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Conclusion

Hungary—Brave and New? Dissecting a Realistic Dystopia

János Mátyás Kovács and Balázs Trencsényi

Let us begin with a confession. Following the Weberian norm of revealing authors' value choices, we admit to harboring strong reservations about the System of National Cooperation (SNC). Otherwise, we would not speak of dystopia. There is no reason to conceal our liberal predisposition—even if the very fact that Fidesz was able to revitalize itself in the 2000s and the Orbán regime managed to thrive during the 2010s proves that the liberal consensus in Hungary has eroded during the past two decades (Kovács 2017; Trencsényi 2017).

As transpiring from the chapters of our volume, our research group has strong doubts about the democratic nature of Orbán's vision of illiberal (more exactly, anti-liberal!) democracy as well as about the uniqueness of his regime and its maturity as a system. Also, many of us challenged the truism concerning Orbán's exclusive role in designing and operating the SNC based on a long-cherished master plan. It was rather presumed that the regime is tamed by repeated compromises between the ruler and his adversaries: be they oligarchs, pressure groups, the European Union (EU), or citizens at-large, and made popular by a variety of "carrots" instead of using just "sticks." As a consequence, a great many groups in Hungarian society may consider themselves winners of Orbánization today. We also supposed that the expansion of the SNC was grounded in a great deal of improvisation and exhibited the zigzags of *Realpolitik*. Orbán was often assisted by sheer luck or, alternatively, he made a virtue of necessity without any scruples.

Relying on these assumptions and our coauthors' insights, we will first rethink some concepts needed for a thorough understanding of the Fidesz universe and formulate a few hypotheses about its origins and modus operandi.

These concepts and assumptions then will be applied and tested in a review of the consecutive stages of the rise and partial consolidation of the Orbán regime and of its possible future evolution.

What do we mean by a *realistic dystopia*? Why is Aldous Huxley and his *Brave New World* invoked in the title of our volume? His vision in 1932 was a gloomy guess and a resolute warning, extrapolating frightening trends of social evolution at the time. In contrast, Orbán is a doer more than a thinker. He considers his own image of the future pleasing, and he has been working around the clock to put it in practice since the mid-1990s. Crucially, with remarkably little open violence and a creative talent for the use of law, corruption, intimidation, ideological mobilization, conversion of political power into economic assets, paralysis of constitutional checks and balances, and media capture, Fidesz has managed to attain a near-hegemonic position. Hence, the SNC has become a real-life dystopia *par excellence* in the eyes of liberals, and a possible future for many polities the world over.

The *Brave New World* imagined by Huxley is a depoliticized eugenic technocracy that was supposed to emerge in advanced countries; it is communist, liberal, and fascist at the same time, where rigid social hierarchies are nuanced by access to consumerist, psychedelic, and sexual satisfaction. In contrast, *Brave New Hungary* is a much less spectacular and rational regime, the components of which are glued together by the authoritarian and collectivist traditions including conformism, helplessness, inertia, and the like as well as by self-defense against the external, unknown Other.² However, social habituation described by Huxley, rooted in the rejection of mobility, openness, and indeterminacy, is common to both: "liking what you've got to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their unescapable social destiny" (Huxley 1932, 17). Yet, Huxley's new world projects a global end of history, an apocalypse of modernism, whereas Orbán's new world is located in a temporary suspense even if it promises an escape from the adversities of history through envisioning an everlasting pro-Fidesz *Gemeinschaft* that is premodern and postmodern at the same time.

We also twist John Rawls' term of "realistic utopia." Our aim is to emphasize the pragmatic nature of the construction process, in the course of which realism has overwritten idealism in the architects' mind time and again. Undoubtedly, as years passed, the initial vision of the brave new regime has radicalized a great deal but rarely crossed the boundaries of viability. Nevertheless, the Young Democrats never miss any chance to speed up the construction of SNC when new spaces open up for invasion. They do not wait passively until new possibilities arise to move ahead and often take huge risks to force the expansion of the regime's room to maneuver.

BENDING CONSERVATISM

Fidesz's doublespeak of "moving ahead" actually means moving backward, that is, rolling back time by laying the foundations of a "conservative revolution" that reaches back to the end of the nineteenth century and the interwar period for ideological ammunition. The SNC embodies a social engineering project that includes both the usual *desiderata* of old-school continental conservatism (respecting national tradition, Christian faith, law and order, paternalist state, patriarchal family values, etc.) and its *odiosa* (challenging cosmopolitanism, secularization, the rule of law, market rivalry, gender equality, etc.). Similar to the interwar "conservative revolutionaries," the engineers of the SNC are aware both of the constructed nature of tradition and of the task to actively recreate it rather than just to subscribe to its prescriptive power.

Therefore, the political style of the SNC can be described as re-sacralized mass politics combined with anti-modernism, which recently was baptized by Orbán as "Christian Democracy" to both normalize the SNC in the eyes of the European conservative public and reclaim the "real" conservative tradition from the mainstream of the European People's Party (EPP).³ In reality, Orbán's regime jumps over the post-1945 Christian Democratic political doctrine that reconciled itself with the idea of economic liberalism and the rule of law within the doctrine of *Soziale Marktwirtschaft*. Since then, it also has endorsed the separation of state and church and recognized the merits of civil society. More recently, Christian Democrats in Western and Northern Europe weakened their ethnic and gender biases to a large degree, while retaining a commitment to the values of social solidarity and subscribing to a high-profile version of environmentalism as well as a lower-profile version of political correctness.

Loudly proclaiming a change of the guard between the "sixty-eighters" and his generation, Orbán declared a return to an allegedly authentic version of conservatism by reviving the norms of the *Kinder-Küche-Kirche/Travail-Famille-Patrie* triangles,⁴ and using racist, homophobic, and chauvinistic language. At the same time, Fidesz denies the principle of social solidarity by promulgating a militant, almost libertarian critique of the welfare state and drawing on hate speech against the "undeserving poor" (often ethnicized as Roma or labeled as migrant). In order to fend off the accusation of neoliberalism, the architects of the SNC covered the introduction of the flat tax and other measures of an "inverse Robin Hood" income policy (supported by trickle-down economics) with anti-elitist rhetoric, pouring scorn on transnational companies, banks, and business tycoons and showering praise on "hardworking ordinary men." This *opportunist* discourse also serves to deflect attention from state-managed corruption deals made for the benefit of

Orbán's close circle of oligarchs/cronies and his own family, the replacement of social assistance with public work, the degrading of welfare services in general, and passing a new labor law that severely restricts workers' rights,⁵ as well as the entanglement of the regime with a handful of foreign multinational companies.

Meanwhile, the regime borrowed the ideal of the paternalist/interventionist state from interwar radical conservatism along with disrespect for local self-government and civil society as such (e.g., upon the inception of the SNC local governments were deprived of the resources and right to manage schools and hospitals). Hierarchy, discipline, loyalty, and internal cohesion (*esprit de corps*) are advanced as core values of state administration. Civil servants are wooed with a series of status privileges while under close supervision by the ruling party. In this respect, the SNC might remind the observer of both Horthy's authoritarian regime and the communist party-state. The same applies to the preferential treatment of armed forces, the creeping militarization of state institutions and society at large, and the establishment of state-controlled corporatist structures (professional associations, chambers) and GONGOs.⁶ Orbán's ideal regime is willing and able to nationalize, centralize, regulate, and micro-manage as energetically as possible, as well as to exercise discretionary power over all major fields of society ranging from dethroning a business magnate all the way down to appointing and dismissing the coach of the leader's favorite soccer team. The principal guarantee of the stability of the regime is a unitary, quasi-Leninist government party of strong discipline (with a cohesive group of its top leaders staunchly loyal to Orbán) that faces a weak and split opposition situated on the left and right edges of the so-called central field of force.

Orbán builds his regime on neo-feudal networks of personal dependency on each and every level of society, from the smallest village up to himself. In cultural terms, the SNC dives even farther into the past, combining the Christian traditions of Hungarians with their pre-Christian nomadic heritage.⁷ While post-1945 European Christian Democracy was firmly Occidentalist, Orbán's worldview (just like that of interwar radical nationalists in Hungary) is emphatically anti-Western and finds the spiritual and ethnic kin of Hungarians in Nazarbaev's Kazakhstan, or Erdoğan's Turkey.

Despite the fact that Viktor Orbán champions *illiberal* democracy as a model to follow since delivering his 2014 speech at Băile Tușnad (Transylvania), we suggest to (a) apply the concept of *anti-liberalism* to portray the fundamental principle of his "Frankenstate" (Scheppelle 2013); and (b) dispute the democratic nature of this creature.⁸ In our opinion, Fidesz ideologues who contend that democracy must be cleansed from its liberal prerequisites are not committed democrats who happen to dislike liberalism or who try to find a comfortable ideological habitat for democracy to secure its survival,

but rather devoted anti-liberals and *modern volens* non democrats or even anti-democrats. As militant purifiers, they seek to establish an allegedly democratic regime without firm constitutional checks and balances, emptying it of popular participation, and paving the way for authoritarian rule.

The concept of "illiberal democracy" usually is employed to describe governments that, to put it simply, play the democratic game without meeting requirements of the rule of law such as separation of powers or freedom of speech.⁹ Reflecting upon the thought experiment by Fareed Zakaria (1997) who suggested "illiberal democracy" to denote such new hybrids, many of our authors pointed to the tension between the two components of the term.¹⁰ In Zakaria's view, illiberal democracies may demolish liberal institutions restricting popular sovereignty without jeopardizing free and fair elections. One may challenge this proposition by asking simple questions: Why would those who decide to get rid of legal constraints be ready to remain under control by the *demos* that can eventually turn its back on them? Why would they refrain from election fraud if they can get away with it unpunished? Finally, provided that for some reason "illiberal democrats" opt for retaining a half-liberal constitution, why would they not interpret it by means of the other half and occupy the remaining institutions of checks and balances with the help of their parliamentary majority?

The reader finds the answers in the nine-year history of the SNC, curbing democracy by means of a purposeful deactivation of liberal constitutionalism. The scenery of a democratic game may have remained on stage, but why mistake simulated democracy for a real one? Furthermore, the concept of illiberal democracy is unduly narrow because it focuses almost exclusively on the political components of such regimes. What happens if a politically illiberal government does not reject some key elements of *economic* liberalism? If one insists on the paradigm of hybridization, the SNC may be regarded as a dual-hybrid mixing political anti-liberalism with *some* economic freedom and the dire straits of simulated (depleted) democracy. To be sure, the rule of law is not immune to simulation either. The determination of Fidesz to maintain a modicum of constitutionalism by writing a Fundamental Law and engaging in "lawfare," that is, packaging arbitrary/anti-constitutional government decisions in laws passed by "their" parliament, are telling examples of pseudo-liberal governance.

Reality or appearance? Reason or rhetoric? Sincere belief or cynical cover discourse? Words or deeds?—questions like these have been tormenting analysts at least since Orbán started to talk about his "peacock dance" in the EU and prompted observers to pay attention to his real moves rather than to what he was saying.¹¹ Be as it may, we do not consider these questions particularly productive in understanding the workings of the SNC. Rather than speculating whether Orbán and his close associates said something sincere

or not, we regard their utterances as speech acts that may matter at certain points and have an "illocutionary force." At the same time, we have done our best to explore the key ideas, norms, values, etc., that transpire from the real world of the SNC, even if they are unintended consequences of the spur-of-the-moment decisions of Fidesz, especially its leader.

UNDER THE SPELL OF A ONE-MAN SHOW

Our research group sought to nuance the popular assumption of Orbán's dominant role played in designing and operating the System of National Cooperation. As our research (and the SNC) evolved, we could not help but ask how such a privileged position could be sustained after much of the economy as well as key fields of social and cultural life had been occupied by Fidesz, and Orbán became surrounded by an oversized ruling elite, the "SNC knights" as Hungarians call them sarcastically. Why does the "king" not fall victim to strife among the oligarchs? Or does he? Thus far, Orbán has succeeded in crowding out his rivals,¹² checking his own appointees, disrupting hostile conspiracies within his party, neutralizing dissenters, and producing very few dissidents. This was already the case during the eight years from 2002 to 2010 he spent in opposition when he possessed neither as much carrot to appease the potential rebels nor as much stick to compel them as today.¹³

The image of strong internal cohesion of the regime, however, tends to deceive observers. It obscures sharp conflicts among oligarchs, pressure groups, generations, industries, regions, and the like, and creates the impression that the supreme leader wins all fights if they nevertheless break out behind the scenes. In our view, the metaphor of a "one-man show" alluding to autocratic rule prevented the analysts from recognizing a series of cases in which Orbán had to accept compromises to ensure his own political survival. True, he proved able to turn defeats into victories by escaping ahead masterfully and painted a glorious picture of his own invulnerability. Much of current "Orbanology" inside and outside of Hungary accepts that picture and thereby tacitly contributes to the leader's self-celebration. His heroic story goes like this: yes, the SNC is me, I am the creative mind behind this authentic design that is bound to stay with Hungarians for decades, at least as long as Admiral Horthy and General Secretary Kádár governed the country.

Orbán's unsurpassable contribution to the SNC has prompted quite a few critical analysts to find literary analogies and describe the regime's process of construction as an *Entwicklungsroman* whose main character sells his soul for power, money, and prestige. In the Budapest circles of liberal-minded intellectuals, Stendhal's Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black* or Jean-Paul Sartre's Lucien Fleuriot in *The Childhood of a Leader* are often referred to in

this respect, while Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician* is cited to stress Orbán's charismatic properties and William Shakespeare's *Richard III* to show his determination "to prove a villain." Similarly, statesmen of all kinds (from Nero to Napoleon to Hitler and Stalin) and political thinkers (from Machiavelli to Carl Schmitt) are evoked to demonstrate his instinctive ability to grab power and frantic insistence to hold on, not to mention his talent in defending dubious moves as an amateur philosopher who loves to meditate on the "decline of the West" or to brag about Hungarian "national character." His addiction to fighting with the enemy brings many of his political opponents to a lay diagnosis that Orbán balances on the edge of mental illnesses characteristic of dictators such as depression, megalomania, paranoia, and even schizophrenia.

On a similarly profane level of constructing Orbán's psychological profile, one encounters a plethora of character traits in the critical media, in recollections of fellow-politicians, or in popular jokes, which admit his diligence, willpower, intelligence, tactical finesse, intuition, etc., but reprimand his arrogance, cynicism, power hunger, disloyalty, sneakiness, and hypocrisy. In explaining that mix, even high-brow intellectuals on the liberal left go back to the village boy of short stature who was born into a communist middle-class family, oppressed by his father, and became a bully. According to this narrative, he wanted to become a world-class soccer player and cherished *macho* values (comfortable in men's company like his mates in the college dormitory who would become the bosses of Fidesz).

