Journal of European Public Policy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rjpp20

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To cite this article: Dorothee Bohle, Béla Greskovits & Marek Naczyk (2024) The Gramscian politics of Europe's rule of law crisis, Journal of European Public Policy, 31:7, 1775-1798, DOI: 10.1080/13501763.2023.2182342

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2182342

JOURNAL OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICY
2024, VOL. 31, NO. 7, 1775–1798
https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2182342

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Gramscian politics of Europe's rule of law crisis

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the long-term trajectory and the recent acceleration of the conflict over the rule of law in the EU. It focusses on the motivation of the two governments in Hungary and Poland to challenge European core values increasingly aggressively even directly at EU level despite the threat of significant material costs to both countries. Putting forward a Gramscian understanding, we argue that this radicalization is the result of a counter-hegemonic strategy that aims at replacing the liberal order with a new, nationalist, ultraconservative, Christian order on domestic and European levels. The paper traces core elements of this strategy which are either disputed or underestimated in existing literature, most importantly the pursuit of a core ideology and the massive and long-term investment into winning moral and cultural leadership through the penetration of civil society which precedes and complements electoral strategies and autocratic institution building.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 16 February 2022; Accepted 14 February 2023

KEYWORDS European Union; Gramsci; Hungary; Poland; rule of law

Introduction

The brave new world of polycrisis has exposed the EU's vulnerability to an increasing number of fault lines (Zeitlin *et al.*, 2019). The series of crises faced by the EU since the 2010s – from the euro and the so-called 'migration' crises to Brexit – has led to simmering distributive conflicts, the rise of illiberalism and increasing politicization of integration. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine have put this fragile fabric to another

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2182342.

major test, laying bare the EU's lack of capacities in public health, vulnerabilities to global supply chains, deep energy dependency and national political entanglements with Russia. Against this background, it is remarkable that the EU has by and large passed the test of the multiple crises, with its institutions and policies having evolved significantly. At the same time, multiple conflicts among member states and between member states and EU institutions have prevailed, resulting in a 'patchwork approach to integration', preventing comprehensive European solutions to the polycrisis, and leading to further political fragmentation (Zeitlin *et al*., 2019, 964).

This paper looks at a particular instance of the polycrisis, which has pitted EU institutions against two of its member states – the conflict over the rule of law. This crisis epitomizes the EU's quandary in a prominent way: Under the pressure of the European Commission and the European Parliament, the EU's rule of law governance and policies have significantly evolved in recent years. At the same time, massive contestation has stalled further integration and conflicts have intensified (Coman, 2022; Emmons & Pavone, 2021).

Our paper explores the long-term trajectory and the recent acceleration of the conflict over the rule of law in the EU. It focusses on the motivation of Hungary's and Poland's conservative-nationalist governments to challenge European core values increasingly aggressively even directly at EU level – a process that we call radicalization – despite the threat of significant material costs. What explains their increasingly uncompromising stance and why are they willing to face material losses over this radicalization?

Recent studies that tackle this question fall broadly into three camps. A first strand of literature accords the uncompromising stance to government leaders' self-interest in safeguarding their project of autocratic state-building. As the EU's efforts to step up its defense of the rule of law compromise these endeavors, government leaders push back (Sadurski, 2019a; Scheppele, 2019). A second body of scholarship points to the electoral purpose of opposing the EU: It stresses the ethno-populist nature of the ruling parties in Hungary and Poland and sees attacks on liberalism and the rule of law, claims to defend the nation, the 'real people' and popular sovereignty, and a harsh 'us versus them' rhetoric as instruments of a strategy to win elections and to justify the authoritarian concentration of power (Enyedi, 2016; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Müller, 2017; Vachudova, 2020). A third strand takes government leaders' ideas more seriously and emphasizes 'a clash between liberal and anti-liberal ideas' and 'a shift from the overemphasised rule of law consensus … to increased dissensus and contestation' (Coman, 2022, p. 2). These authors point to the contested meaning of terms like rule of law, liberalism and democracy and to their role in shaping parties' policies, political practices and popular appeal (Blokker, 2019; Bluhm & Varga, 2019; Buzogány & Varga, 2021; Coman, 2022; Coman & Volintiru, 2021).

Building on the latter scholarship, we argue that the radicalization of Polish and Hungarian leaders' position on the rule of law and liberal values is fueled by these leaders' long-term ideological commitment – and effectively their multi-pronged 'Gramscian' counter-hegemonic strategies – to reshape their domestic and the EU polities in line with an alternative, nationalist sovereigntist and right-wing Christian vision. However, we do not take this ideational argument as a rival explanation to authoritarian state building or the strategic use of ethno-populist rhetoric, but rather seek to bridge institutional, strategic and ideational explanations. Yet, contra the 'autocratic state building' explanation, we argue that these are autocratic state-building projects *with* – not without – a social purpose that legitimates them. And, unlike the 'strategic use of (ethno)populist rhetoric' literature, we see the ideas expressed in the leaders' rhetoric as stable – not as flexible and malleable as this literature suggests.

The paper is structured as follows: The next section outlines the radicalization outcome we seek to explain. Section three presents our Gramsci-inspired argument and sets it up against existing explanations. Subsequent sections substantiate the Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies in Hungary (section four) and Poland (section five). The final section concludes.

