



Hungarian  
Europe Society

# THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY AND THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY

From the  
Perspective of  
a Hungarian NGO

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BUDAPEST2022

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Monika Pál

## PREFACE

This volume is based on the “The Summit for Democracy and the Future of Democracy from the Perspective of a Hungarian NGO” conference held on 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2022 in Budapest. The authors of the present book intend to deal with the future of democracy globally and the socio-political challenges to the liberal world order from the perspective of an NGO. Our focus is on the Summit for Democracy initiated by the Biden administration and its potential impacts on political developments at global, regional and national levels from the perspective of civil society.

The chapters analyse the goals and chances of the summit both from theoretical and practical perspectives. Civil groups still have a chance to interfere and influence the outcome of the summit with recommendations: we want to emphasize the criteria and significance of human values and liberal principles, the rule of law, political liberties, civic education, new methods for citizens’ participation, media pluralism, transparency, and, last, but not least, the importance of securing the international liberal world order.

The Summit can be perceived as a global organizing enterprise at a time when the world is at an inflection point. Turbulent processes in global politics create instability both for citizens and independent civil organizations, whilst anti-democratic, authoritarian tendencies put heavy pressure on liberal democratic systems and their institutional structure at various, local, national, regional and federal levels.

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, we observe strikingly similar historic tendencies in two countries, in Hungary and the United States of America. Despite their geographic distance, social and political polarization combined with tribalism and the widespread circulation - often dominant position - of populist, illiberal views can be detected in both societies. Still established democratic political systems have often shown remarkable resilience in defence of their constitutional order and the rule of law globally. Today’s democratic political actors, NGO-s, think tanks and the free media even see an opportunity to proceed further in order to reform political, social and institutional mechanisms, introducing new methods for more efficient political-civic participation and representation, as well as to renew public policy concepts and tools that guarantee more just and sustainable structures.

2022 will certainly be remembered in history as a year when the world took a sharp bend. It is not clear which way it turned, but the status quo unquestionably changed and underlying processes that had been covert have suddenly become more visible on the surface. The Russian war in Ukraine dominates headlines, the political agenda and our life. The horrible conflagration turned our attention to missed steps and opportunities, pushed stakeholders to make decisions without much hesitation. What has been shady and unequivocal, is crystal clear: authoritarianism may pose an existential threat to the free, democratic world. Forces of extremist populism, authoritarianism may be able to mobilise, but cannot govern without manipulation and propaganda operations.

This world with fake news and misinformation is further complicated by the fact that the camps of democrats and autocrats are not easy to delineate. We have shades rather than clear contours of democracies, degrees of democratic practice rather than black-and-white categories. The “axis of evil” has become a mélange of potential adversaries.

It is high time that the USA, which itself is struggling with keeping up its democratic norms and institutions at home after the social divisions of the Trump years, took on a role again as the torchbearer of liberty. It should not be the time of isolation, but of engagement, though not the sort we had seen before. It is clear, that the export of democracy as it had been applied before is unfeasible, as, for instance, the takeover of the Taliban illustrates.

What can civil society do, how can resilience be built to safeguard democratic practices? What institutional mechanisms should be strengthened to fend off the undemocratic attacks against the very foundation of democracy? How is NATO transforming and how does the geopolitical constellation after 24 February 2022 trigger a European-wide response? What methods do illiberals resort to in order to portray themselves in a positive light? What can the EU do through media legislation to enhance media freedom? Our volume addresses these divergent questions that are all connected to the strengthening of democracy and tackling the illiberal, revisionist challenge targeted at the rules-based global order.

In this volume Yannis Karamitsios discusses the roots of the absence of a common European identity and the practical steps needed for its creation, even if he still acknowledges that it is rather wishful thinking to believe in its birth in the near future. Karamitsios identifies two obstacles federalists have to overcome. The first is convincing European citizens of the fact that a common European identity does not make national identities obsolete or hollow, they do not pose a threat but would coexist in harmony with present national identities. In order to achieve that Karamitsios proposes a ‘union of identities’, namely, “a federation of nations, cultures, languages, ethnicities and religions that serves mutual respect and interests within the collectivity”. Institutions and EU programmes for multilingualism, for instance, the cultivation of historic treasures, educational institutions, cultural education would all serve this endeavour. A real ‘identity acquis’ that should be developed, already encompasses symbols, such as the EU flag, logo, signposts or the EU passport. Furthering this cause means the creation of institutions, such as a European media network along the lines of Euronews and Eurovision. Besides, a genuine European research centre with CERN (the European Organisation for Nuclear Research) and ESA (European Space Agency) as blueprints should be established, as Karamitsios argues. The European Federation would establish a single consulate in place of national consulates as well as joint citizenship with a common passport, ID card embodying the same rights and duties for the citizens. In terms of education, a common curriculum besides national ones with the objective of instilling a common core knowledge and value system in the youth is envisaged by the author. Karamitsios also takes stock of the achievements of the Conference on the Future of Europe and on a positive note he concludes: “A big castle is to be built brick-by-brick over the years and decades. We, European federalists, have a role to play in this.”

Less optimistically, and with a regional focus, Adam Balcer calls attention to democratic backsliding and states that the Russian aggression against Ukraine will have a serious negative impact on an already deteriorating state of democracy and rule of law in Central Europe. Moreover, the further rise of corruption, democratic backslide, deepening political polarization and dissemination of Eurosceptical ideas in the region may undermine the EU’s cohesion and be exploited by Russia or China, he claims. Balcer asserts that in the region, Hungary represents an

unprecedented and the most striking example of democratic backsliding and dismantling of the rule of law. Orbán's model of government serves as a key source of inspiration for Poland ruled by the Law and Justice (PiS). Moreover, strong pro-Russian sentiments particularly in Slovakia, increase a possibility of cooperation between anti-democratic forces from the left and the right of political spectrum.

While Karamitsios studies the federalist toolbox as a way of strengthening resilience, Paulina Fröhlich focuses on one aspect of democratic resilience: civil society. Fröhlich analyses the prospect of a resilient civil society in today's turbulent times, taking stock of the loss of certainty and the role of civil society in improving the immune system of society. The bedrock of that certainty, she asserts, are universally accepted human rights, which are lacking in practice in many countries. Her argument is that besides the protection of law, social habits, such as greetings, make us visible to others and therefore give us a feeling of security. Fröhlich dates back the creeping in of uncertainties to the times of the Covid pandemic, during which social norms, the stability of institutions, such as the health service and economic ties, were put to the test. These problems were exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine as the EU's role as a guarantor of peace and normality was questioned after decades of stability and prosperity. Reducing uncertainty may well be achieved by building resilience, transforming democratic institutions for adaptation. Civil society should, according to the author, play an indispensable role, especially, in increasing civil participation. Its role should not merely be the defence of democracy but the strengthening of the bond between citizens and politics. A two-track approach is suggested by the author: pushing the European Union towards a more responsible role and transforming itself into a flexible and open organisation in addition to being a stable and reliable one.