Switching from common-place psychology to elementary social anthropology, Orbán is often depicted as an instinctive politician who has an excellent ear for the *vox populi*; an ear that has been trained in the countryside, that is, "deep Hungary." He not only manipulates public opinion but also borrows from it. The scenarios of his major populist offensives could have been written in the stands of the soccer field or the pubs of his home village, Felcsút.¹⁴ Hating the ex-communist rich, despising Roma, raising suspicion toward urban intellectuals, Eurocrats, bankers, lawyers, judges, students, feminists, foreigners, and Jews¹⁵; honoring physical (especially agricultural) work; respecting large families and the elderly; blaming the poor for their poverty; expecting free education and healthcare from the state; preferring personal/kinship relations to institutions; tolerating rule bending; paying lip service to religion but ignoring its moral values and opting for a nationalized version of denominational identity; longing for historical justice for Hungarians and the return of a strong paternalist leader; lumping together criminals, refugees, drug users, and homosexuals; demanding their exemplary punishment, etc.—these are just a selection of some motifs of the voices at the regulars' table.

Orbán's favorite themes were deeply rooted in the *Weltanschauung* of the Hungarian lower and middle classes (or, in another terminology, of the

"post-peasant"¹⁶ society) both under Horthy and Kádár. By the mid-1990s, Orbán realized that the allegedly "cold," rule-based project of the liberals could not win the hearts and minds of citizens, especially in the provinces. To put it simply, he supposed that Hungarian voters regard politicians as thieves, parliament as a hotbed of corruption, and expect their would-be leader to distance himself from representative democracy as such. The permission to distill their traditional fruit brandy *pálinka* at home, one of Orbán's first government decrees in 2010, certainly made his own project warmer – a rare example of populist liberalization.

This blend of psychologizing, moralizing, and pathologizing offers juicy bits and pieces for an explanation of the emergence of the SNC, even if some of them rest on anecdotal evidence. They usually serve to substantiate why two formative turns took place in Orbán's political career. The first was a U-turn when he renounced his liberal conviction in the mid-1990s. The second was "only" a gradual shift from illiberalism to explicit anti-liberalism after his election defeat in 2002. To put it in moral terms, Orbán first betrayed liberalism to embrace moderate conservatism, then proved disloyal to the latter as well and started drifting to the populist right on his way to a hard authoritarian rule bordering on autocracy.¹⁷ Certainly, in clarifying these turns one cannot help discovering personal motives such as the desire for upward mobility or the Freudian drive to "kill the liberal father figures" (former dissidents active in the Alliance of Free Democrats who were eventually compressed into the figure of George Soros, an erstwhile supporter of Fidesz). Moreover, some thorny questions arise about his political persona. Let us cite just three questions frequently asked by Orbán's critics: Was Orbán a "true" liberal back in 1989 or was his current authoritarian stance already apparent at that time? Are his *habitus* and ideological reflexes not quintessential products of socialization under Kádár (and, indirectly, Horthy), predestining him to become a leader who reminds observers of Don Corleone in the *Godfather* movies? Did the traditional cleavage in Hungarian political culture between the "urbanites" (Westernizers) and the "populists" (nativists), which does not tolerate go-betweens, push him out of the liberal camp, providing a sufficient explanation for Orbán's *volte face* and successive radicalization?

Why deny that we cannot always release ourselves from the cage of such quick-fix interpretations? However, we fear that, if glued together, they may offer an overarching narrative that reinforces the thesis of linear evolution spelled out by Orbán himself. When his critics use the image change from a slim, bearded and restless young rebel to a fat, middle-aged bureaucrat in suit and tie, they willy-nilly approve Orbán's tale. He would agree: yes, it was a long way, but we proceeded straight ahead and managed to leave our youthful peccadilloes of liberalism, atheism, and multiculturalism behind and became exemplary national conservatives.

To sum up, our research group wanted to understand the Orbán regime rather than Orbán himself and refused to detect "what Orbán *really* had in mind" at various stages of constructing his regime.¹⁸ Instead of testing whether the high-sounding, almost messianic phrases about nation, religion, or family come from his heart or are well-selected elements of a pragmatic and/or cynical discourse, and rather than pointing to the discrepancy between the two with moral indignation, we studied what has been happening before our very eyes: the co-evolution of a regime and its language. Ironically, pragmatism is not incompatible with a strengthening conviction to having a mission. Pragmatic-minded authoritarian leaders begin to dig their own graves at the point when they fall in love with their decisions that brought success, and mistake *Realpolitik* for their calling. Orbán currently thinks he has secured sufficient control over Hungarian society to assume the role of a leader of the "Nationalist International" in Europe. In savoring his fortune "earned" while in government, he hopes to receive a few honorable pages in the future's history books as a hero of a regime named after him.

THE SNC: A SYSTEMATIC MOVE TOWARD THE SYSTEM?

In reflecting upon the Orbán regime, a great many analysts walk into a trap set by the regime's master narrative about its own authenticity as well as institutional and ideological consistency. Still, who could blame social scientists or journalists for being prone to discover, in addition to many dozen regime types, an allegedly brand-new one supported by a Grand Design: a type that did not emerge accidentally and seems sustainable, deserving the illustrious label of "system." In this way, a monument to the SNC and Orbán has been erected, either by praise or denigration.

The wish to elevate an ordinary change of government in 2010 to the level of a major systemic turn was underpinned by the simple rhetorical technique of calling it a revolution. Accordingly, regime building began with a "revolution in the polling booth," to use Orbán's pet neologism devised to prove the popular legitimacy of the SNC. Also, it makes no sense to waste time on discussing the terms "national" and "cooperation" in detail, knowing that these familiar speech acts aim to portray the regime, implementing extremely divisive policies and causing unprecedented ideological polarization, as an embodiment of an enormous joint effort and an unquestionable common cause.¹⁹ Both are collectivist concepts cultivated by both national socialism and communism. "National" initially had been replaced by the adjectives "public," "social," or "socialist" in the communist discourse but was rehabilitated later in the form of "national specifics of

building socialism." As regards "cooperation," it alludes to mutuality and social unity. Taken together, they draw on interwar terminology (cf., Musolini's "national collaboration" and corporatism in general) without completely obliterating the memory of the Kádár era. The expression "national cooperation" crowded out the originally liberal-sounding catchphrase "civic Hungary" from the official rhetoric of Fidesz. The adjective "civic" (in Hungarian: *polgári*, invoking the German *Bürger* rather than the French *citoyen*) was added as a supplement to the name of Fidesz in 1995 to stress its anti-communist provenance. Today, it remains there but even steadfast Orbánites do not take it seriously.

Nevertheless, the new discourse is not empty in three crucial respects: it has managed to strengthen the feeling of *revolutionary* grandeur and *national* togetherness against *ethnic aliens*, which, in turn, contributes to a high level of voters' *cooperation* with the ruling party during elections. Between elections, cooperation is tantamount to a mix of passive acceptance, fear, and moderate satisfaction in large parts of society but Fidesz has been able to convert this "non-resistance" into massive electoral support. Does the well-oiled machinery of this conversion account for the "S" in SNC?

No doubt about it, an intricate mechanism of institutions and policies ranging from solemnly phrased anti-liberal constitutional provisions through repeated waves of a cultural revolution all the way down to gerrymandering and petty election fraud has been constructed by Fidesz to achieve the conversion. One might call it a kind of "electoral success generator." Probably, in 2010 Orbán did not recognize fully that such a mechanism only could promise success if it not only relativized and downgraded but also abandoned essential elements of liberal democracy. However, caught by the whirlpool of power politics, the Fidesz rhetoric of a "new conquest of Hungary" grew into a systematic institutional change that is still on the road to totalization. Bluntly put, the Orbán regime is systematically moving toward a System (with a capital "S"). To avoid misunderstanding, the SNC hopefully does not aim at a Big Brother-like total control of society, but "genetically" it can hardly stop expanding in the long run.²⁰ Therefore, it is exposed to institutional overstretch, blustering promises it may be unable to keep, and a glut of its cultural revolutionary mobilization.

Learning from the fall of his first government, Orbán's primary goal was to develop a political *perpetuum mobile* that would work, after the first push, as a coherent entity for a long time. While coining the term "national cooperation," he did not make great efforts to define the nature of the regime to be established and its place among the emerging varieties of capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. (It was symptomatic that "capitalism" metamorphosed into a swear word in Fidesz discourse and was replaced by "social market economy" and later by "work-based society.") The Young Democrats

saw one thing crystal clear: what is *not* to be done once in power to avoid repeating the suicide strategies of the preceding post-1989 governments (including their own) and make the new regime unshakable.

Prior to 2010, one heard a lot from the Fidesz ideologues about the corruption, incompetence, and chaotic governance of their opponents who were depicted as vicious agents of an international neoliberal conspiracy and, at the same time, as natural heirs of communism. They also were accused of maintaining close contacts to both Brussels and Moscow, and ignoring the career of national independence and the religious traditions of Hungarians. The analysts could thus safely predict that Orbán's regime would be more stable, nation-, and church-oriented and less open to the West than its predecessor, at least in words. A constitutional *coup d'état* (Vörös 2014) was not in sight, but today, with the wisdom of hindsight, one can better understand the practical meaning of some of Orbán's pompous phrases formulated before the victory in 2010, invoking the spirit of the "tyranny of the majority": "we have to win only once but big," "the Parliament works also without an opposition," "there is life outside the European Union," and so on. One could detect the early symptoms of this attitude already under the first Fidesz government between 1998 and 2002.²¹ Nevertheless, the possibility for the new regime to choose an openly anti-liberal course in 2010, and underpin it with a new constitution, could only be forecast if one projected the strengthening of Orbán's position within Fidesz upon the entire political system of the country. Yet, what he did was a sheer emulation of how other would-be authoritarian politicians used to seize power: to put it briefly, by conquering their party with the help of its apparatus and friendly oligarchs, then conquering the state with the help of the party, and finally conquering society with the help of the party state.

Along these lines, we posit that Orbán and Fidesz focused on the seizure of power, the crafting of institutional guarantees of immunity to resistance thereafter, and relied on the classical approach of *on s'engage et puis on voit* (as far as the substance of what they consider a "good society" (let alone "good capitalism") was concerned. Learning from the "mistake" of the first Orbán government, namely, that it did not demolish the opposition completely in terms of its financial and legal capabilities, and from the permissive stance of the socialist-liberal coalition that allowed Fidesz to prosper in opposition, Orbán entered his second term of government in 2010 with a meticulous plan to marginalize his opponents in order to bring about a TINA ("There Is No Alternative") situation. However, this plan was not limited to switching off the money taps of the opposition parties, making disloyal civil servants redundant, or occupying the public media. It was based on fundamental lessons learned since Fidesz left the liberal camp in the early 1990s.

Recognizing the enormous collectivist and nationalist potential within the popular frustration with post-communist liberalization, and discovering a

market niche in the political playing field, which emerged due to the incompetence of the center- and far-right parties, Fidesz decided to enfranchise and modernize the constituencies of these parties, and thereby steal their show. Orbán and his colleagues framed Fidesz's discourse, like most postmodern populists,²² by fabricating a blend of formerly leftist and rightist agendas. Accordingly, the Young Democrats combined civic and statist, nationalist and pro-European, social-liberal and conservative, secular and religious, etc., language depending on the daily requirements of *Realpolitik*, and, at least in the beginning, carefully avoided leaving the middle for the far-right. The "anything goes" approach—culminating in a double- or triple-faced (or amorphous) public identity, which, for example, allowed Fidesz leaders to be anti-communist and anti-liberal at the same time—offered the party enormous flexibility in its struggle for power.

Since 2010, the Young Democrats have built a huge propaganda machinery to assassinate the character of their opponents and spread conspiracy theories and "alternative facts" (often fabricated in Moscow) by the dozen. Meanwhile, they have never ceased to monitor the real norms and values of Hungarians. The rules of thumb emerging from the repeated surveys included: abandoning the increasingly unpopular "liberal" label, camouflaging elitism by a populist discourse, drawing on the collectivist legacy of communism and the popular demand for security versus freedom, hiding austerity measures, and rejecting the majoritarian position of foreign capital but making concessions to some of its powerful representatives. The nurturing of domestic capitalism was to be combined with a tight control of new oligarchs to prevent them from capturing the party and/or the state. The party and the state, in turn, were to be controlled closely (by severe punishments for dissidence), and political allies were forced into a subordinate position with no real power but the reception of symbolic compensation, making it impossible for them to create an alternative power center. A sharp dividing line was to be drawn between government and opposition in order to avoid fraternization between dissenters in the governing party and any oppositional group. In turn, the concept of the "central field of force" implied tolerating and even supporting weak opposition parties on both the left and the right, with the condition that they do not join forces against Fidesz.

Rather than addressing the whole population, Orbán realized that less than one-half of actual voters in the Hungarian electoral system is more than enough to win elections with a constitutional majority, provided that the other half is fragmented. To achieve this, the party had to stand on strong, independent financial pillars and possess its own media. The propaganda was to be focused on the *Lebenswelt* and value system of the countryside and to pay special attention to the Hungarian communities in neighboring countries. Rather than promoting good governance and pursuing a common good, the

Fidesz administration had to penetrate all levels of power: infiltrating local governments, public media, judiciary, and police, as well as creating its own informal paramilitary groups. Rule of law gradually gave way to "rule by the law," exploiting loopholes in the legal system as a means to the end of defeating the enemy and weakening checks and balances. This implied a reduction of democratic procedures to the electoral process and a number of symbolic but uncontrollable manifestations of popular sovereignty in the form of "national consultations."

Many of the above rules of thumb resulted from two large-sample, real world experiments initiated by the Young Democrats in opposition. The first was a robust campaign to organize a broad network of so-called "civic circles", which protected Orbán from the revenge of his party colleagues for losing both the 2002 and 2006 elections. He checked, with success, whether he could launch and control a new social movement backing or perhaps replacing the party (and if need be, parliamentary democracy as such) and flirted with the idea of direct democracy connecting the strong leader with enthusiastic and/or obedient citizens without political mediation. The second initiative aimed at experimenting with extra-parliamentary (plebiscitarian) techniques in two steps: while in 2004 Fidesz lost the referendum on citizenship to be given to Hungarians beyond the border, in 2008 it won the so-called social referendum that helped block the partial marketization of higher education and healthcare and dealt a final blow to the reforms of socialist prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. The results of these experiments fed into two massive electoral campaigns in 2014 and 2018, promising the reduction of utility prices and fencing out refugees, respectively, bringing landslide victories to Fidesz. Orbán learned gradually that by cleverly mixing a reliance on acquisitive attitudes with primordial fear, as well as magnifying these with brand-new techniques of aggressive manipulation, his party could exert a vast influence on the citizenry. Nevertheless, Orbán's ruthless brain-washing and intimidation should not be mistaken for charisma. In our view, he has always been a sober political analyst, a stone-hearted commander, and a lucky gambler rather than a magician.

