Introduction

Historicizing an Anti-Liberal Turn

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Dystopia has acquired a new name. What was laughed at as "*Puszta*-Putinism" yesterday is called "Orbanism" today, reinforced by three consecutive election victories of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party (the Alliance of Young Democrats). It is described, with outright fear or defiant sympathy, as a regime that represents an alternative to modern liberal democracy in Europe and beyond. The Hungarian prime minister who, after proclaiming his "System of National Cooperation" (SNC) in 2010, was ridiculed as an epigone of Jörg Haider or Silvio Berlusconi, has become a role model in his own right, hailed as "Trump before Trump."

Currently, a substantial number of analysts put Hungary under the heading of "illiberal democracy," next to Turkey, Singapore, and Russia, or among "hybrid regimes" like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. Likewise, "Orbanization" (Orbanistan, Viktatorship, and so on) started serving as buzzwords for radical populism and nationalism as well as the decline of republicanism, the rule of law, and the welfare state. By erecting a fence along the Hungarian–Serbian border in order to block a stream of refugees in 2015–2016, Orbán became a populist icon, a gifted international troublemaker whose political influence may greatly exceed his country's actual power.

While the SNC has been expanding with breath-taking speed during the past nine years, social scientists focusing on Hungary were rather slow to catch up with new developments and seldom offered a sober and comprehensive understanding of the new regime. A good part of the literature revolves around Orbán's personality as well as spectacular metaphors to describe the regime while (a) neglecting a thorough empirical study of the nuts and bolts of the SNC, (b) ignoring their historical and comparative contexts, and (c) disregarding the ideational sources of the undertaking in particular. A fair amount of recent political science research has discussed the "stumbling" and "backsliding" of emerging capitalist democracies both in Eastern Europe and in the global South.[1] However, although Hungary features prominently in public discussions about the rise of authoritarianism,[2] in-depth book-length analyses of the Orbán regime are hard to find.[3]

During the 1990s, Hungary was used as a textbook example of consolidated liberal democracy. Today, scholarly literature often refers to our country as a model of an "inverse transition." How could these alarming changes materialize in the twenty-first century, two decades after the 1989 revolutions and a few years after the country joined the EU? In seeking to answer this question, our research group first examined the analytical vocabulary that has been used to describe the SNC in recent years. Do terms such as "illiberal democracy," "liberal autocracy," "post-communist mafia state," "mutant fascism," "electoral authoritarianism," to name some of the most popular labels, cover Orbán's regime appropriately? Why does it slip out of our hands, resisting definition? Are its amorphousness, incomplete nature, and variability the reason for that? Could the analysts become more successful if—rather than making snapshots—they would focus on the whole film of Orbanization? To be sure, capturing a multifaceted process of evolution that originates in numerous sources by freezing one, albeit controversial, still image such as "illiberal democracy" or "electoral authoritarianism" may create the impression of stability, matureness, and even authenticity, thereby reinforcing the regime's own apologetic discourse. Is the SNC a veritable system (writ large) or rather a calculated—almost systematic—move toward becoming a system? Undoubtedly, this large-scale attempt at social engineering is based on a *bricolage* of elements that once seemed to be incompatible. Does this fact guarantee the originality of the experiment? Finally, what role does Viktor Orbán play in constructing the regime carrying his name? Did he have a master plan of leaving liberal democracy behind and has he managed to collect absolute power under the new regime? How can he harmonize being a spiritual chief of a missionary movement and a strong-handed cynical architect of "national cooperation?"

Our volume goes beyond the initial shocks of (and lamentations on) "How could all this happen?" We wanted to avoid using emotional language in defense of the key values of liberal thought under attack. The authors set out to (a) explore, in their particular fields, the role of core ideas in constructing the regime; (b) trace its evolution and assess the (in)coherence of its emerging parts; (c) identify the precedents of the SNC in the Hungarian past and its counterparts in other Eastern and Central European countries; and finally (d) examine whether or not the regime constitutes an original type of emerging capitalism.

Brave New Hungary brings together leading representatives of various disciplines, generations, and persuasions inside and outside Hungary. The volume grew from a joint research project initiated in 2014 by *Pasts, Inc., Center for Historical Studies* at Central European University, Budapest, and the *Institute for Human Sciences* (IWM), Vienna, which led to an international conference in Vienna in June 2015 and a number of smaller meetings. The research process did not end there: over the past years, the participants have engaged in additional inquiries and new research partners joined the group.

The book consists of three main parts. Part I presents the historical and ideological roots of the System of National Cooperation, and the ways in which values, political doctrines, and symbols shaped its evolution in fields like the constitutional coup resulting in a new "fundamental law," the rediscovery of "mythic nationalism," or the invention of "unorthodox" principles in economics. Part II includes studies on the main socio-economic and cultural pillars of the regime, ranging from renationalization to workfare, social exclusion, and conquering the mass media. In Part III, the authors discuss the SNC in a comparative context, subjecting the thesis of the regime's uniqueness to critical scrutiny. The volume ends with the editors' conclusions, linking the research findings of the contributors to a broader discussion on the rise of anti-liberalism in Eastern and Central Europe and beyond.

NOTES

1. See, e.g., Collier and Levitsky 1997; Linz 2000; Carothers 2002; Fish 2005; Rupnik et al. 2007; Bunce, Stoner-Weiss, and McFaul 2009; Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010; Levitsky and Way 2010; Cameron and Orenstein 2012; Innes 2013; Bermeo 2016.
2. See Müller 2013, 2018; see also the chapter on Hungary in Kirchick 2017, 40–70; as well as Scheppele 2013, 559–62; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Krastev and Holmes 2018.
3. As regards Hungarian language publications, the only exceptions are a collection of essays edited by Bálint Magyar and Júlia Vásárhelyi 2014, 2015; Jakab and Urbán 2017; and Debreczeni 2017. Besides a political biography of Viktor Orbán written by Paul Lendvai (2017) as well as Bálint Magyar's analysis of the Hungarian "mafia state" (Magyar 2016, Magyar and Vásárhelyi 2017, Magyar 2019), the only existing volumes published in English on the SNC to date are a collection of essays edited by Péter Krasztev and Jon van Til (2015), which focuses on the lack of "domestic democratic agency," Paul Lendvai's (2012) book that ends with the advent of Orbán's regime, and András L. Pap's (2017) monograph, which examines the constitutional aspects of "national cooperation."

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