A free media is a precondition for a healthy democracy, which „must be shaped, protected and developed in each new phase of social development” as Bernd Holznagel claims in his study entitled „The State of Media Pluralism and the Initiative of the Commission”. Accordingly, Holznagel analyses the European Union's Media Freedom Act, in which “the Commission for the first time presents a codification that provides a minimum standard for central areas of the protection of pluralism.” The author describes the worrying decline of European and especially Hungarian media pluralism. He cites polarisation, interference in elections, the spread of manipulative information and the intimidation of journalists as particularly worrying developments. Holznagel scrutinises the 2020 EU Action Plan for Democracy that contains proposals for numerous measures, including new legislative initiatives. He underlines that this kind of new legislation is not solely important for EU market actors but may serve as „an important point of reference for the legislation of states that have applied to join the EU, such as Ukraine.” In addition, compared to the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive, the scope and content of the new Media Freedom Act (MFA) is much broader: it is applicable not only to television and on-demand services, but also to radio, audio podcast and press and service providers are responsible for the selection of the content of the media service and the way it is presented. Holznagel identifies four pillars of the new regulation: the protection of media users, the strengthening of independence of the media from state and commercial interference is, the European control of media markets and a better cooperation between national regulators. His conclusion is clear: “Having achieved this is already an important step in strengthening the discourse on the preconditions of European democracy.”

The second chapter looks at the future of freedom from a geostrategic angle. Jackson Janes first piece in this chapter focuses on the interplay of Europe and the U.S.. “Fear is a fertilizer for autocracies” claims Janes who quotes President Roosevelt's address when he stated: “let me



assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.” Changing the asymmetric European leadership in transatlantic relations is viewed as necessary as well as overcoming the “distraction” of the strategic sovereignty debate. Janes emphasizes the relationship between domestic and foreign affairs which are not only evident in American politics but as he states “the battle is ongoing elsewhere” not just in Ukraine, referring to Chinese and Russian intrusion into domestic policies of democracies. Janes warns, in line with Dóra Györffy’s or István Gyarmati’s predictions, that it is self-delusion to ponder the reconstruction of the liberal order along pre-war lines.

Looking at the impact of the Ukraine war from a perspective of vying great powers and shifting power relations, Dóra Györffy discusses the roots and the changing narrative of western decline. She claims that this oft-quoted explanatory framework of the West begs for a revision in view of the Russian aggression in Ukraine due both to the obvious Russian failures and the impressive, better late-than-never standing up of the West against the adversary. As the author states, the decline of the west discourse easily found its way in the post-2008 era, when the global financial crisis was followed by Brexit, Trump’s presidency, the (mis)handling of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, and the chaotic withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. Russia could easily be lured into a false sense of confidence following these events. Referring to Joseph Nye’s seminal article on the changing nature of power, Györffy discusses the shift towards ‘soft power’ of culture and ideology as opposed to previous reliance on military might. The Russian and Chinese soft power ambitions did not live up to the expectations and could not counter the significantly more appealing image of the USA. The change of strategy followed, as Györffy explains, with the onset of the application of sharp power that includes Russian disinformation campaigns, strategic corruption (energy, banking system) and the Chinese focus “on increasing its economic power, using it to suppress critical voices in the media, universities, and research institutes”, in sum the application of “coercion, rather than attraction”. The Russian invasion of Georgia, Moldova, Syria, the occupation of Crimea, Russian interference of British soil (the Litvinenko and Skripal murders, Brexit referendum) and tampering with the American presidential elections in 2016 all failed to trigger a suitable deterring counterreaction. Therefore, after the 2008 global financial crisis, the initial mishandling of the similarly serious coronavirus pandemic, everything seemed to underscore the criticism of the west and the talk of its logical demise. The inglorious withdrawal from Afghanistan was a further testament to the limitations of western competence. This tide started to turn with the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine, in which the veneer of political and military competence began to wear off. Györffy finds that “Russia is facing an economic decline in both the short and long term”. As a consequence, the author claims that a new Cold War is in the formation, while “The sharpening of the fight against authoritarian regimes will bring novelty compared to the pre-war period in at least three areas: curbing strategic corruption, combating disinformation, and preventing the emergence of economic dependencies.” Dóra Györffy, striking a positive tone, concludes that:” The war thus led to the revival of the West rather than its further decline. Stronger action against authoritarian influence, strategic corruption and authoritarian propaganda are also likely to strengthen the cohesion of the West further, thus making the economic environment more predictable and reducing its vulnerability.”

István Gyarmati’s study *The Future of NATO in a New Political Constellation* calls attention to the fact that albeit Russia is not the Soviet Union, and the Warsaw Pact does not exist either, the danger she poses is ever greater as Russia is a less predictable adversary. The decades long policy of appeasement, the cooperation in the NATO-Russia Council and ‘resets’ were all tes-

tament to the short-sightedness and some form of naivety after Putin's first aggression against Georgia, which was not interpreted as a clarion call for western action, Gyarmati claims. Inaction – compounded by reduced military budgets ruled the day up until 9/11 when „change was justified, but exaggerated”. Striking a similarly critical tone, Gyarmati remarks that other geopolitical threats also remained below the radar of American foreign policy. Finally, as the war on terrorism narrative subsided, attention was turned to China and with this shift, Gyarmati argues, NATO had to accommodate but at the same time keep up „the rhetoric of maintaining collective defence as its core mission”. Meanwhile, however, the Russian threat and European security were neglected. He finds it crucial to underline that even though the ideology and full-blown military arsenal were not at Russia's disposal, still the nuclear capability remained intact and could be used, if there was political will, to pose a genuine threat. The milestone Madrid NATO Summit is scrutinised by Gyarmati in detail, who states about the historic meeting that the Alliance made an important step when stated that:” core tasks are based on common values, such as individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It is interesting and constitutes an innovative approach that NATO more or less directly addresses non-military threats too and emphasizes the values that are the basis of the very existence and functioning of the alliance. This is all the more important and timely as NATO and its members also have to face another threat: the threat of authoritarianism and dictatorships.” Gyarmati concludes that a return to ”business as usual” is impossible when the war is over, otherwise „we will be doomed to fail. And then the Summit will cease to be historic. More crucially, the crises and dangers will return in a strengthened form.”