How would a program focusing on a comprehensive victory over the "evil forces" of "liberal-bolshevism" crystallize into a new social system? How do the above rules of thumb determine the logic of constructing the SNC? Observers tend to avoid asking these questions. Instead, they often compete to find the most adequate (and stunning) definition of the regime and suggest willy-nilly that it has achieved a level of completeness, which calls for a special designation. Most of them agree that the regime can no longer be characterized as liberal but think the time has yet to arrive to stop calling the SNC some sort of democracy. They are inclined to attach qualifiers to the words "democracy" and "authoritarianism" (e.g., populist democracy,

Führerdemokratie, electoral authoritarianism, externally constrained authoritarianism) in order to dull their edge, or they simply allude to the hybrid character of the regime.

Such adjectives have been mushrooming because analysts feel—reasonably so—that the Orbán regime cannot be classified by means of conventional ideal types of “liberal democracy” and “totalitarian dictatorship,” which were widely used during the Cold War to express the opposition of two distinct polities and the victory of the former over the latter. They also are aware of the fact that in Hungary an agonizing authoritarian (rather than totalitarian) dictatorship was replaced by a nascent—and consequently ambiguous and rudimentary—version of liberal democracy after 1989, and the process of replacement suffered from repeated backlashes even before 2010. Hence, the assumption of hybridity did not come as a surprise to them. Furthermore, depending on how one defines the four main terms under scrutiny (i.e., liberalism, democracy, authoritarianism, and dictatorship), it has not been difficult to discover some traces of liberalism and democracy in the SNC and claim that the regime has not fulfilled all major criteria for authoritarian dictatorship. Those who sympathize with Fidesz refuse to think about the latter: for them even the assumption that Orbán is on the road to become an anti-democratic leader (let alone an autocrat or a tyrant) is tantamount to lese-majesty (Teller 2014). Those, however, who are convinced that he had embarked on that road long ago are left with the thankless task of locating the SNC in a grey zone between the two ideal types.²³

Thus, an impressive list of designations has arisen over the past couple of years. To limit ourselves to Hungarian authors, we enumerate here the most influential labels so far: autocracy, liberal autocracy, post-communist mafia state, post-communist neo-conservatism, mutant/soft fascism, neo-communism, neo-bolshevism, neo-feudalism, semi-feudalism, externally constrained hybrid regime, hybrid counter-revolutionary regime, managed democracy, semi-democracy, totalitarian democracy, plebscitarian leader (Führer) democracy, competitive/electoral authoritarianism, informal national autocracy, illiberal democracy, party-state regime, neoliberal authoritarianism, semi-authoritarianism, soft authoritarianism, tribalism, cleptocracy, right-wing populism, political capitalism, crony capitalism, managed national/state capitalism, neo-patrimonial/prebendal capitalism, rent-seeking capitalism, post-communist neo-conservatism, elitist/paternalist populism, patronage/clientelist democracy, etc.²⁴ The fact that many of these concepts are oxymoron-like constructions reminiscent of the old terms of *democradura* and *dictablanda* need not disappoint the reader. This stems from the logic of hybridization and results in many original discoveries from which historians may learn a great deal. Also, we would not blame some of the authors for ignoring consensual typologies (e.g., by confounding terms

such as autocracy, authoritarianism, and dictatorship) or mixing principal dimensions of classification (e.g., by jumping back and forth between the analysis of the SNC's type of capitalism, the regime's political institutions, and their ideological pillars). These seem to be unavoidable side effects of the exciting venture of theorizing an unexpected turnaround in the current history of Hungary. It is also understandable that even those authors who are convinced that the regime left the stage of liberal democracy behind long ago do not prefer to call Orbán a dictator because they want to reserve the notion for leaders such as Putin and Erdoğan; moreover, they do not want to place him in the same rubric where communist autocrats from Lenin to Kádár used to reside. However, it would be a pity if the aforementioned inquiries got stuck in this assumptive phase of research even if the Hungarian authors here do not lag behind their foreign colleagues in inventing catchy designations and formulating inspiring working hypotheses.²⁵

Having said that, a deeper insight into the evolutionary traits of the System of National Cooperation would be desirable.²⁶ It is not enough, we believe, to state that the regime has not (yet) turned to full-blown dictatorship, tyranny, despotism, or “totalitarian” rule, a notion carrying a heavy historical burden in Central and Eastern Europe.²⁷ Many observers think that there is a tipping point where the regime will eventually change (or has already changed) from liberal democracy to a kind of authoritarian rule. They make a scrupulous search for particular decisions of the Orbán government, which would serve as final evidence that a red line was crossed, beyond which the regime cannot be regarded as liberal and/or democratic any longer.²⁸ Deep down, they recognize that the SNC has followed an evolution from mere hybridity to softer or harder versions of authoritarianism, but they cannot cope with the problem that multiple red lines exist (some respected, some violated) and do not make significant efforts to identify the incentives driving the regime ahead.

The red lines are difficult to define at first. Although Orbán talks about a revolution, he portions out the anti-liberal measures flexibly, albeit incessantly, with only brief interruptions. His regime did not attempt to occupy society in one blow. Following a powerful first push to achieve irreversibility,²⁹ regime-building slowed down, and the Young Democrats occasionally decided to take a few steps back in order to move forward again. In a sense, the authoritarian attitudes of Fidesz have been frugal: the SNC unfolded as rapidly as its leaders deemed necessary and possible. For example, after having crossed a red line, say, by hampering democratic elections through a new law, the government postponed part of the *Gleichschaltung* of the judiciary; after conquering the lion's share of the media (another possible red line), no Chinese-style censorship has been introduced to control the remaining few independent media outlets; similarly, the legal criminalization of the NGO sector was not followed by wholesale police and judicial crackdown. Or.

to list some other major holes in the tissue of a potential, full-fledged hard authoritarian system, capital punishment, the reintroduction of compulsory military service, a ban on abortion, exiting the EU, etc., are still legal taboos (despite careful preparation by propaganda campaigns touching on them), and the political opponents of the regime, including journalists, do not sit in prisons or mental hospitals quite yet. By and large, violence is quiet, non-physical, and mobilization is managed through indoctrination and intimidation rather than brute force. In other words, there are still a number of red lines that have not been crossed.³⁰

Nonetheless, decisions to make "national cooperation" wider and deeper—which have not yet been taken due to internal or external resistance—were delayed rather than dropped for good. Today, experiencing a renewed attempt to tighten the screws of the regime after its third election victory, no sober observer would claim, as they did ten years ago, that it would be impossible even to imagine that show trials or political murders were organized by Orbán's party-state.³¹ Similarly, more observers than before contemplate that Hungary eventually might leave the EU.³² But why—against the hopes of the conservative supporters of the regime, who considered Fidesz's victory in 2010 a historical chance to return to "normalcy," and against the expectations of the remnants of the Kádárist middle class who saw Orbán as a champion of *étatist* welfare policies promising a kind of "goulash capitalism"—can the SNC not present its adherents with the joy of consolidation while bribing its opponents with the same?³³ We are afraid that, seen from a political science and legal perspective (and these are the disciplinary backgrounds of most analysts who strive to identify the regime),³⁴ it is not that easy to fathom its strong propensity for self-completion pointing toward autocracy.

However, if one resorts to an economic, historical, and sociological analysis, the reasons for the relentless perfecting of the SNC (i.e., creating a lasting and waterproof regime) will probably be less opaque. We have avoided constructing a "one-and-only" pigeon hole in which the Orbán regime can be placed and have not offered anything more concrete than a loose observation that in the long run the SNC aspires to move toward a hard authoritarian rule. Similarly, in a larger societal context, the regime was portrayed here as a sort of (interventionist) capitalism governed by a party-state and supported by an old-school conservative ideology.

In pondering on the possible destinations of the SNC, those approaches seem to us the most fruitful which rely on institutions and practices of societies in which personal dependence, reciprocity, kinship, gift, feudal hierarchy, loyalty, informality, etc., matter. To a large degree, these institutions and practices governed Hungarian semi-capitalism prior to state socialism and, having survived four decades of the latter (or even being reinforced during that period), appeared after 1989 as a fatal temptation for the new elites to

adjust to the *longue durée* tradition.³⁵ Of course, certain pieces of this tradition can be combined with cutting-edge political techniques of mobilization and manipulation that may blur their true origin. Nevertheless, very little is known about the nature and process of re-feudalization (re-traditionalization) at various levels of Hungarian society.³⁶ Will it produce relatively stable *Stände* (estates) in the Weberian sense, an ongoing rivalry of oligarchs, or a combination of the two? Will the ruler be able to overpower them and develop a strong state following a patrimonial/prebendal scheme? If he will, is it likely that the state will operate that scheme through a mafia-like (or even tribal) organization led by the ruler's extended/adopted family that can substitute or employ the governing party? Would it still make sense to speak of a party-state in that case? As re-feudalization is contingent on a central redistribution of property, how peaceful can that process be after the "commons" and the "booty" have been allocated among the regime's supporters? How will such a neo-traditionalist regime be able to survive in a European or global capitalist environment?

In a sense, the initial plan to organize Fidesz around and by Orbán as a closed and disciplined group of a few selected professional politicians who are ready to engage in shady business deals and dubious political alliances was defensive. The Young Democrats were convinced that the only way to defeat what they considered (not entirely without foundation) the "liberal-bolshevik mafia"³⁷ in political competition was to emulate the behavior of the latter, but to make it more professional and less hesitant. This became a major determinant of the party's strategy in the subsequent decades. Below, we will recapitulate the main phases of establishing this organizational model and how its architects checked its feasibility. By 2010, the model proved extremely successful, and the election victory in that year, after two defeats in a row, silenced the few remaining skeptics within the party. However, even if the crash of the arch-enemy had not justified Orbán's strategy retroactively, he would not have had another model to offer. His "army"³⁸ was trained to conspire, fight, and invade, as well as introduce hierarchical rule and unconditional loyalty to the "occupied territories." This strategy was tested in all institutions in which Fidesz had a privileged position during the 1990s and 2000s—be it the administration of a city, a state-owned firm, the office of the president, the chief attorney, or the chairman of public television.

Following the first election victory in 1998—when Fidesz was far weaker than today—it had no other choice but to reconcile conquest with the rule of law, but it soon realized how vulnerable a regime becomes if it constantly must confront the power of an independent judiciary, central bank, media, and the like. Under such a system, Fidesz's former offenses (tax fraud, secret deals with the then governing party in the early 1990s, etc.) and

current corruption cases were exposed, and Fidesz's occupation of society was impeded. At this time, Orbán started dreaming of winning big, making a *tabula rasa*, and expanding the hierarchical structure of the party to a neo-feudal party-state to capture society. By 2010, he also learned that, in order to avoid anarchy caused by a rivalry among oligarchs close to Fidesz, he must retain the "single godfather" principle, display force, and go for some kind of an authoritarian solution.

A regime like this loses its meaning if it does not fill as much economic, political, and sociocultural space as possible. According to its internal logic, the ruler cannot stop moving: he'll lose his balance and fall from the saddle if he does not keep spurring his stallion forward. You need not necessarily regard him as paranoid, hysterical, or obsessed with the will to become a hegemonic leader. Given the SNC's prehistory, it is very likely that the regime also would have advanced systematically toward "perfection" and "eternity," with built-in incentives for totalization under a less ambitious ruler.

Why totalization? If applied in good harmony, the rules of thumb almost automatically result in a growing sovereignty of the supreme leader. In this sentence, the emphasis is on both sovereignty and its growth. The prerequisites of systematic escalation, ranging from the organization of a party of iron discipline and centralized (secret) financial operations to the absorption of smaller right-wing parties and the infiltration of high echelons of state administration prior to 2010 would not have urged Orbán to continue concentrating power thereafter if this endeavor had not been successful and accompanied by a whole series of populist promises. Success prompted Fidesz not to change course, whereas the promises made to its own elite and wider constituency accelerated its steps along that path. Maybe, if the party had not entered government right after the global financial crisis, it would not have felt such an urgent need and seen such a large window of opportunity to start dismantling the *Rechtsstaat*. However, Hungary's budget deficit and sovereign debt inherited from the previous government confronted the Young Democrats with a dilemma: either they accept tutelage by international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for cheap loans along with austerity policies that would prevent them from keeping their election promises (e.g., "no more restriction"), or they avoid sovereign default through balancing the budget internally by means of interventionist (in Fidesz's language, "unorthodox") techniques of income redistribution, such as levying special taxes on transnational companies and banks, confiscating private pensions, as well as by taking more expensive loans on the free market. Orbán decided to choose the second option,³⁹ even if he knew it could not materialize without violating constitutional rights such as private ownership, nondiscrimination in economic regulation, and independence of the judiciary, not to mention the neutrality of public media.

The nature of the 2010 takeover thus predetermined the path of the SNC leading to its Fundamental Law and its numerous amendments as well as to new laws governing elections, labor, media, and more: all the way down to the introduction and prolongation of a partial *Aszidome-ország* during and after the refugee crisis. It is particularly disturbing that all the ensuing limitations of human and citizenship rights were packaged in legal acts conveying the impression that the regime had not crossed the normal boundaries of the rule of law. In this sense, it was probably the parliamentary approval of the Fundamental Law in 2011 where the Young Democrats reached one of the most important points of no return away from liberal democracy, something barely noticed by Washington and Brussels as it was justified by a "constitutional majority" finally abrogating the "communist constitution."⁴⁰ (For example, the fact that the Fundamental Law does not contain the term "private property" did not alarm the Western observers.) Since then, the regime has rarely stopped marching on the "road to serfdom," no matter how one declares the consecutive stages and the potential destination of that road. In all probability, the top leaders of Fidesz long cherished the dream of crowning their anti-liberal turn with a new constitution in the future, and the coup-like enactment of the Fundamental Law promised a quick solution to the above dilemma. What had been just one of many instruments in their toolbox became *the* instrument of their choice, and it also proved successful.