Outcome of interest: the radicalization of the Polish and Hungarian attacks on the rule of law and democracy

The EU's rule of law crisis has been persistent ever since Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-led government took power in Hungary in 2010 and used its two-thirds parliamentary majority to systematically eliminate democratic checks and balances. Similar developments have been taking place in Poland since the PiS-led United Right coalition took power in 2015. The EU has struggled to find responses to these developments: It has been divided internally both within and among institutions, and, despite having developed hard- and soft-policy instruments to counter rule-of-law infringements and democratic backsliding, it has often lacked the capacity and political will to use these instruments in an effective fashion (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017; Coman, 2022; Kelemen, 2020; Pech & Scheppele, 2017; Scheppele, 2013; 2018). Nonetheless, recent years have seen the development of a significantly more stringent approach. Arguably, the most remarkable development is the effective threat of financial sanctions in case of rule-of-law breaches, which was introduced by Regulation 2020/2092 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the EU budget. Regulation 2020/2092 was linked to the adoption of the EU's new 2021–2027 budget and the post-COVID recovery plan. It responded to EU institutions' and some member states' concern that the EU's financial interests were being jeopardized and to their expectation that material incentives might finally push Hungary and Poland to make concessions.

This expectation is certainly not unfounded. Both Hungary and Poland are significant net recipients of EU moneys. In 2018, net EU transfers amounted to 5 percent of Hungarian, and 3.4 percent of Polish GDP; and both countries would benefit significantly from the Union's new 2021–2027 budget and the recovery fund (*Financial Times*, 2020; Fleming *et al*., 2022; Fleming & Dunai, 2022). EU resources are a crucial underpinning of the ruling parties' political success in both countries. Further, like most of their East European peers, these countries have been highly vulnerable to the socio-economic and health consequences of COVID-19 and have faced major economic challenges after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. EU funding would allow counteracting some of the fall-out. Rather than giving in to the EU's increasing pressure, however, both Hungary and Poland radicalized their attacks on the EU, the rule of law and core democratic values, thereby indeed risking a loss of substantial economic resources.

In a landmark ruling of 7 October 2021, Poland's politicized Constitutional Tribunal challenged the primacy of EU law over domestic law. The Polish government has also refused yielding to the Commission's demand to dissolve its controversial Supreme Court's disciplinary chamber. In October 2021, the ECJ ordered the country to pay a daily penalty of €1 Million, until the disciplinary chamber is dismantled and dismissed judges are reinstated. By May 2022, the fines had accrued to more than €160 Million, and were being deducted from European budget allocations to Poland (Coffey, 2022). The refusal to yield to the Commission's demands also led to a freezing of the allocations from the COVID recovery fund. Yet the Polish Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro (architect of the judicial reforms and leader of United Poland, a smaller radical right coalition party) doubled down on reforms of the judiciary (Wanat, 2021). Other policy measures that, while not directly in the competence of the EU, have violated its Charter of Fundamental Rights also attest to Polish authorities' radicalization. Most prominently, in October 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal issued a de facto total ban on abortion; a step which according to the European Court of Human Rights is a violation of the right to family and private life (Peseckyte, 2021). The government also strengthened its grip on the media partly through the use of state shareholding and targeted special taxes.

To be sure, the Polish government does not simply stand idle in face of the potential material losses. Against the fall-out of the Russian war, in June 2022, the Polish Parliament passed a bill to eliminate the controversial disciplinary chamber. However, this was widely judged as a cosmetic step since the controversial chamber was replaced with a new 'chamber of professional responsibility' (Wądołowska, 2022). At the time of writing, the EU had not yet agreed to unfreezing the payments to Poland (Fleming *et al*., 2022).

In Hungary, the radicalization of the government's position on the EU and rule of law issues started already in 2015. That year brought about much more

assertive and noisy policies of defending Hungarian borders, sovereignty, and culture from the assaults of 'Brussels' and an increasingly outspoken alternative, 'Christian nationalist' vision of Europe. Fidesz directly attacked the EU in national consultations and large-scale billboard campaigns, and ran personal campaigns against the then President of the European Commission. During the COVID-19 crisis the Hungarian government further radicalized its anti-democratic and anti-EU stance. In March 2020 the Hungarian Parliament passed the Act on Protecting against the Coronavirus that installed a state of emergency which allowed the government to rule by decree and restrict fundamental freedoms during the pandemic. The country has been ruled by states of emergency ever since (Sethi & Pásztor, 2022).

In 2020–2021 ties between the Orbán government and its former political ally, the European Peoples Party (EPP), in the European Parliament were also cut. Relations became increasingly strained after a majority of the EPP voted in favor of triggering Article 7 against Hungary in 2018 and after the EPP supported a resolution in January 2020 that expressed concern over the deteriorating rule of law situation in Poland and Hungary (Macek, 2021). An open conflict emerged in December 2020 when a Fidesz EPP member personally attacked EPP chairman Manfred Weber for requesting Hungary to accept the conditionality mechanism (Macek, 2021). In March 2021, EPP changed its internal rules by defining its group's core values as well as a procedure to exclude a member from the group. Upon the rules' adoption, Fidesz left the EPP (Macek, 2021) and sought to build alliances with other European radical right-wing parties (de la Baume, 2021). Finally, similar to Poland, radicalization also manifests itself in areas that fall outside the EU's competence, such as Hungary's 9th constitutional amendment from 2021, which discriminates against sexual minorities.

As in Poland, the Hungarian government has only made some cosmetic institutional changes with the aim to unfreeze EU funds. It has also threatened to veto crucial Council decisions. Hungary's overall uncompromising stance has led to significant material losses. In April 2022, the Commission announced that it would trigger the conditionality mechanism. Since then, member states agreed to freeze a significant share of funding to Hungary, and while its recovery plan was approved, the unblocking of the funding was conditional on the country complying with rule-of-law conditionality. Remarkably, in December 2022, the Commission also held back all of Hungary's cohesion funds over Hungary's failure to comply with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. With this, the EU has prevented Hungary's access to moneys from the recovery fund *and* most of its regional aid (Abnett & Strupczewski, 2022; Fleming & Dunai, 2022).