In the third chapter which is devoted to authoritarian challenges, Szabolcs Panyi, an investigative journalist, describes the mechanism of the various operations by the Orbán government and claims these activities all stem from the Orbánist belief that the west mistreats the regime, western media and political elites don't give due credit to the Hungarian government, but “attack” it and “portray it negatively”. The operations take various forms and its executioners vary from Hungarian state institutions, government funded proxies, to think tanks and lobbyists. These are all instrumental in serving the common goal of image-building and exerting political influence, enhancing the interest of Fidesz and its leadership rather than the interest of the Hungarian nation as such. Panyi convincingly presents the targets of influence operations and the methods aimed at gaining influence in Washington or Brussels via proxies, by offering “money, generous fellowships, lavish trips and other benefits, or political favours”. The Orbán government's foreign influence operations have numerous well-identifiable objectives and Panyi enumerates the method of sowing division and distrust, pushing culture war issues, actively engaging in international network building of like-minded political actors, among others. Shielding the Orbán government from criticism and enhancing the image of the Orbán government as a defender of Christianity are also pivotal ambitions that all serve to divert attention from the government's Pro-Russian and pro-Chinese leanings.

The evolution of „illiberalism” of the Hungarian kind is elucidated on by Heino Nyssönen in his political analysis. He scrutinises the changing nature of Orbanism and its impact on Trumpism in public parlance, quoting the *New York Times*'s article entitled “How the American Right Fell in Love With Hungary” and also discussing the place of the Orbán phenomenon in the academic literature, referring, for instance, to Cas Mudde's observations. Nyssönen discusses MP Orbán's self-image and looks at how and why the content of international indices evaluating Hungarian democracy diverge. The author claims that albeit the system of national cooperation, a brainchild of the Orbán regime, cannot be imitated in its entirety, still, the „national interest” narrative falls on fertile ground in other European countries. His main argument is that current

Hungarian politics can be described as soft authoritarianism that primarily aims at maintaining power in the hands of the Prime Minister and his allies. Soft authoritarianism follows soft dictatorship and hard democracy, while “illiberalism” has been Orbán’s “own rhetorics of survival” and was used as a paradiastole aiming to stress positive features of the current system”.

In the closing piece in this volume, Garvan Walshe introduces the term “political antitrust” and argues for fair political competition. Walshe’s important writing looks at how illiberals have tried to use liberalism against itself. Opponents of liberalism have sought to delegitimise important elements of liberal democracy, including an independent media and civil society, political pluralism and the rule of law in order to consolidate political power and limit the effectiveness of political competition. They behave like monopolists in an economic market who abuse their market power to bias the rules of the game in their favour. In order to defend liberal democracy against these attacks, liberals need to base their case on the elements of fair political competition needed for a well-functioning democracy. Walshe argues that if something is to qualify as a democracy both liberals and non-liberals need to accept these fundamental requirements of fair political competition. He considers illiberals who try and accumulate unfair political power to be “political monopolists” and argued that institutions that protect democracy including EU institutions need to develop what can be called “political antitrust” to prevent such concentrations of power developing.

It can be seen from the writings in our book that liberal democracy is challenged on many fronts. It cannot procrastinate or be weakhearted, otherwise it is doomed to fail and darkness descends. Its collapse will result in a world with societies less secure, less prosperous and lacking those basic rights that we take for granted. The golden days of peace in Europe are over, still we must avoid the emergence of a new iron curtain. As we have recently seen it in Ukraine, if democracies unite, they are far more capable of handling challenges, at home and abroad, than autocracies. Moreover, each democracy has a moral duty to sustain a rules-based order that serves citizens, wherever they live.

István Hegedűs

## WELCOME SPEECH

Dear Guests, dear Speakers, Participants, Friends, here at the venue in the Ibis Hotel in downtown Budapest and online on the zoom platform. I would like to welcome you all to the conference of the Hungarian Europe Society. With our invited guests from Hungary and abroad, we are going to talk about the future of democracy, the global liberal order, and the state of the European Union.

The political landscape has changed a lot in 2022. When we started to organise this event almost a year ago, the Summit for Democracy initiated by the Biden Presidency was on the top of the agenda during the gradual slowdown of the pandemic. Today, as the Germans say, after a *Zeitenwende* that was provoked by the brutal aggression of the Russian Putin regime against its sovereign neighbour, Ukraine, we live in a different world. I will only mention three important topics/fields in this short welcome speech, starting with a relatively small country and ending with a bigger picture.

1. About Hungary. The Orbán government, the Orbán regime has never been so isolated in the international political arena as it is today. In these days, the Hungarian Prime Minister has to face the consequences of a newly invented EU instrument, the conditionality mechanism. It was introduced to protect the financial interests of the European Union when fighting against corruption, demanding transparency and an independent judiciary system in a member state, which, as we all know, has already systematically breached common European norms and values. After more than a decade of inertia, the narrow and careful legalistic approach was replaced by a political counter-offensive at European level that finally also includes the European Commission against a member government that overtly undermined liberal democracy at national level. Orbán faces more and more antagonistic political partners within the European Union who are especially suspicious of his special ties to Vladimir Putin. It was a (too) long political and psychological process for many political actors, but today the European institutions and all the democratic political parties, including the European People's Party, which no longer gives a protective shield to Fidesz, understand very well the real meaning of the current propaganda campaign by the government. Namely, spin doctors of the regime blame EU sanctions, which Orbán actually voted in favour as well, and not the imperialistic manoeuvres of the Russian bear/tsar for the economic hardships and the high inflation rate. The bombs, which are falling on us, were launched from Brussels as billboards in the streets try to suggest to Hungarians. The real deadly shelling by the Russian army on Ukrainian civilians has not been criticised.

In the meantime, the desired alliance of like-minded radical right-wing parties has not been born (yet): After losing the admiration of his Polish nationalist friends in government, Orbán has less friends in power positions than before. At home, in Hungary, however, he is still the only strongman. But to keep his party's leading position in the polls in the long run, the Hungarian economy desperately needs huge transfers from the Recovery and Resilience Facility as well as the Cohesion Fund of the European budget.

2. About Europe: the European Union has become more united than ever before and has developed a much stronger relationship with the United States than prior to the war. Still, the constitutional re-construction of the European Union is far from being complete and the pro-European, liberal-minded forces – member states, European institutional actors, political parties and civil groups - have not transformed the complex multi-level governance of the EU into a a) more effective, and b) really supranational political entity. Today the vision about an ever closer union has gained a new momentum as the outcome of the conference on the future of Europe presents - but there are still many stakeholders in the European political sphere who oppose the institutional and policy reforms of the European project towards a federalist renewal.

