

INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
FACULTY OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SCIENCES
COMENIUS UNIVERSITY



THE IDENTITARIAN ROOTS OF HUNGARIAN ILLIBERALISM

Aliaksei Kazharski

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*We Hungarians shall not reject Europe, despite
all its weaknesses, emaciation and
unsteadiness; and we shall not abandon it,
despite its current bout of vertigo.*

Viktor Orbán

Hungary will not be a colony.

Krisztina Morvai, member of the European Parliament

Introduction¹

The study examines Hungary’s “illiberal turn” and the new-old geopolitical imaginaries which its rulers have been constructing. Since its landslide victory in 2010, the Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance, led by the charismatic prime minister Viktor Orbán have been transforming Hungary’s political system in ways that have drawn significant international criticism. Orbán clashed with the European Union on issues of domestic constitutional change as well as on the migrant redistribution quotas during the 2015 European migration crisis. Over the years he has become one of Europe’s key ideologues of Euroskepticism and anti-liberalism. His vision of an *illiberal Europe* has also gained traction with audiences outside of Hungary. Thus, in Poland the Law and Justice (PiS) party took Orbán’s discourse and practices as a source of inspiration. It is, thus, unsurprising that many parallels can be found also in how the two discourses are re-imagining Europe.

Pole and Hungarian, two good friends, the rhyme goes, drinking and fighting together. The saying has existed in both languages for centuries, marking the collective memories of close historical ties between the two nations. After 2015, the rhyme could be given a new, ironic meaning, as, in the Western media, Poland and Hungary came to be framed as forming an “illiberal axis” in the EU (The Economist 2018). The ruling parties’ leaders actively contributed to the image. In 2016, the two vocal critics of liberalism, Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán jointly called for a “cultural counter revolution” in Europe (Foy, Henry, and Buckley 2016a). In 2015, an issue of *wSieci* a right-wing Polish magazine, closely connected to Kaczyński’s PiS, came out with a cover featuring the two leaders against the background of a squad of winged hussars, an early modern Polish cavalry unit modelled on the Hungarian hussars. The hussars

¹ I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my Slovak-Hungarian research assistant Silvia Macalová for her valuable help in researching and writing up this text.

became a symbol of military glory and could be read as a reference to the days when Hungarians and Poles fought the Ottomans and other invaders together, serving as Europe's shield. "They are defending Europe", the cover caption ran, "against the insanity of the left and the Islamists".

Since 2015, there has been a growing body of studies comparing the two cases, in which both multiple similarities and important differences are outlined. Before his landslide victory in 2015, Kaczyński did not hide his sympathies for Fidesz, famously expressing his hope that, one day, he may have "a Budapest in Warsaw". Unsurprisingly, many saw Hungary as a "model" or "playbook" (Henry, and Buckley 2016b) that inspired Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. Among other things, observers also noted strong parallels in the identity narratives that Fidesz and PiS promoted. The parallels stemmed, in no small part from similarities between Polish and Hungarian history, which gave birth to shared constructs such as the *Antemurale Christianitatis* myth and "the Polish and Hungarian self-perception of noble heroism, martyrdom and self-sacrifice which can easily translate into the syndrome of self-victimization" (Balcer 2017). On the other hand, researchers also pointed out important differences between two countries both in the degree, to which the ruling parties were able to consolidate political power and in the tactics which their leaders used. Thus, in comparison with his Polish counterpart, Viktor Orbán had a better sense of "when and how to compromise" which allowed him to avoid being seriously sanctioned by the EU (Krekó, Péter, and Enyedi 2018, 45). And, among other things, he also had more time.

Fidesz returned to power in 2010 after eight years in the opposition against the background of a major corruption scandal that decimated their political opponents, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP). The electoral success of Fidesz, which gave it a constitutional supermajority, was, in no small part, driven by the public disappointment with the political establishment which was perceived as thoroughly corrupt, as well as by the economic crisis that hit Hungary hard in the late aughts. Seizing the opportunity, Fidesz and its charismatic leader started transforming the country's political system into a regime that different observers have given various qualifiers, such as "hybrid", "illiberal", "undemocratic", "competitive" or "soft authoritarian". In 2011 Fidesz used its majority in parliament to adopt a new Hungarian constitution, which was sharply criticized by the EU as a step away from liberal democracy (Buzogány 2017). The changes came as a stunning *Blitzkrieg* that took the EU, preoccupied with its own problems, largely by surprise. As Jacques Rupnik (2012, 134) diagnosed the situation just a year later, "Orbán and his lieutenants have downgraded or done away with the checks and balances that are widely considered essential for the rule of law".

Interpretations may vary as to the critical junctures on the timeline, but, according to some scholars, Hungary passed the watershed between democracy and non-democracy in 2014 – at the very latest – after which the country's political system could unambiguously be placed "in the category of undemocratic

regimes” (Bozóki, András, and Hegedűs 2018, 1175). In 2014, as Fidesz won its second electoral victory in a row, the political transformation was given due ideological framing. In 2014, in a speech that would become seminal, Orbán declared his attachment to *illiberal democracy*, criticizing the Western liberal democratic model and praising non-European authoritarian regimes for their success in developing their countries. The speech attracted significant international attention (Buzogány 2017).

Ironically, the shift to *illiberalism* was vested in the language of freedom and sovereignty, which as Fidesz argued, it was bringing back to Hungary. The government undertook a number of other steps aimed at building what the ruling party presented as a *genuinely sovereign Hungary*. Orbán announced “‘a freedom fight’ against ‘colonizing’ foreign powers including multinational companies, foreign investors, the IMF, and the EU to strengthen national sovereignty and boost the economy through reducing what the government considered ‘unfair surplus-profit’ made by multinational companies in the country” (Pogonyi 2017: 2). The government’s new economic policy - nicknamed *Orbánomics* by foreign observers - meant to establish a tighter control over the economy. This included increased regulation of the financial sector, nationalization of private pension funds, and, at the same time, a lowering of corporate taxes for foreign companies.

Meanwhile, increased control over the economy went hand in hand with a surge in political corruption and rent-seeking, the establishment of a local, government-friendly oligarchy, and rather high degrees of state capture in some public sectors (Fazekas, Mihály, and Tóth 2016) – giving political experts a reason to dub the Hungarian system “neo-feudal” (Jarábik 2017). Crony capitalism also fundamentally reshaped the media landscape, as influential oppositional media outlets could be purchased and shut down (without formally violating European freedom of speech norms), while Fidesz emerged with “a media empire of its own” (Krekó, Péter, and Enyedi 2018, 45-46) which included major commercial outlets (in addition to the state controlled public media). Thus, in addition to redesigning the formal, legal framework of Hungarian politics through constitutional change, the ruling party cleverly consolidated its power by using *informal* instruments (which also made sanctioning Hungary more difficult for the EU). The merger of political power and oligarchic property led to the establishment of what the Hungarian sociologist Bálint Magyar (2016) dubbed the “Hungarian post-Communist mafia state”, a type of authoritarian crony capitalism that, at least in some respects, resembled Russia under Vladimir Putin.