To sum up, we define radicalization as the increasingly confrontative stance of the Hungarian and Polish governments in attacking the rule of law, core democratic values and the EU. We further define the threshold of

passing to radicalization when the governments turned to attack the EU head-on rather than indirectly by defying the EU's core values domestically. Thus, radicalization started earlier in Hungary than in Poland, but both countries stepped up their stances in light of the EU's determination to sanction rule-of-law breaches.

Why have the Polish and Hungarian governments become more assertive in their stance on the rule of law, core democratic values and against the EU over time? And why has radicalization not lessened, but rather gathered momentum since 2021, when they have been faced with the threat of substantive material losses due to the new EU conditionality mechanism? The next two sections develop our argument and set it up against existing explanations.

Explaining radicalization: the fruits of a Gramscian counter-hegemonic project

We argue that this radicalizing agenda results from a counter-hegemonic project of nationalist-conservative political leadership that had a decades-long gestation period, stretching from a period when the now ruling parties of the two countries were still in opposition to the times of polycrisis. Underlying this project is a strategic aim to replace the liberal order with a new, nationalist, ultraconservative, Christian order on domestic and European levels. Radicalization is made possible by the deepening entrenchment of this project in domestic political institutions and civil society, and a perceived weakening of liberalism at the European level. Our argument thus stresses the long-term gestation of the contemporary impasse at the EU level. We submit that, only when looking at how this long-term ideological project has taken roots domestically over time, can we understand the power resources on which the Hungarian and Polish political leaders can draw today when increasing their assertiveness.

In order to make this argument we apply a Gramsci-inspired framework. Gramsci is well known for his concept of hegemony, and the strategic consequences for counter-hegemonic struggles. The Italian Marxist philosopher and party leader of the interwar period was preoccupied with the question of why the socialist revolution failed in Western capitalist societies, while it succeeded in Russia. What would it take for socialism to become hegemonic in the West? Gramsci argued that, in contrast to Russia, it was not enough to occupy existing state institutions and change economic ownership structures. This is because in Western societies bourgeois hegemony had developed through a dense cultural and civil society, this way generating broad societal consensus for its rule. Accordingly, Gramsci understood hegemony as political leadership which, while ultimately exercised through coercive state institutions, also provides moral, cultural and ideological guidance, this way appealing to broader parts of the population. He argued that, for

any counter hegemonic strategy to be successful, it needed to penetrate the cultural, moral and ideological spheres, and appeal to people's common sense. Only this way could the take-over of state institutions and the change of material-economic foundations be successful.[1]

In terms of a concrete counter-hegemonic struggle, Gramsci distinguished between two different strategies: a war of position, which is the penetration of civil society and a slow displacement of previously held views in society, and a war of maneuver – a frontal and speedy attack on existing state institutions (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 481–495). The war of position stresses the long-term hegemonic struggle that precedes the attacks on existing institutions, and without which a struggle for hegemony cannot succeed. For the war of position, 'organic' intellectuals cadres close to the political leadership are crucial, as they are the ones who organize, educate and lead others.

At first glance, applying a Gramscian framework to understanding the politics and strategies of today's nationalist – openly anti-Marxist – ultraconservatives might seem misplaced. However, this choice is adequate for two reasons. First, since the 1980s, far-right circles in Western Europe and the U.S.A. have appropriated Gramsci to develop their 'playbook' for taking over power by penetrating civil society and the cultural-moral-ideological sphere (Leggewie, 1987; Pfahl-Traughber, 1998; Wilson & Kamola, 2021). Gramsci himself developed his political strategy from the analysis of diverse historical events, including Mussolini's rise to power. This strategy is therefore not necessarily tied to a socialist political agenda and can be used instrumentally in different political contexts, which is exactly what far-right movements in the West have done. Interestingly, the same holds true for our two cases. There is ample evidence that the political leaders and intellectuals close to them were very familiar with Gramsci and built on his strategic playbook (Behr, 2021; Békés, 2018, 2022; Krasnodębski, 2022; Orbán, 1987).

Second, we claim that, ultimately, a Gramscian framework provides a more encompassing understanding of the political strategies and ambitions than other explanations. It is to this point that we now turn.

Existing explanations

To sum up, we argue that the *radicalization* of the Hungarian and Polish stance on the rule of law, the EU and liberal norms is the result of a long-term counter-hegemonic project. The project is guided by a strategic aim to replace the existing liberal order by a new, nationalist, ultraconservative, Christian order. The project relies on a core ideology, and has become socially entrenched due to a long-term war of position in the cultural-ideological sphere that partly preceded and laid the foundations for electoral victory, which allowed conquering existing political institutions. How does this argument differ from existing literature?

Although existing approaches do not necessarily address the radicalizing agenda, they seek to explain the strategies of the political leaders in both countries on the domestic and European levels, and their findings can therefore be extrapolated to radicalization too. A first prominent explanation is that of autocratic state-building. This argument focusses on the strategies of the Polish and Hungarian governments to systematically dismantle all checks and balances – electoral rules, the judiciary, non-majoritarian state institutions, independent media and liberal NGOs – that stand in the way of their grip on power (Bánkuti *et al*., 2012; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Kelemen & Pech, 2019; Sadurski, 2019a, 2019b; Scheppele, 2013, 2016, 2018, 2019). For this literature, the prime purpose of autocratic state building is to secure the power of the self-serving ruling elites. The radicalization of the Hungarian and Polish governments' attacks on the liberal order can be explained by the increasing entrenchment of authoritarianism, which needs to be defended against any external interference.

We agree that autocratic state-building is a chief tool of Hungarian and Polish political leaderships' strategies, and that institutional entrenchment of power plays an important role in the radicalization of both parties' attacks. Yet we wonder whether there can be lasting power without social purpose. In line with our Gramscian understanding of hegemony, we contend that autocratic state-building is underpinned by the quest for ideological, moral and cultural leadership.