3. About the international order. Some multiple global challenges and crises have become less salient since the Russian invasion against Ukraine. No doubt, this terrible confrontation has become the most important cause for all of us: Ukrainians are fighting for freedom as well as for universal values that liberal democracies and open societies all share with each other. The democratic, liberal community of nations, governments, regional and national institutions, civil groups and, first of all, citizens should keep on supporting the people of this courageous Eastern European country. We do not know what the outcome of this devastating war will be. As Francis Fukuyama - in an interview to The Washington Post on 12 September 2022 - argued: “If Ukraine is able to defeat Russia, the demonstration effect is going to be really tremendous. It’s going to have domestic political consequences inside every democracy that’s threatened by one of these populist parties ... I do think that we could recover a little bit of the spirit of 1989. Ukraine could trigger something like that in the United States and Europe.” He might be too optimistic. But at least, we have to try, again and again.



## Chapter 1

# The Future of Europe in a New Era of Global Conflicts



Yannis Karamitsios

# **A COMMON EUROPEAN IDENTITY IN ADDITION TO OUR NATIONAL ONES: ACHIEVING A EUROPEAN FEDERATION?**

The European federalist movement aims at the creation of a sovereign European federal state that would include and succeed 27 -or more or less- European countries. But, in order to achieve this, it will need a people, a ‘demos’, with a common feeling of belonging. We need to examine whether something like this is feasible, whether it is already happening to a certain extent, and of course what remains to be done.

A state cannot be viable in the long-term if its people lack a sense of a common identity. Only if citizens share this feeling of participating in something bigger than themselves can they build a real society, state and vision. This has been achieved with significant success in strong federations such as the U.S. or Germany. However, the lack of a common identity presents one of the most difficult challenges for the EU today. It would be a similar challenge for a European Federation tomorrow. As long as Europe is viewed solely as an economic or geopolitical project, it will fail to galvanise its citizens or gain their hearts and minds.

## **Europe: a mosaic of identities**

Europe is perhaps unique with its relatively small geographical space and large diversity of cultures. In 2022 the EU has 27 member states and 24 official languages, plus another 60 indigenous or non-indigenous languages. Moreover, our corner of the world is home to the three main denominations of Christianity (Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox), millions of Muslims and many deeply rooted Jewish communities. Leaving such numbers aside, Europe consists of many different cultural blocks with specific traditions, attitudes and values. One could cite a long list of European cultural worlds: Scandinavian, Francophone, Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, Latin Mediterranean, Slavonic, Baltic, Greek, Magyar, Roma, and so on. That list could be further broken down into endless anthropological, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural groups.

We should not mince words: a common European identity is still a remote target. Most of Europe’s inhabitants are emotionally connected to their nationalities and languages rather than to their continent. What is missing is a joint language and political consciousness to bind them together. The average citizen of the USA is above all “American” and secondarily “Californian” or “Floridian”. This is not yet the case in Europe, and perhaps it never will be. Language is the main hindrance to a common identity. Language constitutes the agent of thought and self-determination, and thus can function as a strong barrier or bond between people. As long as we lack a single European

language, we have to accept that the European project is subject to serious limitations. Moreover, language is not the only divider. There is a long history of conflicts, wars and antagonisms, as well as diverse educational systems, religious beliefs and geographical circumstances that have kept European people entrenched within their own identity groups for centuries. This is a reality that cannot be ignored or disrespected. How, then, should we move forward with such a mosaic of identities?

## Two key questions

In our understanding, the issue of identity points to two essential questions.

First, how to assure people across Europe that their future federal state would respect and foster their national and other identities? And second, how to forge a parallel European identity to reinforce a new European Federation, and in what areas?

Concerning the first question, we propose the idea of a *union of identities*, namely a federation of nations, cultures, languages, ethnicities and religions that serves mutual respect and interests within the collectivity. People must be convinced that their identities can be best defended within a large and free space based on tolerance and communication rather than closed borders, nationalism or local chauvinism. A minority language spoken across national borders can be better protected within a federal union than within an individual country. A national historic archive can best be developed within a robust European cultural policy rather than within the shrinking national budget of a small state. And national pride could grow if the respective nation belonged to the strongest federation of nations in the world – the European Federation. The EU has long supported projects linked to diversity and identities: all those EU programmes for multilingualism, historic treasures, educational institutions, cultural education and so on. That policy should continue and be reinforced.

A federal Europe would persistently communicate the message that identities are best preserved within a common political space where wealth, health, social cohesion and human rights are adequately ensured. A federal Europe must help people realise that nationalism, chauvinism, xenophobia and closed borders have historically destroyed the identities, traditions and cultures of people rather than promoting them.

The constituent states of the future European Federation would maintain all the elements considered important for their distinct identities. They could keep their flags, emblems, national anthems, national broadcasters, national academies or national sport teams. They would continue to be the main entities responsible for their history, language, culture, and traditions. Where applicable, they would retain their kings or queens as ceremonial leaders of their nations.

As for the second question: we believe that, gradually over time, a parallel European identity could emerge and grow. There are already some encouraging examples of this. People accept the EU flag as their second one. When they see it flying outside their public buildings next to their national ones, they feel reassured rather than threatened or offended. They also accept the EU logo on signposts outside their local school projects, bridges, roads or hospitals constructed with EU funds. They are also happy to hold an “EU” passport which simultaneously functions as a Belgian, Portuguese or Bulgarian one. This is an EU “identity acquis” which must be appreciated as a major accomplishment of the last decades – and one worth building on.



We should build institutions that help citizens identify themselves with the European idea in a soft and natural manner. Here are three examples. The first would be a European media network to connect Europe's citizens to one another, along the lines of *Euronews* and *Eurovision*, which has been a good start. Second, a European research centre with tangible breakthrough achievements would instill pride in Europe's public; CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, and ESA, the European Space Agency, are brilliant examples. And there would be the goal of installing a single EF consulate to replace all national consulates across the world to offer administrative support to all citizens – a possibility excluded today since each EU member state retains its exclusive competence in foreign affairs.

Finally, a joint citizenship, guaranteeing for all European people a common passport, ID card, rights and duties, would be itself a very strong tool towards forming a common identity. It would constitute a strong bond of solidarity, pride and solidarity in many respects.

## **The big step: a common education curriculum**

In federal systems, education traditionally falls to the competence of the federation's constituent parts, namely its states or regions. This would be the same for the diverse composition of the European Federation that we propose. Italian pupils have a particular interest in Italian geography, German pupils in German history, Lithuanian students in their language, and so on. Such interests must be respected and served. Education is a classic example of the application of the principle of subsidiarity, at least with regards to the teaching subjects. This should remain so in the EF.