Domestic development in Hungary came under strong criticism from the EU and other international bodies. In 2013, a European Parliament report on the state of the rule of law in Hungary, prepared by Rui Tavares, concluded that the 2011 constitutional changes were a breach of Hungary’s obligations under the EU treaties. However, the EU’s actual capacity to influence the developments in Hungary were limited, and often contingent on the complex balance of power between various political players inside the EU. Thus,

the European People's Party, of which Fidesz is a member, was, for a very long time, reluctant to disavow Orbán – despite the mounting criticism his domestic policies faced. (It was not until 2019 that Fidesz was finally suspended, following its public anti-Soros campaign which openly vilified prominent EU officials by accusing them of being bought by George Soros).

In 2015, as the European migration crisis unfolded, Hungary's ruling party found a new ideological agenda. Starting from that year the issue was dominant in the government's political discourse, as it waged "a fierce and constant anti-immigration campaign," "according to which Hungary and the EU have been under threat from migrants bringing terrorism and crime and endangering national cultures in Europe" (Huszka 2017, 592). The image of the razor fence that Hungary was building on the border with Serbia in order to keep out illegal migration became world famous.

The crisis also became a point of consolidation for the Visegrád Four states, and as they rose in joint rebellion against the EU migrant redistribution quota system, the Hungarian prime minister could be considered their chief ideologist. Orbán's normative entrepreneurship, even if it started in 2014, with "illiberal democracy", received a tremendous boost from the European migration crisis. The crisis exposed the antagonisms between the liberal worldview, built on the universalist ideas of human rights, multiculturalism and solidarity with refugees, and the culturalist, protectionist view according to which non-European migrants were a source of threats not opportunities, and the effects of multiculturalism and migration on Europe would be detrimental. Importantly, these antagonisms could be felt not only in post-Communist Central Europe, (which was generally predisposed towards to the latter type of worldview), but in the West itself where right-wing political forces were challenging the European liberal consensus and questioning the established approaches to culture and migration. This was where the Hungarian prime minister could hope to find a promising ideological niche for himself, being able to market his own visions not only to domestic but to Western audiences. It was the vision of a different, *non-liberal, conservative Europe*. It was also the vision of Hungary as a bulwark protecting Europe, from migrants who were coming to destroy the European civilization, and from the liberals and the left that, he claimed, formed a conspiracy to bring down European nation-states.

This following chapter is a scrutiny of these visions. I examine how Europe has been re-imagined in Hungary and how these geopolitical imaginaries are rooted in identity narratives which refer us to crucial events and symbols in Hungarian history. The major bulk of empirics comes from analyzing Viktor Orbán's public speeches for the period of 2014-2019, whose English translations were retrieved from the Hungarian Government's official webpage. In the course of the research four hundred and twenty speeches were processed. Additionally, the research draws on a study of materials from selected pro-government think-tanks (Századvég, Migration Research Institute and Nézőpont Intézet, which were chosen on the basis of

an interview with an expert). Finally, the research was supplemented by open interviews with experts, to whom I would like to express my most sincere gratitude for finding the time to answer my questions.²

Cultural roots of Hungarian geopolitical imaginaries

Starting from the European migration crisis, anti-migration rhetoric became a powerful identity building tool for Viktor Orbán's government. Images of contemporary migration waves were projected upon the older geopolitical imaginaries whose roots go deep into Hungarian national identity. There is a special kind of irony to be found in this fact, considering that migration is also a key constitutive event in Hungarian history. *Honfoglalás*, or the Conquest of the Homeland, refers to the events of the 9th century AD. The nomadic Hungarian (Magyar) tribes migrating from the areas north of the Black Sea, crossed the Carpathian ridge into the Carpathian (Pannonian) Basin. With their military might, they crushed the Slavic empires that had existed here hitherto, effectively driving a Finno-Ugric linguistic wedge between what would later become Western and Southern Slavs. But from now on, it was also their destiny to mix with the Slavic population of Central Europe, adopting significant chunks of their sedentary culture and language. For some time, the bellicose nomads remained one of the Europeans' primary nemeses, undertaking deadly raids into what is now Western Europe. *A sagittis Hungarorum, libera nos Domine*, "Oh Lord, deliver us from the arrows of the Hungarians" is reported to have been a common prayer in those days. By the dawn of the second millennium, however, the Magyar expansion had been checked and Hungarians had accepted the Cross under Stephen (István) I who was crowned as the first Christian king of Hungary circa the year 1000.

From that point Hungary – or rather the multiple political entities existing under this name throughout the next thousand years – would find itself at the position of a *peripheral* state, adopting different European norms and ideas as they evolved in Europe at large. Having entered the game of being European through Christianity, Hungary would subsequently import its multiple ideological projects, or, as Iver Neumann would put it "discursive packages," including nationalism,³ liberalism and Marxism. Ironically, its precarious peripheral position also left Hungary vulnerable to successive waves of migration. In the 1200's, the once nomadic Hungarians suffered from the invasion of Mongols who devastated their country twice in that century. Several centuries later, the Kingdom of Hungary came under another onslaught, as the

² I would like to express my deepest gratitude for their help to H.E. Amb. Rastislav Káčer, Lóránt Győri, Péter Balogh, and to those members of the diplomatic corps in Budapest which had to remain anonymous.

³ One notable symbol of the aspiration to imitate Western Europe is the building of the Hungarian parliament in Budapest, whose design, and even location at the riverbank, was inspired by the Palace of Westminster in London

Ottoman Empire, which by then had effectively dominated the Eastern Mediterranean, was expanding through the Balkans and into Central Europe.

Resistance to the “Turk”, and the eventual Ottoman occupation of significant parts of Hungary remained one of the constitutive stories in the Hungarian national narrative. It was recycled into the *Antemurale Christianitatis*, the Bulwark of Christianity myth – analogous to the similar Polish myth, albeit produced in different geohistorical circumstances. This myth is linked discursively with later episodes of Hungarian history to produce a metahistorical image of heroic resistance. A contemporary Hungarian popular history book, published by an outlet ran by Hungary’s Ministry of Defense and sold at one of the key government-endorsed historical museums, the House of Terror in Budapest, opens by characterizing Hungary as “‘the shield of Christianity’ in the Middle Ages”:

Already an integral “piece of the continent” for several centuries, in 1456 our country heroically defended Europe against the sultan’s huge army at the castle of Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade), against improbable odds. Since that victory, throughout the Christian world the bells toll for Hungary at noon every day, commemorating the heroes of our nation. Five years after the siege of Nándorfehérvár, in the autumn of 1956, Hungarians rose up to overthrow an oppressive and brutal communist regime. This time fighting against insurmountable odds on the streets of the capital, Budapest, Hungarian insurgents engaged the invading Soviet troops sent to crush the revolution. Without our mysterious faith in Hungarian history, we could not appreciate that Hungary, in defending the whole of Europe, could hold up its blood-spattered body first at Nándorfehérvár along the Danube in 1456, and then as another city by the same river, in 1956, exactly 500 later, the first time victorious, the second time left hopelessly to itself, and thereby ultimately once again victorious (Benkóczy 2011, 7).