Most of the autocratic state-building literature emphasizes 'raw' power and neglects the ideological, moral and cultural question of power. In this respect, Scheppele (2019) provides an interesting exception, as she seeks to understand whether a populist ideology informs the autocratic state-building process in Hungary. Ultimately, she finds that even the chief ideologist of the regime sees ideology and normative appeals merely instrumentally: Orbán uses ideological challenges to liberalism, Euroscepticism and populism 'opportunistically. In Orbán's world, power is all that matters' (Scheppele, 2019, p. 329). Scheppele's argument is compelling exactly because she engages seriously with the ideas developed by 'organic intellectuals' around Fidesz, and by Orbán himself, to discard them on the grounds of these actors only talking the talk, but not walking the walk. However, recent literature contests exactly this claim, showing that even in the Hungarian case, there has been a considerable degree of consistency and more importantly *consequentiality* of the ideological discourse (Enyedi, 2023).

The instrumental and opportunistic use of illiberal ideas with the purpose of winning elections and entrenching authoritarian power further is also a key argument proposed by the literature on populist strategies (Enyedi, 2016; Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Vachudova, 2020). Thus, Vachudova (2020, p. 328) argues that 'ethnopopulist incumbents use a playbook of democratic backsliding that is interwoven with and justified by the companion playbook of ethnopopulist appeals'.

Building on Jenne (2018), she uses ethnopopulism 'to describe political parties that intertwine the defense of "the people" with the defense of an ethnicity, culture, nation, religion, and/or race' (Vachudova, 2020, 318). In her understanding, the hallmark of ethnopopulism is a flexible, instrumentalist and opportunistic appeal to voters, which plays variably the nationalist, xenophobe, homophobe, misogynist, racist, illiberal, Christian or/and Eurosceptic card, depending on context and opportunity (Jenne, 2018, Vachudova, 2020, 320). While not explicitly addressing the question of radicalization of the ethnopopulist appeal over time, it implicitly shines through that moments of crises are conducive to radicalization.

While we certainly agree that the ruling parties construct foes instrumentally to win elections, and that this electoral strategy is interwoven with democratic backsliding, we contend that the unique focus on instrumental rhetoric overlooks an underlying canon of relatively coherent ideas. Relatedly, this focus cannot explain the efforts and material resources that go into long-term ideology production. Finally, the focus on electoral strategies overlooks the long-term strategy of civil society building as a core element of providing ideological, moral and cultural leadership.

A third body of literature focusses exactly on ideology production in Eastern Europe's anti-liberal regimes (Blokker, 2019; Buzogány & Varga, 2021; Behr, 2021; Bluhm & Varga, 2019, 2020; Coman & Volintiru, 2021; Enyedi, 2020, 2023; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018). Most of these authors broadly define the ruling ideas as anti-liberal, which share some common core, such as majoritarian understanding of power, economic nationalism, contestation of international integration and social conservativism. While this canon of ideas does not differ from those identified by the populism literature, what sets ideational literature apart is that it analyzes the process of idea production. Focusing on leading intellectuals and think tanks, the literature thus shows that the effort to challenge liberalism by anti-liberal ideas has a long history in the region, and builds on homegrown, rather than imported ideas.

The table below summarizes the core arguments and observable implications of the three approaches and our Gramscian framework (Table 1).

Our paper builds on this ideational approach, but we complement it with a focus on the ideological core related to the EU and by drawing attention to party leaders' relatively early attempts at conquering civil society and the cultural sphere, this way gaining moral and ideological leadership. We focus on the *longue durée* of these efforts, demonstrating that a *first phase* of core ideology production and penetration of civil society (the war of position) preceded the electoral victories of the Fidesz and PiS coalitions in 2010 and 2015 respectively. We however also concur with existing literature that electoral victories gave political elites more resources to change institutions, build broader coalitions, and also instrumentally use political rhetoric to broaden their support base in a *second phase* where a war of maneuver combined with – and, in fact, reinforced – the pre-existing war of position. This long

Table 1. Explaining the radicalizing positions of Hungarian and Polish ruling elites.

Approach	Core argument	Observable implications	Criticism
Autocratic state building	• Dismantling of checks and balances to secure the power of self-serving elites • Radicalization serves the purpose to defend increasingly authoritarian institutions	• Power is all that matters • Appeal to anti-liberal values is used opportunistically • There is no core ideology that guides elite behavior	• Can lasting power be exerted without a broader social purpose? • Pays little attention to long term investment in ideology production
Ethno-populist strategies	• Dismantling of democratic checks and balances is justified with ethnopopulist appeals • Moments of crisis give rise to radicalization	• Ethnopopulist appeals are flexibly and opportunistically used to win elections • There is no core ideology that guides elite behavior	Focus on short term electoral strategies underestimates • the ideological coherence • long-term investment in ideology production • material and ideational investment in civil society building
Ideas and Ideology production	• Leading intellectuals and think tanks have been preparing the anti-liberal political project for a long time	• Existence of a relatively coherent ideological core • Ideology production beyond the political leaders	• should be complemented with analyses of civil society building and institutional take-over
Gramscian approach	• Radicalization is the expression of an entrenched hegemonic project • Entrenchment results from the resources accumulated during a long-term process deploying two complementary strategies, (war of position and war of movement).	Hegemonic Project: • Existence of a relatively coherent ideological core • Strategies • long term investment in ideology production and civil society penetration (war of position) • Take over of institutions (war of movement)	

and phased process accounts for accumulated power resources which in turn underpin the increasing assertiveness of the counter-hegemonic projects in a *third*, radicalizing, *phase* where leaders' perception of a weakening of the West – showcased by e.g., the refugee crisis or Brexit – offered an opportunity to take the EU head-on. While Hungary used this opportunity from 2015 on, Poland passed the threshold of radicalization in the 2020s. Figure 1 illustrates these three phases in the struggle over hegemony.

