic politics versus the striving to be completely value-free
- Controlling and regulating market mechanisms versus laissez-faire economics
- Focusing on national culture in education versus promoting multiculturalism with a universal focus

On the other hand, here are a few actions of the Fidesz party and of the Fidesz-led government, which are both illiberal but also clearly antidemocratic:

- Unilaterally changing the constitution and the electoral law to keep Fidesz in power and other types of "rule by law" (instead of "rule of law") mechanisms

- Refusing to attend preelection debates
- Using lies and smear campaigns to undermine opponents
- Corruption, clientelism, and wealth accumulation in the hands of a small elite circle

How is it possible that Hungary made this U-turn two decades after the successful transition to a full democracy? How is it possible that a Hungarian government could continuously disregard calls from within and outside the country to stay on a democratic course? How is it possible that the electorate did not seem interested or motivated to end this hybrid regime for so long?

In Search of an Explanation

What causes backsliding in general? This question is not at all easy to answer. Establishing causality in social history is always a tricky business. The context of an event or development is infinitely complex: there is an endless array of conditions and developments that precede an event that can be logically connected to it.

This carries with it a serious theoretical problem. Plausible causal links can be constructed from an endless number of factors. The way one narrates a story affects the causal factor one finds. The potential factors one thinks of also affect the storyline. As a result of this loop, the narratives and connected causal chains are quite random. This is true about the ones which use a more complex set of interrelated factors as well.

Furthermore, even when one picks a single factor, its effect can be hard to determine. The connection between the explanans and the explanandum (cause and effect) is almost never deterministic but rather probabilistic—it may or may not be triggered. One can also identify necessary and sufficient causes; direct or indirect, long- or short-term effects. Correspondingly, there is a great abundance of scholarly and popular science works and media articles explaining and debating the causes of democratization or democratic backsliding.

It has been quite amusing to see how the emerging new arguments focus on the most recent global cataclysms, again and again. Around 2010, the favorite explanation for democratic backsliding was the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, then after 2015 the dramatic rise in immigration was in vogue, and then five years later it was populist responses to COVID-19 (and the list can probably go on).

As for deeper, long-term contributing factors identified in the expanding literature, there is a similar cacophony. Some focus more on the machinations of anti-establishment populist politicians (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024; Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021; Haggard & Kaufman, 2021), and others focus on the general disillusionment with rising inequalities (Rau & Stokes, 2025) or the changing modes of social communication (Diamond, 2019).

The effect of certain factors is heavily contested. The most debated ones are probably ideologies and economic performance. Is the influence of political ideas (populism, nationalism, conservatism, illiberalism) substantial or indirect? In other words, do autocratizing leaders really have genuine value considerations that direct them to alternative paths or do they just use these ideas as slogans to deceive the people? In a similar way, there is widespread disagreement about the economic factor. Is contemporary democratic backsliding driven by the failure of democratic governance to offer better living conditions for the people? These debates will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Most studies avoid claiming monocausality and rather state that an interplay of multiple forces is responsible for democratic backsliding. In his article about democracy's third wave, written approximately a quarter of a century ago, Samuel Huntington collected 27 variables which had been said to contribute to democracy and democratization. All of these can be read backwards: the opposite of the factors can be responsible for autocracy and democratic backsliding.

Some items on Huntington's list are still accepted today, but others may come as a surprise to a contemporary reader:

> [A] high overall level of economic wealth; a relatively equal distribution of income and/or wealth; a market economy; economic development and social modernization; a feudal aristocracy at some point in the history of society; the absence of feudalism in the society; a strong bourgeoisie; a strong middle class; high levels of literacy and education; an instrumental rather than consummatory culture; Protestantism; social pluralism and strong intermediate groups; the development of political contestation before the expansion of political participation; democratic authority structures within social groups, particularly those closely connected to politics; low levels of civil violence; low levels of political polarization and extremism; political leaders committed to democracy; experience as a British colony; traditions of toleration and compromise; occupation by a prodemocratic foreign power; influence by a prodemocratic foreign power; elite desire to emulate democratic nations; traditions of respect for law

> and individual rights; communal homogeneity; communal heterogeneity; consensus on political and social values; absence of consensus on political and social values. (Huntington, 1991b, pp. 37–38)

Huntington also offered a list of seven factors contributing to transitions away from democracy during the first and second "reverse" waves:

> 1) the weakness of democratic values among key elite groups and the general public; 2) severe economic setbacks, which intensified social conflict and enhanced the popularity of remedies that could be imposed only by authoritarian governments; 3) social and political polarization, often produced by leftist governments seeking the rapid introduction of major social and economic reforms; 4) the determination of conservative middle-class and upper-class groups to exclude populist and leftist movements and lower-class groups from political power; 5) the breakdown of law and order resulting from terrorism or insurgency; 6) intervention or conquest by a nondemocratic foreign power; 7) "reverse snowballing" triggered by the collapse or overthrow of democratic systems in other countries. (Huntington, 1991b, pp. 17–18)

Francis Fukuyama, while explaining how and why politics is much less favorable to democracy in 2020 than was 30 years earlier, also brings together a collection of factors. He mentions the political climate where authoritarian powers (Russia, China) are challenging the Western liberal democratic model at a time when populist politicians are doing the same in the West. He talks of the reorientation of the major axis of political polarization from economic to ideological. He highlights how technological change (new media, big data) speeds up social fragmentation and provides new opportunities for autocrats, and how "legacy media" becomes a tool of the oligarchs. And he talks of an anti-liberal backlash after an era of neoliberal economic policy (e.g., privatization, liberalization, deregulation) characterized by the Washington Consensus (Fukuyama, 2020).

One of the most rigorous research studies was conducted in 2005—the last year before Freedom House started to detect a so far continuous period of global democratic decline. The authors focused on 32 stable democracies and 30 cases of collapse (Diskin, Diskin, & Hazan, 2005). They were looking at 11 variables, which were ordered in four types: institutional (federalism, presidentialism, proportionality, constitutional weakness), societal (cleavages, malfunctioning economy, unfavorable history), mediating (fragmentation, polarization, governmental instability), and extraneous

(foreign involvement). The result was that democratic backsliding cannot be attributed to any single variable, but rather to a mixture of factors, as "democracy is a highly resilient regime type." However, if four of the most crucial five—cleavages, malfunctioning economy, unfavorable history, governmental instability, foreign involvement—appear, then the "democratic regime is almost doomed to collapse" (Diskin, Diskin, & Hazan, 2005, pp. 303–304).

As there is an abundance of literature about the causes of democratic backsliding in general, the same is true of analytical perspectives about what happened to Hungary since 1989.

According to Balázs Trencsényi's earlier classification,

> interpretive models developed in the Hungarian context contain five major types of argument. One is the analogical approach, which attempts to identify particularities of other existing regimes in the Hungarian context; the second is a specific variant of this, the historicist analogy, which projects the specificities of the past regimes onto the Hungarian situation; the third is concerned with political mentality approached from a stylistic direction (populism, patriarchalism); the fourth concentrates on economic policy and socio-economic aspects (corruption, directed capitalism, etc.); and finally, although it appears more in the realm of political journalism, it is important to mention the psychological profile approach, which focuses on the traumas, proclivities, and behavioral patterns of the "leader." These are, of course, only ideal types—in most cases, there is some combination of these elements. (Trencsényi, 2017)

A more recent example of such a causal sketch is a 2024 article in the *Journal of Democracy*, "What Went Wrong in Hungary" (a title reminiscent of Jacques Rupnik's piece on Hungary, "How Things Went Wrong," from 12 years earlier in the same journal). The winding argument of the two authors is based on several factors, including the global economic and financial crisis, the failure of the socialists to draft a new constitution,[6] a low turnout in the 2010 election (especially of pro-democracy voters), low emancipative values in the country that made illiberalism more acceptable, the "go-along habit" of informal institutions and civil society groups and their openness to party capture, and the legitimacy which was granted to the Hungarian government by being a member of the EU (Anghel & Jones, 2024).

6 The article also says that the socialists lacked a sufficient majority unless they cooperated with Fidesz, which is not exactly the case prior to 1998.

In his book on the democratic decline in Hungary, András L. Pap discusses four causal factors: the passive, isolated, distrustful, inward-looking political culture; Viktor Orbán, who deliberately builds on the dark side of Hungarians' values by employing populism and conspiracy theories to polarize the people and delegitimize his opponents; the initial constitutional structure that combined the illusion of stability with a low level of accountability; and economic hardships and disillusionment due to the economic crisis and earlier mismanagement (Pap, 2018).

Around the same time, in a research article, two outstanding Hungarian scholars described the interplay of factors on three levels: global, regional, and domestic (Enyedi & Krekó, 2018). The first global factor, according to them, was the Western world's shift toward identity politics and the general backlash against political correctness and "gender ideology." The regional factor was the authoritarian characteristics of Central and East European political culture (hierarchy values over the values of egalitarianism, low social trust, anti-liberal climate). The domestic ones were 1) the electoral system that had strong majoritarian elements, 2) the turbulence of the 2006–2010 years with the leaking of the "lie speech" (*őszödi beszéd*) of Ferenc Gyurcsány, the subsequent disturbances that met with police violence, and the effect of the global financial crisis which pushed the country to the brink of insolvency; 3) and the personal authority of charismatic political leader Viktor Orbán, who embodied the aspirations of many Hungarians.

These components more or less correspond to the seven factors, which I detailed earlier (in slightly different ways) in two of my essays (Schweitzer, 2014a, 2014c). My list then included Machiavellian, confrontational, talented, and ambitious Viktor Orbán; popular welfare expectations and budgetary overspending–austerity cycles by the socialist-led governments of Péter Medgyessy and Ferenc Gyurcsány; the disproportionate election system that was totally unsuitable for the country; growing anti-liberal sentiments in the political, economic, and cultural senses; Horthy and Kádár nostalgia and legitimacy models; "survival" instead of "self-expression" values; and a *longue durée* tradition of low trust combined with national and personal isolation.

The role of ideology and of the economy is frequently debated. An article by Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga, for example, argues for the inclusion of the emergence of illiberalism "in a region dominated for two decades by liberalism (and by neoliberalism in economic policy)" (Buzogány & Varga, 2018). They claim that the social science literature had neglected this aspect, while focusing on "[e]xplanations [that] range from the exhaustion and internal contradictions of the 'liberal modernization paradigm' … to problems related to institutional engineering during the early years of transition or the

lack of real elite change" or "party system characteristics, such as increasing polarization and populism" or "features of authoritarian capitalism" or "the role played by external forces such as Russia or the European Union."

Somewhat earlier, Gábor Scheiring was lamenting how the few studies that explain the democratic backsliding in Hungary focus "on the ideational sphere" but "do not include economic processes in their theories in a substantive way" (Scheiring, 2015). As for the "the most widely held" reasons, he lists the following: "the anti-democratic political manoeuvring of Viktor Orbán with the breakdown of the post-89 elite pact," "high ideological and party polarization" or the "cunning and will to power of the liberal-turned-demagogue Orbán," politically driven corruption "rooted in party competition," the "will to power of an anti-democratic leader," and "strategic use of illiberal, populist ideologies or discourses in mobilizing popular discontent in relation to the economic developments of the past 25 years."

Some leading scholars suggest caution in general in identifying the causes of the Hungarian autocratization. Kornai was already mentioned in the preface of this book. He refrained from discussing causal links in his seminal essay where he described the phenomenon in detail (Kornai, 2015). He pointed out how the case is so intricate that a thorough explanation would need to include an investigation into the deep political and social history covering not just the "grave mistakes made by the governments and the political parties functioning within and outside the parliament between 1990 and 2010," but also the heavy-handed but paternalistic political period of "goulash communism," the nationalist autocracy of the Horthy period of 1919 to 1945, and, even deeper, "investigating contradictory historical traditions that reach back over centuries" (Kornai, 2015, p. 19). More recently, András Bozóki and Zoltán Fleck (2024) also settle at the "intermediate-level research program" of investigating the mechanisms by which liberal democracy was weakened and disappeared in Hungary—instead of constructing comprehensive explanations (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024, pp. 24–25).

Despite the caution of such eminent scholars, and the cacophony of the factors and arguments suggested by others, I do believe that a meaningful analysis can still be conducted. My main aim is to evaluate the potential factors: to sort out those that weren't decisive in bringing about Hungary's U-turn and the subsequent democratic decline, and find the ones that were essential in leading to such an outcome.

As a first step, I will distill a workable number of factors from the existing narratives. I will try to be comprehensive and systematic with the categorization, while comprehensible in the content and the structure. The process may seem complex and multidimensional, but the number of

actual factors is not so large, even if they come in different combinations in the various accounts—as was shown. The factors to be tested come from these narratives, but also from considerations that are based more on logic than on actual historical processes.

Politics is done by people; so, from a behaviorist perspective, democratic backsliding happens because of political actions. Logically, it has a supply and a demand side: certain people are making it happen, while others are either allowing it or not doing enough against it. The primary actors are members of the political elite, but to varying degrees all members of the political community contribute to the process (through their choices at the elections, but also in their everyday political actions).

Beyond agency, there are certain structural factors, too. Some of them are domestic: political institutions (e.g., the constitutional setup, the electoral law), contemporary political ideas and ideologies, the prevailing political culture, the performance of the economy. Others are external: international politics and economy, changing media technology, the means and methods of communication.

Combining logical classifications with established academic narratives—including my original seven factors from 2012—here are the seven areas where I will investigate the driving forces of democratic backsliding. These are the ones that will be evaluated one by one in the following seven main chapters of this book.

1. *Political agency*: Politicians may create conditions that hamper free and fair political competition, and/or may accumulate income and wealth into the hands of a few.
2. *Constitutional setup*: It may not adequately translate popular will to governance or might otherwise allow for the centralization of power.
3. *Economic performance*: It may cause general disappointment and loss of support either for a government that faces undemocratic opposition or for democratic governance in general.
4. *International environment*: Foreign actors may meddle with what the people want.
5. *Political communication*: Because of manipulation, fake news, mis- and disinformation, people may not make well-informed decisions or participate in democratic deliberation.
6. *Political ideology*: Politicians and/or ordinary citizens may have undemocratic views or political ideas that do not support democracy.
7. *Social culture*: Certain values, norms, practices, or other aspects of the general culture of society go counter to democracy (e.g., low participation, low trust, low cooperation).

The seven points can be related to several types of interpretive focus in social sciences. One example is the agency versus structure (1 versus 2–7). Another one is the interest–institution–idea classification triad (1, 3, 4 versus 2, 5 versus 6, 7).

At the same time, some of the already developed conceptual-narrative approaches that explain democratic backsliding, either in general or in the Hungarian case, relate to several of the seven factors. For example, populism as an explanatory device connects a certain type of political leadership (1) with a certain kind of communication style or discourse (5) and with a political ideology (6) that is in contradiction with the liberal idea of pluralism and constitutionalism.

These factors are universal and all have been very widely used to explain the Hungarian course—and, indeed, each can be logically connected to the narrative as an independent explanatory variable.

But how can one be sure that there really is a causal link? Generally speaking, causality can only be established by examining repeated occurrences. The claim that "A brings about B" is a plausible statement if B happens whenever there is A, but there is no B if there is no A.

In social history, cause and effect are usually not so clear and deterministic, but it is still true that repeated occurrences help establish a causal link. Theoretically, the best would be to have a large number of ceteris paribus cases: similar events where only one factor is different, and so the different outcome can be indisputably attributed to it. But such cases never exist in human history, nor are there suitable laboratory experiments. So, researchers have to be content if they at least find enough similar cases that can be compared.

I will act accordingly. I will test the possible causes of Hungarian autocratization one by one in a comparative way to find out how plausible it is that the given factor contributed to Hungary's exceptionally deep democratic decline.

My methodology will be based on what I call "temporal" and "regional" comparisons. The temporal one compares the effect of the given factor in Hungary around 1989 and around 2010. The regional one compares the effect of the given factor in Hungary with that of other countries in the region. Was the factor that supposedly caused backsliding in Hungary in 2010 already there in 1989? Was it present in other nearby countries which did not show a similar backslide? If the answer is "yes" in both cases, then the factor could not have played a substantial role in bringing about Hungary's post-2010 autocratization.

Let's consider the economy and culture. These are probably the most popular candidates as "social requisites of democracy" (Lipset, 1959). In theory,

both economic underperformance and the lack of social cooperation can result in democratic backsliding. However, if economic underperformance was the driving factor in Hungary, then other countries in the region that avoided a similar U-turn must have had a significantly greater economic success. Or, if Hungary proved to be culturally unfit for democracy in 2010, then it had to have a different culture in 1989, which permitted it to turn into a democracy successfully (and to function as such for two decades).

Using this method, I will grade each factor in both comparisons on a three-point scale: with a 0 (meaning no or unlikely) effect, a 1 (meaning moderate or possible) effect, or a 2 (meaning strong or very likely effect). The effect of a certain factor on the Hungarian post-2010 de-democratization cannot be substantial if it was there around 1989 when the opposite process was taking place. A significant effect is similarly unlikely if the factor can be detected in other regional countries which did not experience a similar democratic decline. Conversely, the effect of a factor is probable if it appeared prior to 2010 but wasn't there at earlier times of democratization, or if it cannot be detected in similar countries that remained democratic.

Of course, the methodology cannot replicate perfect laboratory experiment with ceteris paribus conditions, but it is a good approximation. That is because Hungary did not completely transform during the two post-1989 decades and countries of the region are also relatively similar: in their size, economic output, *longue durée* historical experiences, and social structure. This is true especially for the four Visegrád countries, which joined the EU at the same time. All showed a certain amount of democratic backsliding in recent years, but none of them to the same extent as Hungary.[7]

The following seven chapters will be dedicated to the analysis of the seven factors. All of the chapters will be divided into five parts: the first part will look into the factor's theoretical connection to democracy and to democratic backsliding in general. The second will summarize the factor's potential role in the Hungarian context. Next will come the temporal and regional comparisons. Each chapter will end in a summary. Finally, after the seven chapters, I will draw conclusions about the effects (and interplay) of the factors and identify the lessons this holds for those who want democracy to prevail.

7 According to timelines created by V-Dem, both Poland and Czechia have a pothole on their graph around the year 2020, caused by the second governments of PiS and ANO, respectively. Poland showed a more serious decline, but with the election victory of Donald Tusk, democratic scores largely recovered. Bulgaria and Romania have sunk in the past few years, and democratic backsliding is also taking place in Slovakia. However, none of these cases show such a sharp decline as in the case of Hungary.

Given the scope of the work, neither the descriptions nor the comparisons can aim to be exhaustive, but they can at least highlight some key events and phenomena that make it possible to draw a meaningful conclusion. The methodology cannot be completely objective, but it can be more rigorous than other attempts, and it will hopefully lead to a lesson that could be valid outside the Hungarian or the East-Central European context.

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1. Orbán the Victor (Political Agency)

Abstract: In the decades following 1989, the political elite in Hungary gradually became more concentrated, with Viktor Orbán as the central figure. He was cunning, flexible, ambitious, confrontational, and Machiavellian. Compared to 2010, at the dawn of Hungarian democracy, both in the ruling party and in the opposition, a great number of politicians were shaping the events, and none showed signs of being determined or capable of stopping democratization. Other autocratizing politicians in the region appeared to be less talented than Orbán in the realm of power politics and in their ability to convince a large enough part of the population of their capabilities. The personality and agency of Viktor Orbán mattered for the democratic backsliding of Hungary as a significant contributing factor.

Keywords: personalization of politics, political talent, personality, attitudes

Political Agency and Democracy

Politics is primarily done by politicians. It is probably logical to assume that the more power a politician has, the more impact they have on how historical events unfold. But are leaders really the drivers for everything that happens in politics?

Some take it for granted that political personality matters. There are even academic disciplines that grew out of this conviction, like "political psychology" or "leadership profiling." Governments themselves invest in research aimed at analyzing foreign rivals. With the rise of a series of political heavyweights, like Putin, Erdoğan, Xi, and Trump, there is a lot of talk about the "personalization of politics." However, according to a logical counterposition, political superstars simply embody the zeitgeist, the "spirit of the era" (or the will of the people), as some of them like to claim.

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The idea that history is mostly driven by the decisions and actions of individuals is usually labeled the "Great Man Theory" (or, to be gender-neutral, the "Big Beast Theory"). Different traditions in political historiography relate to this concept in various ways. Leading contemporary English historian Ian Kershaw talks of the following Western European approaches (Kershaw, 2023, pp. 1–15). The British romanticist historical tradition tends to put a big emphasis on biographies of "great leaders." In contrast, the Marxist tradition holds that the focus should be on eternal dialectic historical forces which are the real drivers of progress, moving the world toward an inevitable goal. The Weberian approach gives credit to individual power: it affirms the ability of a leader to carry out his own will despite resistance. German historiography has shifted greatly in the 20th century: embarrassment about the pre-WWII personality cult, and with the post-WWII personality blaming, led to a new era of attributing less influence to political leaders.

Hungarian historians often provide descriptions of leaders (with a due critical edge) while analyzing various political periods. László Karsai discusses elements of the mental state (e.g., schizoid mysticism) of the fascist leader Ferenc Szálasi, based on the medical opinion of contemporary psychiatrist Dr. Aurel Bakody, to highlight his astonishing trust in a German victory even in the last months of World War II (Karsai, 2011). In his book, János M. Rainer labels the 1956–1988 era of Hungary "Kádárism," named after (and to an extent characterized by) the longest-ruling Hungarian Communist Party leader, János Kádár,

> [a] pragmatic, sober politician, who is, on the one hand, extremely narrow-minded and can only express himself in the primitive derivatives of his ideology, but, on the other hand, is a calm and, in his own instinctive way, a particularly shrewd operator of power. (Rainer, 2011, p. 144)

In an essay, András Bozóki analyzes and compares three Hungarian political leaders, Miklós Horthy, János Kádár, Viktor Orbán, who together spent 70 years out of the previous 100 in power, saying:

> Those who believe that these leaders had a significant impact on Hungarian political culture are certainly not wrong, and perhaps it is not a coincidence that Hungarians were able to live with these three political leaders for such a long time. (Bozóki, 2024)

In a democratic regime, the agency versus structure question involves an apparent paradox. On the one hand, politicians obviously matter a lot; indeed,

they are the ones who are directly responsible for whatever is happening in politics. Responsibility is connected to the principle of accountability. On the other hand, exactly because of the accountability requirement, politicians are supposed to be the servants of the people, the enforcers of the popular will. Politicians who do not represent the electorate well will soon be dismissed (ideally)—this is an inherent feature of democracy. So, it is the electorate that ultimately bears the responsibility. As the saying goes, democracy is the system that ensures that the people cannot get a better government than what they deserve.

But then how can nondemocratic behavior survive in democracies? Elected and representative leaders can behave in ways that damage democracy if either the electorate does not value democracy too much or if it can be tricked into accepting nondemocratic governance. It is reasonable to assume that the primary aim of neither the electorate nor the politicians is to keep democracy alive. The ordinary voters' expectation from a political leader is primarily good governance that enhances their living conditions. Politicians, in turn, may primarily aim to acquire power and to keep it.

Therefore, even if in theory politicians must act according to the wishes of the people they represent, and those people want to uphold democracy because that is the system that guarantees their well-being, in practice the formula is more complicated. There is a built-in tension at work. The three targets—the voters' wish for a better life, the politicians' desire for power, and the more abstract ideal of preserving democracy—create a peculiar triangular dynamic.

If we focus on the political actors alone, the corruption of democracy (via the centralization of power and of the allocation of goods) can be directly tied to the personality of the main political actors. Personal convictions about democratic principles logically matter, so leaders are less likely to act to preserve democracy if they do not consider it important. They may even consciously help to destroy it.

Personal characteristics also have an impact. According to the classic study *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) by Theodor W. Adorno et al., authoritarianism is a syndrome which renders a person receptive to anti-democratic propaganda. In the authors' view it consists of nine sub-syndromes: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and toughness, destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and exaggerated concern with sex (Adorno et al., 1982, p. 228). Many years earlier, authoritarianism was understood by social psychologist Erich Fromm as one of the possibilities embraced by people seeking to "escape from freedom" in search of safety (the other two

are: disposition to destroy the other and automatic conformism; Baars & Scheepers, 1993). People who are power hungry may be readier than others to overstep democratic norms and rules. Openness, one of the so-called big five personality traits, is directly related to tolerance of viewpoints. Those who are less open can be expected to be less ready to respect an opponent or engage in open-ended policy debate—a fundamental requirement of deliberative democracy. *The Authoritarian Personality* also promotes the F (fascism) scale, a measurement of the "authoritarian personality" type. At least two of the three dark triad personality disorders— Machiavellianism and narcissism—can also be closely connected to antidemocratic political styles. The former is especially dangerous as manipulation of the electorate can lend legitimacy to policies that are only seemingly in the interest of the voters.

Both conviction and personality can change with time, and for leaders it often means becoming less democratic. As the nineteenth-century English historian Lord Acton said: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Democracy Erodes from the Top, a recent book by the American political scientist Larry Bartels, argues for an actor-centered framing of the contemporary crisis of democracy (Bartels, 2022). In his view, we misunderstand the populist zeitgeist in contemporary Europe if we believe that the main problem is a growing public acceptance of populism, or anti-immigration fears, or a general dissatisfaction with political institutions or with the European integration project. No political party won elections for being openly against democracy. No leader got to power with a program to turn democracy into authoritarianism—although some of them nevertheless did. The main problem is not the electorate, but rather the opportunistic politicians who try to retain power by exploiting the ever-present vulnerabilities of democracy.[1]

This exploitation of vulnerabilities is closely connected to the breaching of certain unwritten norms. Levitsky and Ziblatt found the following two norms critical to democracy's survival: 1) mutual toleration (the acceptance that the rivals are legitimate and not an existential threat; they have an equal right to exist, to compete for power, and to govern, and 2) institutional forbearance (self-restraint; avoiding to use institutions and regulations,

1 As was mentioned earlier, some studies start from the opposite end, emphasizing the importance of structure as opposed to agency. In *Embedded Autocracy* (2024), András Bozóki and Zoltán Fleck claim that the leader (in this case, Viktor Orbán of Hungary) could not have ruled the country in the way he did for fifteen years if autocracy wasn't embedded institutionally and culturally in Hungarian society.

even those that are technically legal, if they imperil the existing system or breach the spirit of legislation) (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, pp. 102–111).

One last consideration must be added to the theoretical problem of one politician becoming dominant in a given political scene. This may happen not only if that political actor employs antidemocratic means, but also if the pool of politicians is uneven, if one of them is much more talented or fit for the job than the others are. The process could be similar to the so-called "runaway effect" (or "runaway phenomenon") observable in ecology (the rise of humans now dominating the ecosphere) or in economics (a successful corporation becoming a natural monopoly). Democracy involves a political competition of political parties and politicians. Healthy democratic political competition presupposes a balanced pool of politicians. An imbalanced distribution of leadership talent can also lead to de-democratization—especially if it is not curtailed by institutions and norms or political morality and self-restraint.

Political Agency as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

The Hungarian autocratization process has been a one-man show starring Viktor Orbán. He was the president of Fidesz in 1993–2000 and since 2003, he led the party to victory in 2010, and he has been the premier of the country ever since. So it is no surprise that while explaining the recent history of Hungary, a growing number of biographies focus on his personality.

Very early on he was predicted to have a significant political future. Eminent Hungarian writer and political essayist Pál Bodor is remembered to have written in the summer of 1993: "As I see him now, it is hard to imagine Hungary's political life without him in the coming decades" (Kéri, 1994, p. 5). This appears in a book that is probably the first political biography of Orbán based on his speeches, writings, and a series of interviews with him. This was later followed by books that focused on his ever-increasing role in Hungarian politics (Bottoni, 2023; Debreczeni, 2003, 2009; Kende, 2002; Kopátsy, 2002; Lendvai, 2017; Rényi, 2021). The sheer volume of books on Orbán shows that his political personality was taken seriously by analysts. One of the most discussed factors for the autocratization of Hungary is connected to his ambitions and actions.

A few other figures can be connected to the process. One is Ferenc Gyurcsány, a charismatic socialist politician who managed to secure reelection as prime minister in 2006 (a clear first since 1990). However, when he admitted to members of his party in a speech that he used tricks

and told lies to get reelected, and then did not resign when the speech was leaked to the public, he made his own contribution to the subsequent landslide victory of Fidesz in 2010.[2] Another important character is László Kövér, an old friend and close advisor to Orbán, but also the speaker of the Hungarian parliament since 2010. Then there is Lajos Simicska, Fidesz's financial guru from its founding until 2015, when a dramatic rift opened up between Simicska and Orbán. But it is Viktor Orbán who, as the prime minister of the successive governments backed by his Fidesz party with a supermajority in the parliament, was directing the political process that led to the serious, continuous, and deep Hungarian democratic backsliding process since his election victory in 2010.

