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The Politics of Worst Practices: Hungary in the 2010s

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Hungary, a member state of the European Union, which used to be a consolidated democracy, suddenly found itself skating on thin ice under the conservative autocratic government of Viktor Orbán in the 2010s¹. The uniqueness of the situation lies in the fact that there is no example for a reverse transition (i. e. transition from liberal democracy to a hybrid regime) within the European Union so far. Needless to say, no EU member state has ever returned from democracy to autocracy. Perhaps the most troublesome development of this reverse trend was the constitutional *coup d'Etat* which created a one-party constitution in April 2011 (Fundamental Law) that went into effect on January 1, 2012. Quoting Kim Lane Scheppele, the “revolutionary” legislation went through the following way:

“[Fidesz party] won two-thirds of the seats in the Parliament in a system where a single two-thirds vote is enough to change the constitution. Twelve times in a year in office, it amended the constitution it inherited. Those amendments removed most of the institutional checks that could have stopped what the government did next – which was to install a new constitution. The new Fidesz constitution was drafted in secret, presented to the Parliament with only one month for debate, passed by the votes of only the Fidesz parliamentary bloc, and signed by a President that Fidesz had named. Neither the opposition parties nor civil society organizations nor the general public had any influence in the constitutional process. There was no popular ratification” (...) By James Madison’s definition, Hungary is on the verge of tyranny. (...) Fidesz political party has gathered all the powers of the Hungarian government into its own hands, without checks from any other political quarter and without any limits on what it can do².”

The new Fundamental Law approved by governmental majority was the result of a unilateral governmental process which did not reflect a national consensus. The new text kept several portions of the 1989 Constitution; however, it “protects” individual freedoms by lumping them together with communal interests, and as such, it does not in fact value individual freedoms. The Fundamental Law openly refers to Hungary as a country based on Christian values, which is not only an exception for Europe, but also unusual among the neighboring Visegrád countries. Though the Fundamental Law (in one sentence only) formally maintains the form of a republic, it breaks with the essential notion of a republic, by changing the name from “Republic of Hungary” to simply “Hungary.” The text increases the role of religion, traditions and national values. It speaks of a unified nation, yet certain social minorities are not mentioned with the

same degree of importance. In its definition of equality before the law, it mentions gender, ethnicity and religion, yet it does not extend this definition to include legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation³. The text clearly demonstrates the revival of a backward-looking political tradition which includes politically homogenized national culture, social conservatism and exclusion, predatory state, government control of the media, state capitalism, nationalist populism, and the economic policy of inequality.

The 1989 democratic constitution was inclusive, and consensual. By contrast, the new Fundamental Law serves as an expression a “national religious belief system”—a paganized Christianity— it is a vow, in which the Hungarians list all of their sources of pride and hope and pledge to join hands and build a better future, parallel to Orbán’s “system of national cooperation.” The signing the Fundamental Law took place on the first anniversary of the electoral victory of Fidesz on Easter Monday, April 25, 2011, which blasphemously claimed to symbolize the alleged rise of Christianity in Hungary. All of this drew bizarre parallels between the rise of Jesus and the new Fidesz-constitution, which also made it clear how one is to interpret the “separation” of church and state in Hungary today.

By the early 2010s, the shortcomings of liberal democracy, the global economic crisis, and the determined anti-liberal democratic policies of the Fidesz government have together produced a perfect political storm. Though Fidesz was silent during its 2010 campaign about the most important tasks that it would need to carry out after its anticipated victory, once in power, Orbán began constructing a new system to replace, as he called, the “turbulent decades” of liberal democracy. As a first step, he issued the “declaration of national cooperation,” making it obligatory to post this declaration on the walls of all public institutions. In fact, the essence of the new system is that anyone can be a part of “national cooperation” who agrees with the government. However, those who disagree cannot be a part of the system, because the system is based on submission to the ruling party.

The government majority, upon Orbán’s recommendation, appointed servile Pál Schmitt, a former presidential member of Fidesz and European Parliament representative, as President of the Republic. In addition, the new government saw the 1989 Constitution as a heap of purely technical rules, which Orbán has since shaped to fit the needs of his current political agenda. If any of his new laws proved to be unconstitutional, it was not the law, but the Constitution that had to be changed. An extreme example of this was when the parliamentary majority in July 2010 enshrined the concept of “decent morality” into the Constitution, which in November was subsequently removed. Meanwhile, it cited “decent morality” only when it suited its interests. As such, this amendment sent the message that in the name of the “majority” the concept of “decent morality” can be modified at any time.