We also think, however, that in a globalised world a strictly national approach to education would not be enough. Additional elements of a universal education would be needed in several areas such as mathematics or science, which obviously extend beyond national or local identity. We therefore propose the development of a European curriculum – one that complements national ones. It would be obligatory for all primary and secondary educational institutions across the EF. It would include subjects such as European history and culture, principles of ecological development, humanistic values, as well as civic education.

The European curriculum would also include mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, geology, natural history and European and global geography – all subjects that rise above national or regional perspectives. This layer of education would reinforce the reading, science and mathematics skills of European pupils and thus our region's competitive position in a highly globalised world. The constituent states of the future European federation would retain their competence over subjects of national history, language, geography, religion, culture and anything else related to the specific aspects of their national and regional identities.

Both the national and European curricula would be taught in the local or national language of the respective pupils. In addition to their native tongue, all European pupils would learn English, the modern universal language, as well as a third European or other language.

This common European curriculum would be crucial to fostering a sense of joint European identity and belonging. It would be an unprecedented step in our continent's history: all European children, whether living in the mountains of Spain, Greek islands, Hungarian towns or

large German cities, would grow up receiving the same basic knowledge and common set of European values. This should be seen as one of the most fundamental revolutions of the European project proposed by this text.

## The Conference on the Future of Europe

Unfortunately, the creation of a European Federation remains a distant prospect for the time being. Nevertheless, there is still a margin to enhance European integration within the current EU framework. Such an opportunity has been introduced by the Conference on the Future of Europe. It involved European citizens, civil society, and institutions who debated for one year as equal partners. It ended on 9 May 2022 with the presentation of the final report to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. It included 49 proposals consisting of 325 concrete measures proposed by the participating citizens. It is now up to the EU institutions to follow-up on them.

Regarding the promotion of a common European identity, one could notice some elements in citizens' proposals that relate directly or indirectly to it. Out of the suggested measures we could highlight some characteristic ones:

- making a greater use of artificial intelligence and translation technologies to circumvent language barriers
- bringing Europe closer to citizens by improving 120 contact points and dedicated hubs, or “Houses of Europe”, at local level
- EU fund for supporting online and offline interactions (i.e. exchange programmes, panels, meetings) of both short and longer duration between EU citizens
- creating common sports events and teams
- making Europe Day (9 May) an additional European public holiday for all EU citizens
- coordinate the level of all different education programmes in the European Union with acceptance of the national, regional and local contents
- civic education about democratic processes, as well as EU values and history of Europe, through a common module for all European schools
- create opportunities to share European cultures, bring people together and move them towards a common European identity
- promote European exchanges in different fields, both physically and digitally, including educational exchanges, twinning, travel and professional mobility
- EU wide referendum, to be triggered by the European Parliament, in exceptional cases on matters particularly important to all European citizens
- election of some of the Members of the European Parliament through a European Union-wide list

This list can grow longer. It is up to EU institutions, national governments, civil society, media and active individuals to make their own contribution to a new European identity and consciousness. It should be a long, natural process. A big castle to be built brick-by-brick over the years and decades. We, European federalists, have a role to play in this.

Adam Balcer

# **THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

The war in Ukraine has a huge impact on the entire world. It ruthlessly laid bare the weaknesses of Russia's hard power and confirmed a rising relevance of cleavage between democracies and autocratic regimes on the global stage. Indeed, after the full-scale Russian invasion, when the Economist Intelligence Unit divided countries according to their approach towards Russia it turned out that the great majority of autocratic regimes supports or leans towards Moscow. What is even more important, the war is taking place in unfavorable conditions for democracies. Freedom House, the US foundation evaluating political systems on the globe for almost 50 years (dividing countries into three groups: not free, partly free, free) assesses that we are witnessing today „global expansion of authoritarian rule”. Its most recent report „Freedom in the World” states that „the present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997.” This threat is not limited only to non-Western countries. Negative trends of de-democratisation, though, to a lesser degree, can be observed also among the members of the EU, particularly in Central Europe (V-4 countries: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). These trends in the region undermines severely the EU which is based on the cooperation between democratic states and the rule of law. Moreover, political forces in Central Europe that reject a liberal democracy very often promote (soft and hard) Eurosceptic ideas. Today the war in Ukraine is misused by anti-democratic forces in Central Europe in order to maintain or gain power. This environment creates particularly favourable conditions for authoritarian regimes (i.e. Russia and China) to meddle in the region.

## **Central Europe- why the region matters?**

At first glance, negative developments in Central Europe seem not to pose a vital threat to the EU. Indeed, four Central European countries have less than 65 million inhabitants and their total GDP (PPP) is smaller than Italy's. Only Slovakia belongs to the eurozone, and other countries are not going to join it in a foreseeable future. Moreover, the Central European states are different also regarding the scale of their problems with democracy and rule of law. Nevertheless, on the other hand, Hungary which in 2019 was relegated by the Freedom House to the category of partly free countries, represents the most striking and unprecedented example of ongoing democratic backslide with the EU. It is the only partly free country among the EU member states. According to the Corruption Perception Index published every year by Transparency International, Hungary witnessed an exceptional rise of corruption (the smaller score, the bigger corruption: 2012-55 points, 2021-43 points) transforming itself besides Bulgaria into the most corrupted member state in the EU.

Moreover, Viktor Orbán, ruling Hungary since 2010 became a trend-setter and source of inspiration for many prominent radical right-wing politicians in the EU and around the world including the US. In Central Europe Hungarian authoritarian model meets with a special admiration of Law and Justice (PiS), a nationalistic right-wing party ruling Poland since 2015. Under its rule, Poland experienced a considerable authoritarian slide and dismantling of rule of law, approaching in the report “Freedom in the World” the category of partly free countries. Finally, anti-democratic political forces are maintaining a high popularity in Slovakia which also copes with serious corruption problems.

The importance of Central Europe within the Union also stems from its very advanced economic integration with Germany (value chains), definitely the most powerful EU member state. The trade turnover between the region and Germany is more than twice bigger than between the latter and France. Central Europe has become one of the most popular destinations for German direct investments abroad, particularly concerning industry and banking sector (above 5% of the entire German stocks abroad). People from the region represent an important part of the foreign labour force working or/and living in Germany. The scale of the economic integration between Germany and the region should be recognized as even larger if we take into account robust economic ties between Central Europe and Austria, and Germany’s vital role in the Austrian economy. In consequence, the economic situation in Central Europe possesses considerable significance for the entire EU. The probability of its substantial deterioration is increasing, especially, because of the fact that anti-democratic ruling political forces in Poland and Hungary implement populist policies which provoke serious problems of their economies.