This government sponsored Pythagorean mysticism is a fair example of how different historical periods are woven together into a metahistorical image of Hungary as a shield, heroically resisting invasion for the sake of Europe. Orbán’s Fidesz would actively exploit this trope in the wake of the migration crisis, in order to symbolically re-center Hungary – which had come into a normative conflict with Western Europe – as Europe’s “bulwark.” Subsequent Hungarian history, as it is presented by the national narrative, suffers from no lack of drama – or trauma. While the victory at Nándorfehérvár (Belgrade) checked the Ottoman expansion for some time, Hungary was eventually overrun and partially annexed by the Ottoman Empire that was in possession of Budapest for over a century and a half (1541-1699). The non-occupied remnants of the Hungarian Kingdom came under the rule of the Habsburg dynasty who, from then on and until the collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918, would inherit the title of the rulers of Hungary. As the Ottomans were gradually expelled from the Carpathian basin, Hungary found itself to be a multiethnic kingdom ruled by

the Austrian Habsburgs. The 19th century was characterized by two dramatic trends. On the one hand, Hungarian cultural and political elites engaged in a struggle for freedom from Austrian domination. The Hungarian Revolution of 1848 was mercilessly crushed with the assistance of the Russian Emperor Nicholas I, who sent his forces as part of his conservative Holy Alliance obligations to Vienna. The second attempt was more successful, and in 1867 the weakened Austria conceded to a compromise, establishing the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy which gave Hungary's elites broad autonomy in domestic matters. The 19th century struggles for freedom from Vienna were formative for Hungarian national identity and constitute a part of the broader metahistorical Hungarian "freedom fight" narrative, on which Orbán's government also drew for its geopolitical rhetoric.

The second dramatic trend of the 19th century is also linked to the rise of modern Hungarian nationalism. Hungarian nationalism which tried to recycle the historically multiethnic population into a monolingual Hungarian people. This task was particularly challenging, as by 19th century, the non-Hungarian (i.e. non-Magyar) population of the Kingdom outnumbered the ethnic Hungarians. For centuries the Kingdom had a tradition of mixing populations of different ethnic origins, which naturally also had a profound impact on the composition of the modern Hungarian nation. As the Central European joke on the matter runs, "what is a Hungarian? A Hungarian means (s/he will make) goulash! What are two Hungarians then? Two Hungarians are a *csárdás* (a traditional folk dance). And what are three Hungarians then? Three Hungarians are an impossible situation. One of them will turn out to be either Slovak, Croat or Romanian".

Traditional medieval structures of authority did not require ethnic homogeneity, and cultural diversity could even be viewed as a particular virtue. As King Stephen (István) I famously admonished his son, *regnum unius linguae uniusque moris imbecile et fragile est*, that kingdom which has (only) one language and one custom is weak and fragile (Seton-Watson 1908, 21). In the 19th century, and, in particular, after the 1867 establishment of the dual monarchy, this inclusive approach changed radically, as the Hungarian elites engaged in, as Miroslav Hroch puts it, "militant Magyarization" of non-Magyar ethnies, in particular, the Slovaks, whom the Hungarian government declared non-existent as a nation (Hroch 1985, 99). National antagonisms ran high, as even the 19th Hungarian proverb suggests: *tót nem ember*, "the Slovak is not a man" (Seton-Watson, 1908, 59). Unsurprisingly, the Slovak national movement would back Vienna during Hungarian anti-Habsburg uprisings and was inclined towards Russia and the ideas of pan-Slavism as its last hope of preserving its identity. Hungarian nationalism, on the other hand, suffered from a paranoia of a perceived pan-Slavic conspiracy, intended to destroy Hungary from within, and thus treated Slovak and other non-Magyar national claims with particular suspicion and animosity (Seton-Watson 1908).

Therefore, it can be argued, that the 19th century Hungarian experience was shaped by two constitutive existential insecurities. The first had to do with the subjugation of Hungary to the Habsburgs of Vienna and

was fueling the desire for national liberation. The second insecurity stemmed from the conflict between the political vision of a mononational Hungarian state and the reality of a polyethnic Kingdom of Hungary, whose inhabitants resisted forceful assimilation. Contemporary Hungarian nationalism sometimes tries to downplay this aspect, trying to turn *vice into virtue*. As Mária Schmidt (2015, 135), a Hungarian historian, director of the House of Terror in Budapest, and someone perceived as one of Orbán's chief ideologists, argues, Hungarians "were never colonizers" and therefore "have never been racist, nor have there been any hostilities towards "others," that is, aliens, whether gypsies, Jews or various nationalities." "Hungary has always been able to integrate national and religious minorities it was sharing destiny with. Which meant as early as in the nineteenth century that in exchange for identifying themselves with the political goals the nation wanted to achieve, they could freely exercise their cultural and religious identities".

This benevolent vision of an inclusive Hungarian political nation is positively myopic to the 19th century Magyarization practices. But it uses the historical image of the polyethnic Kingdom of Hungary to present an ideological model which aspires to rival Western multiculturalism, and, in that sense, also implies a messianic vision, some kind of a non-Western model of inclusion, a Hungarian civilizational universe embracing many cultures in its own way. Here, the legacy of a multiethnic state, and the related geopolitical imaginaries of regional leadership, of the Hungarians' *mission civilisatrice* in the Carpathian Basin also brings the Hungarian case close to the Polish one with its Jagiellonian myth. In this respect, the two have similarly ambiguous legacies. As Miroslav Hroch (1985, 9) points, out both nations "experienced their formative period at the dawn of capitalism as large nations but then fell into situations characteristic of oppressed nations".

The list of historical insecurities, however, would be grossly incomplete without the 20th century Hungarian territorial trauma. The project of assimilating the non-Magyar identities in the Kingdom of Hungary may have eventually been a success, had it not ended up "on the wrong side of history". The collapse of Austria-Hungary (1918) after its defeat in World War I, was followed up by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, drafted by the victorious Allies. The treaty stripped Hungary of more than two-thirds of its population and territory, with significant chunks being transferred to the neighboring states, including Romania, and the newly established Czechoslovakia. It is argued that "the loss Hungary suffered was not comparable to any other country's loss after World War I." Consequently, Trianon became "a chosen trauma playing a determining role in shaping collective identity" with "the image of a wounded and maimed country" occupying a central place in the nationalist discourse (Menyhért 2016, 72).

Hungary secured a partial revision of the Trianon borders under the Miklós Horthy regime (1920-1944) owing to its alliance with Nazi Germany. These revisions were annulled after 1945 and throughout the Communist era (1945-1989) the topic remained taboo. The image of a truncated, maimed Hungary has

survived into the post-Communist period and can be easily found anywhere from the discourse of the radical right to souvenir shops across the country, which sell postcards with revisionist maps. The Trianon trauma can perhaps even be called a birth trauma, as the treaty established the borders of a modern, mononational Hungary, simultaneously leaving millions of ethnic Hungarians to wake up in a foreign land without physically moving an inch from their homes. Among other things, the trauma continues to play a particularly strong role owing to the fact that, as Slovakia's former ambassador to Budapest Rastislav Káčer points out, Hungarian society had little time to deal with the difficult pact as a matter of an open and honest democratic debate that could form a consensus on the meaning of Trianon.⁴ Neither the Horthy regime (1920-1944), nor the Communist dictatorship (1945-1989) could provide public space for such a debate. Hungarian national identity, thus, remained notably dislocated and contested throughout the post-Communist period. Or, as Batory (2010, 32) puts it, "different conceptualisations of nationhood and national identity constitute one of the key fault lines in Hungary's party system, and the relationship between ethnicity/national identity and political community has often taken centre stage in political life".