When the Constitutional Court repealed a statute that had retroactive effects which it found to be unconstitutional, Fidesz immediately retaliated by amending the Constitution and limiting the Constitutional Court’s jurisdiction. Thus, the Constitutional Court overnight turned from being controlling body, a real check of the legislature, into a feeble controller of the application of the law. The number of judges was increased from eleven to fifteen, and the Court was packed with right-wing personalities and former politicians known to be close to Fidesz. The governmental majority did not (despite the long standing criticism of the rule) do away with the possibility of

re-appointing the judges, and hence they may continue to be kept under check politically.

The propaganda of the government aimed to equate Fidesz voters with “the people” in an Orwellian way. Thus it justified the arbitrary decisions of the government by referring to the “mandate” it has from voters. The Orbán administration has introduced laws that have made the immediate dismissal of public employees without cause possible, and so, too, the cleansing of the entire government apparatus. As a result, central and local public administration have quickly become politicized, riddled with conflicts of interest. All important positions, including those in the independent institutions, have been filled with Fidesz cadres. For the position of attorney general, they appointed a cadre who had previously been a Fidesz political candidate, and who subsequently, during the first Orbán government, was the “trusted candidate” for the job. As President of the Court of Auditors they appointed a person who until May 2010 had worked as a Fidesz parliamentary representative. Another former Fidesz representative became the President of the Media Authority, and the spouse of an influential Fidesz representative was appointed to head of the newly-created National Judicial Office, which serves as the administrative body of the judicial branch. Similarly, the Hungarian Financial Supervisory Authority and the Budgetary Council came under political party influence. A Fidesz politician became the President of the National Cultural Fund, who simultaneously served as the President of the Parliamentary Cultural Committee, and, for this reason, the person oversaw his own job. A right-leaning government official took charge of the ombudsman office, thus forever doing away with the independence of the institution. Most of the above-listed cadres have been appointed for nine to twelve years. Therefore, they can stall or indeed prevent subsequent governments from implementing policies that go against those of the current one. The Orbán regime is based not simply on institutional change but loyal persons who occupied those institutions.

The members of the executive and President Pál Schmitt—until he was removed from office due to his plagiarism in April 2012—competed over who would become the most effective “engine” of legislation. They imposed a retroactive, 98% punitive tax on individuals linked to the previous governments. Moreover, they launched a central campaign against certain former politicians, members of the government or office-holders, as well as left-wing and liberal intellectuals, with the aim of criminalizing them. The state-sponsored television news reports increasingly started to resemble criminal shows. Instead of political debates, for example, they broadcasted news of denunciations. State-backed media replaced public radio and television channels. Their programs heavily underrepresented opposition politicians and intellectuals leaning towards the opposition. The media laws of 2010 created a media supervisory authority, and the individuals who were in the decision-making positions of this body are all close to Fidesz. The media authority can issue financial penalties at its discretion not only to radio or television programs that fail to abide by the media laws, but also to print or electronic media, and even to bloggers. The sum of the penalties can be so high as to be capable of silencing media outlets completely. The government does all it can to influence the media, ranging from personnel policies through to state-led advertising, and facilitated by the fact that the Hungarian language media market is relatively small and can be fairly easily shaped by financial means. Measures aimed to curtail press freedom (such as controlling the policies of news agencies and state television, the new editing practice of even outright forgery and manipulation, and the mass dismissal of employees) created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among journalists and television reporters. As a response to the introduction of the media law, the European Parliament stated that these laws

violated press freedom. Under pressure from the European Commission, the Hungarian government withdrew some of the provisions of the media law, and the Constitutional Court repealed some of the other provisions; however, the possibility of limiting the freedom of the press remains on the books. The broadcasting operations of Budapest's last opposition radio station, Klubrádió, were suspended⁴. In its aftermath, television reporters carried out a hunger strike, calling for honest and transparent public media to be restored⁵.

The minimal requirement of every democracy is holding free and fair elections, which allows for a peaceful change of the government, which enables an incoming government to implement policies that are very different from the ones of its predecessor. After coming to power, the Fidesz government filled the National Electoral Commission, the body which is responsible for conducting clean and smooth elections, with its own people. The government majority, shortly before the municipal elections of fall 2010, changed the electoral laws to make it more difficult for smaller parties to gain seats in local government. New laws have been passed to govern the parliamentary elections. This means—under the pretext of aiming to reduce the differences between the numbers of voters among the electoral districts—a change to a one-round system and a complete redrawing of the electoral districts according to partisan interests (i.e., gerrymandering). That said, the boundaries of electoral districts were drawn to make the left-wing districts more populous than those of the right, to ensure that the votes from the left count for less. Until 2014, only those parties who lost an election could receive compensation for the votes cast for the losing candidates; however, from now on, winning parties will also receive additional parliamentary seats as “compensation.” The mixed system in place since the 1989 Hungarian Electoral Law largely remained⁶; however, the proportionality of the system further decreased. The total number of parliamentary representatives radically decreased (from 386 to 199) so there are fewer and larger electoral districts.