## **The impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine**

The war in Ukraine has already left an important imprint on the state of democracy in Central Europe, the political scenes, and public opinions. The war shows that many Slovaks and Hungarians do not support the EU’s mainstream policy towards Russia, which became a fundamental issue for the Union. In a comprehensive opinion poll released in May 2022 by You. Gov, a British research centre, only around 40% of Slovaks and Hungarians recognized Russia as entirely or mostly responsible for the war. Moreover, more than 30% of Slovaks blamed NATO. In another poll published by Globsec in spring annually (Trends 2022), around 35 % of people in Hungary and Slovakia still saw Russia as a strategic partner and blamed the West and Ukraine for the war (in the last case more than 45% Slovaks did that). Finally, less than 45% Hungarians and half of Slovaks supported the EU sanctions against Russia.

Fidesz, Orbán’s party, undertook a relatively clear pro-Russian stance which is limited by the fact that Hungary is a small EU member state which has to align its policy with the EU mainstream. Nevertheless, Fidesz won national elections in April 2022 gaining the best-ever result (54%) by mostly strengthening social fears of alleged threat of Hungary’s involvement in the war and provoking anti-Ukrainian feelings. Mi Hazánk, a hard Eurosceptic party occupies a considerably more pro-Russian position, rejecting sanctions vehemently against Russia and promoting the idea of Hungary’s exit from the EU and the NATO and alliance with Moscow. The party won 6% in the April national elections. Currently, Mi Hazánk enjoys the support of almost 10% of electorate (Autumn 2022).

In Poland the war stopped the decrease of support of the Law and Justice (PiS), however the economic hardship prevented a substantial recovery of its popularity. In difference to above-mentioned political forces, PiS undertook an unequivocally pro-Ukrainian position regarding the Russian aggression. However, the war was used by PiS as a pretext to launch a comprehensive anti-German and indirectly anti-EU campaign. The Law and Justice accuses Germany of insufficient support for Ukraine but also of attempts to topple its government through an alleged cooperation with the opposition presented as the fifth column and “traitors”. Moreover, the Law and Justice perceives the EU as an organization completely dominated by Germany which used it instrumentally in order to subjugate Poland. This opinion resonates among a huge group of Polish citizens. According to one survey, above 45% of Poles subscribed to this indirectly anti-EU opinion. Moreover, in another poll, more than 40% of Poles recognized Germany as an enemy of Poland. Surveys show also that only a small group of Poles believes in *Zeitenwende*. Opinions showing that German-Russian relations will change only slightly or will remain the same because of the war, prevail among Poles. Finally, generally, Poles are highly skeptical of possible German military support in the case of Russian aggression against Poland.

The rise in the cooperation between pro-Russian left and right constitutes a new dangerous phenomenon in the region. In the Czech Republic, far-right and far-left Eurosceptic forces organized together the single largest European anti-war, de facto pro-Russian demonstration in September 2022 in Prague. (Czech Republic First!). According to the police, around 70,000 attended it. Protesters demanded the Czech government ensure direct supplies of natural gas from Russia and called for the Czech Republic to become militarily neutral and leave the EU. The „Hard” Eurosceptic radical right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) became the main beneficiary of these pro-Russian feelings, increasing its support from almost 10% (the 2021 national elections) to 12-13%. Other small pro-Russian and Eurosceptic far-left and far-right parties enjoy support of around 5% electorate. In Slovakia, radicalization of populist left (Smer-SD) constitutes the main development caused by the war in Ukraine. Smer-SD became a hard pro-Russia party, criticising delivery of arms to Ukraine, claiming that it is US-Russia war and finally stating that USA provoked it. The party’s leader, Robert Fico compared the arrival of NATO soldiers in Slovakia to “welcoming of the Wehrmacht”. Fico also admitted to seeking a coalition with “Republika” the radical right party which has experienced the increase of popularity since the beginning of full-scale war.

## Scenarios for the future

The future of democracy in Central Europe in the coming years looks quite gloomy. The long-term “cold war” between the West and Russia and rising tensions between the former and China constitutes a highly probable scenario. In consequence, phenomena such as foreign electoral interventions, disinformation (trolls, bots, fake news, etc.), psychological and public opinion warfare undertaken in order to provoke divisions and deepen polarisation in the EU will only intensify. Especially, China will try to strengthen its leverage by corrupting local political elites. Unfortunately, according to the Eurobarometer, Poles, Hungarians and to a lesser degree Slovaks distinguish themselves in the EU by a high level of trust in internet as a media outlet providing users with reliable information. Moreover, differing from the rest of the EU, many Poles and Hungarians tend to trust online social networks. Therefore, societies in the region, especially the Polish and Hungarian ones, will be particularly vulnerable and exposed to meddling by external autocratic powers and influence of local anti-democratic forces.

The question of Ukrainian refugees may become a key issue exploited by the above-mentioned actors. Central Europe hosts the largest community of Ukrainian refugees in the EU (1,5 million – Poland, 460 thousand- Czech Republic, 100 thousand- Slovakia). Sociological research shows first symptoms of the refugee fatigue in the region and existence of certain anti-Ukrainian prejudices, which may be misused against the refugees by nationalists and Russia. For instance, according to the opinion poll conducted by YouGov and Cambridge University, published in Autumn 2022, more than 20% of Poles approved the opinion that „before the war started, the Ukrainian Government had fallen under the influence of militant extremists who support the ideology of Nazism and Adolf Hitler” and only above 40% declared that it was false. Above 35% responded „don’t know either way – this may be true or may be false.” The results in Poland were not substantially better than in Hungary (28% true, 33% false, almost 40% don’t know). By comparison, approx. 10% of Swedes endorsed the first response (true) and almost 65% rejected the idea.

As far as political trends are concerned, Poland and Slovakia should be treated as the countries to watch in the coming years. In Autumn 2023 the national elections will take place in Poland. They will be the most important elections in the country in its modern history, because the probability of victory of opposition is the highest one since 2015, though the recovery of PiS with anti-German (Eurosceptic) and security-focused discourse should not be written off. In consequence, Poland will face the most ruthless electoral campaign in its history. After the elections the internal political conflict may escalate even further because PiS will lose power but will maintain control of the presidency for two years (with veto power), the central bank, the constitutional court and public TV and radio. Moreover, a very diverse coalition will govern the country coping with economy finding itself in a dire situation. Therefore, the government may not survive, and snap elections which could bring PiS back to power, should not be excluded. At the beginning of 2024 national elections will be held also in Slovakia. Pro-Russian parties, SD-Smer and more extremist political forces may achieve such good results that at least Fico’s party will become one of key actors in the coalition government. The scenario may seriously weaken the state of democracy in the country and deepen political divisions. Certainly, Russia will try to sharpen the political divisions in both countries by disinformation and weaponization of social media.