They took a tremendous risk by opting for an "unorthodox" program of economic stabilization because it provoked much of their own constituency (cf., the seizure of private pensions or risking sovereign default). They could not have done so without paralyzing social resistance by radically constraining citizens' ability to organize strikes and initiate referenda, effectively stopping the Constitutional Court from rejecting government decisions, and turning in the media and its mission to inform citizens fairly and also present criticism. They could not have done so without playing on and reinforcing ideological cleavages within cultural and economic elites and gratifying their conservative and "nationally sensitive" supporters at the expense of their "cosmopolitan, liberal, leftist" opponents. Orbán trusted the lasting impact of the post-victory honeymoon. However, to play safe, Fidesz swiftly passed a new and extremely biased election law—another point of no return. The SNC was anticipated in the history of Young Democrats by twenty years of preparation including a repeated redesigning (and radicalization) of their project and accumulating organizational strength through piecemeal engineering,⁴¹ learning by doing (and a bit of reading) as well as a good portion of improvisation and pure chance. In other words, Fidesz diligently did its homework for the course on "how to stage an anti-liberal revolution in a parliamentary democracy."

Beyond these points of no return, the process of totalization was animated to a large extent by populist pressures from below and by the vested interests

of the emerging economic and political elites of the SNC. The supreme leader became prisoner of his own promises that brought him to power, because he had to fill the mouths of both the “foot soldiers” at large and the SNC knights (distributing money, jobs, prestige, or—if these were lacking—religious faith, historical justice, national dignity, or the illusion of security). Meanwhile, he had invested so much energy in the construction of the regime that he could not afford the risk of slipping on a banana peel. Thus, Orbán has done his best to cover even the smallest holes in the regime’s armor. Repeated amendments of the Fundamental Law (which was said to be firm like granite by Orbán in 2012) over a few years are good examples.

GLOBAL DYNAMICS AND LOCAL PECULIARITIES

Originally, Orbán had little ambition beyond ruling Hungary. In a way, it was the disapproval by the European Parliament and the Commission of his emerging regime in the early 2010s that pushed him to place his agenda in a transnational frame but, even then, he was unable to position the SNC on the global map. The main ideological reference that he could present was anti-communism that earned him the sympathy of Western liberal and conservative politicians socialized during the Cold War. The situation changed around 2014 when Orbán started experimenting with a new theme, migration, as Hungary’s main external threat. Initially, this was not taken seriously either in Hungary or in Europe since the country hardly was a target of immigration. However, the government had a long-term goal; it systematically heated the xenophobic mood of the public by creating its first propaganda campaign attacking foreigners who had allegedly come to crowd out Hungarians from the job market, rape women, and spread lethal diseases. The escalation of the refugee crisis in 2015 (Juhász, Hunyadi, and Zgut 2015) elevated Orbán’s position dramatically.⁴² The danger of a humanitarian catastrophe eventually triggered Angela Merkel’s reaction to open Germany’s borders. The spectacular nationalist performance by Orbán—in particular, erecting a fence on the Serbian border—earned him wide recognition on the right, including members of the EPP. Notably, he became a key reference in Germany as the Christian Social Union and the emerging radical right began to challenge Merkel’s *Willkommenskultur*.

The anti-EU radicalization of Russian politics following sanctions leveled against the country in response to its occupation of Crimea in 2014 coincided with Orbán’s growing conviction about the impotence of European political elites. As a consequence, he sought political and economic support from all geopolitical actors (especially China, Russia, and Turkey) who seemed to offer an alternative to the EU. In addition, he made efforts to be accepted among the Central Asian Turkic nations, overemphasizing family ties and

stressing that Hungarians feel more at home among these peoples than in Europe. The “Eastern opening,” as it was called by Fidesz, was inserted into a geopolitical master plan that evoked a late-nineteenth-century Hungarian imperialist narrative (see Kállay 1883). From this doctrine, Orbán borrowed the idea of promoting Hungary to Eastern partners as an outpost of their interests in Europe (i.e., as a Trojan horse) rather than acting as an emphatic Westernizer. The open identification with Russian geopolitical interests (most obviously in the case of blocking common EU and NATO policies toward Ukraine) is meant more as backup in Hungary’s hardball with the EU.

For a long time, this strategy worked impeccably. With the help of his allies in the EPP, Orbán could counter political criticism about the SNC as nothing more than partisan attacks from the left-liberal corner—attacks that he began to describe as a conspiracy of pro-migration forces animated by George Soros. The first steps to demolish liberal democracy (through the Fundamental Law, the election law, the media law, the purging of the judiciary, etc.) were conducted on a discursive level, but they did not provoke tangible reactions from Western partners. The Hungarian government’s strategy of taking two steps forward and then backtracking a bit on minor issues proved very efficient.

While the report prepared by Rui Tavares on Hungary—which demanded the establishment of a new mechanism to ensure compliance by all Member States with the common values of the EU—was adopted by the European Parliament in July 2013,⁴³ its practical consequences were minimal. International reaction grew a little stronger when Orbán became an all-European symbol of breaking with the principles of liberal democracy, which brought him important allies (a motley crew including Steve Bannon, Nigel Farage, Janez Janša, Jarosław Kaczyński, Benjamin Netanyahu, Victor Ponta, Matteo Salvini, Horst Seehofer, Geert Wilders, and Miloš Zeman), but also exposed the danger of a populist chain reaction. It remains to be seen whether the recent decisions of the European Parliament (triggering Article 7 in September 2018, and the January 2019 endorsement of a draft law that makes it possible both to fund NGOs from EU sources in countries where civil society is under government attack and to block the transfer of EU funds to countries violating the basic values of the EU) will have a substantial impact in the future.

The growing fear of Orbánization also indicates that, while many of the regime’s above-mentioned features seem idiosyncratic, only a few of them are actually unique. From Macedonia to Japan, many countries underwent a renationalization of their public and cultural spheres in the past two decades; there is endemic corruption targeting European funds, especially in East Central and Southern Europe; the independence of the media is increasingly threatened not only in China and Russia but also in Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia; political leaders and parties rejecting liberal democratic traditions and practices emerged in countries ranging from Italy and Germany to Romania

and Estonia; questions of migration and national homogeneity have become central to the political discourse from Denmark and Sweden to Bulgaria and Greece; and post-factual political propaganda—such as Orbán's anti-Soros campaign, which cost more than the whole Brexit campaign including the expenses of the Leave and Remain camps taken together⁴⁴—is a pervasive political instrument from Russia to the United States.

We argue that the SNC could not have come into being and persisted without a complex transnational entanglement. The most spectacular example is offered by multinational companies that use their influence to attenuate political attacks against Orbán in exchange for preferential treatment in Hungary.⁴⁵ This matched the sympathy or inertia of European conservative politicians who considered Fidesz a pioneer in the opening of the center-right toward themes that have been taboo for a long time, such as ethnic purity, the return of religion to the public sphere, and the reinforcement of traditional family models and gender hierarchies. Rather than an instinctive country boor, as Orbán is often depicted in the Western media, he built his political persona carefully with the help of advisors such as the late Arthur J. Finkelstein, a master of negative campaigns.⁴⁶ There were many global factors that helped consolidate his power under profound ideological and socioeconomic insecurity when previously unquestionable norms of political behavior became much less consensual. A definitive shift toward chauvinistic discourse in Hungary followed Donald Trump's victory. Reacting to the "America First" slogan, Orbán happily stated that no universalist political projects, such as the vision of a "supranational Europe," are to be accepted in a new era of bilateral relationships.⁴⁷

At the same time, the Orbánist *combination* of all these developments and features is less typical. For instance, although some analysts still tend to consider Poland the prototype of new authoritarianism, the dominance of PiS can barely be compared to that of Fidesz: most Polish local governments are controlled by the opposition, free media stand on solid ground, economic elites are less dependent on state power, cultural institutions have broader autonomy, and judges resist the subordination of the courts to politics much more openly and efficiently than their Hungarian colleagues.⁴⁸ Similarly, while in many post-communist countries, such as Romania, certain components of Orbánism are evidently present on both the left and the right, they have not crystallized into a comprehensive regime comparable to the SNC.⁴⁹

HISTORICIZING THE SYSTEM OF NATIONAL COOPERATION: THE LONG MARCH AWAY FROM THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS

The Orbán regime can be better understood if put in a genealogical framework that traces its emergence from the early 1990s to the present as a series

of challenges and responses. Historicizing the SNC, that is, examining both its consecutive phases of development and major historical sources by focusing on the interplay of ideas and practices, is meant to contribute to rethinking its dominant interpretations.⁵⁰

By and large, the literature on Orbánism has been written from two—hardly compatible—historical perspectives. One of them links it to a *longue durée* liberal and democratic deficit that marks out Hungarian society as particularly predisposed to anti-Western resentment. The other perspective stems from a genuine surprise felt by many observers who expected such a backlash to occur not in Hungary but rather in the new democracies of Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, or Slovakia (held to be much less "consolidated" in the 1990s and carrying a heavier burden of communism), or in Poland in the mid-2000s. In contrast, we consider the current Hungarian regime neither accidental nor fatefully predetermined, but the result of a cumulative process of trial and error with a strong dependence on the cultural and political codes and expectations of a large part of the elite and the middle class as well as some of the marginalized groups of society. Rather than indicating a Hungarian *Sonderweg*, these attitudes show remarkable regional parallels (Trencsényi et al. 2018). Thus, the national specifics of the SNC are not acutely predetermined by Hungarian cultural or political traditions.

Nevertheless, as opposed to interpretations that start telling the story of the SNC with the "revolution in the polling booth" in 2010, one can find the deeper roots of the Orbán regime—stretching to (a) interwar Hungary, (b) the Kádár era, and, more recently, to (c) the first two decades of post-communist liberalization. The Horthy regime offered part of the post-1989 elite a vision that integrated anti-communism, irredentism, the symbolism of the Holy Crown, paternalism, national capitalism, feudal hierarchy, the myth of a strong-handed leader, law and order (without the rule of law), limited parliamentarism, state interventionism, welfare chauvinism, the "Christian middle class," a "neo-baroque" political aesthetics, geopolitical reliance on Germany, and a nostalgia for great-power identity. While emerging as oppositional streams under Horthy, ethno-populism (both on the left and the right) and fascism (on the extreme right, but occasionally filling the niches of the radical left) also belong to his regime's legacy, preserved sub-culturally during the long decades of communist rule.

In its turn, Kádárism left behind a somewhat Faustian "social contract" (offering relative existential security in exchange for depoliticization) that was often depicted in terms of "goulash communism," "soft dictatorship," or the "happiest barrack." It provided a mixture of market socialism and informal economy with wide-scale corruption, bargaining, and rule bending, flavored by a rather inclusive cultural policy, a broad stratum of intelligentsia cooperating with the regime, and increasing social differentiation with little

solidarity toward those who fell through the safety net of the communist "welfare state."

Importantly, both Horthyism and Kádárism were hybrid models (of capitalism and communism, respectively), including substantial post-feudal components and various ideas of finding a "Third Way." Although their *prima facie* ideological outlook may have diverged, there were many similarities between them in terms of governance cultures and popular attitudes embedded in social reflexes due to the long socialization/acculturation processes under the two regimes (lasting twenty-five and thirty-three years, respectively). Parallels notwithstanding, there is an obvious tension between the heritage of either Horthy or Kádár with regard to the status of nationalism and religion. The interwar authoritarian regime was outspokenly nationalist and focused on the revision of the Treaty of Trianon, whereas Kádárism was extremely cautious in raising national sentiment and reticent to instrumentalize the deteriorating conditions of Hungarians in neighboring states. At the same time, goulash communism had its own implicit national discourse combining the narratives of civilizational superiority and welfare chauvinism. Furthermore, with the public sphere opening up in the 1980s, many unprocessed national traumas, such as the cataclysm of Soviet occupation, the expulsion of Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, and the massacre of Hungarians in Vojvodina, just to mention three consequences of the Second World War, resurfaced. Thus, the anti-nationalist, technocratic, quasi-liberal attitude of the late communist political elite left a convenient space for anti-communist nationalism to emerge.

The politicization of religion and the sacralization of political rituals were central to the political culture of the Horthy regime. It called itself a "Christian-national course," drawing legitimacy from the anti-communist "counter-revolution" of 1919, which brought together Christian socialist, proto-fascist paramilitary, and traditional conservative forces. Kádárism obviously was unable to apply religion as a central point of reference, but from the 1960s onward it forged a tactical compromise with the "historical churches." In exchange for the political subservience of the clergy (including the cooperation of its leading members with the secret police), it offered them a relatively broad spiritual and institutional field of operation. Here, Fidesz combines the Horthyist and Kádárist legacies, turning, on the one hand, Christianity into a central instrument of justification and, on the other, subjecting the clergy to financial dependence and strong political control. By limiting the political autonomy of churches, the government also fights against any "leftist" influence coming from the Vatican after the election of Francis to the papal throne.

While the authoritarian legacies of the interwar right-wing and postwar communist regimes were challenged in 1989, there were heated debates about the nature of democratic and liberal values already during the 1990s. The

conflicts were fueled by the incessant culture war between the "urbanites" and "populists." The symbolic cleavages between these camps were formative of the emerging political system due to close links between these subcultures and the new non-communist parties. Nevertheless, most conservatives, liberals, and socialists were involved (under the pressure of pragmatic considerations) with implementing economic liberalization, and the long years of the so-called transformational recession and subsequent stabilization in the 1990s questioned their main promise: namely, that political freedom would necessarily lead to welfare. This considerably weakened the prestige of economic liberalism, which was not too high anyway because it had been identified with the "reform economists" (communist technocrats and their academic advisors) before the collapse of the old regime. Also, the popular frustration with a persistent gap between Hungary and "the West" (abruptly starting at the western border of the country) gave a standing invitation to populist political and moral entrepreneurs, including Orbán and other less successful contenders (e.g., József Torgyán from the post-agrarian Smallholders' Party and István Csurka from the extreme-right MIEP, the Party of Hungarian Justice and Life) who rejected the entire transition as a conspiracy of "alien" and "liberal-communist" elites to sell the country to the West.

While Fidesz was long hailed as a genuinely liberal party of the post-communist transition, it was not only cooperating but also competing with the Free Democrats (SZDSZ) that emerged from the "Democratic Opposition" born in the mid-1970s. The Free Democrats became a much more influential actor in the 1989 revolution than the Young Democrats, who were literally young and inexperienced at that time. Apart from the obvious generational difference, their sociocultural background also diverged—a fact often contributing to a simplistic explanation of why the two parties drifted away from each other.

SZDSZ leaders typically came from the urban intelligentsia (most of them from Budapest and many of them from families who had embraced communist ideology as Holocaust survivors), and despite their anti-communist thrust, they showed sympathy toward the reformist wing of the party-state. At the same time, most of the founders of Fidesz were born in the countryside, usually into middle class families, and moved to Budapest to complete their university studies. They became politicized under the wings of the "Democratic Opposition" during the mid-1980s, but surpassed their mentors in terms of anti-communist radicalism, activist fervor, and fresh political style.