Overall, the new electoral law aimed to filter out smaller parties and political opponents. Meanwhile, Hungary became one of Europe's least proportionate electoral systems, by maintaining the 5% threshold to enter parliament, and by increasing the number of representatives to be elected in the individual districts to the detriment of the spots to be gained for votes cast to party lists. The goal of the new law was to increase the chances of Fidesz to win an election, to be achieved by reducing the electoral campaign period, removing policy issues from elections, banning campaign advertisement in the commercial media, and by mobilizing voters to keep presumably opposition voters away from polling stations. The electoral procedures in the law tied the participation in an election to previous permanent addresses, which affects the lower tiers of society, especially the Roma and the poor, diminishing their opportunities to participate in elections. This worked well for them in the 2014 elections where relative majority of votes could be “legally” translated as two-third majority in the parliament.

By introducing a flat tax system, the government made clear that its social policies support the upper middle classes rather than the lower classes and the poor. The original goal of the government was to make Hungary competitive amongst other Central European countries that have lower tax rates⁷. However, the result of all of this was a substantial budgetary deficit, which the government tried to reduce by levying “crisis” taxes on banks and telecommunications companies, alongside a 98% penal tax, which was levied on severance payments and which cannot be reconciled with the concept of rule of law. In addition, the government increased sales

taxes (VAT) to 27%, the highest rate in Europe, nationalized private pension funds, and cut spending in the areas of culture, healthcare, education, and welfare significantly.

Fidesz's sweeping electoral victory at first sight seemed to many as a populist reaction to previous weak governments. After all, Fidesz promoted economic nationalism and "unorthodox" economic policies by levying taxes on banks, launching anti-bank campaigns, and attacking foreign investors and multinational financial institutions. In an effort to balance the budget, the government levied "crisis taxes" on banks and primarily foreign-owned large companies. At first sight, these measures may appear as typically "left wing" economic policies; however, this is a misleading interpretation, because Fidesz's "unorthodox" economic policies were complemented with distinctly "anti-welfare" social policies, as it were. For example, the government now grants tax benefits to families of working parents with children, which means that by definition families where the parents are unemployed and who live in deep poverty (most notably the Roma) are excluded. Social spending on the homeless and the unemployed has been decreased, homelessness has been criminalized. The time frame for disbursing aid has been reduced, meaning that recipients should receive aid quicker; however, more money has been allocated to those mothers who temporarily leave the job market to remain at home with their child. These measure have been justified with the notion of a traditional, patriarchal family values. The Orbán cabinet openly defended its anti-welfare policies, which were rare on continental Europe, where the majority of countries since World War II have aimed foremost to establish a social market economy, which they have since labored to protect.

In the meantime, the government nationalized the reliable private pension insurance system in such a speedy way that people were left with no other rational choice but to move back into the state-supported pension system. By absorbing these pension funds the government was able to meet the Maastricht criterion of 3% annual budget deficit. One year later, the government forced even those who had chosen to remain in the private system into the state pension system. By this point, there was no question of a "freedom of choice": the government behaved like a cop turned thief: it put its hands on the wealth of the people. Thus, in Hungary the basic principles of constitutional law, such as the respect of private property, the freedom of contract and legal certainty came into question. Whilst the government's propaganda played anti-EU tunes, it designed measures to reduce costs, following EU directives, all in the name of the economic crisis. Leaders of the government launched a verbal crusade, lambasting the sins of economic neo-liberalism, by promising a "national rebirth"; however, in reality, the government itself was partly carrying out neoliberal policies, and the sole purpose of these policies was to protect and benefit its own elites and supporters⁸.

The government took several steps to prevent people from expressing opposition or dissatisfaction in a formal and organized fashion: it made the Labor Code stricter, which hurt workers, and it abolished traditional forms of dialogue between employers and employees. Moreover, unions were forced to merge with an emerging corporate structure. Limiting union rights curtailed the rights of workers to call for a strike. Furthermore, government-supported media outlets launched a smear campaign against the new generation of union leaders.