## Conclusion

Central Europe, because of Hungary’s authoritarian slide and Poland’s attempts to emulate Budapest, constitutes the most vivid example of the fact that the struggle between authoritarian and democratic trends does not only concern non-Western countries but is also taking place within the EU. However, the problems with democracy and corruption are persistent also to a substantial degree in Romania and even more in Bulgaria, which latter distinguishes itself in the EU by the strongest pro-Russian sentiments during the war in Ukraine, popular especially among the left and radical right. Moreover, the mix of pro-Russian sympathies with Euroscepticism, anti-US and anti-democratic mood and rising cooperation between far-left and far-right have become widespread phenomena also in Eastern Germany. The combined support for die Linke and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is on the rise (around 35% of Eastern Germans, excluding Berlin) and in certain states it exceeds 40% and even approaches 50%. However, awareness in the West that not only non-Western countries, but also the EU and the US trans-

formed themselves into an arena of confrontation between democratic and authoritarian political forces is on the rise still seems to be insufficient. Indeed, the US and the EU reacted in a rather soft way towards the authoritarian slide in Central Europe. The EU funds constitute a very important engine of growth in the region, but the mechanism of financial conditionality associated with the rule of law has just recently been inserted into EU law. Its consistent implementation against countries violating rule of law remains to be seen. Without a more robust defence of fundamental Western values by Washington and Brussels, Central Europe may succeed in “exporting” the democratic backslide into the rest of the West.

Paulina Fröhlich

# WHAT IS A RESILIENT CIVIL SOCIETY? DEMANDING AND DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTIES IN EUROPE

Realising that something you took for granted is actually fragile and insecure is a bit of a trauma. You have relied on it, considered it to be certain knowledge, built your plans and ideas on it. But then, in some cases suddenly, in other cases slowly, the new reality sets in. The feeling of insecurity, fear or anger arises. What made you feel so sure about something quite uncertain? Who influenced your apparently wrong judgement and don't you have a right to certainties?

*“People strive for certainty due to an inherent desire for it. Uncertainty seems to be stressful in the same unconscious manner as anger and fear. We cannot really control this feeling, and we feel relaxed only when we feel certain about what we know or about what we should anticipate.”*

One could argue, we, as human beings, have given ourselves some basic certainties in the form of international universal rights. They are supposed to cover our basic needs and protect a minimum of what we call our dignity. Those international human rights, including that “no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest” (Article 9) or that everyone is “free to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (Article 19), equip us with a fundamental framework of what we are supposed to rely on. Those rights shall protect and enable us. In case they are broken by a state, we can theoretically sue for them in court. At the same time even if we know of these rights and we might even full-heartedly agree that they are good and must be defended, we are also aware that they are being violated on a daily basis. In 54% of the world's countries, human rights defenders were arbitrarily detained in 2021. To what extent then are human rights useful as a catch-all of certainty?

## Certain once in practice?

Certainties may arise from laws or habits we have witnessed. Once we know of laws in practice and we understand them as our rights, they can at least theoretically provide some certainty. The “closer” the law is to us, the more likely it is that we feel protected by it. A pregnant woman in Germany for example has the right to parental allowance. It is hard not to feel protected by it as everyone knows of several cases around them where they have seen the law in practice. But also habits that are not manifested in some law can become certainties and give us a feeling of security. When we go to work and salute our colleagues, they greet us back. We are not





isolated from our surroundings. There is no law providing us with the right to be recognized and greeted but humans established this habit, and it does give us all a feeling of being visible. Imagine a day where no one, neither in your neighborhood, nor in the bakery, at work or on the bus would actually react to your presence. What a terrible feeling of uncertainty would empower us!

Thus, we can conclude that certainties are not only attractive but important for us and our health and security. It seems more likely that we trust in something that we have experienced or witnessed rather than a rather abstract promise or non-binding treaty, which we know that it is broken regularly. Many Europeans are lucky enough to have witnessed a whole range of pleasant experiences that became habit-based certainties throughout the last decades, which in turn were empowering their health and security feelings. Prosperity, absence of warlike conflicts in close proximity, relatively cheap vacation opportunities, and a growing number of democracies are just a few of those certainties.

## **The last years were a certainty-dam breach.**

Within the last years, however, a number of these certainties have vanished or tumbled. The corona virus might be the most prominent example of a certainty-dam-breach. Suddenly, within a few hours for many of us, the world has changed. Countries were closing their borders, people vacationing had to be evacuated, people did in fact not greet each other anymore because shaking hands, hugging or even talking openly into someone's face was considered dangerous. Further restrictions followed: there were lockdowns in many regions of the world, people were not allowed to leave their homes, schools and theatres closed, productions sides had to stand still. Consequently, our health services were under enormous pressure and their stability was not that certain any longer. Certain practices such as spending Christmas with our loved ones had to be given up. After a short while the question whether our global economy was, actually, built upon a risky system came up. Supply chains seemed fragile, and the idea that vital materials could be obtained exclusively on another continent unsettled many societies. Simply remember how pasta, toilet paper, disinfection spray or life-saving facemasks were running short in supermarkets. For the latter, part of the explanation was that masks for example had to be imported as the production was no longer running in the own country.

The public discourse worldwide was about what the “new normal” might be. But there are other, non-covid related certainties, that tumbled too. The entire idea of how we produce, consume, move and build was based upon the simply wrong and harmful assumption of never-ending cheap materials and the usage of fossil fuels. Thanks to children and youth filling the streets in protest against too limited measures fighting the climate crises, many governments finally understood how deep the problem is that we maneuvered ourselves into. General costs rose as Co2-prices were finally introduced and adjusted in many states. Public discourses circled around questions of how much responsibility every individual citizen bears when it comes to their personal consumption or travelling habits.

The invasion of Russia in Ukraine in February 2022 shook up certainties of several Europeans, mostly not living in East or Central Europe, but in the West or the South. The EU has a proud peace narrative that over decades has offered a unifying commonality to everyone. Despite intensive warnings from states like Poland, many European countries and citizens, most prom-

inently Germany, have lived under the certain assumption that there would be no armed war, gunfire and mass mortality happening anywhere in Europe soon. Did not many Europeans believe that intensified economic bonds would most likely prevent any armed conflicts as dependency stabilises? And just to give one more example, for sure many Europeans would not have thought after the 90s that there would be a populist wave sweeping through their continent with far-right ideologists winning hearts and minds and elections.