Hungary's rich and dramatic history could hardly be summed up in simple terms, but there are two tropes that seem to persist in the national identity narratives, leading to a situation, which Péter Balogh (2020) dubs "a strange co-existence" of "clashing geopolitical self-images." The nomadic past and the collective memories of migration and conquest give birth to the trope which romanticizes Hungary's non-European, Asian origins. The ideology of Turanianism – a cousin to Russian Eurasianism – stresses the Hungarians' historical and spiritual affinity with the "Uralo-Altai" races, the Turkic peoples, the indigenous tribes of Siberia, and even the Mongols, Koreans and Japanese (Akçali, Emel and Korkut 2012). Never a mainstream, official interpretation of national identity, Turanianism has always remained in the background as an ideological inspiration for the different generations of the Hungarian far right and fascists and has also been opportunistically cited by Orbán (Buzogány 2017). The second trope is the trope of a European Hungary and the shield of a Christian Europe. This is where Hungary's peripheral position becomes a source of both vulnerability and greatness, of self-victimization and pride. The vulnerability in the narrative is closely related to the heroic freedom fight that the Hungarians put up against foreign oppressors for centuries, as well as the injustice that it suffered at the hands of European powers, most notably during the Trianon "maiming." These breeds a broadly shared perception of Europe's ingratitude towards Hungary, who has never been properly "thanked" for being the self-sacrificing bulwark of the West (Scott 2018, 669). And while territorial revisionism could only be exploited with caution by the Hungarian government, whose neighbors are also formally its allies through membership in the EU and/or NATO, the themes of the shield of the West and of Christianity could be given full swing. The next section demonstrates how these old

⁴ Interview with HE Rastislav Káčer, Bratislava, November 29, 2018.

geopolitical imaginaries were projected onto contemporary political agendas by the Orbán regime, re-imagining Europe and Hungary's place in it.

The liberties of illiberalism

When it comes to examining official narratives, many notable similarities can be discovered between the Polish case and Viktor Orbán's Hungary. One of them is the intensive othering of the political establishment which had previously ruled the country and a (partial) revisionism of the results of the post-1989 transition. In Hungary, this narrative was further strengthened by the effects of the economic crisis of the late aughts which Poland successfully managed to avoid. Orbán managed to convert the growing disappointment with living standards into an ideological effect. As Bálint Magyar (2016, xviii) put it, "electoral rejection of neo-liberalism, the economic ideology, spilled over into electoral rejection of constitutional liberalism, the political ideology."

Illiberalism and *illiberal democracy* became the lynchpins of Orbán's ideological project. Orbán argued that liberalism and democracy were not identical. Far from it, too much liberalism has been suffocating democracy in Hungary and even more so in Western Europe. Outlining his political philosophy in a 2015 interview to the Russian daily *Kommersant* Orbán argued:

A situation has emerged in Europe in the past twenty years in which one of the three main intellectual tendencies – Christian democracy, social democracy and liberal democracy – has gained overwhelming dominance, and the followers of this tendency have monopolised democracy for themselves. This is why in Europe people are now allowed to say that democracy can only be liberal, but you are not allowed to say that democracy can only be Christian democratic or that democracy can only be social democratic. I take the view that if any one of these competing ideas monopolises democracy, it simply stifles intellectual debate (Hungarian Government 2015a).

Parallels to Poland's Law and Justice narrative can be easily observed as established Western political norms are challenged in the name of freedom - a key ideological concept in the discourses of both parties. There is also a persistent othering of the ruling establishment (the "elites"), "liberalism" and "leftism," which can all be lumped together and discursively linked to Communist totalitarianism, producing a generalized enemy image.

According to Orbán, liberalism failed the Hungarians on several counts. From the economic standpoint, it lacked the necessary solidarity, leading to impoverishment and inequality. Orbán declared in his keynote 2014 speech at the Băile Tușnad (Tusnádfürdő) summer camp, "[t]he liberal democracy and liberal

Hungarian state did not protect community assets” (Hungarian Government 2014a). The new Hungarian economic policy would turn away from “liberal utopias” which had left Hungary vulnerable to globalized financial capitalism, as “the institutions of liberal democracy did not protect taxpayers from financial institutions which abused their superior positions, and the sacred market economy allowed international corporations to take away even our last pennies” (Hungarian Government 2015b).

From the political point of view, liberalism was plainly about betraying Hungarian national interests, challenging “the very idea” of their existence. Among other things, these national interests also included the embracing of the Hungarians abroad “as part of the Hungarian nation,” thus signifying a shift from the civic to the ethnocultural understanding of national community.

Thus, in the Fidesz narrative, its predecessors, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and their allies, were not merely guilty of corruption which dealt them a tremendous blow politically. They suffered from an original sin of espousing a fundamentally faulty ideology: liberalism. Depending on the context, the meaning of Orbán’s “umbrella term” can transform to include ideological platforms as different from each other as neoliberalism is from social liberalism and the left-liberal ideology of political correctness and progressive change.

Sweeping ideological delegitimization of political rivals is part of the populist posture which rests on the assumption of “exclusive ownership of the nation.” To borrow an expression from Emilia Palonen (2018, 313), it can be called the *pre-political*, cultural unity of the nation. This also has clear parallels to the Polish case, where, in rather similar ways, PiS engaged in populist othering of the “liberal” and “leftist” establishment, tying them discursively to the Communist past. In a very similar manner Orbán also promoted a doctrine of *resovereignization* with regard to key aspects of public life such as control over the economy and media ownership. In a 2015 interview, for example, he claimed that Hungary’s was a sovereign country “only at first sight”, outlining a number of points that had to be addressed in the name of genuine sovereignty:

In order to enable Hungary to feel really sovereign as a Member State of the European Union and NATO, we need strong influence in four fields. I do not say that we need to have exclusive influence, because in modern global economic circumstances that would be impossible, and I am not even saying that we should be immune from competition, because that is also impossible. One of these fields is the banking sector. Here the situation is good, and in this sector the ownership ratio of Hungarians exceeds fifty per cent. The second field is the media, because a country in which the majority of these instruments for influencing public opinion are possessed by foreigners is not a sovereign country. In this field we could do better. The third is the energy sector, which is

– as with banks – on the verge of recovery and will continue to improve. And the fourth field is trade – especially the retail trade in food products – in which we are far from reaching our target. These four fields had been passed into the hands of foreign companies, and thus the sovereignty of Hungary could only be of a constitutional nature. True sovereignty, however, also requires a political class that cannot be influenced by economic factors and powerful foreign business and media groups (Hungarian Government 2015c).