The following sections illustrate the ideational core related to the EU and the multipronged – and, effectively, multi-phased – strategies pursued by the

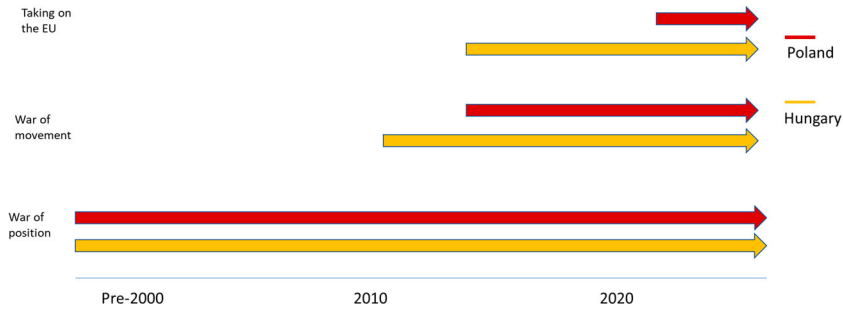

Figure 1. Three strategic phases in the struggle over hegemony: war of position, combined war of position and war of movement, taking on the EU.

political elites in Hungary and Poland. Space prevents us from providing a full-fledged analysis of each of these phases. To illustrate ideological continuity and radicalization, we rely on programmatic documents issued by the parties or core speeches made by their leaders over time, and build on our own previous research as well as secondary sources on civil society building (Greskovits, 2020). Given that the institutional take-over and ensuing democratic backsliding have been widely discussed in the literature, we focus our analysis on the continuous – cross-phase – efforts at providing cultural and moral leadership even when governments took over the institutions. For more information on our empirical strategy see the online appendix.

Counter-hegemonic ideology and strategy under Viktor Orbán

Ideological continuity

In a programmatic speech addressing the participants of the 2018 summer university in Baile Tusnad (Tusnádfürdő), Viktor Orbán drew a stark contrast between the 'old' Christian Europe in which 'there was honour in work … the family was the basis of the nation, the nation was the basis of Europe', and 'today's open-society Europe' where 'European people can be readily replaced with immigrants; the family has been transformed into an optional, fluid form of cohabitation; the nation, national identity and national pride are seen as negative and obsolete notions.' His conclusion was: 'Thirty years ago we thought that Europe was our future. Today we believe that we are Europe's future' (Orbán, 2018).

Far from being mere catchwords for short-term electoral mobilization, in the last 20 years references to God, nation, and work have been a common *fil rouge* woven through Orbán's narrative of purpose of power *and* vision for Europe, whether in opposition or in government. Already in 2004, at an important event where John Paul II decorated him with the Grand Cross of

the Order of St Gregory, Orbán – then in opposition – said that 'Europe is not ready, it needs to be shaped', and expressed his hope that, with the accession of Central European countries to the EU, the power and influence of the peoples of Europe professing Christian values would increase (Civic Circles Event Database). On the occasion of Helmut Kohl's visit to Hungary in the same year, Orbán emphasized that 'Hungarians would bring the love of work to Europe: the attitude of Hungarians to work – because we come from poverty – is different from that of Westerners.' He added that 'The freedom of the whole of Europe is given by the freedom of the nations that make up Europe' (Civic Circles Event Database).

Building civil society[2]

This is not to credit Orbán with having discovered the key to moral leadership. From the early 2000s, Fidesz waged a war of position that used Christian culture, national sovereignty and a work-based society as glues for a lasting 'community of identity' that nurtured sentiments of wider resonance among the citizenry thereby transcending the instrumental logic of a pure electoral coalition and solidifying Fidesz's hegemony even in inter-election periods.

In 2002–2010, forging the identity community mainly happened through the penetration and conquest of civil society, which helped Fidesz to accumulate ample social capital well before its political triumph. This process was decisively advanced by the Civic Circles Movement founded by Orbán when after a term in government his party marginally lost the spring 2002 elections to the Socialists and Liberals. The movement was militant in terms of its hegemonic aspirations and contentious collective practices; massive in terms of its membership and activism; dominantly metropolitan and urban; and based on educated middle-classes.

The movement's hegemonic agenda is best illustrated by the title of one of the many manuals for organization and activism circulated among the circles: *The Recapture of Everyday Life and the Holidays* (László, 2002). Along these lines, patriots, priests, educational and healthcare professionals, politicians, pundits, and petty bourgeoise entrepreneurs offered new frames for Hungarians to feel, think, and act as members of 'imagined communities': the nation, Christianity, and Europe. The numerous nationalist organizations' cultural and political agenda and the Christian churches' spiritual influence were increasingly permeating the holidays, education, entertainment, leisure, and contentious or non-contentious events on the local and national plane alike. In 2002–2006 there were more than 1800 events matching national sentiments, such as local patriotism, attachment to a civic 'European Hungary' or the ethnic/cultural community of 'fifteen million Hungarians'. Similarly, in the same period, 1300 events took place in churches or church-related institutions; or had church-related activists; or partly religious themes (Greskovits, 2020).

Rather than setting the agenda of thousands of civil society organizations, Orbán's role was balancing among the occasionally conflicting civic and electoral interests, while attempting to widen the conservative coalition. However, the movement was not open to everyone, and political maneuvering did not violate the ideological constraints. Accordingly, while the movement tried to embrace all fractions of the right and even some environmental, pro-poor, or anti-war organizations, it did not welcome LGBT activists, feminists, or liberal human rights and civil rights NGOs.