A new law ensured that public education was managed and controlled by the central government. Local government and foundation schools were being nationalized, and a significant number of

these schools were being placed in the hands of churches. Moreover, through these new laws the government has been homogenizing the curriculum of public schools, and it has reduced the age until which students must attend school from 18 to 16 years. The law on public education merged the anti-liberal traditions enshrined in the dogmas of Communism and Catholicism; it was no longer about education, but rather about discipline, and it declares that the state has the right to intervene in the lives of children and parents. The self-proclaimed “family-friendly” government strives to “re-educate” families for them to become “worthy” of participating in the system of national cooperation. Similar patterns can be observed in higher education. The bill on higher education aimed to limit the number of students that could be accepted to universities and colleges with financial aid from the state. The new laws even required that students retroactively repay tuition fees should they choose to live abroad after completing their studies. On top of it all, the government proposed that some university degrees can only be pursued upon payment of full tuition, which would make the more lucrative professions available to only the wealthy. It was the unspoken goal of the government to reduce social mobility, to bring the process of change of the elite to a close, and to “finally” entrench the social hierarchy that emerged through a “revolutionary” process in the post-Communist era.

Though the government stressed that it did not wish to return to the past, it nonetheless fed nostalgia for the period between 1920 and 1944, characterized by Admiral Miklós Horthy’s nationalist and revanchist policies. Prime Minister Orbán has proclaimed the day of the Trianon Peace Treaty that concluded World War I as the “day of national unity.” Moreover the government ordered to erect a statute of German occupation of 1944 in the heart of Budapest by suggesting that all Hungarians had been victims of German Nazism⁹. The government was politically absolving individuals extolled during the Horthy regime by conferring new awards upon them. Under the guise of “national unification,” The government granted citizenship and voting rights to Hungarian minorities living outside of Hungary, to increase the number of right-wing voters, given that the majority living in the diaspora tended to vote for the right-wing parties (and would perhaps return the favor for receiving the automatic right to Hungarian citizenship). Orbán declared that he wishes to politically deal the extreme right party, Jobbik, the same way that Horthy dealt with Nazi “nyilas” (Arrow Cross) movements back in the day: “give them two slaps on the face and send them home.” Meanwhile, various extremist right, paramilitary organizations have appeared in villages across Hungary, bearing a range of eerie names, such as “Magyar Gárda” (“Hungarian Guard”), “Véderő” (“Protective Force”), and “Betyársereg” (“Outlaw’s Army”). These organizations take away the government’s monopoly on force and launch racist campaigns aimed to intimidate the Roma. Courts that banned these extremist paramilitary groups were unable to prevent them from reorganizing under different banners.

The central propaganda rose to protect nationalism, patriarchal family values, power politics and “law and order.” The Criminal Code has also been modified so that teenagers can now be thrown behind bars for minor retail theft or painting graffiti. The independence of the justice system has also suffered: the government is making the Office of the Attorney General dependent upon personal loyalties; it is curbing the rights of lawyers in criminal proceedings; and by forcing early retirement upon Supreme Court judges, it is launching a siege against the courts. When it created the “Kúria” (i.e., the Supreme Court in Hungary before the judicial system was reorganized after World War II), it did not extend the term of the chairman of the Supreme Court

(though his mandate had not yet expired). Instead, the government replaced him with a cadre loyal to the ruling party. In 2010, the Fidesz majority in parliament changed the Constitution nine times in a six month period. Thus, the government itself placed the principle of legal uncertainty under doubt, shaking its own credibility.

In the area of culture, the policies of Fidesz and the far right Jobbik party overlap: both have an exclusionary interpretation of the idea of “national values.” Under this label, both parties go against the equal opportunities policy of recent years. Though the government protected the National Theater’s director against homophobic and extreme-right attacks it finally replaced him by a new, pro-Fidesz director. Within two years, all theater directors across Hungary were replaced, in many towns, relatives of the Fidesz clientele have become the directors of the theaters. Cultural programs that aimed to decrease social and cultural inequalities were terminated. By stopping the activities of the public foundation for film, the government in effect halted one of the most successful branches of Hungarian cultural life, film production for three years. The government even decided which religion could be regarded as “established” (Islam and Mormonism, for instance, were not), and it still has the authority to conduct a complete data search on all “non-established” congregations.

The Orbán regime considered some of the most outstanding artists and scholars to be its enemies¹⁰. The government had requested some of its artist friends to create illustrations for the new basic law, so that it may leave visual footprints of the historical periods of its preference next to the text, displayed on the mandatory “fundamental law tables” in government offices. They redesigned Kossuth Square, the large area just in front of the Parliament, to remove certain statutes and restore the “conditions of 1944.” Their actions were full of contradictions: they simultaneously lauded Chinese Communism and the anti-Communist neo-conservatism in the United States; they banned pro-Tibet protests during the Chinese Communist Party Chairman’s visit and at the same time put up a statue of President Ronald Reagan, who had called Communism the “Evil Empire.” They turned away from previous symbolic figures of Hungarian democracy, such as István Bibó¹¹ and Imre Nagy¹², turning instead towards the successors of Li Peng, with whom they “forge an alliance.” In addition, they declared not only that the Communist Party of the past was a “criminal organization,” but that included its predecessor and successor organizations; however, they welcomed some of the former members of the Communist party in the government; what is more, they have these former members write parts of the Fundamental Law.