Following the 1990 elections and the formation of the first non-communist government led by the national-conservative József Antall, Fidesz developed an ambiguous relationship with the two main political forces of the transition, namely, Antall's Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) and the Free Democrats. While cooperating with the latter in opposition—and disapproving the conservatism and clericalism of the government more harshly than the Free

Democrats—the leaders of Fidesz sought to distance themselves from both sides by stressing the futility of “culture wars.” Thus, it was unsurprising that in 1993, Fidesz came to reject any Popular Front-style cooperation between the liberals and the post-communist Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), both detecting in national conservatism the possibility of a radical right-wing turn. Orbán’s move toward MDF through a dubious business deal,⁵¹ and the fact that much of its revenue was transferred to the stone quarries of Orbán’s father, came as an embarrassment for many. The deal marked the beginning of a merger of economic and political spheres (Ferenczi 2015) in the Fidesz world, already well-known among the ex-communist half of the political sphere. The shift to the right, combined with efforts to create an economic *Hinterland*, eventually led to a substantial transformation of Fidesz. The departure of a number of liberal-leaning members from party leadership made it easier for Orbán to adopt an even more intransigent anti-communist strategy.

The 1994 elections, at which Orbán placed his party between the disintegrating right-wing government and its left-liberal contenders, dealt a serious blow to Fidesz that barely received enough votes to enter parliament. Meanwhile, MSZP gained more than half of the seats, the liberals came second, and the populist Smallholders became the strongest opposition party. After some hesitation, and following the advice of leading businesspeople, the liberals joined the government of Gyula Horn (a former moderate reform-communist with a murky past due to his participation in repressions after 1956), led by the hope to steer the socialists toward further liberalization. This move to the left opened up a niche for the Young Democrats to integrate some of the former supporters of SZDSZ who were convinced that their party betrayed its anti-communist agenda. Fidesz’s popularity grew steadily after the austerity package implemented in 1995 by Horn’s minister of finance, Lajos Bokros, whose resolute measures were rejected by Orbán as an attack on the middle class, which would undermine the future of young generations. This was the moment when Orbán realized that a rational policy of macro-stabilization promising welfare gains in the long run can be discredited by emphasizing its contribution to short-run welfare losses (Bauer 2000).

In 1998, Fidesz managed to defeat the socialist-liberal coalition, gaining many voters of national-conservative persuasion, but also former liberals who saw the Young Democrats as an alternative to the MSZP-SZDSZ coalition government ravaged by corruption scandals. The nationalist (occasionally anti-Semitic) overtones of Orbán’s election campaign were considered either as a tactical weapon to compete with the Smallholders or disregarded as accidental. The coalition government formed in 1998, which co-opted the Smallholders and was thus infected with the antics of violent ethnic-populist rhetoric, was usually credited with mainstream center-right policies

capitalizing on the—otherwise condemned—“neoliberal” accomplishments of the Bokros package.

Nevertheless, in retrospect, one discovers a number of indications about the direction Fidesz would take ten years later. The party recruited a group of government-friendly entrepreneurs who rechanneled part of the money acquired from public tenders to support the aim of building a solid political infrastructure around Orbán. The *grosso modo* moderate socioeconomic policies of the government were increasingly combined with a populist rhetoric accusing the previous administration of serving foreign capital instead of fostering a domestic entrepreneurial class. Parts of the legislative and judicial spheres were subordinated to the executive,⁵² the activities of the opposition were constrained, the “traditional” Christian churches enjoyed privileges, and the public media was hijacked with the help of the extreme right-wing party MIEP.

While initially the Young Democrats experimented with a quasi-republican discourse focusing on the concept of *Bürger*, they gradually recognized how limited the mobilizing power of such a notion was against a strong nostalgia for goulash communism and the actual lack of historical models for civic identification. Therefore, around 2000, in the wake of commemorating the millennium of the Hungarian state, the Orbán government started drifting toward ethno-nationalism and immersing its supporters in the “politics of history.” Ignoring the virtues of republicanism, the Holy Crown was moved from the National Museum to the Parliament, conferring an actual political function upon a relic. A similar symbolic investment was the establishment of the highly controversial House of Terror in 2002, a museum that was meant to justify the anti-communist zeal of the government,⁵³ targeting both the socialists and the former dissident liberals who allegedly conspired to steal the 1989 revolution. However, between 1998 and 2002, there was no talk about building a new “system.” The self-professed agenda of the first Orbán government was to “complete the post-1989 regime change.”

The year 2002 humiliated Orbán both politically and personally. He began the election campaign from a favorable position, at a moment of economic growth and with a country soon entering the EU, but he was defeated by a soft-spoken and colorless former communist technocrat, Péter Medgyessy, who was revealed, right after his victory, to have been a secret agent in the 1970s–1980s. Orbán refused to accept defeat and mobilized his supporters at mass rallies with fiery speeches against the “alien-hearted” socialists and liberals whose rule, he said, was illegitimate by default. At the same time, he reemerged as an organizer of “civic circles” supporting his own survival within Fidesz and reinforcing the infrastructure of the party while in opposition as well as creating preconditions for cultural hegemony (Gieszkovits 2017).⁵⁴

Orbán wrote his MA thesis (1987) on Polish anti-communist social movements in the 1970s–1980s, and his main point of orientation was Antonio Gramsci and the then fashionable theories of civil society (e.g., by Alain Touraine and Jadwiga Staniszkis). The civic circles thus presented a fascinating instance of Orbán's ability to recycle political ideas rooted in liberal democratic dissident culture in a completely different context. Another example was the discourse of Central Europe of the 1980s, used after 2015 against what Orbán described as the decadent, multicultural West. He offered a travesty of Milan Kundera's *Occident kidnappé*, which also bore a certain resentment toward Western political elites for having abandoned their Central European brothers and sisters to the clutches of the Soviet empire. In this way, Orbán combined anti-Western and anti-communist codes in an ingenious way (hence his recurrent rhetorical *topos* equating the "Brusselites" of the EU with the "Muscovites" before 1989).

While the civic circles followed the logic of civil society theories in many ways (prompting voluntary activism, creating parallel structures ranging from visual arts and journalism to viticulture and sports, etc.), their main goal was to challenge the institutions of liberal democracy. They can be characterized as a postmodern version of *totale Mobilmachung*, dividing the society into authentic Hungarians (who support Orbán) and all others, whose unwillingness to follow the leader labels them as "unpatriotic." The ethno-nationalist reconfiguration of political discourse also triggered a preoccupation with Hungarians outside the country.⁵⁵ After 2002, the Young Democrats demanded the introduction of dual citizenship for all Hungarians living in neighboring countries.⁵⁶ When they forced a referendum on this issue in 2004, the socialists launched a populist counter-campaign warning that dual citizenship would open the Hungarian job market to "twenty-three million Romanians." Although the referendum failed because of the number of participants fell below the stipulated quorum, it mobilized and hysterized Hungarians inside and outside the country, particularly in Romania, providing Orbán with enthusiastic support among social strata who normally had little interest in or information about party politics in Hungary (and with about 200 thousand votes from abroad after 2010).

Examining the transformation of Hungarian political culture after 2002, especially the eventual collapse of the party system consisting of a strong socialist and a center-right party, with an influential liberal party and some outlier national-populist formations,⁵⁷ one must not forget that in Hungary the years around the European accession were far from successful in socioeconomic terms. In 2002, the socialist-led government introduced what it culled a "welfare-oriented systemic change" that proved self-defeating as pay rises in education and healthcare severely burdened the budget while other measures of the administration did not provide long-term gains for most of the social groups

that considered themselves losers of the post-communist transition. Similarly, the incentives (initiated by Fidesz but maintained by the socialist-liberal coalition) for the middle class to take credit and purchase flats, cars, computers, and the like, which they could not afford during the post-1989 recession, produced a huge budget deficit rather than triggering economic growth.

To make things even worse, the advantages of the Hungarian economy as the most advanced in terms of liberalization increasingly were reduced by neighboring countries, especially Slovakia. They reached a level of stability, implemented a series of (neo-)liberal reforms (such as cutting corporate taxes and introducing a flat income tax) and offered Western investors more attractive deals. Despite economic development in Hungary, the growing budget deficit and indebtedness of the middle class created an impression of stagnation and supported Orbán's claim of the government's incompetence and the need for an elite change. Such was the context of the electoral campaign of 2006 where Orbán clashed with Ferenc Gyurcsány, a young and dynamic socialist prime minister adhering to the ideas of the Blairian "Third Way." Struggling with the statist/interventionist wing of his party, Gyurcsány and his circle focused on the mobile, pro-Western urban strata who demanded a more efficient government that stimulated entrepreneurship and, in general, a coherent program of modernization.

The results of the 2006 elections were very close: Fidesz lost mainly due to its failure to integrate the anti-government forces in one camp. (MDF was running on a separate ticket and got into parliament with the support of moderate conservative voters who disliked the socialist-liberal coalition but also sought to distance themselves from the populism of Orbán.) During a televised debate of the top candidates, an energetic Gyurcsány swept away the somewhat intimidated and incompetent Orbán. The latter concluded from the election defeat that in the future the Young Democrats must not allow a conservative but anti-Fidesz contender to run. Similarly, public debates before the election should be abandoned by claiming that competitors are morally unfit to join in fair dialogue. While Orbán faced post-election discontent within his party after the defeat, his nemesis came to his rescue as the socialist-liberal coalition created its biggest (self-induced) crisis. In order to persuade the leadership of MSZP to launch a comprehensive liberalization program, Gyurcsány gave a speech at a closed party conference in Ószöd at Lake Balaton, in which he admitted that the government lied "night and day" about the economic situation of the country. The speech, full of four-letter words, was leaked (by frustrated socialists or secret service agents working for Fidesz) and triggered mass protests. They culminated in October 2006 in violent clashes between the demonstrators and the police. The ensuing crisis reinforced the Orbánist discourse about the illegitimate nature of a government that commanded the police to beat up innocent citizens. It also extended

the popular basis of the right, going way beyond the middle-class dominated civic circles and recruiting social groups (like football hooligans) who had hitherto been outside of party politics. The protests hindered the planned reforms, and although Gyurcsány pushed through a number of unpopular measures to balance the budget and managed to attain some economic growth by 2008, the global financial crisis erased the benefits of these reforms, forcing Hungary to turn to the IMF for help.

Meanwhile, the Young Democrats were steadily broadening their own power network. At the 2006 local elections that took place right after the Ószöd scandal, they won almost the entire countryside; their candidate László Sólyom became president of the republic in 2005; they managed to keep their representatives in various multi-party boards (Constitutional Court, public media, central bank, state-owned enterprises, etc.), and reactivated their former appointees in important ministries, the office of the chief attorney, the army, and the police. Whether on purpose or not, Orbán followed the Leninist pattern of *dvoevolastie* and looked forward to scoring the long-awaited Big Victory. As a matter of fact, he could sit back and relax, particularly after the government lost the "social referendum" urged by Fidesz in 2008. The liberals subsequently disintegrated, and—with the help of insiders in the state administration loyal to Orbán—corruption cases against socialist bosses were unveiled nearly every week in the media controlled by the Fidesz oligarch Lajos Simicska.

The reconfiguration of global politics also contributed to the delegitimation of the left-liberal government. While culturally pro-Western, Gyurcsány adjusted his policies to the growing weight of Russia in the mid-2000s, especially in view of the strong dependence of Hungary on Russian energy supply. In contrast, Orbán was busy assuring U.S. and EU diplomats of his Atlanticist commitment. That he combined his anti-communist talk with ethno-nationalist tropes was glossed over by his Western partners as mere rhetoric. They rather focused on the fundamental question of who would gain larger influence upon the new member states of the EU: the East or the West. This, together with Gyurcsány's loss of face due to his "lie speech," created an auspicious moment for Orbán to present himself as a representative of the European center-right. His election campaign in 2010 was boosted by the active participation of Western conservative politicians. Since there was little discussion about Fidesz's platform, most voters had no idea that they actually supported a party willing to initiate a comprehensive change in the constitutional arrangements of the Republic of Hungary, a change that was devised ultimately to delete even the term "republic" from the citizens' vocabulary.⁵⁸

The 2010 elections—bringing 68 percent of the seats to Fidesz with 52 percent of the vote—humiliated the socialists, eliminated the liberals and the

centrist MDE, and gave rise to two anti-systemic parties, the extreme right Jobbik and the environmentalist LMP that located itself in the center as an economically anti-liberal movement respecting human and citizenship rights. The emerging political framework corresponded to Orbán's vision of the central field of force, placing Fidesz as a dominant actor between the discredited left and the deplorable extreme right. This strategy was coupled with an open shift to a decisionist understanding of politics, stressing that in the future the government must not be restrained by the fear that a strong opposition might turn the unpopular moves of the cabinet against it (like the Young Democrats had done for eight years). The planned configuration of power was expected to allow for more efficient governance and long-term planning. Whenever Orbán talked about the ideal of a "strong Hungary," he meant first and foremost a strong state. Rather than following a program of technocratic modernization, the concept of the central field of force was predicated upon historical examples, especially the Horthy regime, relegating its social democratic and fascist opposition to the background. One also can find analogies with the Kádár regime, in which sustaining hegemony implied a so-called two-front struggle against the nostalgic Stalinist and neo-Stalinist/Maoist ultra-left, on the one hand, and the national communist and revisionist/liberal "right", on the other.

The political transformation of the republic in 2010 was framed as an outcome of popular will (cf., "revolution in the polling booth") bringing forth a foundational moment for the new regime. Orbán decided to start his tenure by frontally attacking the inbuilt checks and balances of the liberal constitutional system that limited his government's power. In the beginning, the main battlefields were the judiciary, the media, and the financial sphere. The measures implemented (transforming the Constitutional Court by packing it with pro-Fidesz yes-men and severely constraining its competence, pensioning off leading judges, passing a new law limiting the independence of the non-government-supported media outlets, extending control over the banking system, eliminating the independence of the National Bank, etc.) led to an unheard of concentration of power. Each of these decisions were criticized by various EU bodies. However, Orbán's strategy of compartmentalizing the debate, focusing on minor technical details, pointing to the existing parallels of the contested measures in other European legal systems, and making a few tactical concessions, was successful. While his government did its best to find similar (in fact, usually insignificant) elements of not-quite-liberal regulation lurking in the constitutions of Western democracies to strengthen its position in a noisy international discussion, Orbán managed to silently but decidedly centralize, homogenize, and militarize the state apparatus as a whole without noteworthy resistance during the post-election state of grace.