In the early 1990s Orbán turned Fidesz into a solid block by confronting his (unofficial) liberal challengers (who then left the party), and by becoming the unquestionable leader of the party. Then he repositioned Fidesz from a liberal party to the dominant power on the conservative nationalist (right) side of the political spectrum by cunningly and ruthlessly dividing and crushing rival parties. In the meantime, Orbán further centralized the party in 2003 and introduced institutional changes that strengthened his grip on the party finances and on his ability to control the electoral candidates. Finally, he led the party to victory in 2010 after a long mobilization and smear campaign against the incumbent socialist–liberal coalition. In the formative first years, "Fidesz became Orbán's political enterprise." Ever after, "voting for Fidesz equate[d with] following and supporting Orbán" (Metz & Oross, 2020, p. 148).

His preeminence in Hungarian politics fit nicely with the global tendency toward the personalization of politics and the rise of new (less ideological, more power-hungry) autocrats (Applebaum, 2024). Orbán is believed to have served as a role model for a long list of strongmen in politics worldwide. *Newsweek* magazine put his face on the cover of its March 2018 issue and provided this context:

> Since 2014, when the prime minister infamously outlined his vision of "illiberal democracy" during a speech to ethnic Hungarians in Romania, strongmen—and, with the exception of Le Pen, it does tend to be men—have idealized Orbán. In 2011, Poland's far-right doyen Jaroslaw Kaczynski said Orbán "gave us an example of how we can win"—and four years

2 Gyurcsány's role will be discussed in later chapters, for example, in connection with the role of economic performance in Chapter 3, and in connection with the role of hacking democracy with info-communication tricks in Chapter 5.

> later, his Law and Justice Party took power. Other allies include Russia's Vladimir Putin, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and China's Xi Jinping, who recently abolished China's two-term limit, effectively meaning he can govern for life. (Crowcroft, 2018)

Orbán also appeared on the cover of *The Economist* (in December 2015), which is a feat no other Hungarian politician has ever achieved. (However, probably to his annoyance, he was not portrayed there alone, but together with Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen. The corresponding article wrote that he looked "to Vladimir Putin's Russia as a model," instead of saluting him as a global mastermind.)

Many believe that Viktor Orbán himself is an important (if not the most important) factor in Hungary's autocratization. This was not necessarily because his primary intention was to eliminate democracy. Rather, it was because he did not care that damage was done to democracy in Hungary in his quest to seize and hold power. An alternative narrative is that he considered a more "flexible" approach toward democracy to be more beneficial to his country.

Biographies and personal recollections of Orbán repeatedly say that he is talented, smart, confrontational, power hungry, intellectually and morally flexible, and manipulative. A combination of these personality traits can explain how he secured his victory and why he then worked to solidify his grip on power (which resulted in democratic backsliding).

From multiple sources I gather that he is exceptionally bright and quick to comprehend complex policy issues. I heard this indirectly from a top Hungarian monetary policy expert who briefed him on negotiations with EU and IMF representatives at vital moments for Hungary. I indirectly heard something similar from a top Hungarian medical expert who met with Orbán at the height of the COVID-19 medical emergency. Neither of these experts was a supporter of Orbán and both were stunned by the encounter. Their analysis was that even though Orbán did not have much knowledge of the matter initially, he instantly grasped the situation and asked the right questions.

Yale constitutional law professor Kim Lane Scheppele, who met Orbán in the mid-1990s, described an encounter with him. As she told me, he had a certain mesmerizing power. Here is how Scheppele narrated the meeting in a later interview:

> He was the most charismatic person I'd ever met in person. It was almost like when you were talking to him, if he fixed on you, it was like a

> tractor beam pulling your brain into his. Now I'm not someone who tends to fall for that kind of thing. But I was surprised by how much I felt like I was in this bubble of his creation whenever I was talking to him. (Kempf, 2022)

His way of doing politics has been compared to his enthusiasm for playing football (soccer), which he did in various teams in the second tier of the Hungarian national championship. It is the battle, the fight to win, that interested him, according to Pál Dániel Rényi, a journalist who wrote a biography of Orbán focusing on football and politics. "He thrives when he's out on the field, when his shirt is muddy, and he can shoot at the goal while lying on the ground"—Rényi quoted a fellow Fidesz member on Orbán's extraordinary zeal during a political campaign (Rényi, 2021, pp. 236–237). He is also a team player. Although he has been formally unchallenged as leader of his Fidesz party since 1994, he has relied on a few old trusted friends, primarily László Kövér (speaker of the parliament since 2010), a former fellow player.

Many analysts agree that he is exceptionally eager to be in charge. In the words of Scheppele, he is "not a man of great conviction. He's a man who wants power" (Kempf, 2022). This was repeated by virtually everyone I met who knew Orbán, including by Zsuzsanna Szelényi, a prominent member of Fidesz in the early 1990s who later wrote a book on the autocratization of Hungary. In an interview, she claimed that Orbán became the president of the Fidesz party in 1993 for the reason that he was the one who wanted it the most. "'Didn't you and your colleagues want it enough?'—asked the interviewer. 'Certainly not as much as Orbán'" (Szelényi, 2024).

His flexibility in changing opinions is also legendary. A staggering abundance of his contradictory views and actions have been mocked in opinion pieces by journalists, in satirical cartoons by caricaturists, and in posts and comments by ordinary social media users. It is pointed out how his studies at Oxford were funded by a scholarship from George Soros, whom he later targeted as a figure of incarnate, anti-Hungarian political evil; how one of his sons was baptized by the Methodist priest Gábor Iványi, a liberal philanthropist, whose church (and, indeed, he himself) has since been vehemently persecuted by the government; how he became famous as a young politician at the reburial of Imre Nagy (hero of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956) by talking about the need for Russians to leave the country, then later turned Hungary into an implicit supporter of Russian aggression against Ukraine; how he endorsed and then rejected comparing Ukraine's defensive fight to that of Budapest in 1956; or how he turned from

being anti-communist into supporting the invitation of Fudan University, a higher education institution close to the Chinese Communist Party, to set up a campus in Budapest.

At the same time, his party drifted to the right. In the European Parliament, Fidesz was a member of the liberal group, Liberal International, from 1992 to 2000. Next, Fidesz joined the center-right European People's Party and it stayed there until 2021. By 2024, it was a member of far-right European Parliament group Patriots for Europe.

And yet, there are people, some of whom knew Orbán personally and closely, who think political ideas do matter to him. István Hegedűs, a leading politician in Fidesz in its first five formative years, maintains that Orbán has always been an ideological thinker, and his anti-liberal switch, which began in the early 1990s, was the result of intellectual development, and it was an ideological conviction for him rather than mere political tactic (Hegedűs, 2004, pp. 175–176).

A piece of comparative research yielded surprising results about a less flexible and more determined Orbán (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023). The analysis was the systematic comparison of eight populist leaders, including Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chávez, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi, and Donald Trump. Orbán was the only one who was found to rank quite high in the "task focus" category, which means having the ability to take actions that are not necessarily popular:

> Orbán's recurrent and prolonged substantive spats with European actors—ranging from financial and budgetary matters via profound rule of law issues to migration, social policy, and sanctions against Russia—are indeed exceptional (compared to Berlusconi's much more symbolic disagreements when the European Commission was headed by his domestic rival Romano Prodi). Against this backdrop, Orbán's constant revolts against "Brussels" may frequently be driven by moral conviction rather than only responding to or tapping into Hungarian public opinion. (Fouquet & Brummer, 2023)

The research yielded other results which are surprising in light of the oft-repeated mantra about Orbán's leadership traits: he was high on "self-confidence" (suggesting a reluctance to engage in self-critical thinking), but not at all exceptional on the "need for power" (e.g., the desire to influence or control other actors) or on "conceptual complexity" (a cognitive characteristic) and exceptionally low on "in-group bias" (giving preference to one's own social, political, or ethnic group).

Many question his democratic credentials. The late psychologist Peter Popper spoke about him in a television interview in 2002 (Popper, 2002). Popper's view of Orbán's post-election politics of mobilization, in which he "turned from politician to a popular leader," was summarized by Popper in this way: "He does not believe in democracy. He talks of democracy. But if the tables turn, and democracy does not bring him victory but defeat, then he stops adhering to it in that very moment." None of the opposing politicians had comparable charisma. There was no one "who could talk to the people that way, who could induce such emotional tension as Orbán." And: "He does not accept his defeat, he cannot lose, because he is power obsessed. He cannot lose because, as it would tarnish his reputation." About the Fidesz leadership group, Popper said that they "believe that they are the only ones fighting for noble goals in Hungary", and for those goals they sometimes have to use not-so-noble means."

There are many indications that Orbán rules without real democratic convictions—toleration and self-restraint—the norms Levitsky and Ziblatt found so crucial for democracy. His well-known, aggressive approach to opponents clearly demonstrates this. He seems to be completely ready to manipulate voters with propaganda messages (e.g., with creating and promoting fake enemies or denigrating his opponents with fabricated claims).[3]

Was he ever a democrat? He certainly seemed like one in his early speeches. Hungarian-born Austrian journalist Paul Lendvai met the young Hungarian politician in September 1993 in Vienna and, as he later reported, "Orbán at that time made a strong impression as a consistent liberal democrat who strongly criticized the right-wing nationalist policies of the first post-communist government of József Antall" (Berend, 2020, p. 279).

Rudolf Ungváry, however, denies that Orbán started his career as a democrat, and only later reversed (e.g., because of the reception of his 2010 victory by his political opponents). Recalling Orbán's characterization of the socialist–liberal government in 1997 as "foreign-like," and his implicit nonacceptance of an election defeat in 2002 by saying that "the homeland cannot be in opposition," Ungváry points out that that assumption is not really plausible (Ungváry, 2022). Many recall that the same uncompromising determination characterized Orbán's approach toward the more

3 Just as you need to be seriously disturbed in your cognitive capabilities to believe that a global liberal elite wants to deliberately harm Hungarians, you have to be extremely corrupt morally in order to ceaselessly spread that message the way Orbán and Fidesz do. How come then that he was ready to hand over the power after his defeat in the April 2026 election? He probably came to realize too late that the usual set of tricks will not be enough this time. I will elaborate on this question more in the Epilogue.

liberal-minded members of Fidesz a decade earlier (Petőcz, 2001). This situation is reminiscent of the following words of Samuel Huntington—written at the time when Orbán was still barely known in Hungary and referring to the absence of democratic values among Asian, African, and Middle Eastern politicians: "When they are out of power, political leaders have good reason to advocate democracy. The test of their democratic commitment comes once they are in office" (Huntington, 1991a, p. 21).

Orbán's uncompromising combativeness occasionally backfired. After the election of 2002, he could easily have stayed in power by making a coalition with the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, hereafter SZDSZ), formerly the closest ally of Fidesz. However, after campaigning against practically everything that the liberals stood for, this would have risked his credibility.

Democratic backsliding in Hungary means the concentration of political power in his hands. It has been happening since 2010, when he came to power for the second time with a practically unconstrained supermajority.

In evaluating his personality and agency as a factor in the autocratization of Hungary, the question is not whether he bears the largest responsibility for it, but whether his agency was a crucial factor that caused it. Would it have happened without him?

If his agency is indeed a factor it means that his qualities and determination mattered—to some extent or even more. He was capable and determined to manage a step-by-step political and legal process actively and purposefully, leading to de-democratization: he first centralized Fidesz, installed a Machiavellian culture, then skillfully and relentlessly unified the right wing of the Hungarian political spectrum behind his Fidesz party, then led his people to victory, and managed the largely legalistic autocratization of the country.

The aim of the following two subchapters is to test the validity of the hypothesis that it was Viktor Orbán (with his personal traits) who was primarily responsible for the autocratization of Hungary.

The Political Agency Factor in Temporal Comparison

This subchapter compares the political developments in 1989 with the 2010 trajectory from the point of view of political actors. The more specific question is: If a political leader (specifically, Orbán) moved the country toward autocracy after 2010, why didn't Orbán or a similar politician do it earlier for two decades? Can this be explained by focusing on the characters of the leading politicians?

In 1989, personalization of politics went the other direction than around 2010. A crucial step in the democratization process was the ousting of long-time Communist Party leader János Kádár from his position as secretary general of the party in May 1988. Kádár was sidelined with the creation of the formal but empty position of "president." The Communist Party became less centralized with the emergence of four leaders, the so-called Quartet.

At least three out of the four—the prime minister, Miklós Németh, plus Rezső Nyers and Imre Pozsgay, who had lengthy reformist credentials—had certain democratic convictions and believed in the need for at least a limited amount of power sharing. The opposition was even more open to democratization, but also much more fragmented. A number of lesser-known amateur opposition figures, delegated by the new organizations and parties, started to negotiate the rules of transition with the communists.

The year 1989 was a colorful moment and featured a great variety of new politicians. After all, as András Bozóki argues, the years from 1982 to 1993 can be viewed as the "decade of the intellectuals," individuals who adopted an extremely wide range of political roles in a historically short period of time. This was largely because of a unique phenomenon typical of Hungarian communism: the selective repression and relative liberalization in the final years of the Kádár regime (Bozóki, 2010). The amateur delegates of the new parties were able to cooperate by forming the Opposition Round Table (a coalition of diverse anti-communist opposition groups) and to negotiate and reach a compromise with the incumbent Communist Party about the rules to turn Hungary into a proper democracy at the National Round Table talks in a democratic manner.[4]

In contrast, in 2010, politics was the business of professional politicians. Moral capital—which the early intellectuals generally had—now mattered less for the electorate, compared to successful governance or the expectations surrounding it (Bozóki, 2010). By that year the spectrum of able politicians had been gradually narrowed down to a small cohort. Orbán—a natural talent and now a battle-hardened power politician—dominated the political scene.

Personalization of politics began early, and the public seemed to have preferred a party with a "face." The fact that SZDSZ did not present a prime ministerial candidate to the public before the 1990 elections could have

4 Interestingly, the first democratic popular action in 1989, the "4-yes" referendum, was also mainly aimed at avoiding the situation in which a single politician (reform communist Imre Pozsgay) would secure excessive political influence over the country by becoming president by direct election before the parliamentary elections could take place.

been a factor in the victory of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum, hereafter MDF), which campaigned with József Antall as the prospective prime minister. Leading figures of both of these two big parties, including Antall of MDF and Miklós Tamás Gáspár or János Kis of SZDSZ, were widely characterized around that time as arrogant (not exactly a democratic quality), and they soon entered into vicious political quarrels about aspects of democratic politics (e.g., media oversight). And yet, none of them seemed to be intent on centralizing politics, spreading disinformation, or using political or legal means to annihilate the other side.

At that time, Viktor Orbán was still a rookie compared to the leading politicians of the main parties. Yet, by 1989 he was showing signs of his ambition and talent for a political career on the national scene (demonstrated by his somewhat controversial but influential speech at the Imre Nagy reburial ceremony on June 16). Despite this, less than a year later, he was still a secondary political actor whose Fidesz party had to work hard to even get into the new parliament in 1990.

In the course of the following two decades, Orbán became more and more influential as a politician. He was able to unite the growing political circles around his almost unchallenged rule. In the early 1990s, he grew to be the undisputed leader of Fidesz, and by 1998 that of the right wing. Since 1998, the main question of successive Hungarian elections has been: Orbán or the other guy? In 1998, 2002, and 2006, he was always one of the two participants in the main preelection debate on television. His counterparts were Gyula Horn, Péter Medgyessy, Ferenc Gyurcsány, respectively. Orbán served as a prime minister in 1998–2002 but became the top politician with extraordinary power in 2010, right when the democratic backsliding phase began. He was governing for a decade and a half without having any serious counterbalance or political challenger.

Altogether, the temporal comparison shows a strong correlation. The pool and disposition of political actors is the reverse in 1989 and 2010, and they correlate with the democratization/autocratization cycle. This corroborates the assumption that the two are causally connected.

The Political Agency Factor in Regional Comparison

If the exercise of political agency could result in Hungary becoming a hybrid regime, why didn't it happen in other countries in the neighborhood? Why was Viktor Orbán, or the pool of politicians in Hungary, so special?

In regards to political agency, an interesting phenomenon occurred in Hungary in 1989 and in 2010, as well. Hungary is unique in both cases—though in different ways. In 1989, the political sphere was much more diverse than elsewhere in general. In 2010, the opposite was the case.

In the 1980s, news consumers around the world, or at least those people who were remotely familiar with politics of what was then known as Eastern Europe, could name the dissident leaders of Czechoslovakia and Poland. For the former, the writer Václav Havel was undoubtedly the most prominent, and for the latter, it was the trade union leader Lech Wałęsa. But who was their Hungarian counterpart? No one knew.

This is not because in Hungary there was no opposition movement or no dissidents. On the contrary: the opposition had too many faces. To a large extent this was due to the "conspicuous peculiarity" of the Hungarian transformation, that is, the political activity of intellectuals. As noted by András Bozóki, this development was something that was not found to such an extent in other countries:

> They organized the initial movements and participated in the Roundtable talks, and it was mainly they who filled up the first parliamentary groups in 1990. The process had its antecedents, as the 1980s saw the outlining of various groups of political intellectuals: the democratic opposition standing outside the system, the reformists representing criticism within the system, and the group of populist writers and cultural critics who occupied an intermediate status between the two former groups. (Bozóki, 2022a, p. 3)

The decentralization of the Communist Party in the last years of the 1980s was also somewhat unique. Elsewhere in the region many of the old bulls were still there—like Poland's Wojciech Jaruzelski, East Germany's Erich Honecker, Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu, and Bulgaria's Todor Zhivkov—when Hungary was already effectively governed by the four-member party presidency.

By 2010, Hungary had become an outlier in East-Central Europe (and has been ever since), but in the opposite way. Viktor Orbán was clearly a primus inter pares among Hungarian politicians and public figures.

Is the character of Viktor Orbán also exceptional in the regional political scene? Are there similar politicians elsewhere? (In which case, other factor(s) should account for Hungary's exceptional trajectory.) Could a character like Orbán cause similar autocratization in another country of the region? (In which case, the personality and agency of Orbán are indeed important

factors.) Answering these questions is not easy, but there are some guidelines that can help.

In an article published in 2007, the Budapest-born American political analyst Charles Gati observes that the newer politicians of the East-Central European region were markedly different than the generation that helped establish democracies there after 1989.

> While they did not share the same political philosophy,... they all worked hard to ally their countries with the United States and Western Europe, and they showed a good deal of tolerance toward their political opponents. By contrast, such principled and visionary leaders articulating national needs, interests, and aspirations are now in short supply. Many (and perhaps most) of those in prominent positions today are pragmatic politicians seemingly interested only in gaining and holding on to power. (Gati, 2007, p. 111)

Orbán has been the longest-serving top politician in the region (and in the European Union). This does not necessarily mean that he is the best or the smartest or the most flexible or the most ambitious or the most aggressive or the most amoral politician in the region. It certainly means that he had all of these traits, which fit the specific political circumstances found in Hungary. This may be due to his extraordinary qualities and/or the unbalanced nature of the pool of politicians in the country, where Orbán stood out as being much more talented, motivated, and unconstrained than any of his opponents.

The longest-serving prime ministers in the Visegrád countries are Václav Klaus (five years after 1993, and 10 years as president after 2003), Robert Fico (12 years over three different periods since 2006), and Donald Tusk (nine years in two different periods since 2007). Of the three, Fico comes the closest to Orbán with his populist and pro-Russian rhetoric. His political talent is connected to being receptive to his audience:

> Robert Fico has continuously proved his extraordinary capacity to understand the rules of the political game and to attract voters. However, when one is trying to understand his political positions and policy preferences, they reveal strategic flexibility and ambiguity and rather a lack of firm content. (Nemčok & Spáč, 2020, p. 250)

More recently, *The Guardian* found similar Orbán-like traits in him: "[I]n a three-decade career, he has navigated successfully between mainstream, pro-EU positions and a fiercely nationalist, anti-Western rhetoric destined

mainly for domestic consumption, proving more than willing to change tack depending on public opinion or political reality" (Henley, 2026). Still, he seems to be more cautious and less confrontational than Orbán in actual policy matters (e.g., in foreign policy toward the EU).

If Fico is not substantially different from Orbán, some other factor(s) must have protected Slovak democracy from performing such a deep dive as in Hungary. This could have been the constitutional system that did not allow such an immense political concentration as in Hungary after 2010, or different social attitudes, for example, a more democratically conscious and active public that could be mobilized en masse, as happened in 2018, after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak (see the analysis in the respective chapters dealing with the constitutional setup and the cultural factors).

When it comes to another Slovak politician who lacked democratic constraints even more, Vladimír Mečiar in the 1990s, another factor could have been at play: the fact that Slovakia was not yet a member of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The very realistic prospect of being left out of NATO and the EU, while the three other Visegrád countries became members, served as a serious warning and incentive for Slovak voters to pick a more democratic candidate, Mikuláš Dzurinda, who then became prime minister (1998–2006).

The same can be said about Jarosław Kaczyński, of Poland, who was similar to Orbán in being ready (without normative restraints) to employ clientelism and divisive politics, to infringe rule-of-law mechanisms, and to manipulate the media. The difference was that he had to deal with a more robust social resistance, a more pluralist political elite and power structure, and a better-working legal and institutional system of checks and balances (Zgut-Przybylska, 2026). He also had another disadvantage when it comes to staying in power: his discernible ideological principledness (or rigidity).

All in all, in regional comparison certain traits about Orbán stick out as plausible contributing factors for Hungary's backsliding, but these aspects are not so marked (there have been similar populists elsewhere) and are heavily connected to other factors (e.g., the conviction of the electorate and the constitutional system). The connection between the political agency factor and democratic backsliding is moderate.

Summary: Lessons About the Political Agency Factor

In the decades following 1989, the top Hungarian political elite gradually became more concentrated. One politician, Viktor Orbán, proved to be the most cunning, flexible, and ambitious, and he started to dominate the

field. He was also confrontational and Machiavellian—he has been ruthless with opponents and at the same time attentive to popular expectations. He showed signs of wanting to concentrate political and economic power in his hands after he first became prime minister in 1998, but it was his two-thirds majority in the parliament since 2010 that made it achievable for him. After 2010, Hungarian politics became almost completely a one-man show.

Compared to 2010, the situation was significantly different in 1989 when a great number of politicians were shaping the events. János Kádár was pushed aside in 1988 and the Communist Party was run by the Quartet. As for the opposition, Hungary did not have a single outstanding leader like Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia or Lech Wałęsa in Poland, but a divided group of naïve, amateurish, mostly democratically minded politicians instead. The pool of politicians was quite balanced in qualities, but not one of them was ready or able to become an autocrat.

The correlation is less marked in regional comparison. There were other politicians in the neighborhood with similar qualities and ambitions to Orbán, who showed a readiness to dismantle institutions or manipulate the media to keep power without democratic constraints. But they appeared to be less talented than Orbán in the realm of power politics and in their ability to convince a large enough part of the population of their capabilities.

Altogether, the personality of Viktor Orbán mattered in regard to the democratic backsliding of Hungary as a significant contributing factor. The temporal and regional comparisons, respectively, suggest that the political agency factor was necessary (autocratization probably would not have happened with the pool of politicians in 1989), but not a sufficient factor (it did not happen in other countries where similar politicians came to power). This means that political agency was effective together with the other factors which will be discussed later. Orbán's legalistic political approach was especially useful in (ab)using the existing problems of the constitutional setup, and his Machiavellian approach was conducive to seeking and using technologies of disinformation (see the relevant chapters).

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2. Broken Guardrails (Constitutional Setup)

Abstract: The Hungarian constitutional system, which went largely unchanged during the two decades after 1989, was very poorly designed. Its structural weaknesses made it a ticking time bomb with the dormant threat to grant a political group the chance to make a power grab and concentrate its authority. The country's democratic institutions did not work well as checks and balances: the unicameral parliament was practically omnipotent, and the system granted any political party or coalition an unrestrained rule if it secured a two-thirds supermajority, which was made easy by the disproportionate election system. While the same constitutional setup allowed for a quick democratization after 1989, its effect of not preventing backsliding still appears strong in a regional comparison, as its poor design was almost unparalleled.

Keywords: institutions, legal system, election law, checks and balances

Constitutional Setup and Democracy

The system of democratic institutions is the fundamental infrastructure of democracy. A set of formal structures and rules govern how power is acquired, limited, and exercised. It can be understood as a transmission belt between the people and governance. They help to aggregate individual preferences according to the "will of the people" in a country. They translate these preferences into actual policies, so that decisions about governance can be made in accordance with the popular will and for the benefit of the people. This also acts to impede the centralization of decision-making and the centralization of the benefits resulting from that governance.

In order to achieve this, free and fair elections are necessary to ensure that leaders represent the people and govern responsibly. The constitution

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(or a similar structure made up of fundamental laws) has to put limitations on the powers of the political institutions to ensure the rule of law and the protection of fundamental rights and equal treatment. Besides, the institutions need to be designed to form a system of checks and balances—which includes the separation of powers, legislative oversight over the executive, and judicial independence to ensure that leaders are bound by the legal framework—all to prevent the centralization of decision-making and to guarantee the fairness of the allocation of the benefits of governance.

Inclusivity and the possibility of all forms of popular participation need to be ensured so that people are involved in the decision-making process. The political system must be conducive to an active civil society, with guarantees of civil rights and liberties, freedom of association, transparency, and freedom of the press. These measures further help to solidify the rule of law and ensure accountability.

In contrast to the agency of actual politicians, the constitutional setup—however constructed—cannot in itself guarantee democratic transformation nor be a driver of democratic decline. Abandoned, it cannot even sustain itself. "In current debates on democratic subversion, we have been discovering that democratic institutions are neither self-perpetuating nor self-defensive automatons. The reproduction of democracy is not a self-driving mechanism, but a social achievement" (Schedler, 2024). This, however, does not preclude the fact that certain forms of institutional arrangements can work against backsliding more effectively than others. (Take this analogy: It is the driver, not the guardrails, that ensures the bus is moving along in its lane steadily, keeping it from swerving and drifting. The guardrails, however, can keep the bus from falling into the abyss.)

Based on historical examples of successful and unsuccessful attacks against democracy, there are different ideas about which institutions can serve as the primary guardrails (or gatekeepers) when elected leaders begin to exhibit autocratic tendencies. For instance, there are those who believe in the primacy of the rule of law and independent judges who guarantee it, and trust it even more than free and fair elections (Dahrendorf, 2004). Others stress the importance of mainstream political parties:

> Potential demagogues exist in all democracies, and, occasionally, one or more of them strike a public chord. But in some democracies, political leaders heed the warning signs and take steps to ensure that authoritarians remain on the fringes, far from the centers of power. When faced with the rise of extremists or demagogues, they make a concerted effort to isolate and defeat them. Although mass responses to extremist appeals

> matter, what matters more is whether political elites, and especially parties, serve as filters. (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 20)

The electoral system also matters greatly. Majoritarian systems can disproportionately favor bigger parties and thus be conducive to the centralization of power. This is also true for mixed electoral systems (Kostadinova, 2002). The combination of parliamentarism and proportional representation is suggested to be the better alternative when it comes to the protection of minority interests and guaranteeing voter participation (Lijphart, 1991). According to one study, the proportionality of representation creates a more stable system and makes democratic backsliding less likely (Diskin, Diskin, & Hazan, 2005, p. 300).

A faulty design of a formal democratic system can contribute to democratic backsliding in not helping to prevent it, once politicians are prone to centralizing their power, and if the people allow it. Amending the constitution goes to the core—so allowing it to happen too easily can be a danger to democracy. In some states there are even provisions that are deemed so foundational that they cannot be changed (it can concern provisions about the unity of the state, political pluralism, the national language, or basic human rights). Regulations about amendments differ greatly all around the world (Böckenförde, 2017). The usual requirement is a two-thirds or a three-fifths majority in the parliament, but in many countries, there are extra measures that act as democratic safety checks. In bicameral settings, the upper house also has a say in the process. It is also quite usual to have a popular referendum, as an added requirement. Some states have double-decision rules. This means that the amendment has to be passed twice—with a given time delay, or after new elections—granting extra supervision.

Autocratic attempts in democracies often start with attacks against the constitutional setup, the system of checks and balances, and the electoral system. A mild form of this is gerrymandering (the redrawing of the electoral districts deliberately in such a way that it leads to a better election result for the incumbent party). A drastic example is the abolition of oversight and political checks on governance. In the case of the Weimar Republic in Germany in 1933, this was made possible by the invocation of a legal provision, the famous Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution allowing rule by decree in case of an emergency.