It was surprising that – despite its qualified majority in parliament – the steps of the Fidesz government could be characterized as *Blitzkrieg* tactics, especially where legislation is concerned. If a government announcement of a new law was expected, parts of it were leaked days before, and thus the government could “prepare” public opinion for its receipt. Thereafter, the party’s parliamentary group leader, or the prime minister’s spokespersons, duly delivered the announcement, which was then immediately submitted to parliament, and, by way of an individual representative’s motion, the bill was voted into law. The Minister of Justice, who in theory should be responsible for legislation, in effect had no say in the legislative process. There was no society-wide debate, no professional talks, no impact assessments, and there was no need for other such procedures considered “orthodox” in a democracy. The opposition’s voice was divided and it did not filter through the state-sponsored media. On first sight, this raid tactic gave

the impression of a government determined to govern. Yet what has become clear is that the determination of the government was to centralize power. When criticized, the government has regularly responded by saying that the “most important talks” with society had already taken place, namely at the polling stations in 2010. As such, the government claimed that its policies reflected on the „will of the people”. Work, home, order and family became the regime's catchwords. The popularity of the Orbán regime can partly be explained by the coordinated governmental communication about the advantages of a “strong man rule”, and by the socially “unorthodox” policies of the government. The Orbán regime offered favorable neoliberal policies for the rich, a corporatist and clientele system for the middle class, a mix of ethnicist, nationalist, anticapitalist and anticommunist rhetoric for the lower middle classes, the policies of social exclusion and demobilization against the Roma and the poor, and finally, the familiar Kádárist paternalism to the pensioners.

The Fidesz government promised that after gaining its exceptional majority in government it would take on the fight against poverty and the social crisis. It promised jobs, homes, order and security. It suggested that although some of its measures would be controversial from a rule of law perspective, it would in turn guarantee economic and social development. Millions believed this promise. Perhaps they thought that certain democratic practices could be sacrificed in exchange for economic well-being. However, the government has dismantled the limits on the rule of law and it has bid farewell to liberal democracy; yet in return, not only did it fail to lessen the social burden of the Hungarian population, it has sent the message that it has (and had) no intention of doing this. Thus, it opened the avenue for the rise of the Jobbik.

To guarantee a return towards liberal democracy, strong opposition parties are needed that are willing to cooperate, along with social movements and an independent press, civic organizations and heightened international attention. In 2011 the main points of opposition began to appear, including independent unions and increasingly active civic groups that overshadow the dispersed opposition parties, which today remain unable to join forces. In 2011, the group entitled “One million people for the freedom of the press!” (This name was later shortened as “Milla”) sent ten thousand protestors to the streets; by March 15th, and October 23rd, two of Hungary's most important national holidays, their number had swollen to 30,000 and 70,000, respectively. Labor unions organized larger gatherings in the same year. The Hungarian Solidarity Movement was formed, which organized a demonstration of 30,000 people in front of parliament. Representatives and activists of opposition Green party (LMP) chained themselves around the parliament building to prevent parliamentarians from entering. They aimed to draw attention to the legislation that was being passed by parliament that threatened the rule of law. The police, Belorussian-style, accused the protestors of “restricting personal freedoms.” In early 2012, about one hundred thousand people protested against the new Fundamental Law and the rise of autocracy on the streets of Budapest. Further protests occurred with the attendance of tens of thousands. The Orbán government aimed to counter this series of protests by creating its own government-sponsored “civic” movement, the so-called Forum of Civic Union (Civil Összefogás Fóruma, CÖF) which organized counter-protests in defense of the regime. Flashmobs, scattered protests, new movements by civilians (university students and artists) emerged in the period of 2011-2, challenging the political monopolization of power increasingly seen as mafia state [13](#).

The biggest rally of the democratic opposition movements occurred in Budapest on October

2012, when leaders of three civic organizations declared their decision to form an umbrella organization, called Együtt (Together), inviting other parties of the democratic opposition to create a united electoral bloc for the 2014 elections. With this public announcement, these movements started to begin walking on the long way of party-formation. Between 2012-4 Együtt made several attempts to collaborate with other parties (MSZP, LMP) for an electoral coalition, but internal rivalry between leaders, the growing distrust towards politicians in the society, and the strong negative campaign of Fidesz did not allow them to make a strong alliance early. The green party named as Lehet Más a Politika (Politics Can Be Different, LMP) broke up on this issue: a segment of the party joined the opposition alliance as a new party, Párbeszéd Magyarországért (Dialogue for Hungary, PM), while others, staying at LMP, decided to let their party running alone in the elections.