Fidesz’ building of a new system of “illiberal” democracy was paralleled by systematic public expressions of what one may call a *post-transition attitude*. In sharp contrast to the posture of normative conformity with the West, which the country assumed in order to be accepted by it after 1989, the new Fidesz Hungary, it seemed, no longer saw that much which it could learn from the West in terms of politics, economics or culture. The *pupil* posture was entirely gone. Thus, Orbán’s discourse of economic nationalism boasted of “sending the IMF packing” (Hungarian Government 2016d) and successfully adopting their “own Hungarian model” of crisis management to deal with the domestic economic crisis. Orbán also suggested that the West had been unfairly criticizing Hungary along with other V4 nations because it was “frustrated,” jealous of the region’s economic success (Hungarian Government 2015e), which, according to the prime minister’s confident analysis, had become “the engine of European growth” (Hungarian Government 2014b).

On the side of politics, the pupil posture looked even more markedly gone. EU criticism of the state of democracy in the country was being dismissed as an “attack” on Hungary (Hungarian Government 2017a). In fact, Western political standards could no longer be seen as a model. In 2019, during his traditional Tusnádfürdő student summer camp speech, Orbán mocked Finland, who had just taken over the EU Council Presidency and stated its intent to strengthen the rule of law in the Union by tying it by access to EU funds:

Now, for example, we’re entering a period in which our Finnish friends will be evaluating the situation of the rule of law in Hungary. We’ll be doing this with our Finnish friends. And Finland is a country, Ladies and Gentlemen, where there is no constitutional court. The defense of the Constitution is delegated to a special parliamentary committee set up for that purpose. Imagine the condition of the rule of law in Hungary if we simply announced the dissolution of the Constitutional Court and said that Parliament’s Committee for Constitutional Affairs would be responsible for constitutional review! This is more or less the situation in Finland.

....

Therefore, we need a nervous system, a strong nervous system, to enable us to show due respect, and answer questions politely – not with a smile or a laugh – when our Finnish friends ask us about and delve into the rule of law in Hungary” (Hungarian Government 2019a).

Previously, Orbán had openly suggested that Western democracy had been in decline and therefore should no longer have been a source of emulation for Central European post-Communist states. “There is greater vitality in Central and Eastern European democracy than in its Western European variant”, he said (Miniszterelnök 2018a). In the Fidesz discourse, the West as a normative model often came to be overshadowed by alternative sources of inspiration. The policy of the “Eastern opening”, to which the Hungarian government committed itself, aimed at establishing closer ties with non-democratic nations for the sake of the growing role they played in the global economy. At times, Orbán defended this policy as a *Realpolitik* move (Hungarian Government 2017b) that abandoned false hypocrisies in favor of a transactionalist “marketplace mentality,” which prioritized the national interest and which, according to the prime minister, was considered normal in the West itself (Hungarian Government 2015f).

Yet, *Realpolitik* was far from being the only ideological justification. Public nods to the economic successes of non-democratic powers such as China signaled an interest in alternative models. For instance, the prime minister makes that quite clear by praising Turkey for its performance during a bilateral business forum:

It is therefore reasonable for Hungarians to ask: what is the reason for Turkey’s success? What can we learn from you? You see, this is a very dangerous question, because the trend in the West today is that westerners should only learn from westerners, and if someone dares to say that one can also learn something from people in the East, he will immediately be dismissed in the press as a prime minister not to be trusted as far as democracy is concerned. This is how I am treated most of the time. However, I take the view that if a continent like ours – Europe – is economically unsuccessful, and at this point in time, our problems outnumber our achievements, then it is wise to ask the question: why is someone else successful? ... I am convinced that that there is something behind Turkey’s economic success which is much more than the economy itself: this is the question of demography. I am convinced that the immense respect the Turkish people have for the family, the very fact that family values come first, contributes to the Turkish economy’s resounding success. ... I questioned the Prime Minister in detail on how Turkey has succeeded in placing the family at the center of attention in policy, and not only in private life” (Hungarian Government 2015g).

This ideological underpinning of Hungary’s “Eastern opening” thus brackets authoritarianism, insofar as the latter can deliver economic growth and safeguard the social-conservative agenda. Much more than *Realpolitik*, it is a departure from the assumption of the universal nature of Western liberal democratic

experience, and towards a cultural relativist, or *civilizational* approach, with all the criticism which that implies for Western democracy promotion policies. Orbán argued in an interview to the Russian *Kommersant*:

I challenge the assertion, that there is anyone in the world who can determine the only true description of democracy. ... Why should the Russians build a political system like ours? Russian culture is different, it has its specificities. The Russians themselves will decide what they want – we cannot act like masters. Who authorised us to act like masters? (Hungarian Government 2015a).

In Orbán's comments on international relations, civilizational differences are a frequent theme. He understands civilizations in the Huntingtonian sense, as large and distinct cultural units, ultimately of equal worth and dignity, but with insurmountable differences. These differences are difficult or impossible to overcome and make undesirable and practically unsustainable global migration and *multiculturalism*, understood as the cohabitation of people from different civilizations within one political system. Thus, when the situation and context suit him, Orbán eagerly talks about his respect towards the great Islamic civilization, and even about the possibility of learning from it (Hungarian Government 2015h). However, in principle, mixing members of different civilizations is seen as something like mixing alcoholic drinks – a bad idea from the very start.

Hungary, as its prime minister never ceases to remind his audiences, belongs to the *European Christian civilization*. It chose to ally with the West one thousand years ago, when Saint Stephen (King Stephen I) baptized it, and entering the EU and NATO after 1989 was solely the “reaffirmation of this decision” (Hungarian Government 2014c). The West, however, has entered a period of decline, and, therefore, in contrast to the past, it could no longer be unconditionally emulated. It has stopped being an attractive political and economic model, and it has ceased to be what it was to the Hungarians during the Communist era – the place where *freedom* came from. On the contrary, it has become a source of *unfreedom*, of the “liberal non-democracy” (Hungarian Government 2018a) that has stifled genuine political pluralism, ostracizing and outlawing any substantive criticism of liberal norms. “Liberalism,” as Orbán diagnosed it for the readers of a Swiss weekly, “today no longer stands up for freedom, but for political correctness – which is the opposite of freedom” (Hungarian Government 2015i). Hungary, on the other hand, has remained a sovereign island of freedom, which could successfully choose its developmental model not being restrained by the liberal “straitjacket.” “Hungarian people are by nature politically incorrect – in other words, they have not yet lost their common sense” (Hungarian Government 2015j).

Hungary's doctrine of illiberalism is thus framed as an indigenous way towards liberty, but a liberty, which is understood in opposition to the shape-shifting “liberalism,” a discursively constructed *umbrella Other*

which has many faces, ranging from neoliberal globalism, transnational companies and “financiers” (read George Soros) to social liberalism, multiculturalism and the left-wing ideologies of progressive change. It is thus, ultimately, the freedom to be illiberal. What’s more, Hungary’s struggle against the global advance of the “liberal non-democracy” is discursively anchored in the political mythology of a “freedom fight,” thus invoking powerful collective memories that, for historical reasons, played a constitutive role in Hungarian national identity formation. Global “liberalism” is thereby presented as an heir to the foreign empires that wrought suffering and subjugation on Hungary. A ceremonial speech, which Orbán gave on the occasion of the anniversary of the 1848 Hungarian revolution against the Habsburgs, is worth quoting at length here:

We are the heirs of the 1848 revolutionaries and freedom fighters, because, just as 170 years ago, today we must speak honestly and directly. If we do not clearly state what is happening to Hungary and why it is happening, then no one will understand. And if we do not understand it, then we cannot make a sound decision three weeks from now. Therefore, we must speak directly, without compromise or timidity. Petőfi and his associates expressed it clearly: ‘Shall we be slaves, or we shall be free?’ Everyone understood that, and everyone knew how to reply. Together we have realized many things over the past thirty years. Together we have fought many great fights and memorable battles. But the greatest thing that we could realize in our lives, the greatest battle that we could fight together is still ahead of us. And every indication is that it is immediately ahead of us now. The situation, Dear Friends, is that there are those who want to take our country from us. Not with the stroke of a pen, has happened one hundred years ago at Trianon; now they want us to voluntarily hand our country over to others, over a period of a few decades. They want us to hand it over to foreigners coming from other continents, who do not speak our language, and who do not respect our culture, our laws or our way of life: people who want to replace what is ours with what is theirs. What they want is that henceforward it will increasingly not be we and our descendants who live here, but others. There is no exaggeration in what I have just said. Day by day we see the great European countries and nations losing their countries: little by little, from district to district and from city to city” (Hungarian Government 2018b).

Orbán systematically exploits the theme of threat and foreign subjugation, invoking prominent geopolitical tropes rooted in Hungarian history: the “freedom fight” myth is anchored in collective memories of subjugation and injustice that the Hungarian people, throughout its dramatic history, suffered at the hands of “empires”. Often, these “empires” were Western European great powers. Therefore, invoking these collective memories in nationalist rhetoric logically also leads to certain forms of othering of the West that in the past, wronged Hungary more than once. On the other hand, there is constant reaffirmation Hungary’s

belonging to Europe, to the Christian Western civilization through Saint Stephen's "civilizational" choice of religion. Yet, even if Hungary is described as unconditionally being an organic part of Europe in the Fidesz discourse, contemporary Europe itself comes to be portrayed as hijacked or "captured" by a new type of empire, the globalist one, associated with George Soros, liberalism, multiculturalism and migration (Hungarian Government 2018c). And, as long as it remains "captured," there is not much for Hungary to learn from it. On the contrary, it may now be Western Europe's turn to learn from Hungary as the sovereign island of illiberal freedom in the ocean of "liberal non-democracy." Putting an end to the *pupil* posture that characterized Hungary's post-Communist transition, Orbán thus demonstrated an inclination towards normative entrepreneurship on the European scale. On some occasions, when interviewed by Western media, he suggested that he may have a special role to play in reversing what he saw as political decline not only in Hungary but in the whole of the EU (Hungarian Government 2015i). His call for a "cultural counter-revolution" in Europe, made together with Jarosław Kaczyński, falls into the same pattern.⁵

In his analysis of Russian identity and ways in which it has historically been "caught up in the relationship" with Europe, Iver Neumann (1996) points out to several models of relating to the European Other. One of them is the vision of Russia whose mission it is to save the declining Europe "from itself" by returning it to its spiritual roots – an idea that was featured prominently in Slavophilism and Russian conservative religious philosophy. It would probably be exaggeration to read the same kind of messianism into the Fidesz discourse on Europe. However, it is clear that it demonstrates striking parallels to the Russian as well as to the Polish conservative ideas on Europe. Like Russia, and like Poland, Hungary has been constructing a narrative on two Europes: the "true" or authentic Europe, remaining true to its roots and the "false Europe" ⁶ that has betrayed them. The following section will address the construction of this geonormative imaginary in more detail.

The "Europe of open society" and its critic

Viktor Orbán's rhetoric certainly shows no lack of statements reaffirming Hungary's European destiny. He emphasizes the historical choice made by Hungarians a thousand years ago to become part of the Western civilization, and stresses "Hungary's place in within the Western system of alliances is beyond dispute" (Hungarian Government 2014d). Thus, not only did a *Huxit* from the EU not become a scenario to be

⁵ In this context it is also notable that Orbán's public speeches are carefully archived by the government official website and systematically translated into English. The most important ones are also translated into other major European languages, including German, French and Russian, presumably to maximize the outreach of the prime minister's ideological message.

⁶ See also Neumann's (2017) article on Russia's return as "true Europe".

contemplated by Fidesz. Its leader even criticized the vision of a two-speed Europe or a Europe divided into the “core” and the “periphery”, the “first and “second-class Europe” (Hungarian Government 2017c).

Yet, these public commitments to remaining European are far outnumbered by statements of dissatisfaction with the direction in which Europe has been developing. The main theme of this dissatisfaction is that Europe has lost its original roots and the “true”, authentic Europe has been eclipsed by the false, degenerate Europe, or as Orbán sometimes put it, alluding to George Soros the Europe of the “open society.”

Sometimes, the theme of a decadent Europe suffering through decline comes to be cast in a language reminiscent of 19th century romantic nationalism. Among other things, it includes references to the European “spirit” and to spiritual weakness, and a nostalgia for the greatness lost, for a “Europe of which we were once proud” (Hungarian Government 2015k). The “true” Europe, the Europe of nations has been hijacked by the liberals and the left who have suppressed the national spirit. Mária Schmidt, a chief Fidesz ideologist, who is sometimes called Orbán’s “confidante,” develops this view with striking sincerity in her writings. For instance, the German nation, she argues, was captured by left-wing ideologists (“the doctrinaires of 1968”). And though Germany managed to restore its economy, rising “like a phoenix” from the ashes of World War II, “it has never succeeded in rebuilding the spirit of its citizens. I would write on the tombstone of the German spirit: suffocated in the squeeze of its leftist elite and that of the holocaust rituals” (Schmidt 2015, 251). Echoing her, Orbán also speaks of Europe’s “spiritual straitjacket” (Miniszterelnök 2018b), the suffocation of the “free European spirit,” which has led the continent to abandon “its basic survival instincts” (Hungarian Government 2015l).

In the era of decline, Europe has become its own enemy, in acute need of being saved from itself. It is “waging a cultural war on its own past and its Christian roots” (Hungarian Government 2018d). Its democracy is degenerating, as the people no longer have democratic control over the political establishment. “In ninety percent of European countries,” as the heads of the Hungarian diplomatic missions abroad were admonished during their annual convention, “there is a gap between the opinion of the people and the policy pursued by the elite.” Freedom of information and genuine debate has been replaced by “orchestrated opinions” and “orchestrated journalism” (Hungarian Government 2015m). The liberals have come to ideologically “dominate Europe” so that even if conservative politicians are elected, they are “coerced” into being a liberal, as “a very large proportion of the channels through which the thoughts and policies of conservatives are interpreted and mediated are in the hands of liberals” (Hungarian Government 2015n). Political correctness – that “muzzle made of silk” – has put an end to freedom in Europe, where it is now “forbidden to speak the truth” (Miniszterelnök 2016). Political correctness made Europe build “a wall of taboos and dogmas around itself” (Hungarian Government 2015j). That wall, argues Orbán,

prevents it from seeing the imminent civilizational catastrophe and the suicidal nature of multiculturalist policies:

It is forbidden to say that today we are not witnessing the arrival of refugees, but a Europe being threatened by mass migration. It is forbidden to say that tens of millions are ready to set out in our direction. It is forbidden to say that immigration brings crime and terrorism to our countries. It is forbidden to say that the masses of people coming from different civilizations pose a threat to our way of life, our culture, our customs, and our Christian traditions (Miniszterelnok 2016).