Abuse of the legal system can undermine resistance to autocratization. This is the essence of autocratic legalism and the type of governance that is generally characterized as “rule by law” instead of the democratic “rule of law.”

Constitutional Setup as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

The climax of the U-turn in Hungary was the landslide election victory of Fidesz in 2010, resulting in a supermajority, which was made possible not just by Fidesz's popularity, but also because of a very specific election law, which seriously distorted the result. Other constitutional features then made it easy for Fidesz to dismantle democratic institutions and extend control over independent bodies, which has been the core feature of post-2010 democratic backsliding:

> What happened in April 2010 amounted to a perfect storm battering Hungarian constitutionalism.... In its first year in office, the Fidesz government amended the old constitution twelve times, changing more than fifty separate provisions along the way. Many of these changes were designed to weaken institutions that might have checked what the government was going to do next, which was to impose upon Hungary a wholly new constitutional order using only ideas and votes from Fidesz. (Bánkuti, Halmai, & Scheppele, 2012)

With its two-thirds supermajority—and based on that, with changing relevant regulations and appointing their preferred candidates—the government effectively took control of all major state institutions: the Constitutional Court, the election commission, the media authority (with a new media council), the president, the state audit office, the public prosecutor, ombudspersons, and the data-protection body (the last two were effectively abolished with reduced functions absorbed into ministries).

The "constitutional counterrevolution" since 2010 has been both the result and a sign of democratic backsliding. Power centralization, institutional capture, and autocratic legalism to rewrite the rules and dismantle constitutional checks and balances mutually help each other, creating a perilous downward spiral. By demolishing the guardrails (disabling the system of checks and balances), the Fidesz government gained more leverage for further autocratization.

Initial defects of the constitutional setup helped the democratic downturn in 2010. The victory of Fidesz in the parliamentary elections that year should not have been enough for it to undo democracy and introduce a hybrid regime. Two further factors contributed to it: the electoral system that substantially magnified the result and a lack of institutional and legal

checks and balances that could have constrained the party that dominated the parliament and formed the government.

The disproportionality of the electoral system was a crucial reason why Fidesz achieved a supermajority in parliament. Not much more than half of the voters supported it in the election. Without the disproportionality in place, Fidesz would still have won under a proportional electoral system, but it would not have been able to secure a two-thirds majority and, as a result, use the extraordinary legal options granted by this arrangement.

The foundation of Hungary's mixed electoral system was agreed upon during the National Round Table negotiations in 1989[1]. The complex arrangement consisted of a proportional party-list leg and a first-past-the-post leg. Accordingly, in the first round of the election, voters were to cast two votes: one for their preferred party and one for their favored candidate in the electoral district. If in a district none of the candidates got a simple majority, a second round was held, in which the three best-performing candidates of the first round were the contestants. This time, the one with the most votes, even if receiving less than 50%, became the electoral district representative in the parliament. This two-round, two-leg system was further complemented with a compensation mechanism, which was intended to partially rebalance the election result toward proportionality, to make up for "lost votes." (Under this additional scheme, votes cast for those candidates who didn't win in a given district were calculated and proportionally distributed among the parties to win a few extra mandates.)

Elections were held under this complicated system between 1990 and 2010. The system tended to reward bigger parties. (Thus, in 1990, the victorious Hungarian Democratic Forum got 42% of the mandate, even though the proportion of the votes that were cast for its party list was less than 25%.) This was partly explained by the second round, where similar-minded smaller parties could cooperate and support each other's candidates. Despite the inherent systemic disproportionality until 2010, no party achieved anywhere near a two-thirds majority on its own. One governing coalition achieved it one time (the socialist–liberal coalition between 1994 and 1998). The other major faulty element of the legal-institutional system that made autocratization possible was the general lack of checks and balances. The post-1989 system was such that a governing coalition could be quite powerful with a simple majority in the parliament, because the Hungarian parliament is unicameral, so there is no upper house that could block decisions, and

1 The peculiar story of how the crafting of the electoral system was messed up so badly is going to be detailed in the "Blunders" section of the Conclusion.

neither can the president, who is weak and has largely symbolic powers. To correct this, legislation required a two-thirds majority in a number of fundamental issues. There had also been a few Constitutional Court decisions and a few referendums that impeded the will of the parliamentary majority during the two decades of the post-1990 era. But all this proved to be ineffective against the post-2010 Fidesz supermajority.

In many countries the enacting of a new constitution requires a referendum, or new elections and a qualified majority vote by the new parliament. In Hungary, no such safety regulation was in place. The post-1994 socialist–liberal coalition amended the constitution with a four-fifths majority requirement for the enactment of a new constitution (effectively limiting itself), but that did not apply to amending the constitution. So, Fidesz, using its two-thirds majority, simply abolished the four-fifths requirement and then scrapped the constitution and enacted the new "Fundamental Law" in 2011. The two-thirds majority was also used to make the electoral system even more majoritarian and to adjust the legal system (including curbing the powers of the Constitutional Court) whenever it seemed to benefit the governing party.

A further institutional factor is that Fidesz has been so centralized that there were no voices among the party members and the MPs that objected to any of these steps being taken, despite the fact that the legitimacy of such radical reorganization of the political system lacked popular legitimacy. It had not been in the party program; the electorate did not vote for it. But members of the party, including its elected representatives, were all dependent on the party leadership. This was due to a transformation that had happened after the 2002 election defeat, when Viktor Orbán "monopolized his own power over the party by amending its statutes," thereby "the old, internally democratic party was replaced by a top-down, autocratic party dependent on the party leader" (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024, p. 94).

The question is whether the constitutional setup—the electoral law and the democratic system—was a significant factor in Hungarian autocratization. What needs to be determined is the extent to which it can be held accountable for helping the establishment of an undemocratic government and the operations that caused democratic backsliding.

The Constitutional Factor in Temporal Comparison

When compared with 1989, the constitutional system does not help explain how autocratization came to Hungary in 2010. That is because the centralized

system that was in place until 1989 was even less conducive to democratic governance. Also, the mixed electoral system and other problematic elements of the constitutional design that can be identified as factors in the post-2010 democratic decline have been in place throughout the 1990–2010 period without causing a backslide.

In early 1989, Hungary had only one legal party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). The system has been labeled with different names—state socialism, soft dictatorship, "Soviet-type," or post-totalitarian regime. In any case, it was far from being democratic in that decision-making was very highly centralized. Although formally laws were decided upon by the parliament, and there was an independent government consisting of the Council of Ministers and the judiciary, in practice the general secretary of the party and the Politbüro made all the major decisions. The real constraint on the power of the leadership was located outside the country, in fact. For most of the period of communism until 1989, the party was politically fully dependent on the Soviet Union.

The pre-1989 constitutional setup was not a factor in the democratic transformation, which began not because, but despite it. Rather, it was Hungary's severe economic situation, personal dispositions and choices of incumbent and opposition political actors, a massive amount of people who took to the streets to demonstrate, and, above all, the decision of Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet party leader, to effectively scrap the Brezhnev doctrine, which together contributed to the peaceful negotiated transformation in Budapest. The constitutional setup did not (could not) drive the transformation.

Similarly, a temporal comparison also makes it apparent that the faulty design of the constitutional arrangement, the core of which was worked out by negotiations between the regime and the new opposition parties in the summer of 1989 at the so-called National Round Table, cannot be blamed for the autocratic U-turn in 2010 and the subsequent backslide.

The constitutional transformation did not mean the drafting of an actual new constitution (that was planned to be done after the elections), but rather of fine-tuning the old communist constitution. A series of changes and amendments were made and new legislation—including the tragically ill-crafted electoral law—were enacted. The new system, which granted a dominant role to the new parliament and incumbent parties, was far from being foolproof. But still, it was in place for 20 years, during which no serious antidemocratic deviation happened.

Such a deviation could have happened, however. As was mentioned, the socialist–liberal coalition that formed the government in 1994 had a two-thirds supermajority in the parliament, just like Fidesz in 2010. So,

theoretically, that left-wing coalition government could also have dismantled the democratic system, but it did not. The coalition could have enacted a new constitution unilaterally, it could have introduced new media and electoral laws to its liking, and it could have appointed its own vassals to key government positions. Instead, it put a self-restraining clause into the constitution which raised the bar further: instead of the two-thirds requirement, now a four-fifths majority was needed for the enactment of a new constitution. This was to make sure that any future government with a supermajority would not be able to exclude the opposition entirely from the functions of the parliament.

The reason why the coalition tied its own hands when it came to writing the much-awaited constitution is up for debate. The reason could be political morality connected to the principle of constitutional democracy. Or it could equally be that it was afraid of the political consequences. Unilaterally changing the rules of a democratic competition certainly has the potential to erode political legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate.

The constraining power of the other party or the opposition could also have had the same effect. But whatever was the cause of this democratic self-restraint, it does not change the conclusion stemming from the comparison. It points to the fact that the faulty constitutional setup and the defective electoral law of 1989—even as they granted legality to start a constitutional counterrevolution—do not (in themselves) explain why Orbán decided to (and could) do away with democratic rule in the state.

The Constitutional Factor in Regional Comparison

Contrary to the temporal comparison, when weighted against other countries in the region, the Hungarian constitutional system seems to be a very important factor. This can be seen especially in connection with the electoral law, but also in regulations about the amendment of the constitution and the whole system of checks and balances.

The fairly majoritarian mixed electoral system is a true outlier among the Visegrád countries. Most of the other postcommunist countries have a proportional system based on a party list. Not only is this the case for all the other three Visegrád countries (i.e., the closest reference states: Poland, Czechia, Slovakia), but also for all the postcommunist countries of Southeast Europe, including the former Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

Based on this difference, a prominent Hungarian journalist, Márton Kozák, made a far-reaching claim about the importance of the electoral law

in explaining Hungarian democratic backsliding. Asserting that conditions in general did not differ in the countries of the region (for example, that there have been populist politicians, similar to Orbán, in other countries, too, like Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia), he blames the majoritarian electoral law of Hungary exclusively for the difference between the course of Hungary and other East-Central European states in the past decades (Kozák, 2021):

> The history of Central and Eastern Europe over the last three decades can be seen as an incredibly exciting social science experiment: a dozen or so postcommunist states begin a journey to become multiparty parliamentary democracies. What happens if we change a single variable in one country? What happens if the electoral system everywhere is more proportional than disproportionate, but in the control country it is severely disproportionate? The effect of the selected variable on social development can be examined almost in a laboratory environment! There isn't a natural scientist who wouldn't be satisfied with the circumstances of this experiment [focusing on] the significance of the electoral system: Hungary vs. every other transitioning state in Central and Eastern Europe. (Kozák, 2021)

And the findings? The proportional electoral system is a necessary prerequisite for the success of the democratic transition: "This variable has the most important role in deciding whether a postcommunist country, poor in democratic traditions, is going to be defeated by its own autocratic traditions, or whether it can contain its demons with institutional-legal means" (Kozák, 2021).

This is very convincing. There are only two minor problems with (or addendums to) this radical declaration. One is that it acknowledges that other variables are also at play, e.g., the poverty in democratic traditions (which, by the way, is not entirely uniform within the region—see Czechoslovakia as a democratic outlier in the interwar period). The other is that the proportional electoral system is only almost, but still not entirely, omnipresent in the region outside Hungary. Lithuania, which in 1990 became (and has consistently remained) democratic, also has a relatively majoritarian mixed system.

Nevertheless, the regional comparison shows a very strong correlation between the electoral system and democratic backsliding, and there are multiple examples (Slovakia under Mečiar, Poland under PiS) where it is reasonable to assume that other countries would have followed the path taken by Hungary if the electoral law granted such a far-reaching power for political centralization to one single party or politician.

When it comes to Slovakia, it could indeed have been devastating. This is not only because the electorate there showed that—from time to time—it is ready to support politicians who are prone to some degree of autocratizing (Mečiar, Fico), but also because Slovakia has a constitutional weakness similar to the one found in Hungary: rather lax rules governing the amendment of the constitution. Constitutional change can be effected via a three-fifths majority vote in the single-chamber parliament, with no requirement for an intervening election or referendum or cooling-off period. The single constraint is that, in practice, holding a nonbinding, advisory referendum before making substantial changes to the constitution has become an unwritten rule. Breaching it could cause political controversy (IDEA, 2014, p. 13).

Despite this, Slovak populists could not become strong enough to present a danger to democracy equal to that found in Hungary due to Slovakia's proportional electoral system. Measured by the popular vote, populist political parties won the first seven (!) parliamentary elections of Slovakia (1994, 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010, 2012, and 2016). However, lacking strong enough coalition partners, they could not even form a government in three out of those seven cases (thus, instead of Mečiar, Dzurinda formed a government in 1998 and 2002; and, instead of Fico, Radičová in 2010).

There are automatically stronger rules regarding constitutional change in the two other Visegrád states, as they have bicameral parliaments. In Czechia, both chambers of parliament need to accept the amendment with a three-fifths majority. In Poland, a two-thirds majority is needed in the Sejm, plus an absolute majority in the senate. Amendments to the more fundamental chapters of the constitution—structure and principles of the republic, rights and freedoms, and the amendment process itself—are subject to a delay of at least 60 days between the first reading and adoption, and a confirmatory referendum can be requested by one-fifth of the deputies, or by the senate, or by the president (IDEA, 2014, p. 15).

The Hungarian constitutional system relied almost solely on the unicameral parliament. Compared to other countries in the region—whether they have a semi-presidential system like Poland and Romania, or a parliamentary one, like Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Bulgaria—it is also an outlier in that the president is not elected directly by the people, but rather by the parliament. This arrangement—again a legacy of 1989—is another missed opportunity for Hungary to have a counterweight against the power of the parliament.

A properly working system of checks and balances can be demonstrated on a series of Czech cases where parties and the president were able to

push back attempts at power concentration. In 2000, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Social Democrats voted to adjust the electoral law for the benefit of the bigger parties (modifying the election of the members of the lower house in a more majoritarian and less proportional way). The attempt was blocked by President Václav Havel, who submitted a request to the Constitutional Court to determine whether the law complied with the constitution. The court rejected the law. Conversely, when Miloš Zeman challenged "both the letter and the spirit of the Czech Constitution" in 2013, by "appointing a technocratic caretaker government of political cronies over the heads of the country's party leaders," the political parties and the Constitutional Court used their powers to dissolve parliament, resulting in early elections and curtailing Zeman's ambitions (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, pp. 280–281).

In Hungary, prior to the cutting of its wings, it was the Constitutional Court that acted as the most important democratic watchdog and safeguard against the abuse of power by the government and the incumbent parties. The Hungarian Constitutional Court was considered especially assertive and activist, compared, for example, to the Polish Tribunal, whose decisions were subject to parliamentary approval until 1997. This reflected two different democratic traditions symbolized by Hungarian legal scholar László Sólyom and the Round Table versus Lech Wałęsa and his Solidarność (Solidarity) movement: "[T]he popular, union-based culture of Poland distrusted independent powerful courts to a greater extent than the elitist legal-academic culture of Hungary" (Kinander, 2014, p. 45).

Overall, the constitutional arrangement (institutions and regulations) seem to be a primary explanatory variable for the Hungarian democratic backsliding when seen through regional comparison. Independent institutions could slow down the process of autocratization in other countries—in Slovakia during the 1990s and after 2015 in Poland—until new elections helped get rid of those politicians who initiated the centralization policies, which contributed to democratic backsliding. As opposed to this, in Hungary it was the autocratizing government that eliminated the independent institutions with the two-thirds majority and even tailored the electoral law to its interests to further cement its power.

Summary: Lessons About the Constitutional Factor

The Hungarian constitutional system, which went largely unchanged during the two decades after 1989, was very poorly designed. Its structural

weaknesses made it a ticking time bomb with the dormant threat to grant a political group the opportunity to make a power grab and concentrate its authority.

Democratic institutions did not work as satisfactory checks and balances mechanisms: they provided excessive power to the parliament and the political parties, and also the potential for a practically unrestricted legal authority to any party that reached a two-thirds supermajority. This proved to be a fatal cocktail together with the disproportional electoral law that made a supermajority easily achievable. Just over half of the popular vote was enough to secure a supermajority, and with the lax rules on amendments, the constitution could be scrapped, a new one enacted, and the complete system of checks and balances knocked down.

When compared with 1989, the constitutional factor does not seem to matter much. The same electoral system and the rules of amending or altering the constitution that were in place in 2010 did not prevent democratization after its enactment in 1989. In a regional comparison, however, the Hungarian system sticks out as unusual in postcommunist Europe, where a proportionally representative party list system was generally applied. Such an electoral system and a more robust structure of checks and balances helped to prevent or curtail democratic backsliding in other countries.

The two comparisons thus yield very different results. Put together, it can be concluded that the constitutional setup—including the electoral system—had a moderate effect on the Hungarian trajectory. Its effect comes when combined with other factors. The temporal comparison shows that the constitutional system and the election law did not cause the backsliding. But they also didn't prevent it—which they could have (as the regional comparison suggests), had they not been very poorly designed.

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3. It's the Economy, Stupid (Output Performance)

Abstract: Weak economic performance, a widening social equality gap, and unmet welfare expectations prior to 2010 caused popular disappointment and growing mistrust in democratic governance in Hungary. This encouraged people to be more willing to believe the promised benefits of "unorthodox" economic policies and to provide electoral support for regulation, centralization, and nationalization. This effect, however, is only moderate in temporal and regional comparison. Expectations about the market economy after 1989 were moderate, and the disappointment came very early. The global financial crisis prior to Orbán's rise to power hit Hungary relatively hard compared to other regional countries, especially because of mismanagement in the previous years.

Keywords: economic performance, output legitimacy, inequality, welfare expectations

Economy and Democracy

Economy and democracy are closely related in multiple ways. A causal link can be established in both directions. Additionally, based on the definition used in this book, a system cannot be viewed as democratic without a certain wealth and income allocation. This criterion (an element of the egalitarian democracy concept) is that a democratic system has to ensure a fair distribution of wealth and income so that it benefits the people. Viewed from the opposite end: a system cannot be fully democratic if it does not grant well-being for all.

The economy is also a crucial subject in a democratic election contest. "It's the economy, stupid," was a sign posted in Bill Clinton's Little Rock, Arkansas, campaign headquarters as he ran for president in 1992. This

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motto is legendary, and it is quoted often as a reminder that the economy is always a key concern for voters and can be a focus to mobilize them in a political race. (Indeed, Clinton won against George H. W. Bush to a large extent due to a recession.)

There are quite a few theories in the social sciences that establish a causal link between economic conditions/performance and the advance (or decline) of democracy. There is a debate whether democracy or dictatorship is more conducive to economic growth: research by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (which contributed to them being jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2024) suggests that inclusive institutions are essential in making states successful (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013).

In the other causal direction, certain economic conditions were described as necessary for democracy by Alexis de Tocqueville, who claimed that it was the Industrial Revolution that brought about the democratic revolution. The so-called Lipset hypothesis (or modernization theory) presumes that welfare helps make and sustain democracy, based on the observation that there are more democracies among developed countries. Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi observe, based on the Lipset hypothesis, that the "probability of a democracy dying declines monotonically with the rise of per capita income" (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 170). In their survey, based on 135 countries in the period from 1950 to 1990, they found that "no democracy ever fell, regardless of everything else, in a country with a per capita income higher than that of Argentina in 1975: $6055" and that, as a consequence, "above $6055, democracies could expect to last forever" (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 165).[1] According to some, this oft-repeated quasi-law was breached when Hungary slipped back to a hybrid regime status (although, according to calculations that adjust for inflation, this may not have been the case).

A series of economic factors have been suggested, and are constantly being reevaluated, that are associated with democratic backsliding. An early, radical, and well-detailed argument comes from Hungarian-born Karl Polanyi and his influential book, *The Great Transformation* (1944). He claims that a genuine economic system that is based solely on self-regulating markets is impossible to implement. Attempting it, based on a misconceived

1 It is worth mentioning a few more observations stemming from this research. One is that above an income of $6,000, dictatorships were also found to become more stable (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, pp. 159–160), another is that democracy is more likely to survive in a growing economy with a less than $1,000 per capita income than in a country with an income between $1,000 and $2,000 that declines economically (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997, p. 177).

economic philosophy, leads to poverty and social unrest. Polanyi went so far as to argue that such market disruptions and imbalances in the past were a prime reason for the rise of left-wing or right-wing totalitarian political systems, as impoverished and disappointed people turn to radical ideas before markets can self-correct.

Less radical but more generally held contemporary versions also exist, which connect democratic backsliding to the conflict between democracy and capitalism. Disappointment experienced by the electorate due to perceived inequality may convince them to vote for candidates that do not promote democratic governance but promise to create better living conditions for the people by centralizing power. According to many authors, there is a strong causal link between economic insecurity as the determinant and growing populism (and/or skepticism toward liberal democracy) as the affected variable (for a systematic analysis of the relevant literature, see Scheiring et al., 2024).

Recently, however, two scholars challenged what they called the "democracy-not-delivering thesis" (Carothers & Hartnett, 2024). Based on twelve recent cases, they found the widespread argument that "the ongoing wave of global democratic backsliding" is due to discontent citizens who "embrace antidemocratic politicians" because democracies are failing to deliver adequate socioeconomic goods to them to be very debatable.

The Economy as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

The extraordinary election victory of Fidesz in 2010 and the subsequent democratic backslide was preceded by many years of economic mismanagement and by the most serious economic crisis and downturn since the early 1990s. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the U-turn has an economic cause.

In a step-by-step argument, however, economic underperformance is only an indirect cause. It helps explain the massive disappointment of the electorate in the former socialist-led coalition government (and the popularity of Fidesz, which had been the main challenger of the coalition parties). But it is harder to directly connect it to the autocratization in Hungary. For it to work as a cause, one has to claim either that the Fidesz leadership or the electorate or both believed, due to the previous failures, that abandoning democracy may bring better economic results and benefits.

However, Fidesz did not win on the promise of dismantling the democratic system. So, the connection between disappointment and autocracy can only

be indirect. The missing potential links are: 1) Fidesz politicians were ready to scrap the democratic system because they believed that an authoritarian system could deliver a better economic performance; 2) the people did not vote for such a policy but tolerated it because they were disappointed with the previous economic performance (which they valued more than democracy).

It is hard to know if the first presumption is correct. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the 2008–2009 global financial crisis made Orbán sincerely contemplate the future dynamics of global capitalism and optimal economic policies. As he later put it, unlike most European countries, he considered it not as a natural cyclical but as a structural crisis instead (Orbán, 2022b). He also thought that it was connected with the continued global rise of the East. This is an expectation that may also stem from the unexpected double-digit growth of China in the previous decades, which is probably an underlying factor behind the global erosion of faith in the overall utility of democracy.

But even if the disappointment of the people with the nation's economic performance did not directly lead to a disillusionment with democracy, it was clearly a factor in propelling Fidesz into power with a record margin. The pre-2010 economic underperformance was very real, and it was linked to mismanagement by the coalition of the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt, hereafter MSZP) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, hereafter SZDSZ), which had governed the country since 2002.

In a small way, Fidesz was also responsible for Hungary being struck down by the whirlwind of the global financial crisis. Both the 2002 and the 2006 elections were extraordinary in Hungary. By then, the system-changing duo (the Hungarian Democratic Forum and SZDSZ) of the 1990s had been marginalized and Fidesz and MSZP dominated the political field, running a close contest. These election campaigns were characterized by the making of outlandish promises, especially to the biggest voter group, the pensioners.

After a narrow win, Péter Medgyessy, the prime minister of the socialist–liberal coalition, felt obliged to fulfill the excessive pledges he made in 2002 and to even make some new ones. This was partly due to a political scandal: two months after the election, the right-leaning political daily *Magyar Nemzet* published a document showing that he had been an agent of the communist foreign counterintelligence services. The generous public spending spree—which had its precedent in a preelection fiscal loosening by the Fidesz-led government before 2002—put Hungary on an unsustainable financial course.

In 2004 Ferenc Gyurcsány was appointed prime minister instead of the discredited Medgyessy. However, despite the worsening budget balance, he

did not dare to hit the spending brake before the 2006 election. On the one hand, this proved to be a winning strategy and it countered Fidesz's dishonest campaign slogan: "We are worse off than four years ago!" But, on the other hand, it also resulted in an accumulated budget deficit reaching 10% of the GDP. A very serious adjustment was needed. So, after the elections, as a wake-up call to avoid a financial crisis, Prime Minister Gyurcsány called together the new socialist MPs to explain to them that a painful belt-tightening has to come. In his informal speech, he occasionally used swear words, and he highlighted how he had lied about the state of the economy before the elections just to secure a victory, which now has to stop. The political crisis came as his speech was leaked to the public, causing demonstrations and riots.

The global financial crisis, which arrived all too soon, was not the fault of the governing coalition, of course. But it was, indeed, responsible for the troubled state of the economy prior to the crisis. GDP growth fell from the 4–5% rate of the early 2000s to the 0–1% range in 2007 and 2008 due to severe austerity measures, which were introduced to rebalance earlier overspending. Such a low rate of growth had not been experienced since 1996, the year when the Bokros package of 1995, austerity measures of the first socialist–liberal coalition, had their effect (World Bank, n.d.1).

"Very few felt that the country was racing at 200 kilometer per hour toward the crisis with the handbrakes on"—thus Júlia Király, vice chair of the Hungarian National Bank, characterized the abnormally high level of public borrowing that continued, despite the austerity measures (Király, 2019, p. 18).

A serious insolvency crisis was averted with the help of the IMF–EU duo with a loan package of 20 billion euros at the onset of the global financial crisis in November 2008. But the effects of the crisis were still significant for a large part of the Hungarian population, especially those with foreign currency–denominated debt—as the value of the forint plunged to never before seen lows.

So, in the end, it is no wonder, that by 2010, a large part of society became disappointed with the prevailing economic mantra that there was no alternative to liberal management of the economy, which manifested itself in openness to foreign capital, growing inequality, and intermittent belt-tightening reforms.

> The economic disillusionment with Hungary's new capitalism peaked under the socialist–liberal government in power in the period 2006–2010. The socialists suffered the most significant setback as a result of the austerity measures introduced after their electoral victory in 2006; the party's popularity rating plummeted from 37% to 26%. (Scheiring, 2021)

On the other hand, the "unorthodox" (in part: anti-foreign capital, etatist) alternative methods of Fidesz were greatly helped by the subsequent relative economic boom and global monetary relaxation following the crisis. Even the widespread antidemocratic phenomenon of clientelism and corruption was tolerated, at least partly due to the semi-official explanation: the need to create a national bourgeoisie.[2]

All in all, what needs to be tested is if it is credible to assume that the people supported autocratization (or were not so keen to oppose it) because of a general mistrust in the economic efficiency of democratic governance and because of a general disappointment caused by poor economic performance and unmet welfare expectations.

The Economic Factor in Temporal Comparison

After years of discontent due to the failing economy, in 2010, the replacement of economic liberal openness with political and economic centralization was accepted by the electorate. Practically the same thing—discontent with economic underperformance—can be quoted as a cause to welcome (or at least temporarily accept) the opposite direction of events around 1989: quick marketization, privatization, and deregulation.

Just as discontent rose in the run-up to 2010, by the 1980s the Hungarian population felt that a different form of economic policy would be needed. Quasi-market reforms were introduced into Hungary in 1968, with some limited autonomy granted to companies under the so-called New Economic Mechanism, and a generation of economists were exploring ways to part with the rigid system of state regulation and central planning. But the reform impetus died down by the early 1970s, and the Hungarian economy gradually went into crisis mode. In 1981 the country joined the IMF. In the course of the 1980s, the accumulating foreign debts, which were taken on to avoid a default or a series of austerity measures, started to become an extra burden:

> The crisis atmosphere of the 1980s also revived and intensified the debate about reform, which lasted until the ultimate collapse of the regime. A few new remedies were tried: some companies were given permission to

2 Corruption was famously reframed by András Lánczi as a deliberate policy of Fidesz aimed at the socioeconomic restructuring of the country, similar to what happened after 1945 and after 1989, by diverting capital to a "domestic entrepreneurial stratum" (Lánczi, 2015).