Despite the efforts of the government, Hungary still retained a few of the basic characteristics of a multiparty democracy. Liberal democracy, however, has been replaced with a wrecked version of “majority” rule, where the freedom of speech is limited by self-censorship (people do not speak up, for fear of losing their jobs) and press freedom is clearly being reduced to the blogosphere. The state-run television channels have taken a turn towards the tabloid. The aim is to depoliticize the news or remove political issues from media reports. State-sponsored media outlets, for instance, either did not report or underreported mass protest rallies and demonstrations.

The period of mass protests (2011-2) had been followed by a long, and increasingly self-destructing set of negotiations among the leftist opposition parties (2013). The momentum, offered by the civic initiatives, was lost when still unpopular leaders took over the political process in the opposition. In the meantime, the government introduced its policy of utility-cost cut to regain the support of lower class voters. Finally, in January 2014, a leftist electoral alliance was created, just three months before the April 2014 elections. It was far too late. The influence of civil initiatives was not strong enough to promote new leaders to the democratic opposition which was still dominated but the ones who lost credibility before 2010. Among several other factors, weak organization, poor capacity for innovation, and the lack of imagination resulted in an electoral defeat in 2014.

Hungary’s parliamentary elections in April 2014 saw a 61% turnout, the lowest since 1998. The high abstention rate was a sign of disaffection with Hungarian politics: four-tenths of the electorate believed it was left without a genuine political choice. Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, received 44.5% of the votes, giving it a strong mandate to continue to govern. Thanks to the more disproportional voting system introduced by Fidesz, the party retained its two-thirds parliamentary majority. However, of a total of 8 million citizens eligible to vote, only 2.1 million cast their ballot for Fidesz; this was 8% (or 600,000 voters) less than in 2010. Although this result was far from representing “national unity”, Orbán’s charismatic leadership and his anti-EU, Christian-nationalist rhetoric have managed to forge an alliance between conservative voters and the lower middle class, which expected the state to halt its existential decline. In 2002 and 2006 – when the previous election system was still in place – this solid, two million-strong voter base did not suffice for a Fidesz victory. This time, it secured the party a supermajority.

The alliance of leftist opposition parties came second with 26% of the vote. Led by the socialist

leader, Attila Mesterházy, the alliance is made up of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Together (Együtt), Dialogue for Hungary (PM), the Democratic Coalition (DK) and the Hungarian Liberal Party (MLP). Since the previous elections, the alliance has managed to increase its vote by nearly 300,000, receiving a total of 1.2 million votes. Nevertheless, its performance at the polls has been rightly seen as a crushing defeat. In the last four years, the left has been unable to reinvent itself from the ground up. It has failed to communicate a clear identity or program; its leaders, who are engaged in constant rivalry, decided to field a joint list only at the last minute. The primary message of the alliance was a desire to run Viktor Orbán out of office; it had nothing to offer in terms of a genuine and positive vision.

The third place went to far-right party Jobbik, with 20.5% of the vote. This represented some one million voters, 3% (100,000 votes) more than in the previous election. The results for individual constituencies show that in half the country Jobbik beat leftwing candidates. The elections were, in a way, great victory for Jobbik, which promoted Hungarian nationalism, radicalism, anti-globalization and racism. Analysts blamed Orbán for the growing support of rightwing extremists and said that Europe could no longer ignore the far-right. In the months before the elections, Jobbik assumed a more moderate tone, campaigning with the slogan of “livelihood, order and accountability” and muting its standard racist message. It not only ran successfully in the poorest, north-eastern region of the country, but also managed to gain new positions in counties in the West.

The green party (LMP), came last with 5.2% of the vote. Although this falls short of the party’s 2010 performance, it may grant green policies a new lease on life. Keeping an equal distance from both the rightist and the leftist bloc, LMP sent a middle-of-the-road, anti-establishment messages to its voters during the campaign.