The decline of Europe does not have a purely metaphysical nature. Europe owes its decadence to enemies, both internal (European liberals and left-wingers) and external (the sinister forces of globalization, epitomized by George Soros and his “financial empire”). The anti-Soros campaign launched by the Hungarian government, was rooted in conspiracy theories, unsubstantiated claims, and exaggerations, claiming that the financier controlled many key figures of the Western political establishment and carried out his sinister plans through them. As Orbán put it in 2016, since Soros is one of the key sponsors of the Democratic Party in the United States, “the mouth belongs to [Hillary] Clinton, but the voice belongs to George Soros” (Hungarian Government 2016a). The EU fared no better on that count. The “Soros empire” was said to have formed “an alliance with Brussels” and “the leaders of the European Union” were “receiving George Soros officially, in their offices, before the public” (Hungarian Government 2017a). And, through the term “empire,” present day political conflicts were also linked to identity shaping collective memories. Speaking at the anniversary of the 1956 Revolution, Orbán proclaimed:

“In the twentieth century the trouble was caused by military empires, but now, in the slipstream of globalization, it is financial empires which have risen up. They have no borders, but they have global media, and they have bought tens of thousands of people. They have no fixed structure, but they have extensive networks. They are fast, strong and brutal. It is this empire of financial speculation that has captured Brussels and several Member States. Until it regains its sovereignty, it will be impossible to turn Europe in the right direction” (Hungarian Government 2017d).

The “Soros empire”, which the Hungarian government warned about, was thus presented as a global clandestine network, that included influential Western politicians, “orchestrated” media, civic activists and NGOs - in particular, those that advocated migrants’ rights. Consequently, mass migration was not just an “NGO business”, as Orbán put it. It was also a political instrument, part of a conspiracy to alter Hungary’s population forever. Addressing the nation in 2018, the prime minister claimed that “one of the Soros network’s chief ideologues, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, recently let slip that some years ago they secretly launched a programme to breed a Soros-like human race, or, as they

modestly put it – if I can pronounce the term – Homo sorosensus. This means ‘Soros man’” (Hungarian Government 2018e).

Thus, mass migration was framed as a political instrument, used to destroy Hungary, and the remnants of the “true Europe”, the Europe of free and sovereign nations, the European civilization with its Christian roots. The enemies of “true Europe,” “the European left,” have long ago sought to put an end to sovereign states, looking at migration as an opportunity “to destabilize the nation state and accomplish their historic goal: the elimination of nations” (Hungarian Government 2015o). European integration has also been used as part of this plot. European federalism, and the plans to create “an empire” or a “European superstate” represent a fundamental flaw, a product of European integration going radically astray and mutating into a toxic ideology, espoused by the Brussels bureaucrats, who seek to take away power from the nation states but cannot offer working solutions to the peoples of Europe. They can only offer an ideological cover up for their political impotence – something that Orbán refers to as “Brusselism.” “Europe has become an ideology instead of genuine solutions,” it is now “an ideological obsession; if something is reasonable and successful but strengthens the sovereignty of a nation state, it is to be discarded – indeed, it is seen as an enemy” (Hungarian Government 2015p). Yet, as Orbán puts it, the real Europe, the Europe of free nation states which the European Union was originally meant to represent, is not in Brussels. “It is in Bratislava, in Warsaw, in Budapest, in Bucharest, in Berlin or in Paris” (Hungarian Government 2016b). And the sovereign nations, represent the truly pro-European position when they rebel against the Brussels *diktat*, such as when the Visegrád Four rose up against the migration quota systems.-.

Notably, systematic references to “empires” and “ideologies” in the Fidesz discourse help it establish a link to collective memories of suffering, subjugation and domination. This where Eurofederalism comes to be linked discursively to Bolshevism and Nazism and implicitly presented as their heir or continuation through various allusions and analogies. Thus, when Orbán ironically refers to his political opponent, the social democratic president of the European Parliament (2012-2017) Martin Schulz, as “Comrade Schulz,” it can be understood as a reference to Communist totalitarianism. When he calls on the “Europe’s freedom loving peoples” to “save Brussels from Sovietization,” and warns against the EU’s transformation into “a modern-day empire” of the “United States of Europe” (Hungarian Government 2016c) or into a “kind of Soviet Union reloaded” (Hungarian Government 2016d), or when he says that there are “forces in Europe” that have replaced the “former internationalist” (i.e. Communist) ideology with supranationalism (Hungarian Government 2015q), the allusions become even more obvious. Finally, the connection is made explicit in passages such as this one:

Europe is an extremely fertile continent intellectually. It always has been: it has been the source of a wide range of ideas, economic, political and social teachings. Of course, amidst such an array of

fertile thoughts, not only useful ones tend to emerge, but also dangerous ones. There have been instances in Europe when this intellectual fertility brought dangerous and destructive theories to the surface, and there have been times when the people of Europe were not strong enough to control the destructive ideas which seized the continent. I think this is how Bolshevism – which is a Marxist ideology with roots in Germany – spread in a Europe which lacked the strength to protect itself. National Socialism also grew from the same European soil. The idea of a Europe without nations, the idea of a United States of Europe, the gradual weakening of nations, is also an insane and dangerous idea (Hungarian Government 2015r).

The experience of being subjugated to “empires” is a constant trope in Orbán’s discourse. However, not all collective memories are exploited to the same extent. The trope of “Asian origin” is used opportunistically, predominantly during meetings with representatives of non-European states – such as Kazakhstan – when it is necessary to make a symbolic gesture, stressing Hungary’s special affiliation with the “East.” This is unsurprising, considering that spinning the trope of Asian origin would directly contradict the main ideological pillar of Fidesz, which is the assertion of Hungary’s Christian and European identity.

More conspicuously, in the official discourse, the topic of the Trianon trauma and of the lost territories clearly takes a back seat to the struggle against liberalism and migration. Again, this is *per se* unsurprising. Revision of the Trianon borders is an implausible scenario under the circumstances of Hungary being locked into the system of Western alliances, together with adjacent countries like Slovakia and Romania which host significant Hungarian minorities. Additionally, the Hungarian government also emphasizes regional cooperation with its neighbors and the prospects of Central Europe as a region that has a distinct identity, and which would be capable of standing up to the “supranationalism” of Brussels and the presumed hegemonic attempts of large Western European states. As Orbán put it, instructing Hungarian diplomats, Central Europe “from the Poles to the Croats” forms a community with a shared fate and a common “history of suffering,” and therefore it “will always take priority” (Hungarian Government 2015f). Or, as he put it in an interview, emphasizing regional solidarity against the EU’s criticisms of the state of the rule of law, “when someone attacks Poland – as Brussels is doing now – they attack the whole of Central Europe” (Hungarian Government 2017e).