INSTITUTING THE SYSTEM

Rhetorically, the Fundamental Law adopted in 2011 responded to the democratic deficit of the post-1989 order. The “Founding Fathers” of the post-communist transition amended the communist constitution of 1949 beyond recognition, but failed to exploit the symbolic opportunity of creating a new one. To be sure, the lack of a new constitution after 1989 was due to the consensualist policy of the socialist-liberal coalition that had a supermajority between 1994 and 1998 but, facing the resistance of the opposition, especially the Young Democrats, did not insist on writing a new constitution. The Fundamental Law broke with the activist interpretation of the constitution advocated by László Sólyom, former president of the Constitutional Court (and president of the republic between 2005 and 2010), who developed the concept of an “invisible constitution.” This was a self-regulating set of basic constitutional principles underlying the practice of the Constitutional Court after 1989, which circumvented the challenge of not having a fully-fledged new constitution. In contrast, the professed intention of the authors of the Fundamental Law was to create a permanent order, a *novus ordo saeculorum*, as it were, preventing the constitutional review of major executive decisions, and above all those concerning economic policy. This quest for permanence, manifested also in such grandiose projects as exhibiting decorated copies of the Fundamental Law in all public offices to celebrate Orbán’s “democratic *Machtergreifung*.”

In 2010, Fidesz broke with the stabilization policy of the expert government led by the socialist Gordon Bajnai in 2009–2010, which cooperated closely with the IMF and the EU. Orbán applied an ingenious method of political attrition described by Kim Lane Scheppele (2014) as selective austerity. Seemingly fitting in the European patterns of crisis management, it targeted institutions (in healthcare and social assistance as well as in cultural and educational spheres), the impoverishment of which produced less conflict in the short run than say, freezing wages or raising income taxes, and in many cases hurt the critics of government in person. “Unorthodoxy” was sold to the local and international public as a new way of anti-neoliberal economic thinking promoted by György Matolcsy, the “right hand” of Orbán.⁵⁹ As minister for economic affairs (later president of the National Bank), he advocated Keynesian-style state interventionism to raise employment and consumption, as well as accelerate export-led growth based on the “re-industrialization” of the country, initiated a bundle of protectionist policies to shelter “national capital,” prompted the renationalization of certain industries and banks, and promoted the establishment of corporatist institutions. Unorthodoxy was combined with measures that in other contexts would be described as

expressly neoliberal, such as introducing a flat income tax,⁶⁰ cutting welfare expenditure, and extending workfare.⁶¹

Frustrated with the fact that the economic survival of the Orbán government basically depended on Western demand for products manufactured in Hungary as well as EU transfers and American hedge funds that bought plenty of Hungarian state bonds, Orbán and Matolcsy sought to balance the country’s dependence by making use of the “Eastern wind.” Turning toward the East, that is, a rapidly developing part of the world as compared to the “Declining West,” was also motivated by political sympathy *vis-à-vis* anti-liberal regimes. Orbán’s new “Russophilia” is the best example. After 2010, he abandoned his suspicions about Vladimir Putin, developed close political and economic ties with Russia, and encouraged the freedom of movement that Russian oligarchs and spies enjoy in Hungary (constantly provoking its partners in the EU and NATO). In 2014, the new friendship culminated in a contract for a new nuclear power plant to be financed and built by Russia in Hungary, and later in the pathetically ambiguous approach taken by the Orbán government to Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Most observers considered these policies unsustainable and even self-destructive, but economic stabilization in Europe after 2012 and, primarily, the robust performance of German industry had a salutary impact upon the Hungarian economy that largely hinges on a number of German blue chip companies such as Audi, Bosch, Mercedes-Benz, and Siemens.⁶² Fortunately, for the Young Democrats, recovery also was promoted by three other—accidental—factors: an ample supply of credit on international money markets, falling energy and raw material prices, and an unexpected growth of remittances from Hungarians working abroad. Preferential deals (formal and informal) proved profitable for favored multinational companies, providing them with a promising economic environment, with the power of the trade unions broken and the protection of the workers’ interests minimized.⁶³ In exchange, they were ready to intervene in Orbán’s favor in the political arena.

Overcoming the crisis entailed a further invasion by the state into business life in strategic sectors,⁶⁴ which, in turn, contributed to the withdrawal of a number of foreign investors. After having suffered serious losses during the recession, they decided to clean their portfolios and were happy to sell their assets, accepting bids that were often well above the market price. This strategy was extremely successful in sectors like banking and media, where such transactions often were made by government-funded buyers.⁶⁵

Simultaneously, the government developed a well-designed mechanism for channeling EU funds to government-friendly companies.⁶⁶ This is how Fidesz exponentially strengthened the network of its own oligarchs. With the intimidation of entrepreneurs close to the socialists and their exclusion

from public investment projects by informal means, new vistas opened to create a "national bourgeoisie" that was planned to become a main pillar of the SNC. Nevertheless, while the procedures to funnel European money to Orbán's cronies (such as Lajos Simicska, István Garancsi, and Lőrinc Mészáros) have been obvious from the start, there has hardly been any intervention by European authorities to prosecute the private expropriation of funds. Sadly, Eurocrats closed their eyes over the paradoxical situation, in which a huge amount of EU money has been used to consolidate a regime that proudly rejects the principles of liberal democracy and challenges the Union as such day-by-day. What may explain the reticence to intervene is, besides the proverbial clumsiness of Brussels, that part of the funds coming from the EU is directly or indirectly channeled westward in the form of subsidies for foreign investors.

Another key sphere of selective austerity was social policy. Here again, the statist drive has phased out most non-governmental actors (for example, in homeless care) and established a strong hierarchy between "deserving" and "undeserving" citizens. Focusing on the middle class and trusting in trickle-down effects, the Young Democrats ignored the underclass (whose members do not vote in great numbers) or relegated them to workfare. This also has an ethnic subtext rooted in a demographic panic that animated Hungarian ethno-populism since the 1930s, exaggerating the danger of the extinction of ethnically pure Hungarians and the growth of non-Hungarian population. Segregation of Roma children in the school system—a process tolerated if not encouraged by the government—is a sad consequence of the panic.⁶⁷

Both the economic and social policies of the Orbán regime are permeated by nationalist concerns. Supporting Hungarians who live outside the country is a key aspect of the self-legitimization of the SNC.⁶⁸ This is manifest in symbolic gestures such as replacing the EU flag with that of Transylvania's Szeklers on the parliament building in Budapest or the introduction of a "Trianon memorial day" to anchor the national identity of a new generation of Hungarians in the collective trauma of being "dismembered" by the neighboring states and their Western allies after the First World War. In some way, the Orbán governments accomplished the dream of the national conservatives of the 1990s: the "reunification of the Hungarian nation" without changing the Trianon frontiers. Hungarian communities in neighboring states are shaped to a large extent by Hungarian public media, and lavish subsidies coming from Budapest contributed to the subordination of the local elites to Fidesz.

While the SNC seeks to integrate Hungarians living in neighboring countries, it has been reluctant to offer political voice to domestic citizens who migrated to Western Europe and overseas from 1989 onward. The electoral law allows the former to cast postal ballots whereas the latter need to appear at the Hungarian embassies in person. Thus, many young, oppositional-minded

émigrés end up not voting at all, while more than 90 percent of the votes of Hungarians in Romania or Serbia are harvested by Fidesz.

Moreover, the entire symbolic space is engineered in a way that any criticism addressed to Orbán can be interpreted as an attack on the Hungarian nation as a whole. Hence, national history is re-narrated in terms of a millennial struggle to preserve the independence and ethnic homogeneity of the country. A binary opposition occurs between ethnic Hungarians and "aliens," the latter constructed as the source of all evils (ranging from Habsburg imperial bureaucracy to fascists and communists). From here there is only a small step to reach the far-right. Since 2014, Fidesz has been pillorying indigenous NGOs, which, as "foreign agents," spread political correctness and other cosmopolitan values, not to mention the "caressing of migrants," to copy right-wing newspeak. Another aspect of identity politics is coming to terms with the totalitarian heritage of the twentieth century. In this field, the historical narrative of the SNC is also highly controversial.⁶⁹ The Young Democrats aim at reshaping remembrance through the memorialization of communist crimes by basically equating communism and fascism.⁷⁰ Adding that the former had more victims than the latter (cf., the notorious method of "blood algebra"), this narrative had two functions: to justify the struggle against socialists, the alleged heirs of communist rule, and to accuse their liberal allies of having totalitarian leanings.

The memory of the Holocaust posed a great challenge for the ideologists of the SNC. The internal logic of the Orbánist historical narrative (reflected by the Preamble of the Fundamental Law as well as by the highly contested "Occupation of Hungary" monument in downtown Budapest) exempts the Horthy regime of any responsibility, declaring that the Holocaust occurred after Hungary had lost its sovereignty due to German occupation in March 1944. Nevertheless, both obvious factual problems (e.g., heavy anti-Jewish legislation before the Second World War, the eager involvement of the Hungarian state in deportations, etc.) and external constraints (e.g., the similarity between Orbán's and Netanyahu's political agendas) made it hard for Fidesz to reject moral obligation. This led to a doublespeak that in everyday politics avoids making reference to the Holocaust but expresses some regret in internationally visible situations.

THE SYSTEM OF NATIONAL COOPERATION AS A SIMULACRUM

In sum, the apparent eclecticism of the ideological universe of "national cooperation" notwithstanding, its constituents have something in common. They point to real dilemmas and dysfunctions of the post-1989 order,

-ranging from the "historical compromise" between the old and new elites, insider privatization, the corruption of the socialist-liberal coalition and the ensuing discrediting of democratic and liberal virtues, to an unprecedented dependence of the economy as a whole on a number of transnational firms, growing social polarization, the precarious situation of Hungarians living in neighboring states, and the unprocessed traumas of the right- and left-wing dictatorships in the twentieth century. Yet, rather than discussing these issues by taking into account the different perspectives and interests of all sides involved, Fidesz took them out of their context and tweaked them beyond recognition in the framework of its cultural revolution in order to justify its own move toward authoritarianism.

Rather than featuring a "fearful symmetry" commonly attributed to authoritarian regimes, the one built by Orbán and Fidesz is characterized by many inconsistencies and compromises. The *bricolage* of logically often incompatible components can be a source of strength, and the relative resilience of the SNC is due not to the innovative nature of these components but precisely to the unique and seemingly irrational combination of them. This is, however, not just an eclectic blend of policies and institutions taken out from other contexts, which often prompted analysts to describe the SNC as a hybrid regime. In fact, the lack of an essential core (beyond insisting on power *per se*) and the capacity of turning different faces to different observers may well be the main characteristic trait of Orbán's regime. In our opinion, the SNC works as a simulacrum.

It shows different images to different viewers, and these images are often distorted deliberately (bordering on travesty) to meet the viewers' expectations. Thus, it offers neoliberal economic policies to foreign investors and state subsidies to domestic entrepreneurs; a springboard for undermining the unity of the EU and NATO to Russian *siloviki*; traditional norms to old-school conservatives; permanent mobilization to those craving communal solidarity; the harassment of civil society to those who look back to the Horthyist or Kádárist police state with nostalgia; the defense of Judeo-Christian heritage against Islam to neo-traditionalist Jewish splinter groups and charismatic neo-Protestants; a political religion with a hero cult and a quasi-eschatological narrative of collective sin and redemption for secularized post-Christians longing for some sort of transcendence; anti-cosmopolitan campaigns with racist overtones to avatars of the interwar radical right; an ethnicist "theme park" for Western adherents of white supremacy,⁷¹ but also an attractive location for African and Asian students hoping to get a cheap European diploma; a tax paradise and a gateway to the EU for Chinese, Israeli, Russian, Syrian, or Turkish businesspeople; a wannabe regional power for the local and global adherents of anti-liberalism and national egoism; and a docile and cooperative economic subregion of German industrial space for technocrats who

believe in non-ideological mutual economic dependence. The SNC treats apolitical social groups rather liberally, leaving most of their private choices, including lifestyle and sexual orientation, to them, while repeatedly provoking and humiliating their ideals through the regime's influencers. Even worse is the fate of the liberal or leftist (and lately also anti-government rightist) activists and their organizations: they are doomed to face the entire repertoire of smear campaigns in the government-controlled media and embarrassing institutional harassment.

Having said that, ordinary citizens may have the impression that the government (more exactly, the supreme leader) hears their voice and provides them with goods they want: the worker dismissed by a foreign owner gets a new job in the renationalized firm, the farmer receives a parcel of state-owned land, the small entrepreneur a preferential credit from the central bank, retired persons higher pensions, and families larger tax benefits. Public employees (from teachers to soldiers—amounting to a quarter of the labor force in Hungary!) have preferential treatment in terms of salaries and/or job security, prestige, etc. The jobs, assets, and benefits are distributed selectively as political goods with the hardly hidden aim of extending the Fidesz constituency,⁷² even if a considerable part of the "presents" come from the EU. In this way, most citizens who vote can count on *some* beneficial service from the paternalist government, while it is the task of all-encompassing state brainwashing to make them forget which goods they did not get from the *pater familias*, which goods proved to be fake, and which goods were taken away from them in exchange. The simulacrum (including its electoral success generator) works well if the imperfections and shortage of political goods are counterbalanced by their clever marketing. Meanwhile, a large part of citizens may feel to be among the "chosen." What is more, the xenophobic campaigns targeting the alleged conspiracy of all-too-familiar "enemies of the people" (Soros, the NGOs, Juncker, etc.) create a compelling illusion that fits well into Hungarian political culture, traditionally tuned as oppositional to the external powers that be.⁷³

It would be too easy, we believe, to consider all this hypocrisy,⁷⁴ a chameleon attitude, or an orgy of post-truth, and blame the myopic median voter. It seems more telling in this regard that, despite having been cheated by the regime more than once, Hungarians at large still feel ready to compartmentalize reality and focus on their own (immediate) personal or group benefits rather than (future) costs because "national cooperation" is capable of turning its compassionate and supportive face toward them. The main characteristic of the SNC is exactly this mix of segmentation, fragmentation, variability, and camouflage (i.e., not just hybridity) that make it extremely hard to level a coherent political criticism against it. Last but not least, the fragmentation of reality is also central to political mobilization under the SNC. What Orbán needs is a highly mobilized minority and a highly demotivated and divided

majority. This explains also his focus on migration when it comes to European-level politics: he does not aim at convincing the majority of European citizens with his intransigent biopolitical rhetoric but seeks to fragment the political discussion in a way that he can carve out a strong minority focusing on migration as an explanation for all troubles, while relegating all other issues to the background.