> trade directly with foreign customers without interference from the state monopoly of foreign trade; more private initiative was encouraged by legalizing producers' cooperatives; management positions were freed from the clutches of the nomenklatura and began to be allotted competitively; and groups of workers were allowed to form "work associations," free to contract with managers over and above customary regulated wages. None of these measures were sufficient to turn around an ailing economy, and the regime continued to the end to try to mitigate the political effects of adversity by foreign borrowing. (Janos, 2000, pp. 297–298)

The rising indebtedness worked to keep the standard of living relatively bearable. This ensured that ordinary people were less likely to feel the effects of the serious financial crisis prior to 1989, which was continuously being discussed by politicians and economists. The communist leadership wanted to avoid having to face widespread public outrage at all costs. This is why the transformation process cannot be said to have been forced by the people due to economic dissatisfaction. Despite the rising inflation, the main demands were for democracy (versus one-party dictatorship) and national sovereignty (versus being a Soviet satellite state).

While neoliberal ideas promoting market coordination and private property had spread among Hungarian academics during the Kádár era (Antal, 2021), economic ideas were not widely discussed beyond academia. Ordinary people did not feel like choosing between socialism and capitalism. And, even if they had to, the decision would not have been overwhelmingly supportive of the change.

Support for economic liberalism declined further by early 2010:

> When asked to evaluate their nation's switch to capitalism, Hungarians are divided—46% said they approve of the move from a state-controlled economy to a market economy, while 42% disapproved. In 1991, when the Times Mirror Center (the forerunner of the Pew Research Center) asked this same question, 80% had approved of the change. (Wike, 2010)

These figures show correlation with support for democracy—according to the same reports. The 1991 Times Mirror Center poll found that 74% of Hungarians approved of the change from a one-party system to a multiparty system; by 2009 a slim 56% majority expressed this view. The decline could be due to economic discontent. At the same time, 72% of Hungarians said that today they were worse off economically than they were under communism (Wike, 2010).

Similar to 1989, when democratization and liberalization seemed to offer better economic conditions, by 2010 democracy had been discredited together with the economic system that accompanied it:

> Since the early 2000s, Hungary has been repeating the 1980s—with a slight exaggeration—and … in a similar way to the previous years. It is as if the events of the decades before 1990 had contributed to the new debt: the price of economic policy mistakes was once again the debt trap, and, in the midst of the economic crisis that began in 2008, the country once again had to turn to the IMF for help. It is as if Kádár's debts were haunting [the country], and perhaps they still are. (Mong, 2012, p. 292)

All in all, the poor performance of the economy seems to be a weak determinant for regime change in 1989 and in 2010. Popular views about the liberal economy ran a parallel course with support for democracy. They were not proven to be an important factor in bringing about a political change one way or the other.

The Economic Factor in Regional Comparison

The statement to be tested—compared to regional developments—is this: Autocratization in Hungary was not resisted because of disappointment in the poor economic performance and rise in inequality during the earlier democratic period.

Taken apart, the following aspects need to be analyzed: Is the Hungarian negative economic performance prior to 2010 really outstanding? Is the disappointment more serious than elsewhere? Can the economic principles that were the guidelines before 2010 be connected to democracy in people's minds?

Viewed grosso modo, Hungary's position among the postcommunist countries has not changed dramatically. The first years of the transformation showed a serious decline everywhere in the region, then another slump came because of the global financial crisis in 2008–2009 (World Bank, n.d.2). Throughout the past decades, the region has preserved the general pattern showing that, as you go north or west, countries tend to be better off. Based on the nominal GDP per capita of the postcommunist countries west of Russia in 2023, the northernmost and westernmost countries are the richest (Estonia, Czechia, Slovenia), and the easternmost and southernmost countries are the poorest (Ukraine, North Macedonia, Albania).

Nevertheless, Hungary's economic performance was somewhat weaker than that of the others. The difference was not dramatic, but noticeable. In the period between the early 1990s and 2024, by the most relevant measures, Hungary had been overtaken by Slovakia and by Poland, and the gap between Hungary and Romania had significantly narrowed. The growth figures for the period did not deviate much from those of the other Visegrád countries, with the notable exception of the 2006–2009 period—which happens to be when Fidesz rose to power.

The economic problems of Hungary were more serious than those of the other Visegrád countries in the years before 2010:

> By 2008, foreign-currency loans constituted almost 30 percent of GDP, compared with less than 10 percent in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Of the four Visegrád economies, Hungary's economy suffered the most when its buildup of public and private external debt faced the global economic crisis of 2008 and 2009. (Rohac, 2016, p. 6)

The effect of the crisis was the most severe among the Visegrád four in 2009: their GDP declined by 6.7% together with sinking rates of foreign trade, domestic consumption, investment, and government expenditure, and sharply rising unemployment, reaching over 10%, with more than 100,000 people losing their jobs in that year alone (Király, 2019, pp. 123–124).

That being said, the Hungarian rate of decline is not exceptional in the wider East-Central European region. GDP contraction was higher in Romania, and even more so—between 10 and 20%—in the Baltic countries (IMF, 2011).

The economy was very much on people's minds in Hungary. In 2009, Pew Research (the Pew Global Attitudes Project) carried out a survey in Europe about what people valued more: a strong economy or a good democracy. The results show a clear East–West divide (Smoczyński, 2019, p. 39). In Western European countries, people tended to appreciate less a strong economy compared to a good democracy: France (27% versus 73%), Spain (26% versus 68%), Germany (37% versus 58%). In the East the reverse was the case with Poland (55% versus 36%), Czechia (50% versus 44%), and Slovakia (50% versus 42%), while the biggest difference was measured in Ukraine (78% versus 12%). Hungarians also clearly preferred a strong economic output over a good democracy (73% versus 20%).

Other figures show that disappointment with the economic performance in Hungary seems to have been translated into negative opinions about democracy. Compared to the Hungarians, most of the Czechs were still

happy about their nation's earlier transition to the free market (79%), and residents in the other two Visegrád countries—Poland (71%) and Slovakia (66%)—also valued the free market more than those in Hungary (46%) (Pew Research Center, 2010). The corresponding approval rate of change to a multiparty system was 80% for the Czech Republic, 71% for Slovakia, 70% for Poland, and 56% for Hungary.

The dissatisfaction was embedded in a general frustration with the experiences of the past two decades. The transformation from a command to a market economy came at a tremendous price everywhere: a steep rise in the number of unemployed and growing inequality. This, in part, was a natural consequence of the transformation, but the problems were more heavily present in Hungary than in most of the other transforming countries. The employment rate fell below 60%, which was much lower than the rate in the other Visegrád countries or the Baltic states, Slovenia, Romania, or Bulgaria (Nesporova, 2002). Special difficulties for Hungary included the debt burden that had been accumulated by the Kádár regime. Indeed, it was the largest one per capita among the East-Central European countries.

Even the otherwise beneficial cautiously pro-market pre-1989 Hungarian economic reforms backfired somewhat. According to a leading Hungarian economist, Péter Ákos Bod, the shady rules of the "market economy embedded in a planned economy" meant that privately owned mini-enterprises could operate in the backyard of large, state-owned companies. As a result, "the new entrepreneurial layer that emerged in this way learned dexterity instead of how to compete.... The survival and cultural tradition of the proto-market economy within the Kádár system still holds the country back" (Eurológus, 2020).

Add to these the assailable methods of privatization: in the first years, the selling of state companies and their assets to foreign investors was used very extensively (partly to help pay back the state debt), and Hungary was a clear leader in this. Another method, the so-called spontaneous privatization, was even more unique. For roughly half a year in 1989–1990, it was possible for managers of small and medium-sized firms to direct the transformation in such a (basically uncontrolled) way that in the end they—sometimes together with a circle of other employees—became the owners. In Czechoslovakia, by comparison, "privatization was socially mediated by agreements among the state, companies and labor unions" (Lorenz, 2021, p. 1).

In the mind of the general population, all this could have been combined as a democracy equals liberal capitalism equals a get-rich-quick scheme for the "resourceful" together with a selling out of the country to foreigners.

In the early 1990s, political elites in the Visegrád countries were generally convinced that the effective functioning of the economy required deregulation, trade liberalization, and privatization. It was also widely believed that when embracing those positions, governments should act quickly before domestic resistance escalated. To the surprise of international observers, the liberal fervor lasted longer and went deeper than in the West with "radical neoliberal reforms" like the flat tax, pension privatization, the slashing of corporate tax rates, extreme monetarism, and strong central bank independence (Appel & Orenstein, 2018).

Hungary was a leading country in East-Central Europe in how it transformed its economic system with elements of market coordination and small-scale private ownership prior to 1989. By the end of 1995, it was attracting as much foreign investment as all the other countries of the former Communist Bloc together, and it continued to be exceptionally dependent on foreign investment (Pogátsa, 2009). In the years preceding 2010, in terms of property rights, government integrity, business freedom, trade freedom, investment freedom, and financial freedom, Hungary was more liberal than the other Visegrád countries, and much more liberal than the EU average (Bohle & Greskovits, 2018, p. 1073).

Through a comparative lens in general, neither the Hungarian negative economic performance nor the disappointment is unique, but Hungary is a pronounced case in both. Partly due to an exceptional openness to foreign capital in the privatization process, economic liberalism was viewed with growing suspicion. Skepticism about democracy went with it. The difference compared with countries in the region is moderate, indicating that this alone cannot justify an antidemocratic turn or the popular acceptance of it, but—together with other causal effects—it could have been a moderately important factor.

Summary: Lessons About the Economic Factor

A weak economic performance, a widening social inequality gap, and unmet welfare expectations prior to 2010 caused popular disappointment and a growing mistrust in democratic governance. This made people more willing to welcome, or at least accept, promises of alternative ("unorthodox") economic policies and to provide electoral support for regulation, centralization, and nationalization.

This could have a noticeable but not a decisive effect on Hungarian de-democratization. The economic output expectations of the introduction

of a free market economy after 1989 were only moderate. The pre-2010 economic underperformance and disappointment was stronger in Hungary than in other similar states, but elsewhere in the region people also felt the negative consequences of the economic backlash caused by the global financial crisis.

The effect of the economic factor is insufficient by itself; others must have contributed. The pre-2010 electoral disappointment and the post-2010 economic policy shift was strongly connected to the "international environment" and the "political ideology" factors. The international environment mattered with the relative economic successes of China and other autocratic countries and the global financial crisis. Political ideology was pushed in an anti-liberal direction because of economic failures that were attributed to open, pro-market, neoliberal economic policies.

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4. Russians in the Pantry[1] (International Environment)

Abstract: While the democratization trajectory in Hungary went hand in hand with a political/economic/cultural turn toward the West, the autocratization phase was connected to an "Eastern opening." The connection seems to be moderately relevant in explaining Hungary's post-1989 political course. The earlier "Euro-Atlantic" pulling effect was sidelined by disappointment with the Western liberal democratic model, which accompanied the more assertive anti-Western foreign policies of Russia and the growing global weight of the Chinese economy. With accession to the EU and NATO, Hungary could become a free rider, so the democratizing leverage of these Western organizations became weaker. This international shift also affected other countries of the region, so it can only explain Hungary's democratic backsliding together with other factors.

Keywords: Eastern opening, international politics, Euro-Atlantic integration, authoritarian diffusion

The International Environment and Democracy

Democracies presuppose the existence of a society that can work as a sovereign community. However, countries do not exist in a bubble; international developments have an effect on societies. Economic and political interdependence connect states, political ideas, and social movements across borders.

1 "The Russians are already in the pantry" ("Az oroszok már a spájzban vannak") is an oft-repeated Hungarian slogan. It is a quotation from the 1965 Hungarian comedy movie *A tizedes meg a többiek* (The corporal and the others) about a group of soldiers who had deserted trying to survive the last weeks of World War II.

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Being an ally of the West or of the Soviet Union often (though certainly not always) had an effect on the political system of smaller states during the Cold War. Synchronized liberal revolutions swept through Europe during the springtime of the peoples in 1848, empires collapsed after World War I, conservative dictatorships fell in Latin America and Southern Europe in the 1970s, communist ones in East-Central Europe in 1989, and long-standing dictators were toppled after 2010 during the Arab Spring.

As was shown by Samuel Huntington, democratization on the global level has happened in waves (Huntington, 1991a, 1991b). He identified three waves of democratization: a century-long first one that began in the 1820s, a second one after World War II "that reached its zenith in 1962," and another one beginning in 1974 (Huntington, 1991a, p. 12). This last one began with the democratization of countries in South America and Southern Europe. Huntington also included the postcommunist countries of East-Central Europe and further East in this wave.

Huntington also explains why democracy sometimes comes in waves. One reason is snowballing, which is "the demonstration effect" of earlier transitions "in stimulating and providing models for subsequent efforts at democratization" (Huntington, 1991a, p. 13). The other possibility occurs when multiple countries are affected by the same factor. Such was the "striking shift in the doctrine and activities of the Catholic Church, manifested in the Second Vatican Council of 1963–65 and the transformation of national Catholic churches from defenders of the status quo to opponents of authoritarianism" (Huntington, 1991a, p. 13). In the 1970s and 1980s, it helped a Catholic democratic wave, which affected Portugal, Spain, six Latin American countries, plus Poland and Hungary. A similar positive role was played by the European Community, whose promised membership and economic benefits helped consolidate democracies of Southern and Eastern Europe (Huntington, 1991a, pp. 13–14).

In a seminal article, Andrew C. Janos introduced a new paradigm to the study of the events of 1989, the *annus mirabilis*, for East-Central Europe. He listed the following four earlier frameworks: the fall of European communism as the "triumph of human rationality culminating in the end of history"; the "modernization and convergence" theory about the growing complexity of the economic base that led to the rise of political pluralism; political extinction understood as imperial decay; and the transitologist teleology from authoritarianism to democracy based on the templates of earlier Latin American and South European examples (Janos, 2001, pp. 221–222). What he suggested as a fifth paradigm matches the title of his article: "From Eastern Empire to Western Hegemony: East Central Europe Under Two International Regimes."

These two international regimes, according to his account, had "very different identities, purposes, and capabilities." The regime associated with the Soviet Union

> established its hegemony over the region by force of arms in order to co-opt these countries not just into a conventional security system, but into a grand political venture designed to overthrow the global economic and political primacy of the West. In exchange the Soviets promised paradise at the end of a long road to global socialism.... In contrast, the Western democracies entered the politics of the region reluctantly, and with the credible claim of making its nations equal partners in a prosperous and secure commonwealth. (Janos, 2001, pp. 247.)

The choice of the peoples of the region was then clearly based on welfare: "While the paradise of full communism remained pie in the sky, the consumer paradise of western capitalism was fully visible in the shop windows of Paris, Vienna, and Berlin" (Janos, 2001, p. 247).

The switch from one international regime to the other can be redone, warned the prescient scholar. If, following the transition, the East-Central European countries do not experience high enough growth rates, if a global recession were to undermine the Western willingness to provide aid, if Western hegemony on the continent were to face a renewed challenge from the East, this "may quickly unite the now-scattered forces of discontent" and "rally them around radical flags whether red or brown." In that case, the region "may be divided again between competing spheres of influence with different sets of political and economic institutions" (Janos, 2001, pp. 248–249).

The potential for democratization and democratic backsliding due to foreign intervention is a general global reality. While democratization can be helped by foreign powers—for example, with economic aid programs like the Marshall Plan and education programs like the one provided by the USA to Germany and Japan after World War II—such initiatives often fail.

On the other hand, foreign involvement is one of the few crucial factors for democratic decline: "Countries experiencing serious levels of involvement by foreign forces" from indirect influence to outright invasion are "significantly more prone to democratic collapse than those with low involvement" (Diskin, Diskin, & Hazan, 2005, p. 296). The so-called authoritarian diffusion, the process whereby nondemocratic institutions, organizations, policies, strategies, practices, and norms travel between polities, has several forms and mechanisms. Today it is "mainly driven by learning and adaptation, while

compulsion is least pronounced" (Tolstrup, 2024). International collaboration between autocratic regimes is a fact of life, which affects international trade, but also defense, propaganda, and media control (Applebaum, 2024).

The International Environment as a Factor Affecting Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

Lacking any direct foreign military intervention, and given Hungary's close relationship with other democracies and its membership in organizations dominated by such countries (especially the EU and NATO), it is difficult to propose a reasonable hypothesis for outside factors that could substantially influence Hungary's political system toward autocratization. But it is not impossible.

Hungary's autocratic turn has been accompanied by a dramatic foreign policy shift away from Europe and toward Russia. "No matter what Moscow does, Hungary's prime minister consistently carries water for the Kremlin," claimed an article in *Foreign Policy* in 2022, "Putin's Trojan Horse Inside the European Union" (Coakley, 2022). A more recent article in *The Guardian* called Orbán the EU's "foremost troublemaker" and its "disruptor-in-chief" (Henley, 2026).

There is a long list of "favors" that exemplifies this attitude. The Hungarian government has vetoed many EU and NATO resolutions that went against Russian interests: it delayed for more than a year Sweden's accession to the military alliance by failing to ratify the treaty; it made a shady deal with the Russian state and with nuclear giant Rosatom to finance and enlarge the nuclear plant at Paks (while other European states were trying to lessen their dependence on Moscow); and Viktor Orbán and Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó had recurring high-profile meetings with President Putin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov of Russia. At the same time, Fidesz politicians and their media machine (public media outlets and a significant part of the private ones) speak of war-torn Ukraine with a shocking degree of hatred and ridicule for its patriotic and heroic leader.

There are a few explanations for this surprising diplomatic orientation, which can be derived from official government statements and communications in the Fidesz-friendly media. For one, the overall economic rationale: the Eastern Opening policy was announced in 2010 to primarily mean a significant redirection of trade relations, based on expectations of a gradual but continuous global rise of the East—primarily China—and a relative decline of the West. The economic realignment does not seem to have brought real advantage

to Hungary, and even the trade redirection did not really happen despite the efforts made. (This was due largely to the fact that an overwhelming part of the Hungarian GDP is produced by foreign-owned multinational companies, whose export and import decisions are made centrally.)

There is also a geopolitical consideration: Hungary has to have good relations with all the major power poles in the region. This policy is discussed in Fidesz circles with the buzzword "connectivity." This rationale seems to be rather unconvincing when one takes into account the serious deterioration in relations between Hungary and Ukraine, Poland, Germany, and other Western states that has resulted from this policy. Another rationale is energy security, but that would probably call for more geographical diversification. Yet another is Hungary's wish to avoid being dragged into the war, but it is hard to understand how it would be prevented if Western support to Ukraine was cut off (as the government insists) and Russia achieved its goals (including Putin's call to roll back NATO to where it was in 1997, when Hungary was not yet a member).

Another, somewhat more plausible reason for the connection is ideological alignment. Early Hungarian communications around the Eastern Opening policy were connected to the appraisal of the political and economic model of the more centralized Eastern countries. In recent years, Fidesz's statements often presented Russia as a defender of traditional values and "normality" against Western liberal wokeism, demonstrated by the "aggressive" spreading of "gender ideology."

According to a popular narrative, Orbán is effectively working as an agent of Moscow because of some sort of blackmail by Russia. There are theories that claim that Moscow holds some sort of kompromat (compromising material) on him. Based on a video podcast, this is what historian Krisztián Ungváry seems to suspect, although he denies the likelihood of the often-told story about Orbán having been an informer for state security prior to 1989 (Ungváry, 2024). Another story circulating in the media, based on a claim by Dietmar Clodo, a former influential figure in international organized crime, is that Orbán was bribed in 1994 by another mafioso, Semyon Mogilevich, and that Putin obtained a recording of that money transfer in 2009, around the time when Fidesz made a sudden U-turn toward Russia. Other versions of the "Russian agent" narrative involve direct financial gains made by members of the Fidesz circle. It is certainly true that there are fewer transparency requirements and less oversight over trade and investment transactions with autocratic regimes than those within the European Union.

Whatever the cause, the turn toward Russia preceded 2010. A few years earlier, Gyurcsány's socialist-led government had taken a few steps toward

opening up contact with Russia. His support for Hungarian participation in the building of the Russian South Stream gas pipeline—a rival of the European Nabucco pipeline project—brought condemnation from inside and outside of Hungary. In 2008, it was Viktor Orbán himself who accused Gyurcsány of turning Hungary into the happiest barrack of Gazprom.[2] This seems to show that it was not necessarily the personality or the convictions of Viktor Orbán, but something more profound, that started to pull Hungary toward Russia. (And China should not be left out of the picture either, at least according to Freedom House. In its most recent issue of *Nations in Transit*, in the section titled "Autocratic Cooperation," Hungary is marked on a map alongside a few other countries [none of them EU members], with the claim: "Hungary has pursued an economic relationship with China for several years. In February 2024, China announced that it would also back Hungary in security matters" [Freedom House, 2024, p. 16].)

What is the connection between the foreign policy reorientation and the specific domestic politics that brought about the erosion of democracy? An indirect influence is undoubtedly present: Putin provided an autocratic model, in general, and a series of techniques to retain power, including legislation to cut back civil society and media freedom. More direct influence could be Russian covert operations, including disinformation campaigns. These certainly exist—but they are seemingly conducted in accordance with government propaganda and in the media controlled by Fidesz. The Hungarian government apparently imported certain techniques from Moscow in an attempt to silence unfavorable opinions, like the "foreign agent" legislation against NGOs. It is possible that the Russian connection offers other means or technologies to help Fidesz stay in power, but, if so, much of that—like the presumption of blackmail—is in the realms of speculation.[3]

On the other hand, Hungary is a member of the European Union and NATO, and both organizations expect its members to be democratic. This

2 A reference to the old catchphrase that described Hungary as "the happiest barrack" in the communist camp under János Kádár.

3 A series of mysterious events have taken place at the same time as several Hungarian parliamentary elections. There was a series of bomb explosions in Budapest before the election in 1998. This contributed to the downfall of the socialist-led government. After the 2002 and 2006 elections, leaking of sensitive information about the prime ministers caused major embarrassment to the victorious socialists: in 2002 it was the fact that Péter Medgyessy had been working for the communist state security, in 2006 it was the leaking of Gyurcsány's (in)famous "lie speech" (*őszödi beszéd*). None of these events have been connected to clandestine Russian activity, but Russian meddling in other elections in the USA and in Europe, and its support for far-right parties in various countries, has been documented.

expectation in itself should have a democratizing effect, but there are more direct means for influence.

According to an article by András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, contemporary Hungary is sui generis, a single political species representing a new political category, the externally constrained hybrid regime (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). They claim not only that Hungary is alone in the EU as a hybrid (nondemocratic) regime, but also that the EU has played a crucial role in the development of its unique categories with its system supporting, system legitimating, and system constraining functions.

At the time of the writing of the article, this latter function was mostly exercised by rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), which the Hungarian Constitutional Court—though staffed by Fidesz loyalists—did not dare to overlook. Since then, Hungary's access to EU funds has been tied to certain conditionality mechanisms. The following observation still seems to hold true:

> Even though the EU could not stop the deconstruction of liberal democracy, it did help to slow down and prevent the undermining of liberal constitutionalism and the concomitant curbing of human rights and liberties in Hungary.... In the absence of effective domestic forces, the EU and the ECtHR have become the most important systemic level obstacles to the curbing of basic human rights and the move toward a more authoritarian regime in Hungary. In general, Hungarian political leadership is externally constrained by European law and institutions. (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018, pp. 1179–1180)

Many say that the European Union was very slow to react. (Some analysts put the responsibility on former German chancellor Angela Merkel—Germany theoretically has a significant leverage, but also counterinterests based on extensive economic ties between the two countries, mainly in car production.) Despite warnings about serious infringements of core democratic values of the European Union, including the European Parliament's Tavares Report (2013) condemning the decline of democracy and fundamental rights in Hungary under Orbán, the Article 7(1) procedure was only triggered against Hungary in 2018 (although it did not have any results). The membership of Fidesz in the European People's Party group was suspended a year later, and Fidesz left the moderate right-wing group in 2021. Since rule-of-law conditionality regulations went into effect in April 2022, many billions of euros from EU funds to Hungary have been suspended, of which 2 billion euros are lost forever.

Overall, outside forces supporting Hungarian autocratization may have outweighed others that promoted and, in many ways, tried to help defend Hungarian democracy. How plausible is it that this imbalance was a factor in Hungarian democratic backsliding?

The International Environment Factor in Temporal Comparison

The international landscape changed significantly for Hungary between 1989 and 2010. Before 1989, Gorbachev was effectively scrapping the Brezhnev doctrine, giving a green light to whatever political change the peoples of East-Central European countries chose. This was crucial at a time when the dictatorial regimes in these states fully relied on the backing of the Soviet Union—including a possible military intervention as a last resort, as happened in 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The Soviet leadership even acquiesced to the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact, and withdrew its troops from the member states.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was still a fear in Hungary of a potential future reversal of the intentions and actions of Moscow toward the region. This is apparent from a conference speech made by József Antall, the Hungarian prime minister from 1990 to 1993. A partial recording of the presentation was later made public in which he warns that "it is a naïve person who believes that eternal Russia has given up on its political role in the Central European region" (Antall, n.d.).

Antall was right—Russia did grow more assertive vis-à-vis East-Central Europe. In this respect, the run-up to 1989 was clearly different: Russian influence was receding. On the other hand, Hungary had been gradually opening up to the West. After the crushing of the 1956 revolution, the new party leader, János Kádár, became an international pariah—especially in the West. In exchange for the general amnesty granted to political prisoners in 1962, the Hungarian question was removed from the agenda at the UN. In 1971, Cardinal Mindszenty was allowed to leave the country, effectively in exchange for the return of the Hungarian historic crown of St. Stephen from the USA a few years later. In 1973, Hungary joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and, in 1982, the IMF. A year later, Vice President George Bush visited Hungary and portrayed US–Hungarian relations "as a model for the rest of the world."

Hungary was significantly influenced by the USA and Western Europe in 1989. This was achieved by them providing Hungary with much-needed financial liquidity for the economy and, after the transition, by the promise

of a future "Euro-Atlantic integration." The West expected and demanded democratization in return. The need to reunite with the West—primarily through membership in NATO and in the EU—was a consensus view held by the political parties in the 1990s for ideological and financial reasons.

With Hungarian membership in 2004, the effect of the EU also altered. From 2010 for 16 years Hungary acted as a free rider or a bully (receiving transfers while breaching EU norms), even if Brussels still had some constraining power against democratic backsliding (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018).

The international factor can be taken as a moderate factor in the temporal comparison. The international surroundings did not alter dramatically throughout the decades by 2010, but it had clearly shifted. While Russian influence had collapsed by 1989, it was growing before and after 2010 in East-Central Europe, and it had the potential to undermine Hungary's democratic political system.

The International Environment Factor in Regional Comparison

By and large Hungary is in a position similar to other EU members in East-Central Europe. Membership in the EU has provided the country with immense economic benefits, while membership in NATO has provided a security umbrella. At the same time, Russia and China are exerting pressure to attract these countries: promising economic benefits and spreading their influence through different means, including propaganda and disinformation.

In his book, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, first published in 2008, veteran expert of international affairs Robert Kagan wrote the following:

> In Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, in the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and even in the Balkans, a contest for influence is underway between a resurgent Russia on one side, and the European Union and the United States on the other. Instead of an anticipated zone of peace, western Eurasia has once again become a zone of competition. (Kagan, 2009, pp. 12–13)

Kagan also envisioned the coming of a new era, which (unlike the end of history prophecy of Francis Fukuyama) "rather than being a time of 'universal values,' will be one of growing tensions and sometimes confrontation

between the forces of democracy and the forces of autocracy" (Kagan, 2009, p. 58).

Around the time of the Hungarian U-turn, Russian influence has started to be felt or suspected in East-Central Europe and beyond. In 2016, Russian meddling was reported in the American elections, but by then there had been reports all around Europe about Russian ties to illiberal nationalist-extremist parties, like the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the French Front National, the AfD in Germany, Hungary's Jobbik, and Golden Dawn in Greece. Analysts started to talk of a new Cold War. At one point, I opined that in the far future the whole post-1945 epoch will feel like one long Cold War with a couple of détentes lasting a few years, such as the one during the Yeltsin era (Schweitzer, 2016). Just as the original EU–NATO pull was an important reason for Mečiar's downfall in 1998 in Slovakia, in the next decades the increasing assertiveness of Russia's anti-Western stance was also appealing to populist politicians in the region from Czechia to Romania.

Nevertheless, there are factors that differentiate Hungary from most of the other East-Central European countries. One is the age-old traditional skepticism about anything foreign, including Western democracy, which is fueled by the cultivation of a historical grievance about the lost territories, and perhaps also by Hungary's linguistically isolated position. Another is that Hungary has been more dependent on Russian gas and oil than many other East-Central European countries.