Taking over the institutions and strengthening an illiberal civil society from above

Since 2010, the repeated landslide electoral victories gave the ascending Orbán regime access to an ever-increasing amount of symbolic and material resources to deepen its social embeddedness. This second phase of the pursuit of hegemonic power shifted from a civic activist to a dominantly statist pattern, which combined strategies of the war of maneuver and the war of position. Building an 'illiberal state' consisted first and foremost in the elimination of democratic checks and balances, which is widely analyzed in the relevant literature, and corresponds to the war of maneuver. However, no less important was the extension of state control over the regime's social base coupled with the repression of liberal NGOs. As to the former, after 2012 the state-sponsored Civic Association Forum organized almost a dozen pro-government 'Peace Marches'. Rather than being mercenaries bribed by the regime, research found peace marchers to be heirs of the civic circles' spirit in that they only trusted 'their' (i.e., Orbán's) democracy, were frequent participants in patriotic and religious organizations, and overwhelmingly followed right-wing media (Susánszky *et al*., 2016).

On its own terms, the Orbán regime took many other promises of the 'prefigurative politics' of the civic circles' era seriously, and implemented them in signature policies, such as selected economic nationalism, carefare, workfare, and massive churchification of education, social services and care (Enyedi, 2023; Fodor, 2022; Orenstein & Bugarič, 2022; Szikra, 2014).

The 2010s also brought about a move toward more instrumental and opportunistic methods of permanent mobilization – such as the half-dozen referenda and almost a dozen 'national consultations'. While the government propagated these initiatives as direct democratic ways of staying in close touch with the citizenry, these exercises mostly served to nurture, and, indeed, radicalize, the identity community at the regime's base (Pócza & Oross, 2022). Widely mediatized top-down culture wars on gender, migrants, political correctness, and globalization complemented the civic circles' grassroots mobilization in defense of religious morals, traditional family, and honorable work.

Radicalization since 2015

Especially from 2015, we can detect escalation in the tone of these culture wars, as well as significant material investment. The purpose of hegemonic power was no longer merely defined as the protection of true Hungarian values from unwanted influences on the road back to Europe, but rather in terms of advocating Europe's return to its original moral self if it were to survive the impending crises. The radicalization and scale-shift are also attested by the highly suggestive 'questions' asked during the referenda and national consultations, turning these encounters more and more into forums of incitement against 'Brussels'.

Radicalization occurred against the background of the West's perceived weakness. Taking stock of 2015, Orbán labeled the year a historical juncture for opening a new era of mass migration, a grave threat to European culture and security. However, in his view, the EU proved impotent in coping with the threat, because its senior positions were occupied by 'globalist-liberal forces' seeking to build a European United States and 'Christian, nationalist Europeans' had 'no say' (*Daily News*, 2016). Importantly, around the same time, the European and global political climate was marked by other critical challenges as well. The Brexit referendum, Donald Trump's election as US President in 2016 and the rivalry with China all converged to produce a situation revealing the EU's vulnerability on multiple dimensions of the economy, political cohesion, solidarity, and international affairs. It is against this background that Orbán declared 2017 was going to be the 'year of revolt' of nations and middle classes against political correctness, isolation, and stigmatization (*Daily News*, 2016). He appeared to have a sense that the gun was loaded and only the trigger had to be pulled.

Importantly, the third, more radical, phase of Orbán's struggle for hegemonic power was also underpinned by further massive investment in developing cultural leadership. Most recently, well-endowed foundations have sprung up to finance institutions that 'breed right-wing intellectuals' (Balogh, 2020). The most notable breeding place is the Matthias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), founded in 1996 by a businessman close to Fidesz, which became a boarding school for talented students from Hungary and neighboring countries. MCC made a big leap forward when in 2020 the foundation behind it received about €1.7 billion in shares, public money and real estate – an endowment more sizeable than that of all Hungarian universities taken together. MCC has planned to erect branches in 35 European cities and has created a think tank in Brussels (Enyedi, 2023; Lau, 2022).

Counter-hegemonic ideology and strategy under Jarosław Kaczyński[3]

Ideological continuity

While Poland's challenge to the primacy of EU law over Polish law in October 2021 epitomized the radicalization of PiS's agenda for reform, there was

nothing novel in Jarosław Kaczyński's emphasis on the need to defend national sovereignty as well as the Christian character of the Polish nation *and* of the European Union. These themes had been consistently developed by the party's only ever leader and its activists not just in recent years, but, in fact, ever since PiS's creation by Kaczyński himself in 2001. During Law and Justice's main programmatic convention of its victorious 2019 legislative election campaign, Jarosław Kaczyński gave a long speech about his party's 'value system', which, he argued, 'is not a secret. We have already presented it in different ways. That system of values does not really change, but circumstances change, so there is a need to remind us about it' (PolskieRadio24.pl, 2019). In the speech, Kaczyński listed 'the inherent dignity of man and his life', 'heroic values [of national defense and security]', 'freedom', 'solidarity', 'equality of rights and opportunities', 'justice', 'family' and the 'nation' as some of his party's core values. While talking about the 'nation', Kaczyński emphasized that 'a great role in shaping the Polish Nation, and later in its defence, was played by the Catholic Church'. Kaczyński also rejected the idea that 'Polishness' would be in any way opposed to 'Europeanness' since 'We are full-fledged Europeans, also in a cultural sense, in every sense!'