Nevertheless, Hungary’s ethnic kin policies under Fidesz have in the past complicated relations with other Central European states. Thus, the government’s decision to offer passports to Hungarians living abroad triggered a reaction. In 2010, Slovakia introduced a new law banning the voluntary acquisition of a second citizenship. Though, for the reasons outlined above, the themes of Trianon and territorial revisionism, have to be toned down in *public* official discourse, it nevertheless features a geopolitical imaginary of the *Carpathian basin*. The term is used, in particular, in speeches which address representatives of the

Hungarian diaspora and could be understood as a kind of a euphemism for a Greater Hungary. As Balogh (2015, 195) points out, it is a “geographical metanarrative” that is coupled with the idea that all Hungarians across the basin belong together. In the official discourse is devoid of open territorial revisionism and interpreted rather as an economic, cultural and logistical space that Hungary needs to integrate through various regional infrastructures (railways, motorways) but also social policies, such as maternity support, extended from Hungary to its ethnic kin abroad (Hungarian Government 2017f). The Hungarian prime minister said proudly, Budapest is not only the capital of Hungary but “the center of a region extending beyond Hungary’s borders: the Carpathian Basin” (Hungarian Government 2017g).

Another theme that is conspicuously absent from Orbánite discourse is Russia. Historically, relations with this country have been complicated and at times, tragic. As it was already pointed out, 19th century Hungarian nationalism had a deep distrust for Russia, who was thought to be behind a pan-Slavist conspiracy, aiming to tear apart the Kingdom of Hungary. Additionally, Moscow suppressed the Hungarian freedom fight twice, in 1848 when the Russian emperor assisted Vienna in crushing the Hungarian revolution, and in 1956 when the USSR invaded Hungary as a Warsaw Pact member, in order to stop its Communist regime from liberalizing. Both 1848 and 1956 are sacred dates in the “freedom fight” narrative that Fidesz promotes systematically. And yet, the negative othering of Russia is conspicuously absent from it, with “Communism” overtaking the role of the primary villain. Furthermore, the government’s lenient stance on the present-day Russia as well as a record of cooperation undertaken as part of the “Eastern opening” policy (see above) had led to a seemingly paradoxical situation, when a significant part of the Hungarian electorate, had, presumably for the first time in history, developed a liking for Moscow, with Vladimir Putin being more popular in Hungary than the Chancellor of Germany, and European Union being perceived as a bigger threat than Russia (Krekó and Győri, 2017).

Certainly, the Russia-related memories did not evaporate completely. As Orbán once remarked in the realist vein, while instructing the heads of Hungarian diplomatic missions abroad on the importance of Ukraine’s territorial integrity, “there must always be something between Russia and Hungary. We do not want a common border; there must be something there: a sovereign state, the bigger the better” (Government 2015e). Still, that does not change the fact that the perception of the Russian Other in the Hungarian nationalist narrative has been notably transformed. As Bálint Magyar (2016) puts it, by abandoning the anti-Russian sentiment the Hungarian ruling establishment had for the first time “resorted to destroying an identity-shaping symbol in the hopes of gaining an economic and political advantage.” Here, it could also be argued that, while political and economic advantages certainly had to be important, one should not overlook the ideological convergence between Orbán’s Hungary and Putin’s Russia, the conservative, anti-liberal turn in domestic politics, notable similarities between the doctrines of “sovereign” and “illiberal”

democracy, and strong criticism of the West and its normative and “spiritual” state.⁷ In other words, the Russian vision of “another”, authentic, or “true” Europe (Neumann 2017) had come to be increasingly reminiscent of how Orbán and Fidesz were trying to reimagine Europe for themselves – and for the rest of Europe.

Conclusion

After the Soviet empire collapsed, as Bálint Magyar (2016, 57) observes, most people in Hungary accepted the illusion that only a Western form of liberal democracy could follow the Communist dictatorship. He continues, “[a]nd though the path ahead did not seem free of tribulations, there was a consensus that Hungary was on track for a linear, progressive process of development in this direction. Occasional deviations from the norms of liberal democracy seemed like growth pains, rather than adult character traits.”

Indeed, Hungary was often marked as a star pupil, back in the days of the so-called transition paradigm with its teleological implications. Political scientists believed it had “all the attributes that favored a democratic transition” (Mounk 2018, 9). The illiberal turn sent the linear notions to their grave. Orbán’s criticism of Western liberal democracy, his occasional sardonic whataboutism, clearly marked the end of the *pupil posture*, of the principle by which the West had to be imitated, unconditionally and comprehensively, in order for Hungary to win its recognition and to be accepted as a member of the prestigious club of Europeans. Moreover, three decades into the transition, the “pupil” was trying to inverse that relationship, and to reeducate the former “teacher” who, according to the former pupil, had grown to be somewhat senile.

The shift to illiberalism in Hungary not only marked the end of the transition as a period when Europe remained an unconditional normative standard, and, thus, a constant point of (positive) reference. It also ended the era when “Europe,” as one of the key *floating signifiers* of contemporary international politics, itself remained clear and uncontested in its meaning. Previously, “Europe” and “Europeanization” were intuitively clear, obvious notions. Now, three decades after 1989, as Jacques Rupnik pointed out, no one quite knew what it meant to “Europeanize” something.

In this destabilization and contestation of “Europe” a key role belonged to the Visegrád Four, and their 2015 rebellion against the *monopoly of Brussels on defining Europe*. If previously it was defined by the “West” for the “East,” now the “East” wanted to offer its own definition, to reimagine Europe according to

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the ideological affinities between Orbánism and Putinism and of the similarity of their historical roots see the 2020 study by Kazharski and Macalová.

its own standards. At the forefront of this was Hungary and Viktor Orbán with his *alternative* Europe, a geopolitical imaginary which he also wished to sell on the Western political market.

As we saw, many themes that constitute this imaginary can be traced to their cultural roots, to narratives on national identity that have been reproduced for many decades and even centuries, being linked to collective memories about crucial points in Hungarian history. As with other, V4 countries, the themes of subjugation and vulnerability are rather strong, and self-victimization is a prominent habit. The narrative on Hungarian history as a “freedom fight” against foreign domination, and against the “empires” that strived to overwhelm the freedom-loving Hungarian nation, is projected onto contemporary international politics. Thus, the “Sovietization” of Brussels, the “modern-day empire” of the “European superstate” and “the Soros empire” are clear allusions to well-known collective memories and traumas. The contemporary “freedom fight” is the struggle for the *liberty of being illiberal*, for sovereignty, as Hungary’s ruling elites understand it, i.e. for the sovereignty unrestrained by liberal norms or by international scrutiny. Not only is this an understanding that is emulated by Orbán’s followers in Poland and elsewhere, but, in itself, it comes rather close to the *Russian* understanding of sovereignty, as it crystallized under Vladimir Putin (see Kazharski and Macalová 2020).

In April 2018 Fidesz won another landslide victory in the national parliamentary elections. The elections, concluded the OSCE, were still free, but they were not entirely *fair*. Yet, the power of the EU and other authoritative international bodies to influence Hungary’s domestic politics has remained limited. Apparently, Hungary’s rulers managed – at least partially – to subvert Western standards of democratic politics while eschewing serious sanctions. They have stayed inside the Western institutional and political order, and reaped its benefits, while also making a bid to transform that order from within. Hungary, said Orbán, would not abandon Europe despite its current “bout of vertigo.” It is not going anywhere. But, neither, it seems, is the new Hungarian understanding of Europe.

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