The OSCE found that the elections themselves were effective and partly transparent, however cast serious doubt on the legitimacy of Orbán’s landslide victory, commenting on the “undue advantage” enjoyed by Fidesz and the lack of freedom for the opposition during the campaign¹⁴. The European Parliament, the European Council, the United States, and several EU member states have also openly criticized this abuse. All of them pointed out that the act on electoral procedure was passed without meaningful public debate, in violation of both Hungarian and international practice. Constituency boundaries were shifted around to make leftwing districts more populous than rightwing districts, causing a left-wing vote to carry less weight. Different rules applied to Hungarian nationals working abroad and so-called “Trianon Hungarians” living beyond state borders. Moreover, under the new system extra mandates were added to the list of the winning party receives, which made the regulation extremely disproportionate. These rules violated the principle of equal vote. There has also been a failure to properly regulate a number of important areas connected to campaign financing, such as the campaign activities of satellite organizations. Using public funds, Fidesz outsourced part of its campaign to an allegedly civic organization with close ties to the party, the Civil Alliance Forum (CÖF). Thanks to new financing regulations, the transparency of the system and its accountability has been compromised. The Media Council set up by Fidesz has not been politically neutral. The acquisition of media companies by investors with close ties to Fidesz undermined the plurality of the media and forces journalists to self-censor. Regulations introduced by Fidesz prohibited commercial television stations from running financed promotions, which did not stop

government ads being aired. The majority of television channels broadcasted reports that were biased towards Fidesz. Together, these factors granted the government significant and unfair advantages and restrict citizens' access to proper information. The result has been a loss of public confidence in the electoral system. Not only Fidesz as a party campaigned, as it is usual in any multiparty democracy, but the Fidesz-controlled state administration "campaigned" too by using taxpayers' money and creating an uneven playing field. The boundaries between party and the state became blurred. This violated the principles about fair competition laid down in OSCE's 1990 Copenhagen Document¹⁵. The electoral rules represented the compilation of worst practices that existed in different European countries. The elections were free but not fair.

The lower middle classes and the poor, victims of the discriminative governmental social policies of the past four years, have been compensated with utility-cost cuts before the election year. While advertising on utility-cost cuts are delivered regularly to all Hungarian citizens, the burden of special taxes is borne by various segments of the population in isolation. The majority of the public has been convinced by the media that, despite permanent economic stagnation, "Hungary has been performing better" over Fidesz's four-year term. Nationalist sentiments, paternalism, "strong man rule" and an overwhelming populist discourse captured the largest segments of the Hungarian voters¹⁶. The victory of Fidesz can be metaphorically described as a successful "rebellion of the countryside" against the previous political setup widely perceived as empty, elitist democracy.

The Hungarian public has been constantly reminded by its current political leader of the importance of national pride. Individual rights and the democratic institutions that protect them have taken a backseat to constitutionally endorsed policies of collective identity and cultural uniformity. With government propaganda about order, home, fatherland and family drowning out all other voices, many are voting with their feet: In the past four years, half a million people have left the country.

In the meantime, the Orbán regime moved closer to Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey, and Aliyev's Azerbaijan—all are authoritarian regimes of different sorts—by risking Hungary's future within the European Union for their own political survival. Orbán praised these regimes, plus China and Singapore, for their illiberalism. As he stated in a speech in the summer of 2014, Hungary should take a closer look on the countries of the East and learn from their social organization:

"What is happening in Hungary today can accordingly be interpreted by stating that the prevailing political leadership has today attempted to ensure that people's personal work and interests, which must be acknowledged, are closely linked to the life of the community and the nation, and that this relationship is preserved and reinforced. In other words, the Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organized, reinforced and in fact constructed. And so in this sense the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state¹⁷."

It is an important lesson for those who believe in liberal democracy: they cannot pretend as though all is well, as they have in the past decades. History does not end with the transition to democracy, because democracy is never a complete condition; rather, it is a dynamic process,

full of tension. In essence, it is but a fragile balance of forces and counter-forces¹⁸. If Hungarian democracy survives the current challenge thanks to resistance from society, there is a chance that it will subsequently be stronger than ever. The protest movements and the democratic opposition proved to be too weak, fragile and fragmented to alter the dominant, illiberal trend in the past few years. The crisis of liberal democracy calls attention to the fact that democracy cannot be narrowed down purely institutions, because institutions can be easily hollowed out by leaders, who do not respect freedom. Democracy can only be preserved if, along with its values, a plethora of dedicated people help it thrive.

Since the autumn of 2014 a new wave of street protest emerged in Hungary. These protests were more widespread, by moving beyond the capital and covering more and more countryside cities and towns. Protesters displayed more bitterness and stronger dedication for resistance than their forerunners. Instead of nicely formulated speeches they were less well articulated but more radical. A new generation of protesters appeared who not only wanted to remove the Orbán regime but aimed to rethink critically the general achievement of the democratic regime of the past 25 years.