Hannah Arendt memorably described totalitarian regimes in terms of an onion structure, where one can peel back the layers (of more and more exclusive and elitist organizations), which have an external facade of normality and an internal interface of radicalism, while in the center there is a void in which the leader dwells.⁷⁵ In contrast, the structure of Hungary's System of National Cooperation resembles a garlic rather than an onion. What from the outside looks like a bulb is actually the aggregate of bigger and smaller cloves covered by a very thin papery sheath (the Fundamental Law, as it were). Rather than constituting the very center (garlic does not have an internal void), the leader is the flower that grows out of the scape. As the bulb lies underground, one first sees the flower. The larger and fancier the flower grows, the less energy the cloves actually get. The bulb is fed by its roots going deep in the soil: in our metaphor these roots are many, including authoritarian traditions, mobilization, indoctrination, and—last but not least—popular support.

SHAKY FORECASTS: CONSOLIDATION, IMPLOSION, OR . . . ?

Observers whose take on the SNC is shaped by the memory of authoritarian rule in the twentieth century tend to consider the regime transitory. They expect it to be able to preserve its variability until some sort of crisis causes its collapse into a genuine autocracy. It is just a question of time, they believe, when exactly Orbán will show his true colors as a dictator.

Needless to say, we do not consider it a primary task of history-writing to formulate predictions. Yet, if we had wrapped up this volume in early 2018, before Fidesz's third landslide victory, our forecast would have been more optimistic than afterwards, when the regime was quickening its steps on the way to become a de facto one-party state. Neither pre-election hope nor post-election apathy result in reliable estimates. Witnessing, during the past two years, a series of corruption scandals, a few strikes and street demonstrations, the bitter fight between Orbán and Simicska, victories of opposition candidates in local elections, and strong warnings by the European Commission against the authoritarian turn in Hungary, a number of analysts thought wishfully that the consolidation of the SNC

was interrupted and its decline has begun. And vice versa, often the same people are observing the current moves of the Young Democrats to complete what they call "national systemic change" with consternation mixed with lethargy.

Indeed, the regime is busy to demolish the remaining bastions of resistance by launching a new round of *Kulturkampf* to break the independence of academic institutions such as the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The "rationalization" of the Academy of Sciences is one of the final organizational steps in Orbán's cultural revolution, taken after subordinating the National Scientific Research Fund to the Ministry of Innovation; bolstering the regime's own "counter-academy," the Hungarian Academy of Arts; disciplining universities by curtailing their budgets and deploying Fidesz-appointee "chancellors" next to the rectors; chasing away the Central European University,⁷⁶ cleaning the school curricula; occupying the National Cultural Fund, the largest public grant-giving institution in the cultural sphere; laying off "disloyal" directors of museums and theaters; not to speak of creating an atmosphere in which the publication of blacklists, denunciation, or encouraging students to report on the political views of their professors may become business as usual. The immediate consequences are exit and loyalty (or at least self-censorship) rather than strong and lasting voice.

Another move by Orbán to perfect his regime is to please his party's constituency by implementing a major goal of the conservative revolution: pronatalism combined with nativism, or—as one of the Fidesz bosses put it—"those who fill the world with children own the world."⁷⁷ By means of a new "family protection" program, the government wants to raise birthrates through lavish benefits to be given to women who live in "normal" (i.e., not same-sex) marriages, have taxable income, are eligible to take a bank loan, and are ready to give birth to more than one child. Should we conclude from this that the Young Democrats continue to hijack the middle class in order to totalize "national cooperation" and humiliate women as machines of procreation? Or had we better suggest that preferring the carrot to the stick, that is, refraining from hardening the rules of abortion, Orbán does *not* escalate authoritarian control even if the financial incentives of his current pronatalist campaign are packaged in old-school conservative rhetoric? Again, both explanations can be correct depending on the perspective of the observer. However, one cannot resist the impression that—despite the ambiguities of the System of National Cooperation displayed by such snapshots—the film of the regime portrays an unmistakable process of Hungary creeping toward hardball varieties of authoritarian rule. True, she may not arrive there, neither sooner nor later.

To finish, we briefly sketch out two scenarios of how the film of the SNC could roll on:

Consolidation

Many social groups in Hungary have made their peace with the SNC and loyally accept it as long as wages go up, income tax is low, welfare allowances are distributed generously among middle-class and upper-middle-class families whose members also feel protected by law and order. The fragmentation of society follows many lines: economic, rural-urban, generational, educational, informational, etc., and existing divisions are reinforced by a government that incites the different groups against each other. The outcome resembles the pattern of post-Stalinist atomization and social *anomie* of Hungarian society following 1956 or the post-1968 “normalization” period in Czechoslovakia. By combining consumerism for citizens-at-large with a selective oppression of dissidents, these regimes proved relatively resistant to change and successful in muddling-through.

It may well be a long way to go until the consolidation of the Orbán regime turns into decline as well as popular acceptance into fatigue and resilience due to the growing inability of the SNC to deliver and/or to mounting external pressure. In all probability, a simple binary evolutionary model of rise and fall will not match the actual course of events. Further consolidation will be less a triumphal march to heaven than a pathetic craving to preserve the main pillars of the regime. It may overlap with decline, show cyclical features of tightening versus loosening the regime’s grip over society, radicalization versus moderation or, in other words, accelerating versus slowing down the conservative revolution. Maybe creeping toward dictatorship will manifest itself in certain fields of the SNC while in other fields the regime will stop moving ahead or—God forbid—move backward a little. One thing is certain: any attempt to discontinue the authoritarian muddling through in *all* important fields, even for a while, carries the risk of discrediting the revolution, ridiculing the “supreme revolutionary,” and may result in the ex- or implosion of his regime.

Implosion

Collaboration with the SNC penetrated the formal and informal institutions and cultures of society too deeply to be dismantled rapidly by either external intervention or an outburst of home-grown resistance leading to explosion. At the same time, “national cooperation” is not immune to an implosion. Undoubtedly, the SNC knights have amassed large fortunes during the past decade, and the political system became sufficiently polarized for the Fidesz elite to fear a rapid political downturn. However, a combination of increasingly unfavorable external conditions (e.g., slowdown of German industry, and a growing reticence of the EU to subsidize anti-liberal elites,) and internal developments (e.g.,

emigration of qualified workforce, growing discontent with the deterioration of public services, especially education and healthcare) may well destabilize the regime. This was shown by the local elections in October 2019, in which Fidesz lost Budapest and a number of large towns in the provinces. The elections also proved that the central field of force can be damaged by a tactical coalition of the opposition parties. Also, the desiccation of resources sustaining its underlying social contract may invalidate Orbán’s strategy of regime-building. As the SNC has been allocating to its supporters what others possessed or earned rather than generating new revenue, at a certain point it will have to make a distinction between its “deserving” and “undeserving” supporters.

Orbán also may fall victim to Orbánism itself. He has built “national cooperation” precisely around himself, which only works smoothly if he is able to balance the different stakeholders. Without him, the SNC may collapse overnight. As mentioned earlier, the regime is exposed to other threats, too. It may suffer from institutional overstretch or from an overdose of revolutionary mobilization and hubris and prove unable to keep its promises (bluntly put, to feed its voters and oligarchs at the same time). The 2019 local elections also demonstrated that overconfidence in the mobilizing techniques of Fidesz can backfire. Furthermore, underperformance of the regime at lower levels of society certainly increases citizens’ frustration with corruption at higher levels. As soon as the hierarchy within the SNC becomes shaken, the regime may fast-track toward its own collapse.⁷⁸

In contrast, a different configuration of almost the very same internal and external factors mentioned earlier also could catalyze a more repressive regime, pushing Hungary onto a road leading to Ankara, Beijing, or Moscow. The growing determination of authoritarian leaders to stiffen their regimes in response to a dwindling of resources likely will transform a slow process of implosion to explosion before Orbán becomes a senile, octogenarian “grandfather of the nation.” It is already close to impossible to force him to quit by means of democratic elections. Maybe we, as the proverbial generals who always prepare for the previous war, trust too much in the plausibility of reviving the 1989-style negotiated regime change that at a certain juncture put an end to the implosion of the then *ancien régime* and led to the construction of a new one. However, the System of National Cooperation is not “ancient” yet and still has huge reserves of indoctrination and terror to employ. Currently, as paradoxical as it may be, Orbán is too strong to use sheer force.

Even if the current Hungarian variety of authoritarianism described in our book will eventually prove less than bulletproof and collapse before becoming a straightforward autocracy, its emergence and successful self-perpetuation must be an important point of comparative relevance. Studying the “peripheries” may offer insights into patterns of evolution that manifest themselves less sharply in the “central” zone. The past communist regime of Central and

Eastern Europe was praised widely for its bloodless and smooth exit from decaying communist authoritarianism in 1989. Now, it provides a number of painful examples for a bloodless and smooth introduction of authoritarian rule under emerging capitalism.⁷⁹ The SNC, as dystopias are wont to do, anticipates a possible future of humankind; therefore, it may serve as a powerful warning for those who are just about to switch from understanding the new authoritarian temptations to their toleration or even acceptance.

While opponents of liberal democracy are more than conscious of their transnational entanglements, its adherents tend to sink into self-complacency or self-pity, and fail to develop transnational solidarity as long as things seem to go reasonably well in their own countries. If, in turn, they were also swallowed by the vortex of authoritarianism, they would have little moral basis to appeal to such solidarity.

NOTES

1. The authors were free to decide which term they wanted to apply.
2. While eugenics is arguably not central to the ideology of the SNC, one should not disregard its obvious biopolitical components, such as the focus on demography. As Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2018) argue, the demographic panic caused by low birth rates and sizable out-migration is one of the possible triggers of populist mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe, while the rejection of immigration is rather the cover story. At the same time, in Hungary, the boom of ethnopopulist mobilization predated (and perhaps contributed to) mass out-migration.
3. At the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in January 2019, Orbán went even further. According to him, the best model of European Christian Democracy is in Brazil, where the newly elected president's slogan is: "Brazil first and God above all." Initially Orbán's strategy has been surprisingly successful within the Christian Democratic party family, keen on preserving its relative majority in the European Parliament, and it also resonates with the current program of the alt-right in the United States and Europe. In March 2019, the EPP decided to suspend the membership of Fidesz. Although in Hungary the decision was preceded by a large-scale propaganda campaign against the European Commission (ridiculing George Soros and Jean-Claude Juncker), the Political Assembly of the EPP did not exclude Orbán's party, and even allowed him to make the impression that Fidesz suspended its own membership.
4. In the Hungarian context he refers mainly to "Isten, Haza, Család" (God, Fatherland, Family), previously the slogan of the anti-communist Smallholders' Party (and of the Portuguese clerico-fascist *Estado Novo*) or, recently, to "Munka, Család, Haza" (Work, Family, Fatherland), which is identical to the catchphrase of the Vichy regime.
5. See the chapter by Domotya Szikra in this volume.
6. There are spectacular rites of symbiosis between church, state, and army, such as the inauguration of military officers with a church blessing, or the festive commencement at the newly created National University of Public Service, whose future

public servants are surrounded by military and religious paraphernalia. As for new military organizations, colorful examples range from the generously equipped anti-terror security service (TEK), which is regarded by the public as Orbán's personal guard led by his former driver, a separate Parliamentary Guard, and the head of the Hungarian National Bank, to scolding up shooting ranges all over the country and the reintroduction of military education in secondary schools.

7. This is also reflected by Orbán's rhetoric when he likes to talk about Hungarians as a "half-Asiatic people" who understand the language of force, as well as by cultivating the totemic bird of Hungarian myth of origin, the *Turul*, and by giving official aura to such events as the *Királitűz*, a jamboree of Turkic nations, organized in Hungary. Stressing these Asiatic features, he inadvertently follows the logic of most recent value surveys evidencing the survival of authoritarian/paternalist/egalitarian values in Hungarian society after communism (see Tóth 2017).

8. See Orbán (2014).

9. For similar concepts, see the notions of quasi-democracy (Villalon and Von Döpp 2005), hybrid democracy (Karl 1995), electoral democracy (Diamond 2002), guided democracy (Brown 2001), managed democracy (Wolin 2008), defective democracy (Merkel 2004), and Potemkin democracy (King 2001). See also the concept of informational autocracy (Guriev and Treisman 2015), as well as the studies by Diamond (2003), Bunce and Wolchuk (2011), and Müller (2016a).

10. For critical approaches to Zakaria's concept in Hungarian political science literature, see, for example, Kis (2014) and Bozóki (2016).

11. "Peacock dance" is an allusion to Hungarian "swing politics" between Germany and Great Britain in the Horthy era. Orbán memorably warned U.S. diplomats before the 2010 elections to disregard his words in order to dispel their worries about his radical nationalist rhetoric.

12. The defeated competitors range from Gábor Fodor to Lajos Simicska (both long-time friends of Orbán). The former was the leading figure of the liberals within Fidesz in the early 1990s, whereas the latter worked as the "cashier" of the party and grew into a major oligarch before 2014 when he broke with Orbán. From the old guard, it is only the president of the parliament, László Kövér, who has remained on top, albeit assuming rather empty power positions. Meanwhile, Orbán surrounds himself with younger yes-men like his former secretaries, cabinet chief Antal Rogán, and foreign minister Péter Szijjártó. While Fidesz ministers come and go, minister of interior Sándor Pintér (a leading police officer prior to 1989) has remained in office in each Orbán government until today.

13. It is well known that, by that time, Fidesz controlled a number of large local governments and relied on leading dignitaries—such as the state president, members of the constitutional court, or key managers of the public media—to put pressure on the socialist-liberal governments and prevent the formation of alternative power centers in conservative politics. However, there is a hitherto uncovered aspect of informal interference by Fidesz (with the help of the richest banker in the country, Sándor Csányi) in the elections within the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) by means of using secret service methods in 2008. The operation eventually resulted in the collapse of the only serious contender to Orbán on the center-right. These organizing the

conspiracy in technical terms had worked for the state security during the first Orbán government.

14. Felső became internationally known after a luxury stadium had been built literally next to Orbán's house, with a capacity far exceeding the population of the village. The stadium is owned by a football club under his supervision, which—lavishly subsidized from taxpayers' money—skyrocketed to the first league in the subsequent months.

15. Among all aspects of the propaganda campaigns after 2010, the question of anti-Semitic connotations has been the most controversial because of the intolerance of political anti-Semitism by two Western powers shaping Hungarian politics (the United States and Germany), and because of a complex political game the Orbán government plays with the local Jewish community and the Israeli government. Fidesz seeks to forge a common nationalist and anti-Muslim agenda with Benjamin Netanyahu and support the neo-traditionalist radicalism of fringe groups of Judaism (e.g., the Chabad community) against mainstream Jewish organizations dominated by the assimilated and liberal Budapest Jewish elite. This entanglement provided Orbán with tangible benefits when critics of the anti-Soros campaign, who revealed the similarities of the posters with the Nazi propaganda images of Jewish plutocrats, could be silenced by the Israeli prime minister. Netanyahu confirmed that inciting hatred toward Soros is not anti-Semitism but a legitimate assertion of national interest.