A third—largely overlooked—specificity is a peculiar foreign policy disposition observable all through Hungarian history. The country has almost always been in the orbit of a great power—which in itself is not unique for peoples in the neighborhood. However, while many other nations (e.g., Czechs or Slovenes) tended to reconcile with this constrained strategic status and focused their development on achievable aims within the given limits, Hungary regularly became a reluctant ally obsessed with the need to constantly redefine and reshape the relationship with the regional heavyweight. Whether it was the question of loyalty to the Habsburg Empire (Austria) prior to 1918, or collaboration with Nazi Germany until 1945, or being a satellite of the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1989, the question of loyalty was a major political cleavage of the Hungarian political elites, and the country fluctuated between overcompliance verging on self-abandonment and breakaway with serious adverse consequences. Unlike other states of the region—many of which were part of a federation or were engaged in European politics of cooperation in the interwar period—Hungary never had a true experience of firmly belonging to a community of states.

As part of this foreign policy tradition (and, indeed, frequently invoking earlier rebellions against "Vienna" or "Moscow" that had been compared to "Brussels"), Hungary under Fidesz has been an increasingly reluctant ally again, this time of the EU and NATO. The differences from belonging to earlier "empires" are clear: NATO and the EU are democratic communities which Hungary willingly joined in 1999 and in 2004, respectively. Nevertheless, the *longue durée* national reflexes remained: the question of adhering to the principles and norms of the alliance and loyalty to it became a central topic defining the main political cleavage of the country, especially after 2010. The foreign policy tradition of being a reluctant ally facilitated Hungary's dissociation from the democratic values of the alliances.

The international political conditions across the region are similar. it is mainly because of culture-related and domestic political issues that Russian and Chinese influence could be stronger in Hungary than elsewhere in the region. Considering these factors, it can be established that the international environment does not play a significant role in the regional comparison.

Summary: Lessons About the International Environment Factor

The democratization/autocratization trajectory in Hungary went hand in hand with a shift in the international political/economic/cultural direction. The initial westward ("Euro-Atlantic") orientation was followed by an "Eastern opening." A causal connection seems likely.

From the late 1970s economic hardships and decline of trust in communist ideologies called for cooperation with the West, fueling democratization in return. After 1989 the prospect of becoming part of Western ("Euro-Atlantic") structures and organizations that ensure security and prosperity had the same effect. During the 2000s, disappointment with the Western model emerged, there was a liberal democratic decline across the globe, Russia became more assertive in its anti-Western foreign policies, and the growing size and scope of the Chinese economy began to make an impression on the rest of the world. These global trends made it more appealing for the Hungarian political elite to make closer connections with Eastern powers like Russia, China, Turkey, etc., while also being less enthusiastic about institutions supporting liberal democracy. At the same time, with EU and NATO accession, Hungary could become a free rider, so the democratizing leverage of these organizations became less strong.

Nevertheless, Hungary remained a member of these democratic communities and is not directly affected by Russian assertiveness. The international

environmental factor seems moderate when compared to developments in 1989. Hungary's international relations as a factor in democratic backsliding seem even less important when compared to other regional countries. The anti-West rebound effect—which is not country specific, but regional—is more significant in Hungary than elsewhere, but only because of a domestic cultural trait: the remarkably strong historical skepticism about the "West" and a general political tendency to waver in loyalty to political allies based on perceived national interest and the dubious principle of national sovereignty.

Altogether, the international environment cannot alone explain Hungary's democratic backsliding. It could have affected it only mildly, while in interplay with other factors.

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5. Hacking Democracy (Political Communication)

Abstract: Over the years, the Hungarian political elite acquired political knowledge on how to win elections using communication tricks. Although fabricated stories and disinformation were not completely absent around 1989, the negative campaigning strategy of Fidesz stands in contrast with the early years of Hungarian democracy when such methods were generally dismissed as unfair. The 2010 campaign period was also unique in Orbán's refusal to participate in a preelection debate with his main challenger (which remained his policy through the most recent election). After the decisive election victory of Fidesz, the party built an extensive media conglomerate, which is unique in regional comparison, and helped to turn Hungary into a "post-truth laboratory."

Keywords: communication tricks, alternative realities, post-truth, media, negative campaigns, disinformation

Political Communication and Democracy

The democratic system of governance requires a constant flow of accurate information. The population has to make informed choices about the political groups competing for power and then be informed about the plans and operations of the government. Those in power—in turn—must be informed about the state of the economy, the desires of the population, the severity of environmental risks, etc. Information channels—first and foremost an unbiased free media—play a vital role. Besides transparency, the quality of information and the plurality of opinions is also important for deliberative democracy.

Plenty of reasons can cause the quality of information to be below satisfactory levels. Rational ignorance—a concept based on utilitarian cost–benefit

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calculations (as described by Anthony Downs)—may cause the electorate to not put too much effort into educating themselves about public affairs (Downs, 1957). At the same time, politicians also have an interest in hiding certain information from the public.

As Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman show in their book *Manufacturing Consent*, the mass media often serves the interests of elites and uses subtle techniques to shape public opinion, rather than providing unbiased information. Media may become biased due to influence by the owners, by the advertisers, by sources that are more easily available, and by feedback to already published materials, such as readers' comments or company complaints and lawsuits (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Democratic backsliding in the last decades has been connected to the spread of misinformation and (deliberate) disinformation. Hence the proverb "Democracy dies in darkness," which became the official slogan of the *Washington Post* in 2017.

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, in their book *Spin Dictators*, identify a new type of dictatorship (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). They claim that today's typical authoritarian governments—which they call "spin dictatorship"—is characterized by "rule through deception" instead of "rule through fear." This means little repression, concealed violence, the toleration of some opposition media, covert censorship (with private media co-opted), no official ideology, subtle propaganda, the pretense of democracy, and usually no limits to the international flows of people and information (Guriev & Treisman, 2022, p. 20).

Telling and knowing the truth is at the very core of democracy. Conversely, autocrats need people who are isolated from each other and who have lost contact with reality. We see this in the dystopia of George Orwell's *1984*. This is what Hannah Arendt claimed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but the people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction no longer holds" (Arendt, 2017, p. 622). And this is how historian Timothy Snyder explains what is happening in the current post-truth era: "[I]f nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights" (Snyder, 2017, p. 65). And he draws an ever more succinct and radical conclusion: "Post-truth is pre-fascism" (Snyder, 2017, p. 71).

The internet was initially expected to bring about the demise of dictatorships as it would facilitate the uncontrollable spread of the truth. However, with the rise of social media, and with the decline of traditional media, this assumption turned out to be wrong. As has been quickly realized,

the sharing of "information" that is not reliable is widespread and it is a problem—what is needed is the truth. Freedom of opinion is insufficient without reliable information. Without professional journalists and editors doing their jobs, information flows have grown out of control. And, unlike 50 years ago, these days everyone not only consumes but also creates and spreads information.

It is increasingly difficult to hold the endless number of information providers accountable—as could be done with the relatively few media companies and their outlets that existed throughout the 20th century. This situation is being exploited by political groups and corporations. The problem has been widely recognized since about the time of the American elections and Brexit in 2016 and by news about companies like Cambridge Analytica, which employed big data, user profiling, and targeted advertisements. Democracy has been further hacked by the proliferation of disinformation campaigns, with paid trolls and automated bots.

These developments do not seem to be offset by the potential the internet provides to circumvent censorship, especially as dictators themselves learn to exploit the tools that interconnectedness provides. It is interesting to note that at the dawn of East-Central European democratization Samuel Huntington raised the possibility of a future reminiscent of *1984*. He said one possible way the third wave of democratization could reverse in the future is with the rise of a new form of authoritarianism: "a technocratic 'electronic dictatorship,' in which authoritarian rule is made possible and legitimated by the regime's ability to manipulate information, the media, and sophisticated means of communication" (Huntington, 1991a, p. 20).

Political Communication as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

The distorted representation of the political world, the imbalance in the media landscape, and the spread of mis- and disinformation are phenomena accompanying Hungarian backsliding. "Hungary is a post-truth laboratory where the system includes elements of both the Western fake news world and the communication strategies of autocratic illiberal regimes of the East," summarized Péter Krekó (2018). Conspiracy theories are part of official communication. The government not only finances the fake news machinery, but itself is directly communicating through them (e.g., how the EU wants to harm Hungary, or how George Soros has a plan to bring migrants into the country).

At the core of the 2010 U-turn, there was also a communications scam. Immediately after the election results became known, on April 26, in front of a cheering crowd, Orbán declared that the event that had just taken place was a "revolution at the voting booths." Surprisingly, three and a half years later, speaking in parliament, he denied having interpreted the events as a "revolution," but he nevertheless talked of a mandate to completely "renew" Hungary (Plankog, 2013). In reality, the mandate was clearly missing. Prior to the elections, Fidesz had not announced its intention to introduce a new political system, and it did not even initiate a referendum on the matter after it.

There were other political steps of Fidesz which deliberately curtailed citizens' democratic right to information. Not only did Fidesz not publicize its plans to turn Hungary's political system upside down, it also refused to participate in the usual televised election debate between the prime ministerial candidates of the main parties—as had been done in previous elections. Lack of information about the future plans of Fidesz could have been a partial cause for its election victory. No policy plans were debated prior to (or after) 2010 about the unilateral adoption of a new constitution, of a new (even more disproportional) electoral law, of a new media law (giving far-reaching rights to a new supervisory body).

But Fidesz's tactics did not just involve keeping certain information secret, but also spreading information that was false. The 2010 landslide victory was made possible—and the subsequent democratic backsliding was made more acceptable—by a campaign of lies and smears directed against the party's political opponents.

Prior to the decisive election, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu introduced two internationally successful political advisors, Arthur Finkelstein and George Birnbaum, to Orbán. With that, simple, hateful, and divisive messages became rampant in Fidesz.

> Starting in 2008, Birnbaum and Finkelstein worked in secret to get Orbán elected. Their victory in Hungary—away from the intense political scrutiny of Western Europe—showed that constructing an external enemy could bring electoral success in the modern era. It allowed Hungary to give birth to "Trump before Trump," as Steve Bannon said. (Grassegger, 2019)

The two advisors—despite both being of Jewish origin—became the proponents of George Soros as the most suitable enemy figure.

Some of Finkelstein's main ideas for Orbán to employ were to polarize the electorate as much as possible, to demoralize his opponent's supporters,

and to attack first. Finkelstein also "developed negative campaigning into a technique he called 'rejectionist voting'—to demonize the enemy so much that even the laziest of voters would want to get out and vote, just to reject them" (Grassegger, 2019).

The ideas of the American consultants continued to be carried out under the leadership of Árpád Habony (a business partner of Finkelstein) and Antal Rogán (a minister, leading the prime minister's cabinet office). From 2016, Fidesz's growing media conglomerate started to use coordinated smear campaigns on an industrial level against political opponents, which included NGO activists, political researchers, and even demonstrating teenagers. Some of the widely broadcast messages were shameless lies and some used information obtained through sting operations, i.e., carefully planned fake job interviews and business meetings (Magyar Jeti Film, 2023).

Defamatory stories aimed at intimidating those who dared to speak up against the government and others meant to fortify the anti-liberal and anti-Brussels narrative (in order to justify the need for a strong government to "protect the nation") were issued. There were also others that more directly affected the outcome of the election. For example, prior to the 2018 elections the Fidesz media accused Gábor Vona of having had homosexual relationships (which for the leader of the then far-right Jobbik party was an allegation that could be detrimental), then of being a Muslim and having close ties to a Turkish terrorist group). At the same time, liberal democratic politician Péter Juhász was accused of being a drug addict who had locked up and assaulted his partner. In both cases a brief rectification was later published by the media outlets involved—but only after legal procedures had been followed and by which time the election was already over.

The campaigns did not stop there. The wife of the 2022 opposition candidate for prime minister, Péter Márky-Zay—a midwife who assisted at home births—was accused of negligent murder. The latest rival of Orbán, Péter Magyar, also faced a long series of accusations, including being financed by the Ukrainian secret service.

This all occurred in an increasingly concentrated media market. As the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observed at the time of the parliamentary elections in April 2022, the ownership of 476 media outlets, including the main regional print media, were transferred to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) in 2018, and the review of this transaction by the competition authority was exempted by government decree, referring to its "national strategic importance" (OSCE, 2022). Around the same time, V-Dem reported serious deterioration in the scores received by government censorship efforts and media bias

indicators, and it observed that "[o]ver the past decade, 90% of private media in Hungary have been bought up by Orbán and his allies. They almost exclusively broadcast the party's messages, giving little to no air time to the opposition" (Glass, 2022).

In sum: the media landscape was changing and technologies of manipulation were spreading. The truth was getting lost in an abundance of dubious information. Social media was broadcasting uncontrolled information without professional oversight or accountability but with a potentially massive reach. The spread of manipulative techniques made it easier for rogue political players to construct alternative realities. The question is, was the lack of credible information (or the disturbed flow of it) a genuine factor in the Hungarian democratic backsliding?

The Political Communication Factor in Temporal Comparison

Compared to the situation in Hungary in 2010 and onward, 1989 was a moment that can be characterized as the opening up to truth. The process had actually begun earlier, but it gradually sped up. Both journalism and history writing became more professional, more fact-based, after the 1960s. The political opening toward the West in the 1970s and 1980s led to increased toleration of critical voices.

The 1980s marked a peak for samizdat literature created by dissident intellectuals. In June 1987, while a group of liberal economists and social researchers issued a program of far-reaching market-oriented economic reforms and democratization, "Fordulat és reform" ("Turnaround and reform"), dissidents circulated their even more radical manifesto, "Társadalmi szerződés" ("Social contract"), containing the legendary demand: "Kádár must go."

Later, when Kádár did go, there came an explosion of free speech, open debate, and media pluralism. In early 1989, when reform communist Imre Pozsgay stated that 1956 was a popular revolt, even the burial place of the prime minister executed for his involvement in it was a secret. When a reburial ceremony occurred a few months later, 200,000 people attended and millions watched live on television. Media freedom came very early on and Hungarian national television—the most important media at the time (there were no commercial channels initially, just two state channels)—became dominated by journalists who not only were professionals but were also noticeably dedicated to conducting investigations, spreading the news, and giving voice to the new politicians.

In January 1990, the minister of internal affairs resigned as a result of the so-called Duna-gate scandal, after a whistleblower helped to disclose information showing that the secret services were spying on opposition politicians. A bit later, long series of television programs were dedicated to the upcoming parliamentary elections, where members of the new parties held debates covering a range of different policy areas. The frequency of the political debates, the broad representation of the candidates at them, and the meticulous, second-by-second equalization of speaking time, has been unparalleled ever since.

The picture was not entirely rosy. Although it has not occurred as frequently as in recent times, in 1989–1990 a degree of subterfuge and even disinformation were present more than was healthy in a democratic society. In the televised election debate between József Antall and János Kis, the latter complained about large-scale secretive smear campaigns aimed at the liberal candidates.[1] The early years of the 1990s were also characterized by a "media war" connected closely to the two large political groups—the governing nationalists and the liberals—affecting regulations, news programs, and the hiring and firing of media professionals and executives.

And yet, high expectations about transparency and honesty characterized the early years of Hungarian democratization. In the summer of 1990, it was indeed the lying of the new government (about its intention to raise the price of fuel) that got people (especially taxi drivers and transportation workers) so enraged that they blockaded bridges and roads around Budapest. On the other hand, "Fidesz's popularity grew incredibly quickly, and the image it created played a major role in this: its naturally honest tone, its outright rejection of lying, false piety, and slyness," says historian Zoltán Ripp, chronicler of the Hungarian transformation process, in an essay about lying (Ripp, 2005).[2] The piece, which is remarkable also in being written

1 The claim of large-scale denigration sounds credible. I preserve a batch of leaflets from those days, stuffed into our mailbox at home (by an apparently not very enthusiastic activist, who wanted to get the job over quickly), accusing the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats candidate for that area, philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás, of being a member of the Romanian secret services (Securitate).

2 Based on the finishing lines, it does not seem unlikely that this essay was an important inspiration for Gyurcsány to make his speech in 2006, which he always interpreted as an admission of lies in order to help establish honest politics. Ripp concluded his essay with his view on how the rising tide of political lies could be countered: "It is feared that the parties, mired in their own internal world of lies, are unable to do this credibly. Even though the way out of the current situation could indeed be that they turn this into a program to stop lie-creating politics and then start to implement it. In that case, perhaps, it may even happen, that we lie our way through to a more truthful world" (Ripp, 2005).

one year before the internationally infamous "lie speech" (*őszödi beszéd*) of Ferenc Gyurcsány, details the process by which Hungarian political life became gradually overwhelmed by deceit, illusion, and manipulation.

Political communication has changed a lot in the past decades. in the 1990s negative campaigns that focused on smearing the opponent instead of offering a positive program were widely considered unfair and undesirable. A quarter of a century later, they had become almost the norm. Research by Dániel Matók into political advertisements in five national newspapers found that in the 2018 election campaign—for the first time since 1990—there were more ads attacking opponents than ads presenting a positive image (Tóth, Hevesi, & Szászi, 2022).

Nevertheless, the change is not profound enough to make us assume that it alone could have contributed to democratic backsliding in Hungary. If the situation of political communication in 2010 was similar to that in 1990, Fidesz would have still won by a landslide, although without the extensive smear campaigns it would probably not have achieved a supermajority in every election ever since. The communication factor seems moderate in the temporal comparison.

The Political Communication Factor in Regional Comparison

The era of post-truth is global. The technologies of online disinformation are everywhere. The decline of traditional media and the rise of social media is apparent. However, the potential for constructing an alternative virtual media reality to further political goals is not exploited uniformly. It needs a central political will, as well as media workers who are ready to contribute to it, and a low level of critical media consumption skills in the general population.

Based on data in the 2020 European Social Survey, East-Central Europe is a "hotbed of conspiracy theorizing," with around 50% of the populations ready to agree with statements like "viruses have been intentionally produced" or "the cure for cancer exists, but it is hidden for commercial reasons." These statements are believed by only 4–5% in Denmark or Sweden (Krekó, 2024). Nevertheless, Hungary altogether has an average regional combined score in "belief in conspiracy theories"—somewhat worse than Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, but better than Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia (Krekó, 2024, p. 52).

The quality of information Hungarian citizens receive is significantly lower than elsewhere in the region. This is largely due to the extraordinary concentration of the media, politically motivated smear campaigns, and the spread of disinformation.

According to a 2019 report of the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, "the gravity of the media freedom situation in Hungary … is unprecedented in an EU member state" (ECPMF, 2019). This report was compiled as the outcome of a joint mission to Hungary by the International Press Institute (IPI), Article 19, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The most important finding was the serious media market distortion (the overwhelming dominance of pro-government media) and the lack of media pluralism (the hegemonic influence of the state narrative in the field of political and public affairs news):

> Pro-government media have a quasi-monopoly in the daily print media and radio sectors and are dominant overall in the television sector, especially when counting the public broadcaster. The online sector is more balanced on paper, but the reach of online media is primarily restricted to urban areas. (ECPMF, 2019)

The findings are completely in line with the observations of the OSCE made at the time of the parliamentary elections in April 2022 (OSCE, 2022).

And yet, there are reasons why this unparalleled situation cannot be viewed as so decisive to alone account for Hungary's unique decline in the region.

For one, varying degrees of media capture have happened almost everywhere in the region. Besides, this method of enhancing support may not be as effective as it seems. At least that seems to be the conclusion drawn by a study carried out by Media and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe, a European Research Council project based at Oxford University (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015, pp. 63–64). In it, 300 interviews were conducted with media professionals, politicians, political communicators, and social scientists in the 10 former communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. A surprising collection of views shows that doubts about the media's ability to influence public opinion and voting behavior is quite widespread in the region. Some of the interviewed politicians opined that "the relationship between the press and people's behavior is often unpredictable" or that parties "overestimate the role of the media." Others went further, claiming that media capture "didn't work" or "never pays off," or that attempts to control the media is counterproductive and "those who submit public service media to tight government control will lose the next elections" (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015, p. 64). One further conclusion of the study is that when parties try to

assume control over the media, they do it not only "to suppress critical voices and to gain favorable coverage," but also to "extract various resources from the media" (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015, p. 74).

It must be noted, too, that Fidesz did not have a regionally unparalleled media conglomerate behind it prior to its landslide election victory in 2010, it built that later. What it did have then was a campaign strategy to delegitimize its opponents. Fidesz had a higher anti-pluralism index score than other regional governing parties in the Visegrád region (V-Party Explorer, n.d.). This score rose significantly in 2002, and by the 2006 election it overtook that of PiS and continued to rise further. Fidesz's high anti-pluralism score stems mainly from its high "demonization" score (which is close to that held by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party [AKP] in Turkey), and not from its score for "encouragement of violence," which is relatively low. This is also typical of PiS (Medzihorsky & Lindberg, 2023).

So, the info-communication effect is plausible but not decisive. As a factor, it seems to have had a moderate effect in regional comparison.

Summary: Lessons About the Political Communication Factor

Hacking democracy by communication tricks is a quickly developing technology worldwide. It is developing faster than the capacity of the electorate for critical media and information consumption.

Communication tricks help democratic backsliding by disrupting the flow of credible information and altering people's (including politicians') perception. The democratic principles of representation, transparency, and accountability are weakened as a result. An altered media landscape (uncontrolled social media, abundance of low-quality communication) further disturbs the flow of information, making it easier to construct alternative realities and garner support for policies that do not benefit the voters.

Over the years, members of the Hungarian political elite have acquired political knowledge on how to gain political support and win elections using communication tricks. Lies that led to the 2006 election victory of the socialists were inadvertently exposed by their leader, Ferenc Gyurcsány, through a leaked speech. Fidesz built a complete network of dubious claims about the "left" and the "liberals," which were then further developed into simple deceptive messages by foreign advisors like Arthur Finkelstein.

Although fabricated stories and disinformation were not completely absent around 1989, the negative campaigning strategy of Fidesz stands in

contrast with the early years of Hungarian democracy when such methods were generally dismissed as unfair. The 2010 campaign period was also unique in Orbán's refusal to participate in a preelection debate with his main challenger (which remained his policy through the most recent election).

After the decisive election victory of Fidesz, the party built an extensive media conglomerate, something that was unique in regional comparison and helped to turn Hungary into a "post-truth laboratory." On the other hand, the readiness of Hungarians to believe in conspiracy theories still seems to be average in the region.

The impact of negative campaigning, hateful disinformation, and lies and conspiracy theories appears moderate, both historically and regionally. It is more marked, but not decisively more, than in earlier periods in Hungary or elsewhere in the region. Other factors must have also contributed to the backsliding, some of which are connected to the political communication effect (the Machiavellian personality of Orbán, the scarcity of checks and balances, or the foreign policy reorientation toward Russia).

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6. Illiberal Swingback (Political Ideology)

Abstract: Nation-centered identitarian political thought has been traditionally strong and liberal ideas weak in Hungary, but the run-up to the fate-changing election in 2010 saw a rise of nationalism and anti-liberalism (illiberalism) in the country. This happened to a greater degree than elsewhere in the region. These ideologies are connected to the subsequent Hungarian democratic backsliding. The electorate became ready to accept illiberal (anti-liberal) ideas and policies in the name of a strong and effective state. They were also ready to sacrifice or limit democratic norms. This effectively kicked out one of the basic supporting legs of democracy: constitutionalism to protect free and fair elections and to constrain government overreach and centralization efforts.

Keywords: political ideologies, constitutionalism, antidemocratic nationalism, populism

Political Ideology and Democracy

The belief that democracy is beneficial to the people is a political idea. It is logical to assume that the most important foundations of a democratic system, and one of the most important factors for its survival is the belief of the people that a democratic system needs to be upheld. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that autocratization happens when people think otherwise.

The authors of the bestseller *How Democracies Die* debate just that. "If the people hold democratic values, democracy will be safe. If citizens are open to authoritarian appeals, then, sooner or later, democracy will be in trouble. This view is wrong" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 19). As they claim, it is hard to find any evidence of majority support for authoritarianism in 1920s Germany and Italy, and solid electoral majorities opposed Hitler and Mussolini. They put more emphasis on how elected leaders disrespect political and social institutions as a primary cause for democratic decline.

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Beliefs about democracy and autocracy matters, nevertheless. The authors of the quoted book are right in that autocratic political leaders do not usually get to power by promising autocracy to the people, but they still stay in power because people fail to reject them when they do become autocrats. Even dictators cannot stay in power without a substantial number of people supporting them. When popular support for a leader remains high despite undemocratic governance, either the people do not value democracy or they do not comprehend what democracy is.

Unlike the situation in the 1920s and the 1930s, democracy is such a widely expected norm today—it's the only acceptable game in town—that almost no political group campaigns against it anywhere. This includes autocratizing politicians. Autocrats nowadays tend to rule through disinformation, not coercion. This means that it is not enough that there is widespread popular support for democracy. A clear understanding of what democracy actually means is vital.[1]

After 1989, liberalism was believed to be the primary (or even the only) ideology that supported the political system called democracy. This is despite the fact that the tension between liberalism and democracy has often been highlighted, especially since the seminal essay of Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1997. But in his framing, democracy that is not liberal is just a formal, electoral democracy. So, by this reasoning, real substantial democracy is still very much connected to the idea of liberalism.

Correspondingly, antidemocratic and illiberal views (or sentiments or policies) are frequently used synonymously. Democratic backsliding is regularly used interchangeably with advances in illiberal politics, or at least understood to coincide with (and probably also be caused by) a weakening of the liberal foundations of the political system with such institutions as free elections, the constitutional system of checks and balances, etc. As a concept, illiberalism is widely understood to mean the negation of three liberal democratic principles—limited power, a neutral state, and an open society (Enyedi, 2024a)—and is described as a concept that captures "the ideological modules of de-democratization and the actions that follow from them" (Enyedi et al., 2025, p. 2).

1 A comic strip in the famous *Napirajz* (Daily drawings) Hungarian webcomic series depicts this. In a casual street conversation, an outraged corpulent lady tells his interlocutor that placards of a small opposition political group should be immediately banned. Upon hearing that, unfortunately, it cannot be done, she bursts out: "How so? What kind of a democracy is this then?" (Grafitember, 2016)

With the collapse of communism in 1989, liberalism and democracy were famously declared the ultimate winners of human ideological development. Later, this claim was generally acknowledged to be mistaken due to the general self-conceit involved in historicism (the belief that there is a logical foreseeable path of history). I believe there was another inherent mistake in the proposition due to a misunderstanding of the ideological underpinnings of modern democracy.

I suggest that the relationship between political ideas and democracy should be framed differently: the idea that liberalism is the ideational cornerstone of democracy needs to be altered and amended. Democracy rests not only on the idea of liberty, but also on the other two ideas of the French Revolution: equality and fraternity. The two centuries after the revolution brought not only the victory of liberalism (liberal democracy, a state for its free citizens), but also the victory of nationalism (the nation-state, popular sovereignty) and the victory of socialism (the welfare state, social democracy). Western democracies embody a blend of political liberties, civil freedoms, and robust social protections, all anchored within a sovereign national community of citizens.

The defeat of fascism in 1945 and of communism in 1989 (as referred to in the famous claim made by Francis Fukuyama about the end of history) made political analysts forget this. It discredited more moderate forms of nationalism and socialism. The spatial metaphor of left–right also plays a role in this, as it suggests that liberalism is the democratic center between left and right, the furthest away from extreme nationalism and extreme socialism.

However, there can be no democracy, no rule "of the people" or "by the people," without the elements that are the foundational values behind the main political ideologies of liberalism, socialism, and nationalism and which correspond to the political slogan "Liberty, equality, fraternity." The political elite must uphold principles of liberalism (civil and political rights and liberties), but that is just one element. There is also a need for social justice, social protection, and social care, plus a feeling of national cohesion and the drive to act for the benefit of the nation. For democracy to prevail, a delicate balance must be struck—there is a liberal, a social, and a national minimum.[2] If people fail to believe in and support any of the corresponding principles, it leads to democratic backsliding.

2 There are a few authors who describe similar ideas. In a sarcastic piece, titled "How to Be a Conservative-Liberal Socialist: A Credo," the eminent Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski argues for the compatibility of the political ideology trio and mentions a mighty new International

What this means is that democratic backsliding should not be equated with illiberalism. No doubt, democracy is in decline if liberal constitutionalism is weakened, freedom of speech is curtailed, etc., because these pose a clear danger to transparency, accountability, and popular participation. But democracy is also in decline if the equality principle goes missing: if solidarity and social safety nets disappear, the governance benefits only a few. Or if the problem is with the fraternity principle: the national polity becomes fragmented, popular sovereignty is curtailed, the state does not truly represent the will of the community or does not work for the public good.