- [1.](#) Strangely enough, Freedom House (2014) still evaluated the [Hungarian political regime](#) [2] as free, consolidated democracy as late as in 2013. This assessment does not reflect the political reality of the country.
- [2.](#) Kim Lane Scheppelle, Testimony. U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe hearing on “The Trajectory of Democracy – Why Hungary Matters” Washington, D. C. March 19, 2013.
- [3.](#) For a detailed analysis of the new Fundamental Law see Miklós Bánkuti, Gábor Halmai and Kim Lane Scheppelle (2012): „Disabling the Constitution”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, n° 3. July, pp. 38-46.
- [4.](#) The attack on Klubrádió represents the last phase of a long lasting tendency in which, since 2006 Fidesz systematically occupied countryside media outlets and created their own newspapers, radio and television channels. Among the newspapers one can mention *Helyi Téma*, *Metropol*, *Magyar Nemzet*, *Magyar Hírlap*, *Heti Válasz*. As for the radio stations: Lánchíd Rádió, Class FM, Mária Rádió, and television channels: Hír TV, Echo TV. Since 2010, public radio and television channels became strongly influenced by government propaganda (the channels of Magyar Rádió and Magyar Televízió).
- [5.](#) See detailed analysis of the Hungarian media situation in Péter Bajomi-Lázár (2013), “The Party Colonisation of the Media. The Case of Hungary”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 27, n°1, pp. 67-87.
- [6.](#) The Hungarian electoral system at the time of the 2010 elections was a mix of direct election of representatives in a single-seat constituencies (176 members in the National Assembly), proportional representation (152) and 58 “compensation” seats, which were determined through a complex system in connection with voter turnout and votes that in each electoral round that did not get counted because they did not go to the winning member. The aim of this mixed systems was to try to optimally capture voter preference in the actual numbers of representations of each party in the Parliament.
- [7.](#) For a comprehensive analysis of tax regimes see Arpad Todor (2013), „A quantitative approach on the diffusion of neoliberal tax policies into the postcommunist new-EU

member states”, *European Journal of Science and Technology*, Vol. 9, suppl. 2, June, pp. 237-246.

- [8](#). This way of politics is nicely described Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith (2011), *The Dictator's Handbook*, New York: Public Affairs. See also András Bozóki (2013), „Dictators and Rebellious Civilians”, *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 11, n° 3. September, pp. 841-851.
 - [9](#). By doing so the Orbán cabinet disregarded the fact that Hungary had been an ally of Nazi Germany in World War II. Moreover, Hungarian authorities effectively helped Eichmann and his squad to transport most Hungarian Jews to extermination camps.
 - [10](#). The list includes the pianist András Schiff, the Nobel Prize winner writer Imre Kertész, conductors Ádám Fischer and Iván Fischer, filmmaker Béla Tarr, economist János Kornai, sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge, philosophers Ágnes Heller, Mihály Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and many others. Cf. András Bozóki (2012), *Virtuális köztársaság* (Virtual Republic), Budapest: Gondolat, p. 256.
 - [11](#). István Bibó was a major democratic political thinker in the post-World War II Hungary. Cf. István Bibó (1991), *Democracy, Revolution, Self-Determination: Selected Writings*. Edited by Károly Nagy, Boulder: Social Science Monographs.
 - [12](#). Imre Nagy was a reformist Communist leader, who served as Prime Minister during the 1956 revolution. He was executed by the Kádár regime in 1958.
 - [13](#). Cf. Bálint Magyar & Júlia Vásárhelyi eds. (2013), *Magyar polip: A posztkommunista maffiaállam* (Hungarian Polyp: The Post-Communist Mafia-State), Budapest: Noran Libro.
 - [14](#). Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2014), *Hungary, Parliamentary Elections, 6 April 2014: Final Report*, Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR.
 - [15](#). For more details see: Kim Lane Scheppelle (2014), „Hungary and the End of Politics” *Nation*, May 26.
 - [16](#). For a more radical analysis see Rudolf Ungváry (2014), *A láthatatlan valóság: A fasisztoid mutáció a mai Magyarországon* (Invisible Reality: The Fascistic Mutant in Contemporary Hungary), Pozsony: Kalligram.
 - [17](#). Viktor Orbán's speech of July 25, 2014 can be found [here](#) [3]
 - [18](#). A reliable overview about the state of democracy in Hungary can be found here: Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (2014), *Disrespect for European Values in Hungary, 2010-2014*, Budapest: HCLU. For a broader, comparative framework, presented in a more diplomatic way, see Péter Balázs, Bogdan M. Radu, Áron Szele, András Bozóki, Ágnes Simon, and Julius Horváth (2014), *25 Years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain: The State of Integration of East and West into the European Union*, Brussels: European Commission.
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