16. On the concept of "post-peasant society," see Buzalka (2008).

17. As will be explained later, we use this term to make a cautious distinction between authoritarian rule, on the one hand, and autocracy, dictatorship, tyranny, etc., on the other. In our opinion, the SNC has been moving toward hard authoritarianism, thereby approaching (and in certain fields satisfying the criteria for) autocracy. Of course, the two terms tend to overlap but in Orbán's case they do so in a peculiar way, causing some confusion. In certain respects, his regime is still relatively soft while his quasi-hegemonic position within the regime probably would allow him to opt for harder authoritarian solutions. (Cf. Kornai 2011 and Kis 2019.)

18. Many contributors to this volume met Orbán in person either as his teacher, political ally, or opponent, a panelist in a public debate, or just a participant in private gatherings years ago when he was still accessible to academics like ourselves.

19. Cf. Dénes (2012). Hurrying to include the adjective "national" in names of state institutions and companies, for example, *Nemzeti Dohánybolt* (National Tobacco Shop), it has lost its solemn meaning in Hungarian as a notion related to Fatherland.

20. Critical journalism in Hungary uses the metaphor of *kisgömböc* (pig stomach) from a folk tale, which grows by swallowing people until it finally cracks, to depict the insatiable appetite of Orbán for power.

21. As for Orbán's personal attitude to law, here is an episode from his life, a man who graduated at the Law Faculty of the Eötvös University in Budapest. In 2001, he employed various tricks to obtain a state subsidy to enlarge his wife's winery, and when the corruption case became public after his fall from power in 2002, Orbán downplayed it with obscure arguments in court, with success. This was the third big corruption scandal of Fidesz after surviving a tax fraud case concerning firms within the party's orbit and the so-called quarry case linked to Orbán's father during the

1990s. These instances must have convinced the Fidesz leaders of the need to put a leash on the judiciary once in government again.

22. See Kovács (1998).

23. For example, Greskovits (2015) wrote about the "hollowing and backsliding of democracy" and reverting to "semi-authoritarian practices," Csillag and Szelényi (2015) about "drifting to managed illiberal democracy," and Szelényi (2017) about the "road to Damascus," where Orbán turned to authoritarianism, without estimating the distance the SNC already covered. For a rare instance of the opposite approach, see János Kornai (2015 and 2016) who set up a long list of characteristics of what he calls autocracy to distinguish it from both democracy (the point of departure) and dictatorship (a potential destination) while describing the "U-turn of Hungary." See also the concept of "autocratic breakthrough" in Kis (2019).

24. See Heller (2010); Kornai (2011, 2015, 2016); Palaki (2013); Tölgyessy (2013); Halmi (2014); Kis (2014, 2019); Ladányi and Szelényi (2014); Ungváry (2014); Greskovits (2015); Körösné (2015, 2017); Csillag and Szelényi (2015); Szilágyi (2015); Enyedi (2016); Magyar (2016); Bozóki (2016); Szalai (2016, 2018); Antal (2017); Magyar and Várhelyi (2017); Bozóki and Hegedűs (2017, 2018); Filippov (2018); Szűcs (2018).

25. See, for example, Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018), who pioneeringly put the SNC in a European framework to demonstrate the external constraints and stimuli of its move toward authoritarianism. Csillag and Szelényi (2015) excel by focusing on property rights and introducing the concepts of patrimonialism and prebendalism in examining Orbán's drift toward authoritarian rule.

26. For an original attempt at periodization, see Krekó and Enyedi (2018).

27. These comparisons are, however, accepted widely in daily politics and journalism. If, for example, the concept of fascism occurs in the analysis, then a qualifier (like "mutant" or "soft") is attached to it, or it is moderated to "fascistoid" (Ungváry 2014). Likewise, the term "national socialism" is changed to "nation-socialism" (Bokros 2018) to avoid full identification with Nazism. For a broader overview, see Stanley 2018. The possibility of reviving monarchic rule in Hungary appears—for the time being—only in the analogy of Bonapartism if one disregards popular jokes about Orbán's absurd instruction in 2000 to move the royal crown to parliament, where his office was also located.

28. Only a few analysts, such as Kornai (2011), took the risk to call the SNC an autocracy right after the regime's birth, realizing that Fidesz could not be removed from power by democratic means in the future.

29. Among the institutional guarantees of irreversibility, the substantial extension of the period of service of the chief attorney, chief justice, members of the Constitutional Court, etc., (all Fidesz appointees) was perhaps the most expedient for the new rule.

30. True, the government's heartless attitude to refugees (e.g., keeping them in prison camps in miserable conditions) and the poor (e.g., expelling homeless people from public spaces) as well as criminalizing political opponents or employing criminals and private security guards to terrorize them demonstrates that the regime does not have any scruples about taking harsh measures if those promise political gain.

31. Interestingly enough, it is still widely supposed that Fidesz steals, bullies, and lies as well as organizes smaller show trials, but it does not kill.

32. A good illustration of this is Manfred Weber's statement in February 2019 about the need for a dialogue with Orbán to avoid making him, as he says, a new Cameron who eventually would take his country out of the EU. See Weise (2019).

33. Consolidation managed by the counterrevolutionary regimes after both 1919 and 1956 is remembered clearly in the Hungarian historical mind.

34. Plausibly, these are the fields in which scholarship had to react rapidly to radical and spectacular changes in the constitution. See the chapters by Gábor Halmi and Renáta Úitz in this volume, as well as the studies by Kim Lane Scheppele (2013, 2018).

35. It is perhaps not by chance that the concept of mafia is so popular in Hungarian political sociology. Compared to other metaphors, it has been examined in empirical terms the most profoundly thus far by Magyar and his colleagues. This was an important reason for us to organize a discussion on the relevance of the concept on the pages of our volume (see the contributions by Bálint Magyar, Stephen Holmes, and Balázs Váradi). For "re-feudalization" and "semi-feudalism," see Szalai (2016, 2018); Ádám (2019); for "patronalism," see Hale (2019); for ownership of land and local hierarchies in the countryside, see Kovách (2016, 2017).

36. An interesting feature of the Fidesz elite is its attraction to landed property, castles, wineries, real estate at Lake Balaton, and so on—a phenomenon that cannot be explained only by business rationale or snobbery.

37. To use analytical language, both terms denote a thick layer of communist and liberal elites who preserved strong links to the ex-communist party and converted their pre-1989 political privileges into economic power. In Hungary they were called "clotted structures" (*megalvadt struktúrák*); in Poland, pact or system (*układ*).

38. In the subculture of Fidesz, including the civic circles, Orbán often has been referred to as the "commanding general" (*vezénylő tábornok*) of the party.

39. In addition, the government declared proudly that Hungary would postpone the date of her joining the Eurozone, eschewing all advantages of the common currency but preventing the EU from intervening in Orbán's major economic decisions.

40. Western European politicians—explaining their inaction *vis-à-vis* the Hungarian government after 2010 versus the determined opposition shown to less radical measures of the PiS government in Poland after 2015—have often pointed to the "constitutional" nature of the SNC.

41. Another nickname for Orbán among his followers is "chief engineer."

42. To be sure, his government substantially contributed to this escalation by disrupting the system of domestic refugee care, cramming the refugees in Budapest, transporting all those who got stuck in Hungary to Austria during the night, and passing inaccurate information to the Austrian and German authorities about the number of those brought to the Western border.

43. For the text of the Tavares report, see http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7_TA_2013_315, accessed June 25, 2019.

44. In 2017 alone, the government spent EUR 10 million on the campaign against George Soros (see atlatszo.hu 2018). The French-based multinational advertising

company JCDecaux displayed most of the anti-Soros posters and earned about EUR 13 million from this account in the same year.

45. A similar game is played by the government within NATO where it competes for fraternization with China and Russia by importing military equipment from the West.

46. On Finkelstein's role, see Grassegger 2019, even though many critics argued that this article overstated the importance of the advisors and understated the local ingredients of the hate campaign.

47. See "Többpólusúvá kell tenni Európát," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Md4agKiBH0>. Earlier, Orbán borrowed Silvio Berlusconi's slogan "Forza Italia!", and he still finishes every speech with "Hajrá Magyarországi!" (Let's go, Hungary!).

48. See the chapter by Radosław Markowski in this volume. For a comparative analysis of various aspects of the Hungarian and Polish anti-liberal regime-building projects, see the articles in the thematic issue of *Osteuropa*, edited by Sapper and Weichsel (2018).

49. See the chapter by Silvia Marton in this volume.

50. Although "Orbánism" has become a trope in the global literature on new forms of anti-liberal politics, there are not so many diachronic analyses of the SNC available for international readership. A good recent overview is Bos (2018). Our reservations about typologies based on "snapshots" freezing reality and ignoring change concurs with János Kis's interpretation (Kis 2019).

51. It was known in Hungary as the "quarry case" and meant accepting hidden state subsidies in the form of precious buildings (given to Fidesz by the government with the aim of hosting the offices of the party) that were subsequently sold and the money was reinvested into companies around the party.

52. In addition, government agencies (such as the tax authority managed by Fidesz's chief of party finance, Lajos Simicska) were used to blackmail political opponents and business rivals.

53. The same government was notorious for co-opting a series of former communist dignitaries (including a member of the Politburo, a secretary of the Central Committee, and a deputy minister) and ordinary party members in the Fidesz *nomenklatura*, providing them with high-level positions such as president of the republic, chairman of parliament, minister of finance, minister of the interior, foreign minister, and so on.

54. See also Virág Molnár's chapter in this volume.

55. The engagement of the Orbán government with this issue in 2000–2002 also had a pragmatic reason. The expectation that Hungary would join the EU soon but the neighboring countries only later (or maybe never) produced a legitimate fear about the hardening of borders, which might cut channels of mobility as well as cultural and economic transfer between the Hungarian communities beyond the borders and the Hungarian state.

56. See the analysis of the so-called Status Law of 2001 in the chapters by Gábor Újry and Anikó Mészáros.

57. The Hungarian party system had been previously considered by most observers particularly stable (see, e.g., Fenyvéri and Fekete 2007; Chabal Héron 2011).

58. See Renáta Úitz's chapter in this volume.

59. See the chapters by János Máttyás Kovács and Péter Mihályi in this volume.
60. While reducing personal income tax, the government raised VAT to a record high of 27 percent and introduced a great many special taxes in order to balance the budget.
61. See the chapter by János Köllő in this volume.
62. Throughout the 2010s, Germany has been the source or destination of about one quarter of Hungarian foreign trade. See: <https://atlasz.hu/en/profile/country/hun/>.
63. For example, the government recently passed a law allowing employers to demand up to 400 hours of overtime work a year and defer payment for three years.
64. See the chapter by Péter Mihályi in this volume.
65. See the chapter by Miklós Haraszti in this volume.
66. Orbán's former classmate and friend, Lőrinc Mészáros, who in 2010 still worked as a village plumber, became the richest person in the country by 2018 (his wealth exceeds one billion euros). In 2017 alone, he was awarded contracts worth EUR 850 million at public tenders, with 93 percent of this exorbitant sum coming from the EU. See atlasz.hu (2019).
67. For instance, the subsidization of church schools that typically teach non-Roma children who are taken out from state-run schools by their parents leads to gradual ghettoization within the public education system. Selective pronatalist policies (supporting higher-income families) yield a similar result. Likewise, the public work system, set up by the government to tackle unemployment, offers low incomes in exchange for unproductive work while preventing the unemployed (many of them Roma) from escaping from dependency and reentering the job market. (In 2015, 42 percent of all employed Roma took part in the public work program, in contrast to the 4 percent of non-Roma; see "fideszaki munkahelyez15.pdf," <http://www.ksh.hu/do cs/hun/xftp/fidoszaki/munkahelyez/munkahelyez15.pdf>, accessed June 25, 2019.) Due to the lack of alternatives, workfare has seemed a viable and acceptable solution in the eyes of many Roma families living in the poorest regions of the country—and actually secured their votes for Fidesz in 2014 and 2018.
68. See the chapter by Gábor Egry in this volume.
69. The spin doctor of Orbán's memory politics is Mária Schmidt, director of the House of Terror, head of state-sponsored nationwide commemoration projects, and—last, but not least—a wealthy businesswoman.
70. See the chapter by Ferenc Laczó in this volume.
71. See Bayer (2017).
72. Perhaps the most revolting example of bribing voters is when Fidesz activists distribute election goodies (potatoes, canned food, firewood, etc.) in Roma communities.
73. This is how a political style based on anti-systemic mobilization can turn systemic. For a long time, this development was neglected by most external observers captivated by the anti-institutional and anti-systemic features of Western European populist politics. Jan-Werner Müller (2016b) was among the first to focus on the possibility of populist regime-building, taking Hungary as one of his central test cases.

74. See Anne Applebaum (2019) on the hypocrisy of populist leaders.
75. "In contradistinction to both tyrannical and authoritarian regimes, the proper image of totalitarian rule and organization seems to me to be the structure of the union, in whose center, in a kind of empty space, the leader is located; whatever he does—whether he integrates the body politic as in an authoritarian hierarchy, or oppresses his subjects like a tyrant—he does it from within, and not from without or above. All the extraordinarily manifold parts of the movement: the front organizations, the various professional societies, the party membership, the party bureaucracy, the elite formations and police groups, are related in such a way that each forms the facade in one direction and the center in the other, that is, plays the role of normal outside world for one layer and the role of radical extremism for another." (Arendt 1961, 99)
76. See the chapter by Zsolt Enyedi in this volume.
77. See HVG (2017).
78. One of Orbán's fans argues that his "political career will either come with him walking away, or with the sad fate of even a successful politician in a democracy; eventually everyone gets tired of you" (Fischer 2016). Walking away? Currently, all opposition parties promise meticulous justice-making, and the SNC knights do their best to keep much of their "savings" abroad and make sure that Fidesz appointees will continue to occupy leading positions in law enforcement long after the possible collapse of "national cooperation."
79. Tellingly, a leading expert on the post-communist trajectory of the region, Jacques Rupnik, argued twelve years ago (Rupnik 2007) that the backlash was relative: "For all these reasons, Europe is less vulnerable than other regions facing democratic regression." In contrast, in a recent (2018) article, he detected crisis phenomena all over the continent: "The post-1989 liberal cycle is exhausted. In Central Europe, it represented a triple transition: democracy, the market economy, and Europe. These three objectives were successfully attained, but all three are now in crisis."

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