Very similar themes were already at the center of the party's discourse around the time of its creation. Although, in early 2003, PiS invited Poles to vote 'yes' to their joining the European Union, it also called for the

> pursuit of a new European policy, which will definitely break with the errors of euro-enthusiasm and a policy devoid of the spirit of sovereignty. (…) we demand respect for the foundations of the Christian civilization of the West and for the spiritual and moral dimension of Europe's unity. (…) (PiS, 2003)

Apart from those values, one should also emphasize the fact that, from the beginning, the reform of Poland's judiciary system and a replacement of the elites ruling Poland was at the heart of the political project developed by PiS. The choice of 'Law and Justice' as the party's name was a sign of the importance of this issue for the Kaczyński brothers (Jarosław and his twin brother, Lech) both of whom were doctors of law and had made the denunciation of supposed corrupt deals between 'post-communist' politicians and business elites as well as weaknesses in the criminal justice system a centerpiece of their political agenda in the 1990s (Kaczyński, 2016). The first slogans the party proposed in a 'political manifesto' published at the time of its creation in early 2001 were the need to 'clean up politics', to 'repair the state' and to reinstate 'security for citizens – prisons for criminals' (PiS, 2001).

Building civil society

From the beginning of his political career, Jarosław Kaczyński has engaged in a war of position in order to reinforce the societal bases of the political parties he has headed (PC – *Porozumienie Centrum* – Centre Alliance – between 1990

and 2001; PiS since 2001) typically by relying on befriended conservative media groups to forge close links with civil society organizations allied with those media. In his own words,

> it all started with *Tygodnik Solidarność* [Solidarity movement's weekly magazine of which Kaczyński was editor-in-chief in 1989–1990]. It was a centre around which people gathered to build the party. Without it, it [party-building] would have failed, although it was never an organ of the PC. (Kaczyński, 2016, p. 391)

Kaczyński would most directly capitalize on these links with the Solidarity movement – which was now controlled by Catholic-nationalist leaders (Ost, 2005) – from PiS's victorious 2005 electoral campaign when he involved *Solidarność* union activists in the preparation of his party manifesto and presented his party as the representative of 'Polska *solidarna*' as opposed to 'Polska *liberalna*'.

The PC's/PiS's penetration and conquest of civil society has nonetheless gone well beyond a dwindling labor movement and its magazine (Ekiert, 2021). Apart from the relationship PiS has developed from the mid-2000s with ultra-conservative *Radio Maryja* media group (which also includes catholic television *Trwam* – literally: 'I continue/last [in the catholic faith]' and newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* – literally: 'Our newspaper' and the 'Radio Maryja Families' civil society groups), another prominent example is the very close relationship Kaczyński's parties have forged with the editors of the *Gazeta Polska* newspaper and with its 'clubs' – a group of civil society organizations now closely allied with PiS – that were created from 1993 (Ślarzyński, 2022). The organization of memorial events to celebrate 'patriotic' resistance to communism was the clubs' initial hallmark before they focused their attention on the very intensive – and highly politicized – commemoration of the 2010 Smolensk air disaster where President Lech Kaczyński and 95 other – often high-profile – people died while traveling to commemorate the victims of the Katyń massacre. These efforts had a lasting impact on many Poles' attitudes and on PiS's capacity to cement a core electoral constituency.

Taking over the institutions and strengthening an illiberal civil society from above

Further steps in building ideological counter-hegemony – and in preparing for a war of maneuver – were largely thought up as part of the *Polska Wielki Projekt* ('Poland as a Great Project') conferences that have been organized from 2011 and were described by Jaroslaw Kaczyński as a 'conference of the Polish intelligentsia – that with an ethos' (Blogpress, 2011). In those conferences, the party's organic intellectuals – e.g., Piotr Gliński, Zdzisław

Krasnodębski, Ryszard Legutko (Buzogány & Varga, 2021) – participated in panels on topics such as 'Public, private and social media' and 'Polish national interest' (2011), 'Crisis of the fourth estate? Media and the quality of Polish public life' and 'Who Really Rules Poland?' (2012), 'How are culture wars waged and won?' (2013).[4]

Once it was back in power, PiS not only waged a war of maneuver by directly taking control of state institutions such as the public prosecution service and the public media (television and radio), but it also used state institutions to give further financial support for party-allied private media and civil society organizations so that, like in Hungary, these could mediatize top-down culture wars on gender, political correctness, globalization, etc. In particular, Poland's state-owned – now effectively party-controlled – enterprises have become central providers of highly significant advertising revenues to PiS-allied *Gazeta Polska* or also media (e.g., weekly *Sieci*) controlled by the Karnowski twin brothers and partly owned by a foundation funded by a network of credit unions, which is itself controlled by long-time PiS senator, Grzegorz Bierecki (e.g., Mikołajewska, 2021).

A powerful tool for reshaping civil society has been the newly established state agency 'National Freedom Institute – Centre for Civil Society Development' (*Narodowy Instytut Wolności – Centrum Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Obywatelskiego*), which has been used to cut public funding for liberal/progressive NGOs and to redirect that funding to allied nationalist-conservative civil society groups (Bill, 2022). It is certainly not a coincidence that the Institute was founded by Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński. As an organic intellectual of PiS, Gliński has been taking an active part in the *Polska Wielki Projekt* conferences. Yet, as an academic sociologist specializing in research on civil society, Gliński has also been – as mentioned to us by a former colleague of his at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences and as evidenced by his publications (e.g., Gliński, 2004, p. 433) – 'well aware of Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony' (authors' interview, 1 June 2022).