Democracy cannot exist without a nation. Samuel Huntington addressed the problem of creating democracy in the former Soviet republics around the time of their emergence from the USSR, warning about the kinds of problems that can be caused by ethnic heterogeneity and the unwillingness of a dominant nationality to allow equal rights to ethnic minorities. He quoted Sir Ivor Jennings: "[T]he people cannot decide until somebody decides who are the people" (Huntington, 1991a, pp. 14–15). More recently, Ivan Krastev argued that "nationalism—in one form or another—is an organic part of any democratic political scene" and that liberals are making a serious mistake when they don't acknowledge it out of the fear that it could lead to fascism or conflict or out of the hope that it could be defeated, like communism (Krastev, 2018b).

This does not mean that multiethnic states cannot properly function as democracies, but for them to do so, there is a need for a common national identity. Despite ethnic and linguistic divisions, a strong Swiss (and a weaker Belgian) identity still exists. Where such a unifying national feeling is missing—like in the case of Bosnia or Cyprus—managing a democratic state meets very serious difficulties.

The commonly used left–right political spectrum of political ideologies is seriously misleading. It puts liberalism in the democratic center between socialism or social democracy (as the moderate left position that is next to extreme left communism) and conservatism or nationalism (as the moderate

(presumably based on the combination of the three ideologies), which, however, "will never exist because it cannot promise people that they will be happy" (Kolakowski, 1978). Timothy Garton Ash struck a similar tune in an opinion piece where he suggested that liberals, in order to be successful, should embrace equality and solidarity, but also identity and community (Ash, 2020). Karl Polanyi's concept, the "double movement" (a process where overreliance on market mechanisms results in an antidemocratic backlash), can also be understood as the tipping of the aforementioned balance from excessive liberalism toward extreme nationalism (fascism) or socialism (communism) (Polanyi, 2010).

right position that is next to extreme right fascism). But, in reality, it is not just socialism or nationalism which can become antidemocratic when pursued to extremes. This can happen in the case of liberalism, too, and then it becomes libertarianism or individualist anarchism. The theoretical extreme of liberalism—a complete absence of state control in the name of freedom and individualism—could destroy the political community, and uncontrolled and unregulated freedom in the economy could destroy social cohesion.

In sum: the foundational ideas of democracy are the core values of the French Revolution (liberty, equality, fraternity). The corresponding political ideologies (liberalism, socialism, nationalism) should all be present for a polity to work as a democracy. If any of them goes to the extreme, democracy is in danger. To illustrate this, it is much more fitting to arrange the ideology triad in a triangle. Conservatism (the ideology based on the support for traditional hierarchies) can be placed at an independent fourth corner. In this way the model needs a three-dimensional space: the triangle turns into a tetrahedron.

This model for the relationship of political ideologies and democracy is somewhat more complicated than the near-universal left–right axis. But it also has deep additional explanatory power. The four corners are independent and so none of them occupies a central position. Democracy is the three-dimensional space inside the tetrahedron. A political position can be closer to liberalism, socialism, conservatism, or nationalism, but still be democratic (within the tetrahedron). On the other hand, leaving that space in any direction means going outside the realm of democracy—toward extreme versions of the four ideologies and away from some of the foundational moderate ones. Exiting toward extreme equality (the idea behind communism) means leaving behind liberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. Exiting toward extreme freedom (individual anarchism) means going away from socialism, nationalism, and conservatism.

Fifty years ago, the main political cleavage in Western Europe used to be socialism versus (liberal) conservatism. Today, the main cleavage is liberalism versus nationalism. This appears to be superfluous to some analysts, who cannot imagine that these political ideas directly contribute to democratic backsliding. They are seen as mere elements of political communication, a rhetorical mode or discourse type for politicians to influence (or even manipulate) people (see, for example, Aslanidis, 2015; Dai & Kustov, 2022). After all, the distinctness of nationalism as a political ideology is generally questioned (Freeden, 1998). However, these days nationalism (the ideology of national politics) is very much alive and well, and—contrary to Michael

Freeden's claims—has very specific policy implications for foreign, domestic, and cultural politics, and even economic management (Varga, 2021).

In their bestselling book, *The Light That Failed*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes put forward a claim that illiberalism is a worldview which reflects the "disillusion and resentment" that is typical of this "unipolar age" and that it actually is a "global revolt against what is widely perceived to be a liberal imitation imperative" (Krastev & Holmes, 2020, pp. 139–140). Krastev opined earlier that the "illiberal revolution" in Eastern Europe was in essence "a nationalist revolt against liberalism" (Krastev, 2018a).

The recent wave of global de-democratization runs parallel to the rise of illiberalism, and can indeed be characterized as a worldwide liberalism-to-nationalism shift. It can be argued that the 1980s and the 1990s were an era of liberal overstretch. The pendulum went too far toward individual freedom and away from social equality, national cohesion, and traditional values. According to Karl Polanyi, in the early decades of the 20th century, an excessive belief in the self-corrective nature of free-market liberalism resulted in market disruptions and imbalances, which, in turn, gave rise to the perilous extreme ideologies of fascism and communism (Polanyi, 2010). The contemporary democratic backlash probably has a similar background.

Political Ideology as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

Democratic backsliding in Hungary has been accompanied by a significant ideological switch toward nationalism and away from liberalism. Fidesz had been mobilizing voters by portraying the socialist–liberal coalition as effectively working against the interests of the nation, and liberalism as an ideology that was driving just that. Fidesz's rise to power and the political and economic centralization it carried out in government happened in parallel with the rise and spread of nationalist and illiberal (anti-liberal) ideas. The political regime was named the System of National Cooperation, a peculiar term Fidesz started to market to the public and even use in official documents.

This does not necessarily mean that political-ideational change was a factor in bringing about democratic backsliding. There are two theoretical possibilities for a causal connection: either if antidemocratic government policies were affected by ideological considerations, or if the autocratic turn and subsequent democratic decline were legitimized in the eyes of the electorate by their own ideational convictions.

Are antidemocratic measures that have been initiated by Fidesz the result of the deep-seated anti-liberal or nationalist convictions of their politicians? The conviction part is very much debated. The majority of analysts claim that Orbán is a shamelessly opportunistic user and abuser of ideology, although, as was shown in the first part of this book, not everyone.

The political system he introduced to Hungary, according to Bálint Magyar, is ideology applying rather than ideology driven. "Rather than driven by ideology, the mafia state relies on ideological templates of various sorts, and their use is determined by political expediency. It is as inconsistent in its policies as it is consistent emotionally" (Magyar, 2016, p. 231). "To achieve its psychological legitimization, the mafia state dons the garb of nationalism, recycling its original, bloodied pieces and using them as marketing tools"—agrees social psychologist György Csepeli, adding that one function of the ubiquitous use of the "national" rhetoric is to create a "nonnational other," that is, groups marginalized from the national society, "including the poor, the Roma, the homeless, homosexuals, liberals, rootless cosmopolitans" (Csepeli, 2017, pp. 36–38).

However, on the question of pragmatism versus ideology, Zsolt Enyedi claims that there is coherence and consistency between what they do and say: "While not denying Machiavellian motivations or the importance of the autocratic client–patron dynamics," there is "correspondence between the regime's signature policies and discourse" (Enyedi, 2024b, p. 507).

Nationalism and illiberalism are certainly there in Fidesz's rhetoric and government policies. The Orbán regime is sometimes characterized as conservative—some even label it as Christian fundamentalist (Kürti, 2020)—but most of its ideological rhetoric and many of its actual policy steps can be described as nativist-nationalist. Even the designation of the regime articulates it: the System of National Cooperation. Its education policy primarily emphasizes a more marked national curriculum; its foreign policy discourse pushes Hungarian minority rights in neighboring countries; it is using a rhetoric combined with actual measures against those it deems to be the "enemies of the nation"; and it follows an anti-immigration foreign policy line connected to an expressed idea of the need to protect the people of the nation from embracing a "mixed culture" (Orbán, 2019) or becoming a "mixed race" (Orbán, 2022a).

"Illiberalism" is a vague term used by Viktor Orbán. He did not bother to explain it in detail and sometimes referred to the concept as nothing more than a democracy where liberals are not in power. However, as a term in political science, "illiberalism" is a substantive challenge to democracy: it typically justifies power concentration, rejects state neutrality, and replaces

"the standards of universality and rationality with the tribal taboos of a closed society." It uses policy measures that disregard minority preferences, sidestep consultative mechanisms, ignore expert opinion, minimize civil society participation, and rely on divisive and emotional discourse (Enyedi et al., 2025). Many of these elements can be easily detected in Fidesz's policies: from the curbing of the powers of the Constitutional Court and the creation of a new media regulatory authority in the beginning of its rule after 2010, to the most recent installation of a cross on the pedestal of the Liberty Statue on Gellért Hill in Budapest without approval or even consultation with the municipality or the inhabitants of the city.

The ideological basis for the post-2010 Fidesz rule was prepared gradually throughout the 2000s by intellectual networks around Fidesz and the Századvég Foundation, as shown in a rare academic work that takes the ideational aspects of the Hungarian backsliding seriously (Buzogány & Varga, 2018). This book, *A rendszerváltás válsága/The Crisis of the Regime Change*, which was published a year before the decisive election victory of Fidesz and was coauthored by Gábor G. Fodor, a prominent political scientist close to Fidesz, and Tamás Kern, tells a version of the foundational grand narrative of the political fight for a better Hungary (Fodor & Kern, 2009). It defines two camps: the progressives and the internalists. The former includes the liberals and the communists who are weirdly similar, in that they both believe in linear progressivism, both apply a crisis narrative, and both want to copy an existing foreign system. As opposed to the "progressive approach" of "joining the West" and "copying Western institutions and procedures" as the purpose of the transition, the internalist approach wants the (obviously more noble-sounding) "'foundation of the state'; identity politics, including the issue of national independence; a clear definition of national interest; willingness to get into a conflict in order to protect national interests." The message was more bluntly summarized by Viktor Orbán five years later: "Liberal democracy was not capable of openly declaring, or even obliging, governments with constitutional power to declare that they should serve national interests. Moreover, it even questioned the existence of national interests" (Berend, 2020, p. 281).

Even if one believes that nationalism and anti-liberalism are mere communication tools for Fidesz to stay in power, they are more than empty rhetoric for the electorate. The nationalist turn is at times explained by the adverse (and worsening) economic situation of a large number of citizens and their perception that liberal economic policies, including the opening up of the nation to foreign investors, are to be blamed for it. According to Bozóki, the turn toward the nationalist camp (which came with a "Hungary

belongs to the Hungarians" message versus those who seemed to have favored foreign capital) can be explained by a lack of alternatives, because "nearly by definition, if social solidarity from the politics of the Left is lacking, the values remaining on the side of the road are lifted up by the extreme Right based on ethnic rhetoric" (Bozóki, 2012, p. 34). So, the question still is: Can ideology (believed by the government or only by its supporter base) be confirmed to be a factor in Hungary's democratic decline?

In sum: what needs to be tested is the assumption that democratic backsliding is caused by popular support for undemocratic political forces because of anti-liberal nationalist ideas that made them susceptible to abandon core liberal democratic values like individual freedom, human rights, rule of law, checks and balances, and constitutional constraining of power in the name of the national interest.

The Political Ideology Factor in Temporal Comparison

China's almost uninterrupted economic rise, its unexpected decades-long march toward its current global economic superpower status, has been a recent phenomenon that is in stark contrast with what was the general conviction in the early 1990s. Then, a perceived lesson after the collapse of communism was that an autocratic system is bound to fail economically in the longer run. Based on the Eastern Opening policy and the praising of China, Singapore, and other centralized states, it seems likely that this transformation also affected Fidesz ideologists and politicians; it changed their perception about the economic utility value of democracy.

Earlier I showed how anti-liberal and nationalist ideas could have led to the weakening of the liberal foundations (constitutionalism, checks and balances, protection of minority rights and opinions, etc.) of the political system. The regime may have anti-liberal and nationalist political convictions, or it may introduce related political measures for pragmatic reasons: to satisfy the ideological expectation of the electorate, and fill a political representation gap.[3] But, either way, the question is: Weren't these political ideas around at the time of the rapid democratization in 1989, or during the following years?

3 Laurenz Guenther (2005) claims that this is a typical pattern in the European Union. There are systematic differences between the policymaking by established parties and the "popular will" (primarily, in cultural issues, where members of parliament are more liberal than the voters, in general). Right-wing populists can fill the representation gap.

There are indications that anti-liberalism was inherently widespread in Hungarian political-ideological thinking.[4] Nevertheless, in 1989, getting back Hungarian sovereignty (national independence after decades of Soviet oppression) and establishing a liberal democracy (ending one-party rule and granting freedoms and liberties to the citizens) was among the main concerns of both the new politicians on the scene and the people supporting them. It was also believed, probably with less enthusiasm, that establishing a capitalist market economy instead of the communist command economy would also be favorable and result in better living conditions to the people.

Nationalism was an important and emotionally appealing ideology. But a relatively high degree of liberalism was also in the air—at least it was supported by the new political elite. The revolution that took place in 1989 was a movement for both national liberation and individual liberty. The demand that the Soviet troops leave the country was mixed with calls for an end to the police state. For example, on March 15, 1989, in a demonstration organized by the main opposition groups, the 12 points that were read out in front of the television building in Liberty Square (Szabadság tér) contained calls for "a neutral, independent Hungary. The Soviet troops should be withdrawn from the territory of our country. November 7 should be deleted from the list of Hungarian holidays" and "National self-respect. End the falsification of history. Give back the nation its coat of arms" (points 9 and 11). But also: "Replace the police state with the rule of law. Let human rights prevail. Let there be judicial independence" and "Freedom of speech, of the press, of conscience and of education. Eliminate the state monopoly of the media. Dissolve the State Office for Church Affairs" (points 2 and 3).

The seeds of a political cleavage between nationalism and liberalism (national and individual liberty) were planted very early on. The two main

4 "According to a survey in 1991, only 5 percent of the 30 thousand membership of even the most western oriented, liberal party to have emerged from the anti-communist dissident movement, the Alliance of Free Democrats,... revealed a value system that could be considered consistently liberal in matters concerning human rights and economics—though the party leadership proclaimed such a stance with full determination. A value analysis of liberalism in 2013 on the other hand showed that though the proportion of those considering themselves liberal in Hungary was 14 percent, and 18 percent categorized themselves as liberals in matters of human rights, the percentage of those committed to capitalism was a mere 5 percent. Among the three dimensions of the liberal value system examined by the survey, the number of those who believed in at least two of the three did not even reach 5 percent. Yet the condition of the stability of western liberal democracy is a broad and cohesive sense of commitment to the values of human rights, the free market and respect for private property, and awareness of this commitment" (Magyar, 2016, p. 17).

opposition groups in 1989 and, correspondingly, the two biggest parties in the new parliament one year later, were the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum, hereafter MDF) and the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, hereafter SZDSZ). As the names suggest, the primary difference between them was ideological: the former one was more nationalist (emphasizing the "nation," Hungarian culture, language, history, etc.), the latter more liberal (prioritizing human rights, free speech, free association, free entrepreneurship, constitutional checks and balances). By the 1990s, the main Hungarian political cleavage was ideological—something that analysts today describe as identitarian and believe to be a contemporary phenomenon.

Anti-liberalism did not come into being suddenly around 2010. It had been spreading and growing gradually. A justification behind the drafting of the new Fundamental Law by Fidesz is the idea that the 1989 transition was not genuine or was incomplete. In one version, the myth was centered around a "conspiracy between the post-socialist elite and the global markets to betray the original goals of democratization" It asserted that "the Hungarian transition was 'stolen,' and the new system—not even democratic in nature—only serves the interest of the socialist elite and international capital (or, in anti-Semitic interpretations, the Jews inside and outside the country)" (Krekó & Mayer, 2015). This "insufficient transition" argument "in different forms, frequently appears in governmental statements, and resonates with the myth of the 'stolen transition' that had been introduced into the public discourse by István Csurka and forms a core of Jobbik's ideology and rhetoric as well" (Krekó & Mayer, 2015).

From the beginning the originally weak far right in Hungary maintained that liberalism (as a political, economic, foreign policy, and cultural idea) was alien and detrimental to Hungary. This included Csurka (a prominent Hungarian writer and until 1993 a member of MDF) throughout the 1990s, and Jobbik for about a decade after its formation in 2003.

Fidesz gradually came to hold this conviction. In 1989, the party still defined itself as a radical liberal party. An early milestone on the way to illiberalism was a 1997 statement that the government is "foreign-like"—recalling the famous Opposition Manifesto 150 years earlier that made the same claim in a much different political context (Ellenzéki Nyilatkozat, 1847). The accusation in 1997 was that a series of measures of the socialist–liberal government in connection with privatization were blatantly against the national interest (Deáki & Kövér, 1997). The famous claim after the 2002 elections that "the homeland cannot be in opposition" was another milestone on the same road.

All this corresponds to what V-Dem measured as a rising anti-pluralism in Fidesz, which—according to the figures—had been observable since the mid-1990s but grew more steeply after 2002 (Arioli, 2025). Another study, my holistic content analysis comparing two of Fidesz's foundational documents—the original party program from 1988 and a new one written in 2003—also shows that the party's ideological position moved from being predominantly liberal and not at all nationalist to being just moderately liberal and very nationalist (Schweitzer, 2014b).

As Fidesz became the main opposition party in 2002 and then formed a government in 2010, its discourses became more anti-liberal. With Gyurcsány's "lie speech" (*őszödi beszéd*) going public, and with the global financial crisis, Fidesz did not have to campaign very hard to prove what it had increasingly been saying: everything that the public perceived as liberalism was detrimental to Hungarians. The nationalist promise of Fidesz prior to 2010 indicated the creation of a more active state initiating a "Hungary first" kind of political-economic course of social protectionism that seemed appealing after two decades of essentially liberal political and economic openness. After almost a decade, compared to its rhetoric, which was still against foreign dominance and for more active development policies, the actual economic policy change was not so substantial (Bohle & Greskovits, 2018).

The 2010 democratic downturn was preceded by a long buildup of popular anti-liberal sentiment. Most members of the Hungarian right embraced anti-liberal ideas: national collectivism, the primacy of the national community over the individual, and strong state intervention in the economic, social, and cultural spheres (Juhász, László, & Zgut, 2016, p. 2). Liberalism was portrayed by nationalist politicians as foreign, and this was made more and more credible to the people by liberal policies endorsing an open society and an open economy, and by liberals' suspicion of and aversion to nationalism.

Quite a few analysts believe that former governments were also responsible for the anti-liberal shift. One problem that is mentioned was the initial excessive trust in the corrective capabilities of markets in the 1990s. According to jurist Gábor Halmai, formerly a chief counselor associated with the Constitutional Court, legal constitutionalism had also been introduced into Hungary in an elite-driven (antidemocratic) way and was generally foreign to the population. This, together with its formalistic application, could be abused by the illiberal Orbán government (Halmai, 2024).

The anti-liberal nationalist shift in public opinion did not just mean Fidesz became more popular. A new extreme right political party, Jobbik, defining itself as Christian and radically nationalist, was established in

2003 and by the 2009 European parliamentary elections overtook liberal SZDSZ to become the third force behind Fidesz and the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP).

All in all, the political ideas of politicians and ordinary citizens mattered during both the democratization and the autocratization phases of the political trajectory of Hungary after 1989. A combination of nationalist anti-liberal political ideas can be detected in Fidesz's rhetoric before and after 2010, and such ideological elements support its post-2010 policies. In 1989 these ideas were already around, but they were very much sidelined. Fidesz was still liberal. The MDF government pursued liberal policies both in domestic politics and in the economy, and it sidelined its own prominent anti-liberal members (first and foremost the anti-Semitic writer István Csurka, who is hailed today as an early nationalist visionary) out of the party. (The expelled members formed a far-right group, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party [MIÉP], which was then also marginalized by the political elite.) So, anti-liberalism was on the fringes—both in the political sphere and in the general population.

This means that the landscape of political ideas that mattered to the Hungarian public and its politics changed significantly between 1989 and 2010 from favoring liberalism to supporting extreme anti-liberal nationalism. This was partly due to a perception that the previous economic policies had been too open, too foreign, too liberal. The ideology factor seems strong in comparison.

The Political Ideology Factor in Regional Comparison

Is there such a profound difference between the political-ideological landscape of Hungary and of other regional countries, which would explain why Hungary experienced democratic backsliding? Did Hungarian nationalism grow so much stronger? Is anti-liberalism so much more marked?

According to István Bibó, a leading Hungarian political thinker of the 20th century, antidemocratic nationalism is a historically characteristic feature of all the countries of East-Central Europe. This is caused by being part of various empires for too long and starting the process of nation-building too late. In his study "The Miseries of East European Small States" (1946), Bibó analyzed how the consequent fragility of the national framework led to existential anxiety and a situation where the "cause of the community" and the "cause of liberty" (essentially the national versus the liberal democratic idea) did not align (Bibó, 2015). As he wrote:

> [T]hese nations experienced historical moments that seemed to prove that the collapse of the oppressive political and social powers of the past and the carrying of democracy unrelentingly to its logical conclusion jeopardized, even brought disaster to the national community. These shocks brought into being the greatest monstrosity of modern European political development: anti-democratic nationalism. (Bibó, 2015, p. 151)

This ideological creed seems to have returned to the region in 1989. Countries that did not have a long independent history, like Croatia or Slovakia, had especially strong nationalist parties that did not fully embrace the liberal ideas necessary for democracy. Independence and the end of communism provided plenty of opportunities for people to resort to excessive "national self-documentation," which Bibó said was typical of late nationalism and of the region before and after World War I. New monuments were erected, national history was rewritten, and—in line with Western fears of "defreezing" or "thawing out" the demons of the past—old national conflicts were revived, to the point that the disintegration of Yugoslavia led to the bloodiest war in post-1945 European history.

There was a difference in the political spectrum and the party structures between the three countries that were the front-runners for liberal political and economic transformation. Visegrád countries differ very much when it comes to polarization along political ideologies. This feature is more or less constant, and it was described very early on. The post-1989 political scenes in Poland and Hungary were dominated by communist successor parties embracing economic reform on the left and nationalistic-conservative anti-communist parties on the right. Contrary to this, in Czechia, the main party blocks were the social democratic center-left and the economically liberal, pro-market center-right (Hanley, 2015, p. 4; Kitschelt, 1995). The Czech party system has been mostly structured by economic distribution issues ever since.

Among the four Visegrád countries, Hungary had been an outlier in its political right wing since 1989. Its unique feature was its almost total lack of liberal conservatism. Prior to 1994, there was such a branch in MDF, and after 1994 many hoped that Fidesz's drift to the right would mean the creation of a genuine liberal conservative power pole—similar to the Polish Freedom Union (later, Civil Platform), or the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS). But as Fidesz sailed to the right, it also turned illiberal.

The lack of national liberalism is unique in the region, a "retrograde heritage" in the words of historian Krisztián Ungváry. It is a political tradition everywhere in the region, but in Hungary it disappeared after the Treaty of Trianon (1920)—partly because this postwar treaty, which sanctified the loss

of two-thirds of Hungary's historical territory, was generally communicated as an evil liberal scheme (Ungváry, 2025).

It is no surprise then, that the anti-liberal swing back, though observable elsewhere in the region, is more marked in Hungary. This was true in the realm of politics and the economy, too:

> Unlike the Czech ANO 2011 and the Slovak SMER leaders, Orbán never sought to deny his strong ideological grounding, with topics such as a strong Hungarian nation, Hungarian minorities abroad and a significant emphasis on Hungarian history traditionally serving him as major political issues. (Havlík & Hloušek, 2021, pp. 114–115)

In Czechia, the founder and leader of the populist ANO party, Andrej Babiš, claimed that he "want[ed] to rule the country in the same manner as he [ran] his business holdings." Altogether, he was the "closest to the model of a business-friendly party akin to Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia." Fico is more of a "classical populist, mixing elements of social populism and Slovak nationalism with pragmatic policies in many areas" (Hloušek, 2022).

PiS in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary are more similar when it comes to ideology. They are

> well-established and ostensibly mainstream conservative groupings [and] won big in elections by capitalizing on popular frustration with corruption, austerity or the uneven benefits of growth. In office, they have called for a return to national grandeur and conservative social values, and promised to defend the nation from liberals, the ex-communist left, foreign-owned big business, and the EU. Political competition on socioeconomic issues has thus been eclipsed by or subsumed into competition on identity and values. (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 279)

After its election victory, PiS formed a government that initiated illiberal, antidemocratic reforms that were reminiscent of Hungary's post-2010 transformation, especially when it came to curbing judicial freedoms. However, the process never went as deep. This is usually attributed to the existence of a more developed civil society and a more robust independent media in Poland, but ideology can be seen playing a significant role in the background. Ultimately, the process of democratic backsliding was halted by the election victory of a right-wing liberal conservative block, the Civic Platform, in 2023. (A year earlier, Poland was still being described as "a battlefield between the liberal and illiberal versions of democracy, where the outcome is not clear" [Hloušek, 2022].)

Another comparison that points to ideological differences as explanatory factors for Hungary's exceptional democratic decline concerns the economy. Following the transformative year of 1989, economic liberalism was important as an ideology in creating market conditions and private property everywhere. The dichotomic view (you have either communism or capitalism) was significant. "Experiments were forbidden" because, as Václav Klaus said, "the third way is the fastest way to the Third World" (Krastev, 2018a, p. 54). This mirrors a claim in the 1989 manifesto of the liberal alliance SZDSZ. The "third way" or any other potential specific Hungarian *Sonderweg* is rejected: "[I]f there is a 'Hungarian path,' it does not lead between the two known social systems, but from one to the other"; "the paths that bypass Europe lead either to right-wing dictatorship or left-wing totalitarianism." And:

> We do not share the utopia of the populist movement, the possibility of creating a "garden Hungary" that simultaneously overcomes the contradictions of "capitalism" and "socialism," because there is no such method of coordinating society and the economy which can simultaneously replace market and bureaucratic integration. (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, 1989, pp. 16–17)

The party only came to power in 1994, its main rival led the first democratic government after 1990, which happened to be MDF with a significant support base for a populist third way. But that fraction of the party was quickly sidelined, and the party initiated an economic program based on large-scale marketization and privatization.

Just as the original positive disposition toward a liberal economy was by and large uniform in the region, the anti-liberal swing back was also detected in most countries. However, the depth to which economic anti-liberalism as an ideology went in Hungary is still unique. Fidesz's rhetoric against economic liberalism was directed at economic openness, focusing on the exploitative nature of uncontrolled privatization, foreign trade, and the machinations of foreign-owned companies. This was the original implication of the slogan "Nem leszünk gyarmat" ("We will not be a colony"), before it shifted to mean confrontation with the European Commission and other European institutions ("Brussels") and the global liberal elite.

> The myth that the Hungarian transition was "stolen," and the new system serves the interest of the socialist elite and international capital (or, in anti-Semitic interpretations, the Jews inside and outside the country)

> … appears in other post-socialist countries as well, especially in the manifestos of radical right parties, but in no other country has it become so important in shaping the political processes than it has in Hungary. (Krekó & Mayer, 2015)

This can be connected to dissatisfaction with democracy as a whole. "Hungarians were found to be the most frustrated by the gap between what they want from democracy and what they perceive they have" (Krekó & Mayer, 2015). Quoting regional data from the Pew Center, the authors show that it was in Hungary where approval of change to capitalism declined by far the most dramatically between 1991 and 2009. While the approval rate declined in every other Visegrád country and other states in the wider region, the decline is from 80% to 46% in Hungary—a change of 34 percentage points compared to just 9 in Poland, 8 in the Czech Republic, and 3 in Slovakia. Other countries with a significant decline include Bulgaria (from 73% to 53%) and Ukraine (from 52% to 36%). The approval rate decline for the "change to democracy" between 1991 and 2009 was also outstanding within the Visegrád region (75% to 56%), but it did not stick out in the wider region. (It was almost equal to that of Lithuania and better than Bulgaria.)

Altogether, the growing presence and prevalence of anti-liberalism and nationalism in Hungary shows some unique specificities. In comparison to other states in the region, this indicates a moderate correlation with democratic backsliding.

Summary: Lessons About the Political Ideology Factor

Nation-centered identitarian political thought has been traditionally strong and liberal ideas weak in Hungary, but the run-up to the fateful election in 2010 saw a further rise of nationalism and anti-liberalism (illiberalism). The electorate was ready to accept illiberal (anti-liberal) ideas and policies, which effectively kicked out one of the basic supporting legs of democracy: constitutionalism to protect free and fair elections and to constrain government overreach and centralization efforts.

Liberal policies after 1989 went further than what would fit the value and belief system of the electorate. This gap was especially wide in connection with economic liberalism. Profound early pro-capitalist and pro-market policies were certainly not reflective of popular sentiments. In the democratic competition that followed, promises and government programs were slowly adjusted to these ideological expectations.

Another reason for liberalism to lose popularity was the fact that liberals, in general, tended to undervalue the importance and regard with skepticism ideas and policies of national cohesion and of social protection by the state. Both nationalism and socialism were viewed with suspicion, something reminiscent of earlier antidemocratic (or even totalitarian) periods in Hungarian history.

On the other hand, national traumas and a long tradition of national self-victimization made the electorate more prone to an argument that portrayed liberalism as foreign to the nation and largely detrimental to it. This very message, often in the form of a leftist–liberal conspiracy involving foreign elements, was initially marginalized in the early 1990s, but later it gradually became more prominent in public discourse, as Fidesz, a mainstream party, also endorsed it. Initial minority liberal views and majority nationalist anti-liberal thinking polarized the society between 1989 and 2010, until the absolute victory of the latter.

The temporal comparison suggests a strong correlation with the gradual and dramatic rise of anti-liberalism. The regional comparison suggests a moderate correlation, because the rise of anti-liberalism and nationalism is typical elsewhere, too, even if less markedly. Overall, ideology seems to have played a significant role in autocratization, but it is still an insufficient factor in itself.

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7. Behind the Curtain (Social Culture)

Abstract: The prevailing Hungarian value system and culture is far from the tolerant, inclusive, supportive one that makes democracy more resilient in most countries in Western Europe. The low levels of trust, political participation, and solidarity are but a few traits corroborated again and again by social research. Nevertheless, culture cannot be considered as the sole or even primary causal factor in democratic backsliding. Democracy was established in 1989 and maintained for two decades with a culture in Hungary that was essentially similar to the national cultures found elsewhere in the region. There are a few unfavorable Hungarian cultural characteristics that are distinctive when compared to other countries of the Visegrád group. While they have contributed to Hungary's democratic backsliding, they cannot fully explain the strange historical course it followed.

Keywords: social values, tolerance, inclusiveness, solidarity, trust, self-victimization

Social Culture and Democracy

Democracy ultimately depends on the behavior of the people—voters and leaders alike. Democracy needs democrats. No leader can create a democratic system against the will of the people. Democracy is said to be the system which ensures that the government will never be better than what the people deserve. The problem of creating a "democracy without democrats" was raised more than a hundred years ago by Czechoslovak president Thomas G. Masaryk (Pehe, 2017) and the phrase was used as the title of a 1994 book by Ghassan Salamé, a Lebanese scholar (and today the minister of culture of Lebanon), about the political future of the Muslim world.

In 1990, Samuel Huntington found the absence of experience with democracy a "potentially significant political obstacle to future democratization" for most of the authoritarian countries.

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> Twenty-three of 30 countries that democratized between 1974 and 1990 had had some history of democracy, while only a few countries that were nondemocratic in 1990 could claim such experience.... This obviously is not a decisive impediment to democratization—if it were, no countries would now be democratic—but it does make it more difficult. (Huntington, 1991a, p. 21)

He dealt in length whether Confucianism (in its classic Chinese version or in its East Asian derivatives) or Islam was a suitable base for democracy.

There is a long list of general sociocultural dispositions and traits that are necessary for a democratic political system and can be logically deduced from the definition "for the people, by the people." Some of these cultural elements correspond to the ideological triad of liberty, equality, fraternity. They are, respectively: tolerance, (self-)respect, inclusivity (for an open and free social debate); solidarity, justice (for fair allocation of benefits); and trust, cooperation (for the cohesion of the community). The responsibility of the political elite and the broad participation of the people in public affairs are also important.

History forms societal values and behavior, which can directly or indirectly affect politics. Certain cultural features can lead to democratic backsliding by causing society not to value democracy and thus be ready to vote for undemocratic political forces. Others have an impact through unknowingly influencing the political behavior of members of a society (including those in power) to function in nondemocratic ways.

The belief that politicians generally cannot be trusted or that a strong leader is needed to run a country effectively are examples of the former. They undermine democratic competition and deliberation.

Several other cultural traits can hamper democratic social behavior. The doctrine that politics is dirty can lead to low participation in politics, as can the dominance of survival values over self-expression values. Elitism or a low level of solidarity is a fertile ground for neo-feudal relations. Intolerance for other individuals, selfishness, low levels of trust, and low levels of respect can hinder social cooperation. Polarization and intolerance for other groups or opinions can also undermine social cohesion and cooperation.

Social Culture as a Factor in Democratic Backsliding in Hungary

Practically all of the antidemocratic cultural features summarized above have been mentioned by various social scientists and other intellectuals

as Hungarian national characteristics. *Longue durée* Hungarian history and national cultural traits have been evoked to explain the popular support for an autocratizing regime and the lack of social resistance against de-democratization.

The general attitude toward politics is often described by the phrase "straw fire enthusiasm" ("szalmaláng lelkesedés") in connection with how quickly Hungarians can turn from a rebellious mood to despair. Another one is the saying "Politics is a lord's ploy," ("a politika úri huncutság") which can be understood as a warning to ordinary people to keep away from politics. The joke "How do you know when a politician is lying? His mouth is moving" shows a general mistrust of politicians. A further illustration of the common Hungarian attitude toward politics is the phrase used to characterize the political transformation happening around 1989: "gangster change" ("gengsztерváltás"), which rhymes nicely with the official category "regime change" ("rendszerváltás").

Early culturalist explanations for democratic backsliding appeared immediately after 2010 in newspaper opinion pieces. Some of them can be read in an edited volume, *Miért hagytuk, hogy így legyen?* (Why did we let it happen?), where 14 leading Hungarian intellectuals were brooding about lost opportunities (Rényi, 2012). According to Gábor Bruck, a psychologist turned liberal campaign advisor, Orbán was not the real culprit, because he was only responding to the demands of the voters. He could be replaced, but 10 million Hungarians could not be (Rényi, 2012, pp. 26–27). As Bruck says about the cultural traits that led to this demand,

> Hungary is in trouble, because it believes that it has a lot of enemies.... If you look down on children, women, intellectuals, if you smear the Roma, the Jews, the Slovaks, the homosexuals, then in the end you will have nobody to exchange thoughts and ideas. If Orbán adds to this that Europe is in a decline, the liberals are traitors to the homeland, the communists steal everything, then there is not much else to do than to leave the community of nations and pull up walls around the community of Hungarians. (Rényi, 2012, p. 31)

In the same book the eminent novelist György Spiró connects it to Hungarians' national conceit coupled with their very shallow understanding of the region and the wider world (Rényi, 2012, p. 171).

The Hungarian-Polish writer Krzysztof Varga has attempted to explain political developments in Hungary to a Polish audience through an examination of Hungarian culture—to a large extent culinary culture—and the

scenery around Budapest in a sarcastic but compassionate and loving way (Varga, 2015). The title of the book is *Turulpörkölt*, a word that combines Turul, the name of a giant bird of prey that serves as an ancient symbol of national identity in Hungarian mythology, and *pörkölt*, a traditional Hungarian stew that is known all over the world as "goulash" (although the actual *gulyás* is a different dish). As the title suggests, the observations of the book revolve around heavy foods and the atmosphere of the city full of dreams of national greatness and nostalgia:

> The primary victims of Hungarian gloom and boredom are vegetables—the synonyms of freshness, health, and lightness. Vegetables must be killed, butchered like animals; everything that is alive, that has vitamins, must be stripped of life and health, then drowned in vinegar or smothered in a greasy-floury coating. (Varga, 2015, pp. 24–25)

> Hungary became free from the dynasty only after World War I and the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy. But only to become dependent first on the consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty, then on Germany, and after 1945 on the Soviet Union. Today, however, when subordination to Brussels and the global market only seems like an occupation in the minds of the moonstruck, there is no other dependence left but history and memories. (Varga, 2015, p. 54)

> The greatest symbol of victory, the Statue of Liberty on Gellért Hill, overlooking the city, is a monument to Soviet rule, it stands next to the Citadel, which was built by the victorious Austrians. (Varga, 2015, p. 57)

Probably the strongest (and most brutal) culturalist argument for the tragic fate of Hungarian democracy at an early phase of the Fidesz era came from the Hungarian writer Ákos Kertész (Kertész, 2011). In his open letter to the editor in chief of *Amerikai Népszava*, a US-based Hungarian-language online publication, he bashed Fidesz's rise to power and the betrayal of the people by left-wing politicians. He also referred to typical Hungarian national characteristics and claimed that only the progressive democratic left could have improved them. He wrote:

> The Hungarian is genetically subjugated. He happily wallows in the slurry of dictators, grunts, swallows the muck and disavows the fact that one would kill him. He will not learn, [he will] not work, he can only begrudge others, and when he is given the opportunity, he kills

> anyone who achieves anything through work, study, or innovation. (Verseck, 2012)[1]

Following the publication of this open letter, Kertész received a number of threatening and anti-Semitic messages, which continued even after he acknowledged that the use of the racist-sounding phrase "genetically subjugated" was a mistake. He applied for and received Canadian citizenship, and he relocated to Montreal. In a later interview, he again emphasized that his message was not about "genes" but about typical Hungarian sociocultural behavioral traits shaped by deep historical influences, as described by the political thinker István Bibó. In Kertész's argument, Hungary's historical trajectory distorted the Hungarian national spirit to the point that Hungarians were "able to love" Franz Joseph, "who drowned their War of Independence in blood"; Horthy, who came to power through massacres and the recognition of the Treaty of Trianon; and Viktor Orbán, who "oppresses and deprives the people with his senseless economic policy and ruthless austerity, and who tramples on democracy" (Németh, 2020).

A number of (perhaps less radical, but similar) culturalist explanations have been created by other Hungarian thinkers. Philosopher Gáspár Miklós Tamás talks of persistent *longue durée* anti-Westernism in Hungary (and in the wider region), which is connected to antidemocratic sentiments (Tamás, 2020). Another philosopher, János Kis, blamed (at least partially) the persistent tragic polarization between the political left and right (Hungary's hundred years' war) for the autocratic turn and the end of the Third Republic (Kis, 2013).

A long list of historical traits is presented in *Embedded Autocracy*, by the political scientist András Bozóki and the legal sociologist Zoltán Fleck. Their foundational claim is that Orbán's regime could not be possible without an institutional and social embeddedness, and a large part of that has to do with the general social culture mentality of Hungarians. They blame it all on a weak legal consciousness, ethno-nationalism, a culture of grievances, a weak tradition of equal rights, anti-liberalism, low levels of cooperation, a lack of experience with self-organization, voluntary servitude, and self-abasement (Bozóki & Fleck, 2024).

1 The open letter by Kertész caused a serious controversy in Hungary: although he stated that his use of words was mistaken (e.g., he did not actually mean the national characteristics to be actually "genetically" subjugated), his honorary citizenship of Budapest was revoked and, due to constant verbal attacks and threats, he relocated to Canada. The English translation of this quotation is from Verseck, 2012.

Some of the arguments that focus on cultural attitudes come from Western-oriented thinkers, who are in an age-old debate with the more autochthonist, "populist" political and intellectual circles. The intellectual debate is about how much should Hungarian society adopt Western liberal norms. Dating from the 1930s, this "Westerner" group, called the "urbanists," has often included Jewish members, and criticism of the group has sometimes carried anti-Semitic overtones. The intellectual debate reemerged in the late 1980s. This helped create an atmosphere of political polarization that could serve as fertile ground for autocratization. To a significant extent, the interwar intellectual conflict aligned with the left–right polarity, which naturally had a Budapest versus countryside aspect, and coincidentally it became even more marked as the Holocaust essentially reduced Hungarian Jewish life to Budapest.

A cultural background of political polarization in 1989 was also rooted in a dual suspicion based on past trauma. There was dismay and fear among certain sections of society about the reemerging national sentiment, on one side, and, at the same time, anxiety about the "cosmopolitans" who were often assumed to have come from (communist) families that had betrayed the nation or may themselves do so in the future (as liberals). By the late 2000s, political-intellectual polarization had grown to such height that many people were ready to support their political side, whatever politicians there said or did, just to prevent an election victory by the other side. Orbán worked hard to preserve this identity-based polarization till 2026 in a Fidesz-or-foreigners dichotomy.

As for more uniform Hungarian social characteristics in a global comparison, social researcher György István Tóth colloquially summarized the related findings of the social research institute Tárki in the following way: Hungarians are highly distrustful (both in terms of trust tendencies in relation to other people and institutions). They have an ambivalent relationship regarding the assessment of norm compliance and norm violation. (Their perception of corruption is relatively high, but they tend to see its existence as a part of life and, of course, they fundamentally attribute corrupt practices not to themselves, but to others who break the rules in unacceptable ways.) They consider the inequalities that have developed in the economy to be unjustly large, and, what is perhaps more important, the way in which they are asserted and thus the mechanisms of the development of the inequalities to be unacceptable. The inequalities are not perceived to be linked to achievements, but to loopholes, norm violation, and striving to the detriment of others. Overall, Hungarians consider the entire economic functioning to be a zero-sum game. They are strongly state-dependent and

support redistribution and state solutions more than market solutions and techniques (Tóth, 2017).

Altogether, the question is the following. Can culture explain Hungarian democratic backsliding? Did the people's general social predispositions (a tradition of anti-Western feeling, enthusiasm for great leaders, a low level of political participation and of solidarity, a tendency toward paranoia) matter in this? Can we say that autocratization happened mainly because the people were culturally predisposed to prefer an antidemocratic strong leader over democratic deliberation and were susceptible to disinformation wrapped in nationalist rhetoric while overly suspicious of pro-Western democrats?

The Sociocultural Factors in Temporal Comparison

Sociocultural factors are largely stable historically. Recent election maps of European countries frequently show so-called "phantom borders": geographical dividing lines based on long-gone political frontiers. Such is often the case in Germany (between what used to be West and East Germany) and in Poland and Romania (between territories that belonged to different countries prior to 1918).[2] These maps demonstrate that long-forgotten historical influences can shape contemporary voting habits.

Cultural characteristics change slowly, and this is true also for those traits that were cited in connection with Hungary's autocratic turn (e.g., anti-Western feelings, polarization, nonparticipation, intolerance, elitism). This being the case, anyone who claims that the reason for the democratic decline is cultural has to explain how it is possible that democracy was created within this culture in the first place.

Two different lines of argument support the cultural explanations. Either culture changed significantly between 1989 and 2010 in Hungary, or democratization happened not because of the general cultural conditions, but despite them. The latter could be the case if the new political elite that rose to prominence in 1989 did so due to exceptional circumstances, but its members did not represent the culture of the general electorate well, which exerted a gradual assimilatory backlash effect.

Cultural change did not take place on a large scale. A notable case where antidemocratic cultural traits were demonstrated to be heading in the

2 Interestingly, in all three cases the Eastern parts show a tendency for greater support for ethno-nationalism, xenophobia, EU skepticism, and anti-liberalism.

wrong direction from the point of view of democracy is intolerance toward foreigners:

> Sociological research shows that the thinking of different groups in Hungarian society is traditionally characterized by strong individualism, low solidarity toward each other, and very high levels of intolerance. The latter was further strengthened by the Hungarian government's xenophobic campaign following the 2015 European migration crisis. (Valuch, 2021)

But again, generally speaking, culture has not changed much. When it comes to survival versus self-expression values, it even moved in the direction that is favorable for democracy. According to cultural maps published as part of the World Values Survey, Hungarians moved significantly toward the self-expression values (which include tolerance and openness) in the past decades (World Values Survey, 1996, 2017, 2023).

The only way to still justify a culturalist explanation is to assume that democracy was established in Hungary not because of but despite—and in clear confrontation with—the general cultural condition of the country. This would mean that an *Aufklärist* (or pro-Enlightenment) political elite took the country to a place where it does not belong culturally. Though this explanation is plausible, this would mean that other factors must have played a role.

The Social Culture Factor in Regional Comparison

It is easy to be surprised by what you see when you look outside the border of your own country and at the cultural traits of the people who live there. For Hungarians, stuffed cabbage (*töltött káposzta*) and poppy seed rolls (*mákos bejgli*) are quintessential Hungarian foods. Many Hungarians would be surprised to see that they are served everywhere in the wider Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltic countries to the Balkans. A Hungarian cannot avoid being similarly surprised when reading the cultural self-description of other peoples in the neighborhood. Serbs often attribute their profound sense of national pride to a legacy of defiance, having historically confronted multiple empires and emerged unbroken (Kapor, 2014, p. 244)—similarly to Hungarians. Czechs characterize themselves as being creatively cunning and possessing special abilities to craftily circumvent regulations (Berka et al., 2013, p. 21)—as if it was taken from a half-proud, half-ashamed autobiography of the Hungarian people.

Many of the perceived national characteristics are true for the wider region. In an influential essay written almost half a century ago, Hungarian historian Jenő Szűcs (1983) identified three historical regions of Europe. In Hungary, in the early 1980s, it was almost revolutionary for a scholar to mention a third independent cultural region between the West and the East, because the region he was talking about was under Soviet control and was widely referred to as part of Eastern Europe. And yet, as Szűcs explained, this in-between region was different from both the West and the East, belonging to each at different epochs. In the first half of the second millennium, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary were the three Catholic monarchies on the eastern edge of the Western world (Occidens). There they were influenced by such cultural and social impulses as the Romanesque and Gothic styles of architecture, the Renaissance, the Reformation, autonomous cities, estates, the separation of the sacred and the secular, modernization, liberties, and free contractual relations. Later, these countries fell prey to Eastern empires that brought hierarchical and autocratic influences and patriarchal relations with them, like a second serfdom.

What Szűcs could not have foreseen is that a decade later, when these countries had the opportunity to again be part of the West, they got together in an informal alliance, which came to be called the Visegrád group. For many years after 1989 the Visegrád countries (initially Poland and Czechoslovakia, then Poland and the two successor states of the latter) served as a frame of reference for evaluating Hungary's political performance. These countries were described as being relatively similar.

The resemblances were affected by more recent historical experiences. These countries regained their full independence after World War I. They were exposed to fascism and communism and occupied by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. They seriously challenged the totalitarianism imposed by Moscow (Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland in the 1980s). They were the front-runners in the transformation and were seen as the most developed candidates to be included in Western institutional structures.

Some differences, however, were highlighted very early on. Analyzing party structures, political scientist Herbert Kitschelt soon pointed out that in Poland and Hungary the post-1989 political scene consisted of communist successor parties embracing economic reform on the left versus a nationalistic-conservative right as opposed to Czechia, where the party structure was dominated by a social democratic center-left block and a free market center-right block. He constructed a *longue durée* historical causal model (Kitschelt, 1995), according to which the difference is the distant historical legacy of the pre–World War II social realities. According

to him, Poland and Hungary experienced incomplete processes of social modernization and had gentry-dominated semi-agrarian systems that supported the creation of a "national-accommodationist" type of communist regime (which granted some freedom to the traditional intelligentsia and the church). In the Czech lands, on the other hand, the relatively modern pre–World War II social and political structures, socialist traditions, and modern state apparatus were perfect for creating a "bureaucratic authoritarian" communist regime which was repressive and averse to market reform. Focusing on more recent developments, social and political conditions in the interwar period can probably also be connected to the fact that it was Hungary and Poland that showed signs of more serious democratic backsliding, and less so Czechia.

Other significant differences also exist that put Hungary in a unique position. One is the lack of a legacy of an anti-fascist national uprising during World War II (Rényi, 2012, p. 171). There was a heroic revolution against the Soviets in 1956, but the then existing almost all-encompassing national unity was absent by 1989. Unlike in Czechoslovakia and Poland, where opposition formed a large uniform block versus the incumbent communists in 1989, in Hungary opposition was highly polarized. In the words of András Bozóki, "there was not yet a democracy, but there was already party pluralism" (Bozóki, 2022b). The initial, mostly identitarian, deep cleavage persisted and constrained the functioning of a democratic community.

Another difference is the relatively low level of popular participation in the transformation in 1989 again compared to the other Visegrád countries. In Poland in the 1980s, the independent trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) had approximately 10 million members (a quarter of the population). Dissident activity in Czechoslovakia was limited to small intellectual circles, just like in Hungary, but nevertheless, at the climax of the Velvet Revolution, a crowd of a million people gathered in Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí). Although the March 15 demonstration of the "alternative" organizations and the Imre Nagy reburial ceremony on June 16, 1989, was attended by 200,000 to 300,000 people, these did not mean the same level of catharsis for Hungarian society.

Hungarians are generally more isolated and exhibit a lower level of trust and solidarity than Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks. The historical legacy of a major anti-fascist movement is also lacking in the Hungarian consciousness (and the anti-communist heritage of 1956 is also more dated than that of similar Polish and Czechoslovak movements).

All this, however, does not mean that Hungary is a negative regional outlier culturally, in a way that could clearly explain its deviance vis-à-vis

a democratic development. It may be so in a Visegrád comparison, but not when compared to other countries in the wider Eastern European region.

The Inglehart–Welzel cultural map of the world consistently presented Hungary as an outlier in the "Catholic Europe" block of countries, which includes ex-communist states like Slovenia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia (see, for example, World Values Survey, 1996 and 2017). In that group, Hungary scored the highest on having "survival" versus "self-expression" values. This puts the country the furthest away in tolerance and openness from leading democracies of "Protestant Europe" and the "English-speaking" world and the closest to the Orthodox countries of Southern and Eastern Europe.

In the words of István György Tóth:

> [T]he maps based on the European values surveys show that the silhouette of Hungary does not essentially stand out from the gradients running from north to south and from west to east, whether we examine the assessment of trust, tolerance, or norm compliance/non-norm compliance. The shock that came to interested public figures in 2009 as a result of our aforementioned values survey was not caused by the fact that we were very different from others, but quite the opposite: by the fact that we are exactly like our environment. Only we are not where we imagine ourselves (say, in the Netherlands), but where we were born (just a little north of the Balkans, east of the Czech Republic and Slovenia, and right next door to Ukraine). (Tóth, 2017, p. 9)

Interestingly, Hungary is no longer the lowest-ranking country in Catholic Europe in terms of self-expression values. Most countries have moved slowly upward in that scale, but Hungary has overtaken Lithuania, caught up with Croatia, and got well ahead of Serbia (contrary to 1996). Hungary is still the lowest-ranking country among the Visegrád nations, however, and, due to the diverse movements of the countries on the map, has moved further away from both the laggard "Orthodox Europe" and the more open-minded "Protestant Europe."

Summary: Lessons About the Social Culture Factor

Prevailing Hungarian culture is far from the tolerant, inclusive, supportive one that makes democracy more resilient to backsliding in Western Europe. People's general social predispositions (a tradition of anti-Western feeling,

enthusiasm for great leaders, a low level of political participation and of solidarity, a tendency toward paranoia) made them ready to support antidemocratic political forces.

However, this can hardly explain the downturn, given that democracy was established in Hungary in 1989 and was maintained there for two decades with essentially the same culture. If anything, Hungarian social culture shifted toward greater openness over the period, reflecting a general trend in Europe at the time.

A regional comparison can point to a few distinctive unfavorable Hungarian characteristics when focusing on the Visegrád region. But if compared to the wider region, in values surveys Hungary sits culturally where it geographically belongs, between northern and southern and between western and eastern countries.

The effect of culture is therefore only moderate. It cannot explain much of Hungary's strange historical course vis-à-vis democracy. If culture in Hungary was replaced by that of other regional countries, the autocratic U-turn and democratic backsliding would have probably still happened.

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Conclusion: Causes, Blunders, Lessons

Abstract: While all of the analyzed factors contributed to Hungarian democratic backsliding, none can explain it alone. Three factors stood out as especially important: 1) the agency of Viktor Orbán, an exceptionally ambitious, talented, and uncompromising political actor; 2) the victory of antidemocratic nationalism over liberalism, which undermined support for checks and balances; 3) the dysfunctional constitutional framework with a disproportionate election law. The main lesson of democratic backsliding in Hungary is that democracies need an educated elite and voters who refuse to put their trust fully in one person, one institution, or one ideology. Democracy needs the plurality and self-restraint of politicians; institutional constraining of parties that compete for power; and ideological plurality, which ensures a fair degree of freedom, solidarity, and national cohesion.

Keywords: causality, political elite, electorate, political education, trust

The world is infinitely complex. The same is true of anything that appears there: any object, any event, any phenomenon. Pick any topic about what is "out there," and your account of it will be a simplification, whether it is a single sentence or a long monograph.

In this book, I did not want to narrate the story of how the Hungarian democratization in 1989-1990 turned into a failed project two decades later. Rather, I wished to try to explain it. The explanandum is an endlessly complex web of events stretching through almost four decades, so the result could be an infinitely complicated tangle of interacting causal chains.

What I wanted to provide instead was an explanatory model that carries a lesson. Like all models, for it to be useful, it should avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of overexplaining (producing another overly detailed event history of Hungary's decline) or oversimplifying (giving a useless unidimensional explanation). I tried to produce an argument that is complex

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enough to grasp the most important aspects of the dynamic, but simple enough to have apprehensible implications.

With this aim in mind, I grouped together the logically conceivable and previously proposed potential causes into seven groups. Then I tested them one by one, using a temporal and a regional comparison. The idea was to filter out those factors that could not plausibly be crucial—either because they were already there in 1989 at the time of democratization (so how could they be the cause of backsliding after 2010?) or because they were also present in other countries in the region, where no such serious autocratic turn took place (so how could they be the cause in Hungary?).

In the following, I will summarize the results of this investigation, tell a few stories in connection with the most important causes, and then draw some lessons—which hopefully can be used to benefit people all around the world in relation to what makes, sustains, or breaks democracies.

Causes of the Hungarian Democratic Backsliding

The research shows that all seven factor groups contributed to the Hungarian democratic downturn and backsliding. One was the political agency of Viktor Orbán, a person who is exceptionally talented in power politics and motivated as a political actor, and who had no moral inhibitions against undermining democracy. Another was the constitutional setup (the legal system and the arrangement of state institutions, including the disproportionate election law of 1989), which did not prevent the centralization of power. A third was the poor economic performance and unmet welfare expectations, which caused general disappointment and growing mistrust in democratic governance, especially in the run-up to the decisive 2010 election. Fourth was the international environment, that is, Hungary's interactions with outside forces (like the effect of the political model offered by Russia and the economic example of China) that supported autocratization and that outweighed those forces (primarily EU institutions) that supported democratization. Fifth was the changing media landscape, which disturbed the flow of credible information, making it easier to construct alternative realities. Sixth was the undemocratic political ideas that made it easier to discredit liberal values like individual freedom, human rights, the rule of law, checks and balances, and constitutional constraints on power. Finally, people's general sociocultural predispositions (a tradition of anti-Western feeling, enthusiasm for great leaders, a low level of political participation and of solidarity, a tendency toward paranoia) made them ready to support antidemocratic political forces.

Graded from 0 to 2 both in temporal and regional comparison, none of the factors had an overall rating of either 0 or 4. (For a very brief summary of the factors, and a revisiting of the grades and the effects, see the appendix to this volume.) The following two conclusions can be drawn from this study: On the one hand, all factors mattered to some extent. On the other hand, none of the factors can explain it alone.

Some factors mattered more than others. There were two outstanding factors, which got a combined high rating of 3: political agency and ideology. For both, the high rating can be attributed mostly to the temporal comparison. Crucially, these factors worked differently around 1989 (at the time of the quick democratization) than around and after 2010, when the democratic reversal happened and the backsliding started and continued. As they changed, so too did the political reality. To put it simply: Orbán's apparatus remained the only game in town and liberalism became completely discredited.

If the pool of politicians in 2010 had been similar to those active at the end of 1989, characters like Miklós Németh, József Antall, Imre Kónya, János Kis, Péter Tölgyessy, László Sólyom, etc., it is doubtful that the dismantling of the constitutional order in 2010 would have taken place. The political scene around 2010 (which was led by the battle-hardened, smart, ambitious, flexible, and not at all democratically self-restrained Orbán) was much more conducive to democratic backsliding than was the case during the amateurish and somewhat naïve early years of Hungarian democracy.[1]

The same can be said if the dominant political ideas in general (of politicians, of the intellectual elite, of ordinary people) were similar around 2010 to what had been the case around 1989. The epoch of the transformation was a time of approval for democratization, including the near-consensus of ideas about the need for political pluralism, human rights, freedom of the press and of association, and a constitutionally limited government. These ideas became sidelined by decades of anti-liberal arguments and political failures attributed widely to liberal policies, while the ideas—projected by politicians and intellectual circles around Fidesz—about the need for strong-handed governance that could protect perceived national interests came to be seen in a more positive light.