Perceived western weakness

As we argued in section 2, Poland's political elites took somewhat longer to directly confront the EU. However, the fact that PiS knew that it could count on support from Fidesz at the European level allowed it to act very fast in taking over state institutions after it returned to power in 2015. Just like Fidesz, the party's leader also got emboldened by the refugee crisis and by Brexit in wanting to shake up the European liberal order well before Covid-19. A perfect symbol of the two parties thinking and acting in unison was a two-man – Orbán-Kaczyński – panel held at the 2016 Economic Forum in Krynica (South of Poland). At the time, Viktor Orbán declared:

> Brexit is a fantastic opportunity for us. We are at a historic cultural moment. (…) Because Brexit is not a cause; it is an effect. Brits decided that what was going on in the European Union was not good and that is why they will quit. (…) The crisis strengthens our argument. All these phenomena observed in Europe today show that a cultural counter-revolution is possible. We, in Central Europe, we can initiate this renaissance. (PiS, 2016)

Kaczyński agreed that

> the only alternative is change. Of course, change must lead to a cultural counter-revolution in essence. (…) [Brexit] is part of a wider phenomenon that can be described as a crisis of European consciousness. This crisis of consciousness meant for a long time that the EU was not being questioned. (PiS, 2016)

Overall, then, PiS's hegemonic project was well entrenched domestically when the EU started to get more serious about rule of law breaches, and the domestic entrenchment allowed PiS to take on the EU head-on (see Section 2).

Conclusions

The paper sought to understand the increasing radicalization of the Hungarian and Polish attacks on the EU and its core values – the rule of law and liberal democracy – which have resulted in one of the most salient crises of the EU with no easy way out. While the EU has become more determined in combatting rule-of-law breaches and has imposed financial sanctions, this has only led to further challenges from Hungary and Poland.

Putting forward a Gramscian understanding, we argue that the increasing assertiveness of the Hungarian and Polish leaders in confronting the EU on its core values is the result of a counter-hegemonic strategy that aims at replacing the liberal order with a new, nationalist, ultraconservative, Christian order on domestic and European levels. The paper traces core elements of this strategy which are either disputed or underestimated in existing literature, most importantly the pursuit of a core ideology which defies notions of power without purpose as well as the simple instrumental use of ideological tropes to win elections; and the massive and long-term investment into winning moral and cultural leadership through the penetration of civil society which precedes and complements electoral strategies and autocratic institution-building.

Why put forward a Gramscian approach? We see two areas where the approach adds value to existing debates. In theoretical terms, a Gramscian approach allows to integrate several perspectives on the take on power of Europe's ultraconservative forces. What we offer is not an alternative to existing explanations. Our argument is not that existing theories are wrong, but that they are incomplete. Thus, we agree with approaches that focus on autocratic state building in that conquering democratic institutions is a major element of the Polish and Hungarian strategy. However, a Gramscian

approach shows that autocratic state building in modern societies can only be successful in the long run if the autocracy has a social purpose. We also agree with the literature on (ethno)populism that major elements of this social purpose are built around claims about the defense of the people, ethnicity, culture, nation, and race. However, while the literature on (ethno)populism stresses the short term, instrumental and flexible use of these claims in the electoral arena, we rather see consistency in the ideology, and significant investment in ideology production beyond the electoral arena. In this, we follow the ideational literature. However, whereas this literature focusses mostly on think tanks and 'organic intellectuals' close to the ruling elites, we see the biggest value added of the Gramscian approach in its stress on the quest for moral leadership acquired through penetration of civil society. This long-term and continuous war of position was therefore a major focus of this paper.

Ultimately, we argue that our approach can better account for the accumulation of power resources by both governments over time, which enables them to increasingly openly challenge European core values on domestic and EU levels. In both countries, a civil society imbued with ultraconservative values and institutions combines with successful short-term electoral mobilization of core *and* non-core voters and increasingly autocratic institutions. The accumulation of power resources allows the leaders in both countries to carry their struggle to the European level and build transnational alliances. It also has repercussions on how to fight authoritarianism.

Indeed, in the implications of how to politically counter the authoritarian advance lies a second value added of a Gramscian approach. Once again, we concur with many observers that the EU has for long time done too little too late, and that there is an institutionalist and partisan logic to why this was the case. In that respect, the conditionality mechanism is an important step forward in the politicization of core values that these authors have long argued for (e.g., Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017). This approach might work well in cases where rule of law breaches are not part and parcel of a broader hegemonic project (Sedelmeier, 2017). However, in order to effectively combat authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland, more and a different type of engagement is needed. As a recent pathbreaking book on economic sanctions has shown, sanctions are mostly not effective at changing the behavior of target countries (Mulder, 2022, p. 296). If the EU, its member states, and the domestic opposition are serious about securing a victory for democracy and the rule of law, the most important battle these actors need to fight are not those over economic resources and institutions, but over fundamental values, ideas and moral leadership. This battle needs to be fought first and foremost in and through civil society. Ultimately then, this paper argues for taking the leadership quest of the Polish and Hungarian political elites seriously. If they follow a Gramscian script, so should their opponents.

Notes

1. Gramsci's political thought is scattered and fragmented. Our summary relies on selections from the prison notebook Gramsci (1971), Leggewie (1987) and Kebir (2022).
2. This subsection builds on Greskovits (2020).
3. Even if Kaczyński has not assumed a political position since PiS came to power in 2015 until 2020 when he became deputy Prime Minister, his influence as party leader – since 2001 – on the strategy of PiS is as crucial as Orbáńs influence on Fidesz. For this reason we focus on Kaczyński and intellectuals close to him.
4. For details on the latter see Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej (2013).

Acknowledgements

The paper was long in coming and underwent substantial revisions from its first draft to its final version. We gratefully acknowledge the organizers and participants of the workshops 'Testing Europe's democracy in the Covid-19 crisis' and 'The COVID-19 Pandemic and the European Union', both held at the Robert Schuman Center at the EUI, Florence in 2021 for their comments on previous versions. Special thanks go to Adrienne Héritier, Amy Verdun, Lucia Quaglia, four reviewers and the chief editors of the Journal of European Public Policy for their helpful comments, support along the way and encouragement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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