However, neither political agency nor the ideology factor was sufficient to be a cause. This can be shown by the regional comparison, in which

1 One exception, when fears were running high about the possible loss of democracy, came before the 1994 elections. Partly because of the tragic death of József Antall in 1993, there were fears that the governing coalition would refuse to hand over its power democratically. These fears proved unfounded.

neither of these factors is strong, neither of them is unique. There have been other talented and opportunistic populists in the region elsewhere, and the illiberal (or anti-liberal) turn has also been significant, without causing such a serious democratic backsliding.

Evaluation of the constitutional setup brought a surprising result. The connection was strong (2) in regional comparison, in fact, it was the only such grade there, while in the temporal one it was zero (0).

By 2010, no other country in the region had a constitution which was constructed by simply amending the old communist one. (Latvia was still an outlier, in that its constitution dated back to the early interwar period.) The other three Visegrád countries and almost all the postcommunist EU member states had electoral systems based on proportional representation (a notable exception was Lithuania[2]). Had Hungary utilized a standard regional electoral system in 2010, Fidesz would not have been able to secure a supermajority, preventing it from engineering a constitutional counterrevolution and unilaterally consolidating power through a centralized, monopolized state structure. The constitutional system is a decisive factor that has helped prevent autocratic attempts in Poland, Czechia, and—so far—Slovakia.

On the other hand, the picture is completely different in the temporal comparison. The original constitutional conditions in 1989 weren't more conducive to democratization than in 2010. Therefore, this comparison shows that the constitutional setup is not a driver of democratization or of autocratization and does not trigger change in either a democratic or an autocratic direction. The maximum it can do is to act as a guardrail protecting the existing system as best it can. (It did not do such a good job in relation to Hungary after 2010.) Altogether, the constitutional setup is a very clear-cut case for a necessary but not sufficient factor.

The least important factor is also worth mentioning. Although culturalist explanations abound in Hungary (and initially I myself leaned toward arguments that fit this category), culture turned out to be the weakest factor in the two comparisons. Cultural attributes change slowly. Social attitudes and values (like individualism, a low level of trust, or intolerance) were not fundamentally different in 1989 from 2010, so they could not have determined Hungary's backsliding. If Hungarians found themselves in

2 The Lithuanian election system is also mixed, similarly to the Hungarian one. And yet, the Baltic country has shown an almost constantly very high level of democracy since 1990, according to surveys carried out by V-Dem. The risk of autocratization may be there, but the system is more institutionally protected than in Hungary by a regulation according to which certain provisions of the constitution can only be amended if an additional referendum confirms the decision by the Seimas (parliament).

2010 with a cultural mindset that was akin to that of 1989, it would not have made a real difference. This is also true with an imagined switch to the cultural traits of another people in the region. According to global and European surveys, by and large, Hungary seems to be culturally where it is positioned geographically. (Although some adverse cultural traits can still be detected in Hungary.)

Some of the factors worked as a multiplier for democratic backsliding, producing a self-reinforcing feedback loop, a vicious cycle. One such phenomenon had to do with the relationship between economic performance and democracy. Just as an economy that is lagging behind can cause democratic backsliding, that outcome can further increase problems in the economy. The political system, the distribution of political power, affects economic performance. If political power is more concentrated, if institutions are less inclusive and more extractive, the law is less strictly and less uniformly enforced, monopolies are distributed centrally, all of which blocks the incentives and opportunities of people to innovate and participate, leading to clientelism (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2013). Besides, democratic backsliding (which can be caused by economic deprivation) increases social inequalities. In an unequal society, clientalist ties are more easily built, thus democracy may be further eroded (Rau & Stokes, 2025). This is not just a theoretical possibility, but the reality in Hungary. Without an adequate social safety net, hundreds of thousands of unemployed people ended up as public workers, and many became dependent on local political power circles. Poverty provides a base for shady political operations at elections, bribing people with petty sums and controlling their activity by organizing chain voting.

The autocratization–closed culture cycle could also produce a similar vicious circle. Democratic backsliding can be supported by survival values and an inward-looking culture, but it also promotes them. This is again not just a theoretical possibility. Hungarian writer György Spiró recently described how in rural Hungary in the 2010s he had encountered people with a mentality that struck him as being like something that you would find in the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. “Hatred is universal. They assume the other person is bad from the outset, and the press trumpets prejudices that were previously dismissed” (Spiró, 2025). The phenomenon is not only about a lack of trust in others, but also about “the way people behave towards each other, the terrible irritation, envy and indifference” which has been continuously growing: “severe and depressive indifference is at work, and carelessness has become overwhelming.”

Factors also helped fortify each other. Technologies used to hack democracy by creating enemy straw men and spreading disinformation found

fertile ground within the largely amoral Fidesz leadership[3] and could be nicely aligned with a *longue durée* foreign policy tradition of freedom fights against allies. Economic difficulties could also be used as pretexts to exploit long-standing aversion about the West and to look for potential economic role models and political allies among autocratic regimes as the international context transformed.

Misread Warnings, Reckless Blunders, Ancient Ghosts

It is beyond doubt that the primary responsibility for the collapse of Hungarian democracy rests on those politicians who made it happen (together with their accomplices in the media, bureaucracy, etc.). However, the liberal elite also has a stake in it, with its occasional carelessness. And even the survival attempts of the dying communist regime in the 1980s—like a reappearing ghost—had an unexpected influence decades later.

There were a few prescient warnings that could have helped the democratic transition immensely. Some of these were heard on time and repeated endlessly, but only in a twisted or partial way, so the original meaning was completely lost.

Such were István Bibó's words: "To be a democrat is first and foremost not to be afraid…" (Bibó, 2015, p. 152). This statement (just a fragment of a sentence in an essay) became probably the most widely repeated political aphorism and motto in Hungary. It has been written on posters carried in numerous demonstrations. As an early example, on March 15, 1989, liberal dissident Imre Mécs urged the "silent majority" with these words to stop being afraid of the "weapons of Stalinists," to step forward and let their voices be heard (Mécs, 1989). Protesting Fidesz almost exactly 25 years later, even Jobbik (then a far-right party) used Bibó's words as a slogan in front of the parliament (Herczeg, 2014). The eternal words were even printed on a commemorative stamp issued by the Hungarian Postal Services to honor Hungary's premier political thinker (Magyar Posta Zrt., 2011).

However, Bibó did not intend to urge people to confront power without hesitation, as can be understood from the quotation.[4] What he meant,

3 Zsuzsa Szelényi tells how an anonymous Fidesz leader expressed his admiration for the "professionalism" of Arthur Finkelstein, who first designed and led a campaign for a Republican senator against gay marriage, and then had such a marriage himself (Szelényi, 2023, p. 230).

4 He was brave, but not confrontational. On November 4, 1956, as Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, he was the only government minister who remained in the parliament and wrote a manifesto calling on his people to exercise passive—not violent—resistance.

instead, was for people not to be afraid of others, but to be tolerant, attentive, and open-minded. Those who read the full passage that the quotation is taken from can easily grasp this idea (but apparently only a few did):

> In a state of convulsive fear and belief that the advance of freedom endangers the cause of the nation, the benefits of democracy cannot be made use of. To be a democrat is first and foremost not to be afraid—not to be afraid of those who have a different opinion, speak a different language, and are of another race; not to be afraid of revolution, conspiracies, the unknown evil intentions of the enemy, hostile propaganda, disdain, and generally all those imaginary dangers that become real because we are afraid of them. (Bibó, 2015, p. 152)

Not exactly a call to build barricades.

There is another idea that has been quoted ad nauseam since 1990 – again in a misleading way and out of context. It is an early analysis and warning by Ralf Dahrendorf in 1990 about the need to be cautious about the democratic future of East-Central Europe. His view was generally summarized along these lines: "The transition to democracy is a long process. It takes six months to change the political system, six years to change the economic system, but 60 years to change the sociocultural relations" (see, for example, Agh, 2016; Csáky, 2010; Csizmadia, 2011; HVG, 2012; Pók, 2009; Vitányi, 2006)

However, this is not exactly what Dahrendorf said. He was not talking about the duration of restructuring the economy, but rather about its positive results for the general public. In his long open letter, he was lamenting the prospect of the future of Poland. He was lamenting the dangers for democracy in case external shocks hit. So, what he really said was that it was important for the people in a democracy to possess the "general sense that things are looking up as a result of economic reform" in order to survive bad times. This is what is "unlikely to spread before six years have passed" (Dahrendorf, 1990).

This matters, because misreading Bibó and Dahrendorf meant not grasping their advice. And, as is now clear, these warnings—if they were received—would have been extremely important. Bibó's message, that people should not demonize those who are different (or think differently), would have provided a valuable warning about the threat of polarization. Dahrendorf's message about the crucial importance of an economy that produces popular welfare was also completely lost in its misquotation.

Yet, the biggest blunder was the construction of the electoral law. The father of the Hungarian mixed system, the liberal Péter Tölgyessy, never knew about the research of the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart,

in which he suggested that new democracies should favor proportional representation—the study only appeared in the *Journal of Democracy* in 1991 (Lijphart, 1991). Somehow, as was discussed in the second chapter of this book, practically all new democracies to the west of the former Soviet Union picked such a system.

Why was Hungary an outlier? Records of the negotiations about this question make it all too clear. The two biggest new parties, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the Alliance of Liberal Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége, hereafter SZDSZ), suggested that a mixed system—instead of a proportional one—would be the best one to ensure governability and to avoid the kind of fractured parliament reminiscent of the pre-Hitler Weimar system. The design was also intended to disadvantage established parties that relied on the familiarity of their historical names (Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Smallholders), thereby helping new parties.

> For the SZDSZ, Tölgyessy warned well before the negotiations that proportional elections would lead to "permanent government crisis," and on 10 July, citing the French Fourth Republic and the Weimar Republic as examples, he argued, "The purely proportional system, in every European country, has led always to collapse and catastrophe." … Tölgyessy also argued against proportionality on the grounds that it was good for the communists and [the] historical parties. (Renwick, 2005, pp. 1010–1013)

What is more surprising than the initial naïveté of the crafters, is that politicians were not worried even after the election system had been tested a few times. The 1998 election program of SZDSZ raised the issue of changing the electoral law, but not in order to address the actual looming danger of a supermajority. A more proportional system was called for in order to prevent a "crisis of legitimacy" when a governing coalition would not have the majority of the popular vote (Horn, 1998, p. 14).

Moreover, the significance of the electoral law in the collapse of Hungarian democracy is still denied by its "spiritual father." In a presentation, Tölgyessy said that the assumption that with a proportional voting system history would have turned out completely differently was childish (Tölgyessy, 2019). He also called attempts to blame the election law for Hungary's current ills "conspiracy theorizing," "displacement activity," and "scapegoating." These arguments are not very convincing.[5] But another part of his presentation is

5 It is surprising that the possibility of a landslide resulting in a supermajority was not anticipated before 2010, because the first few democratic years had already produced cases when a single party

indeed remarkable. Tölgyessy told a story that shows how a fatal coincidence and a group of communists in 1989 also contributed to the outcome.

The National Round Table, where the incumbent Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) debated state affairs with the opposition parties, was an important institution and had more legitimacy than official state bodies, but it was not part of the constitutional order. The results of the negotiations had to be legalized by the parliament. Communist members of the parliament rebelled and threatened to vote against the agreement. They would have preferred a clear majoritarian system instead of the mixed one, contrary to the position of their own party's leading negotiator, György Fejti.

Hearing the news about the revolt, Tölgyessy rushed to the parliament. The result of the subsequent informal but tense impromptu negotiation was an ad hoc compromise: 12 more mandates (out of the 386) were to be decided by the first-past-the-post method. This minor and seemingly inconsequential change was at that time hailed by the other parties as a miraculous rescue operation. But here is the fatal twist: without this alteration in 1989, Fidesz would not have got the supermajority in 2010.

This was just one of the futile efforts of pre-1989 communists to stay in power, which did not help them but indirectly and unexpectedly harmed the new Hungarian democracy. Another equally tragic one was the accumulation of debt (discussed in Chapter 3) to keep up the standard of living despite the lack of appropriately supporting economic foundations. This backfired in two distinct ways. First, existing welfare measures nurtured the illusion that the state socialist economic system was sustainable, which resulted in nostalgia for Kádár and additional disappointment when the difficulties of the transformation hit. Second, the record level of per capita debt was (and continues to be) an extra burden on the government budget.

The Lessons for Democrats

Democratic backsliding is a physical metaphor for political change. It inherently presupposes a force, comparable to gravity, that causes a political

surged ahead significantly. As I wrote in my unpublished op-ed in 1994: "The bomb implanted in the electoral law, which is threatening to explode now, has been ticking since 1989. Now the MSZP [Hungarian Socialist Party] may achieve a 'groundbreaking' victory, but at the end of 1992 Fidesz, and, a few months before the 1990 elections, MDF [Hungarian Democratic Forum] could have won, enormously. In the latter case, the coalition that is now leaving could have had 70–80%, this way there would have been no hassle with the media law and the amendment of the constitution, they would have taken care of all this, it is awful just to think about it" (Schweitzer, 1994).

system to go downhill toward autocracy. Those who want to stop this process must put an obstacle on the inclination to block the movement, or otherwise exert an uphill counterforce. What is the counterforce that stops centralization by political actors?

This research shows that the following two circumstances are of primary importance: 1) a balanced pool of politicians with democratic convictions and moral self-restraint; 2) the right political ideas about democracy, including the appreciation of its essence as a political system for the people, by the people (and not equating it with elections). For the latter there is a need for understanding democracy's inherent and utilitarian value in creating well-being, and not equating it with either liberty- or nation-centered politics. Democracy is a system that needs a significant degree of all moderate political ideologies: constitutionally protected individual freedom (liberty), social welfare and solidarity (equality), cohesion and national unity of the citizens (fraternity).

This is not just an expectation or requirement from politicians; it is equally a program for all members of a society, including educators. People also have to grasp the real meaning and value of democracy, and, with it, understand that the democratic conviction of the politicians, whom they elect, matters immensely. The Hungarian example shows both that overenthusiasm about (and turning a blind eye to) a particular politician can be as deadly as the opposite approach, assuming that all politicians are self-interested liars. People should not fall for demagogues. Keeping democracy alive should be more important than the victory of any single candidate.

A third important requirement is a proportional representative voting mechanism coupled with a constitutional arrangement designed to impede the concentration of power. Based on the Hungarian post-1989 political journey, the most important trap to avoid seems to be that state bodies, civic organizations, and media outlets would all become partisan institutions subject to partisan politics. Therefore, the most important thing is that the existence of truly independent organizations should be guaranteed.

Instead of "checks and balances," where state institutions monitor and limit each other's power, a "players and referee" system would serve democracy better. This would mean the separation of the political competitors for power from the independent institutions of the state which oversee their competition.

Outside of politics, in other situations where competition takes place—among companies on the market, between teams in a football (soccer) match—there are independent supervisors. In a market economy this supervisor is the competition authority, and in a football match it is the referee. In playground football there is no need for a referee as the participants themselves define and enforce the rules. Why don't we see endless

quarrels on the playground? Because the match is for fun, the players restrain themselves: they usually don't start bending the rules, faking a fault, or insisting for too long that the ball was out of bounds.

The situation is different in professional football. The stakes are higher. In politics, the stakes are higher still, with even more incentives to play hardball.

For rule-based fair play, one needs either the self-restraint of the players or an independent referee. In Hungary, both guarantors were missing: there was no "amateurish" self-restraint by the players, nor strong professional referees. Orbán, at least, did not play as a street player but as a professional, who will do anything to win. This is reminiscent of an argument by Andreas Schedler. Democratic competition, he explains, has long been seen by political theorists as a game based on self-interest, and yet the analysts are shocked whenever—all around the globe—the real utilitarian (not antidemocratic but nondemocratic) politicians arrive on the scene (Schedler, 2024).

Lacking the discipline to follow the norms, which seems to be disappearing in politics, there is a desperate need for referees: strong independent institutions (election committee, Constitutional Court, judiciary, media supervisory authority) to guarantee that the game is played by the rules. These institutions should be as independent from the parties as possible. Paradoxically, and contrary to the claims of populists, unelected and uncontrolled institutions can indeed help sustain a democracy. But in a parliamentary system, a directly elected president (as opposed to one picked by the parliament) can also help prevent the concentration of power.

All this worked better in other countries in the neighborhood. In those countries overcentralization could be prevented by politicians' self-restraint and political expediency could be constrained by properly functioning institutions. When the new democratic election system of Czechoslovakia was discussed in the winter of 1989–1990, Civic Forum was clearly dominating the political field, and under a majority voting system could have received a landslide like Solidarity did in Poland half a year earlier. As the story is told by political scientist Jon Elster, "The remarkable fact is that in the end the decision to adopt proportional voting was taken by the very group—Civic Forum—which had everything to gain from adopting majority voting and which, moreover, had the power to impose that system" (Elster, 1995, p. 113). By 1992, continues Elster, the altruism seems to have diminished, and Havel proposed to divide his country into electoral districts in order to establish a first-past-the-post voting system. That time, it was the Federal Assembly which turned down the proposal, saying that it sought to "ensure reelection for leading figures of the Velvet Revolution."

In sum, the most important three guardrails of democracy are: politicians constraining themselves to play by the rules and work for the community; independent and fair institutions as referees; and an educated electorate. Voters should not put all their trust in one single politician (e.g., Orbán or anyone else), constitution drafters should not create one single strong institution (e.g., parliament or presidency), politicians and ordinary citizens should not believe that one single ideology (e.g., nationalism or liberalism) is equal to democracy. Balance is vital.

But the other factors (numbered here as 3, 4, 5, 7) also have a certain effect on democracy. Thus, democrats should also strive to have the following: a well-functioning, inclusive economy; cooperation with the democratic international community; a pluralistic, professional, independent media, and critical media consumption; a tolerant, inclusive, supportive culture.

Gideon Rose, the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, said this in the introduction of the issue titled *Is Democracy Dying?*:

> Some say that global democracy is experiencing its worst setback since the 1930s and that it will continue to retreat unless rich countries find ways to reduce inequality and manage the information revolution. Those are the optimists. Pessimists fear the game is already over, that democratic dominance has ended for good. (Rose, 2018, p. 8)

I belong to neither of these groups. Based on what I found, I do not see a game over, but I also do not think that dealing with inequality and the information revolution—important as they are—can offer a way out. Building a players-and-referee type of constitutional system and understanding democracy as founded on liberty, equality, fraternity provide a better chance. My main findings are in line with the words attributed to Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe: "A functioning, robust democracy requires a healthy, educated, participatory followership, and an educated, morally grounded leadership."

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Epilogue

The defeat of the Orbán regime and the victory of Péter Magyar's Tisza Party in the April election of 2026 surprised many inside and outside Hungary. Francis Fukuyama saw it as proof that the spirit of 1989 is alive and liberal democracy still has no real alternative. Historian Timothy Snyder and M. Gessen, an opinion columnist at the *New York Times*, found it a model event that holds lessons for Americans.

In connection with the Hungarian opposition winning a "landslide victory uphill," Snyder emphasizes the significance of the independent media, the message that corruption is tightly connected to the autocratic misuse of power, and the importance of protest action. M. Gessen identifies a long list of factors for Magyar's win, including the scale and reach of his organizing network, his old-fashioned in-person politics, and the aspirational and inspirational tone of his politics.

Magyar's political performance was truly extraordinary, and the performance of other democrats—politicians, intellectuals, media outlets, activists—was crucial. But the other side of the story is no less surprising.

International observers have labeled the past four elections in Hungary free but not fair. Not only was the playing field tilted to favor Fidesz, but the party could also adjust the rate of the inclination. Fidesz had a supermajority in the parliament and party loyalists held major political positions. In addition, the government had special powers to rule granted to it by the parliament based on war and migration emergencies, enabling it to mobilize state resources to support Orbán's campaign. It had enough complicit loyalists to ban Tisza from running in the election. It could have postponed the election or it could have introduced a new political system with Orbán as lifelong president. Instead, the regime stuck to employing the usual undemocratic means: Orbán refused to have a pre-election debate, Fidesz used public money for its campaign, and its media applied the well-honed techniques of disinformation (such as claims of an attempted foreign attack

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against a gas pipeline in Hungary and the presentation of a fake election program offered by Tisza, including a planned massive rise in taxes).

Why didn't the regime do more? From media reports it seems that it did not believe, or did not learn until too late, that the usual methods would not be enough to secure a victory. Playing hardball would have led Fidesz to pay a serious political cost and most likely have resulted in large protests that could have turned violent. At that point the crucial question would have become: Is the government prepared and capable of using mass violence against its own people? If yes, it would have saved its rule, but it would have turned Hungary from a hybrid regime into a full autocracy. Orbán and his circle might not have wanted to get to that point. But it also mattered that a few public servants working in law enforcement stepped up against unlawful government practices before the election.

How does Orbán's downfall relate to the narrative of this book? It corroborates the importance of many factors presented and tested here as causally important for democracy.

In the past few years, the effect of the economic performance, of international relations, of political communication—which this book found to be connected to democratic backsliding—started to work in reverse. Serious economic difficulties worked to delegitimize autocracy. These were partly connected to the drying up of EU transfers. (The rule of law conditionality mechanism, designed to bring Hungary back to a democratic path, started to bite.) This occurred at a time when examples of the Hungarian government's subservient communication with Russian leaders were leaked, and a series of investigative reports on the immense level of state corruption were seen by over a million viewers. The allegedly pro-peace, anti-Ukraine propaganda was widely ridiculed, and the classic 1956 call, "Ruszkik haza!" ("Russians go home!") was routinely chanted at anti-government demonstrations.

Political agency and ideology, which were described in this book as the most significant factors for democratic backsliding, also mattered a lot in stopping it.

The Tisza Party began as a one-man show. It was the extraordinary zeal and charismatic performance of Magyar that broke the spell of Viktor Orbán. (Some compare Magyar to the young Orbán—he is similarly courageous and outspoken—but, in fact, his party is even more centered around him. Fidesz was not the creation of Orbán: he had to work hard for years to dominate it unquestionably.) Magyar mobilized a huge number of people, and speedily propelled himself into the position of a serious challenger to Orbán. This reaffirms the view that the personalization of politics in Hungary has a robust demand side, that the Hungarian electorate tends to cherish a strongman.

The rise of Tisza also demonstrates the importance of political ideas. The person who defeated the right-wing Fidesz is a right-winger himself—after more than a decade of unsuccessful similar attempts by politicians and parties that come from socialist or liberal circles. Hungarians, in general, seem to trust only those politicians who can convincingly present themselves as true Hungarian patriots (holding a Hungarian flag and talking with pathos about the country and the nation). Much of the campaign efforts of Fidesz were to try to present Magyar as just another disguised liberal leftist (that is, an anti-Magyar). Following the April 2026 election, Hungary has three parties in parliament—and all claim to represent the "national right."

As of now, whether Hungary will return to democracy is an open question. The signs, so far, provide reasons for cautious optimism.

On the one hand, the tasks seem to be difficult when politics is overwhelmingly dominated by one party and one politician. Tisza now has the same supermajority that helped Fidesz to establish and maintain its hybrid regime. On the other hand, the tremendous support behind Magyar and his party is based on an expectation that he would do away with the autocratic past. Indeed, he has already promised to constrain his own power by limiting the premiership to two election cycles. He also declared that Tisza will not enact a new constitution alone, but will initiate a process of nationwide deliberation, to be followed by a referendum. With these declarations, along with many other symbolic gestures, he has begun to show that he means to work for the public good of all citizens.

In line with the findings of this book, I believe that good economic performance, a favorable international environment, and the flow of accurate information are important for a successful re-democratization of the country. However, ultimately, three crucial factors will decide its political course in the future: the characters of the leading politicians, the constitutional setup, and the dominant political ideas about democracy.

Politics should again be characterized by a plurality of political leaders, and they will have to be ready to limit their own power to uphold democratic principles—even when political institutions don't. A new constitutional order, which includes nonpartisan institutions and an election law based on proportional representation, has to further ensure that power will not be concentrated in the hands of a few. Finally, democracy will have to be understood as a value in itself, besides being a means to bring welfare to the people, and as a system essentially based on a compromise between liberal ideas of human rights and constitutional checks on power, social justice and fairness, and the promotion of a national community based on inclusion.

Appendix

The seven factors are analyzed in two comparative ways:

– *Temporal comparison* (comparing the effect of the given factor around 1989 and around 2010 in Hungary): To what extent can that factor explain why there was a democratization process in Hungary after 1989, but autocratization after 2010?
– *Regional comparison* (comparing the effect of the given factor between Hungary and other regional countries): To what extent can that factor explain why was democratic backsliding elsewhere in the region not as serious as in Hungary?

Table 1. The Seven Factors with Summaries of the Temporal and Regional Evaluations

Political agency effect: SIGNIFICANT (2-1). An exceptionally talented and motivated political actor (Viktor Orbán) had no democratic inhibitions against undermining democracy in order to centralize power in his own hands.

– 2: Viktor Orbán came to dominate the political field long before 2010 in stark difference to the more pluralistic 1989; he was an extremely talented power politician lacking in democratic inhibitions (compared to the other politicians in government and in opposition in 1989).
– 1: The pool of politicians was more imbalanced in Hungary than in other countries in the region. There, the politicians who were ready to undermine democracy were not so much more motivated and talented to convince voters than the democratic-minded politicians.

Constitutional setup effect: MODERATE (0-2). The constitutional setup (the legal system and the arrangement of state institutions, including the disproportionate election law of 1989), helped the centralization of power by giving legitimacy to antidemocratic changes.

– 0: The Hungarian constitutional system did not hamper democratization around 1989, so it cannot have caused autocratization in 2010.
– 2: The electoral system is a clear outlier in regional comparison, in being disproportionate (in almost every country of East-Central Europe it is proportional based on party lists). Checks and balances were insufficient, the constitution could more easily be modified.

Economic performance effect: MODERATE (1-1). Poor economic performance and unmet welfare expectations caused general disappointment, growing mistrust in democratic governance, and increasing support for regulation, centralization, and nationalization.

– 1: Economic underperformance before 2010 can somewhat explain the disillusionment when compared to the moderately hopeful expectations of the introduction of the market economy around 1989.
– 1: The pre-2010 economic underperformance and disappointment is stronger in Hungary than in similar states of the region, but it was not completely unusual.

International environment effect: MILD (1-0). Outside forces that support autocratization outweighed those that supported democratization.
- 1: The pull effect of NATO and the EU was less marked with the potential of free-rider membership, while the pull of China and Russia grew between 1989 and 2010.
- 0: Neither EU influence on Hungarian democracy, nor Russian meddling (political support to Orbán, financial support to the far right) is outstanding in regional comparison.

Political communication effect: MODERATE (1-1). Over the years, the Hungarian political elite acquired political knowledge on how to gain political support and win elections using communication tricks.
- 1: Negative campaigns were present but generally dismissed in 1989 as undemocratic, while by 2010, disinformation and smear campaigns became overwhelming.
- 1: The effect of negative campaigning and disinformation became more marked everywhere in the region, but did not reach the level of Hungary, where media concentration was exceptional.

Political ideology effect: SIGNIFICANT (2-1). After many years of liberal versus nationalist political-ideological polarization, liberal ideas had been discredited by 2010, and the illiberal political turn effectively kicked out one of the basic supporting legs of democracy.
- 2: Liberals and nationalists could collaborate in 1989 while the two shared the common purpose of removing the Soviet-style system, but the two political-ideological streams began to polarize the society between 1989 and 2010, until the absolute victory of the latter.
- 1: A similar, but less robust, illiberal turn can be observed in other countries of the region, and the liberalism–nationalism polarization is also less manifest.

Social culture effect: MILD (0-1). People's general social predispositions (a tradition of anti-Western feeling, enthusiasm for great leaders, a low level of political participation and of solidarity, a tendency toward paranoia) made them ready to support antidemocratic political forces.
- 0: Culture did not change much from 1989 to 2010 (if so, to more openness).
- 1: Hungary has a few unfavorable cultural traits, but, in general, in a regional comparison, when it comes to proximity to other states based on survival and self-expression values, Hungary is culturally where it geographically belongs.

Table 2. The Grading of Factors and the Strength of Their Effects

Temporal comparison (0 to 2) + regional comparison (0 to 2) = overall grade (0 to 4)
0 + 0 = 0 = negligible
0 + 1 or 1 + 0 = 1 = mild
1 + 1 or 0 + 2 or 2 + 0 = 2 = moderate
1 + 2 or 2 + 1 = 3 = significant
2 + 2 = 4 = strong

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