## Resilience towards uncertainties?

All these developments, which are human-made, characterize the phase in which we are currently living as a time of uncertainty. Large societal groups in the economy, the state or civil society work hard to bridge the gaps that crack-up. But as the crises we are facing will first not simply end anytime soon and second, not leave us with the world we had before. Therefore, we need to ask ourselves: How do we reduce the risk of experiencing what I called a trauma above? By reducing uncertainties, by relying less on what we call certainties or by developing a mode of resilience towards change? Surely, there are good arguments for each option. And in the end, it might in fact be the magic mixture that helps the most. But I would like to focus on the last suggestion, resilience.

The definition of the Cambridge dictionary left me stunning at first because its explanation of resilience can be read as the talent for carelessness: “the ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened”. Therefore, I turn to a broad definition by Wilbanks:

*“A resilient community anticipates problems, opportunities, and potential for surprises, reduces vulnerabilities relative to development paths, social and economic conditions, and sensitivities to possible threats; responds effectively, daily and legitimately in the event of an emergency; and recovers rapidly, better, safer, and fairer.”*

Democracies must develop better resilience to enable their citizens to walk the tightrope between the need for security and the need for change. Most of the talk about resilient democracies is about our institutions and how they must transform to adapt.

But a large and indispensable part of democracy is its civil society. In addition to their role as mediators between citizens and politicians, they fulfill an important watchdog function; through their involvement, they often take care of human destinies, maintain valuable databases, analyse and evaluate situations, mediate contacts and form opinions. One aspect of democratic resilience that would be unthinkable without civil society is participation. For decades, civil society has driven research, experimentation, and advocacy for greater civic participation. Today, many political policymakers realise that the major changes needed in our times of crisis can only be achieved peacefully through participation. Participation builds legitimacy, improves representation, can increase consent, and can increase understanding of complexity. Civil society and its resilience capacity is thus inextricably intertwined with the resilience of democracy.

Before asking the question how a resilient civil society is characterised, we look at the current state of civil society in Europe.



The charity organisation Brot für die Welt (Bread for the world) together with the non-for-profit Civicus annually publishes the so-called “Atlas of Civil Society”. The atlas implies an interactive online map colour-coding the world’s countries in five categories according to the quality of the freedom in civil societies. While dark green (e.g. Portugal, Austria or Sweden) and dark red (e.g. Belarus, Egypt, China) should be self-explanatory, the colors in between them might be more of interest. In Europe there is light green (e.g. France, Italy or Czech Republic) and yellow (e.g. Poland, Hungary or Serbia). Light green means “impaired” and includes for example the following criteria:

- People can form associations to pursue a whole range of interests. However, there are cases in which associations considered critical of the government are legally persecuted or otherwise harassed.
- Demonstrations proceed largely undisturbed but are sometimes banned with reference to security concerns. It also happens that disproportionate force is used against peaceful demonstrators.
- Media outlets have the freedom to disseminate a wide range of information. However, complete freedom of the press is prevented either by strict regulation or the exertion of political pressure on media professionals.

Yellow means “restricted” and includes among others the following criteria:

- Those in power restrict the free exercise of fundamental rights through a combination of legal and practical restrictions. Civil society organizations exist, but state agencies attempt to dismantle them, including through surveillance, bureaucratic harassment, and public humiliation.
- Citizens can assemble peacefully but are often dispersed by police forces using excessive force, such as rubber bullets, tear gas and batons.
- There is room for nongovernmental media and editorial independence, but journalists are subject to physical assault and defamation charges and they, therefore, feel compelled to self-censor.

## From a downward trend to a resilient civil society

Surely, the EU, in comparison to other parts of the world, has seen a relatively good standing. But compared to the previous state of affairs, the trend for Europe itself does not look good. Four EU-member states had to be downgraded so they are now in a worse color category. The five most frequent fundamental rights violations are the arrest of protesters, intimidation, harassment, restrictive laws, and attacks on journalists. A civil society that is being harassed and restricted cannot fulfill its functions for a resilient democracy as it should. While the table lists a number of fundamental freedoms that lay the ground for a potentially resilient civil society, there are also further characteristics that must evolve rather from inside civil society itself. The following table summarizes the features of both what the state has to guarantee and how civil society activity has to develop and what it should demand. A resilient society...

Guarantee of the state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...is able to act / is not hindered in basic communication, assembly, money acquisition or networking</li> <li>• ...has reliable resources when it comes to (wo)manpower, funding, technical equipment and physical spaces</li> <li>• ...has live access to worldwide diverse information sources and can likewise spread their own gathered information</li> <li>• ...is protected on- and offline from hate and intimidation.</li> </ul>
Claim on itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...is able to prioritise goals and strategically sets milestones</li> <li>• ...is self-critical and open for renewal in the way it works methodologically, it communicates and it advocates</li> <li>• ...is constantly and professionally developing alliance-building skills and implies the idea of intersectionality to its work</li> <li>• ...accepts differences within civil society but shows solidarity when other democratic NGOs are being intimidated.</li> </ul>

Just reading through this undoubtedly incomplete list, one can easily recognize that we are not there yet. And keeping in mind the trend that Brot für die Welt and Civicus are tracking on an annual basis, we are actually not even on the path of getting closer. The European Union – and thereby I particularly mean the European Parliament – has not overlooked this ominous trend. Shortly after Russia's latest attack on Ukraine, the EU Parliament held a debate in March 2022 on supporting civil society and agreed in a vote on three highly relevant points:

- Call for a comprehensive civil society strategy, and a European civic space index
- Civil society organisations need fair rules and financing across the EU
- EU countries are obliged to provide an environment free from threats and attacks.

Just like the certainties discussed above, these resolutions must be implemented in practice in order to unfold their strength. Financing across the EU, for example, must be a real and achievable prospect. If civil society in Europe wants to become more future-proof, defend its incomparable role for democracy and stabilise the bond between citizens and politics in the midst of the greatest transformation the world has seen in centuries, the ecologicalisation of our economy and society, then it must in fact follow both tracks at the same time: 1. pushing the European Union towards a more responsible role, demanding protection and support, especially when not provided by the national government 2. Transforming itself into a flexible and open organisation in addition to being a stable and reliable one.

European democracy is no natural success story. Progress must be achieved despite internal counterforces and global trends. Civil society is one of Europe's most valuable resources and should play a key role in steering our continent towards a sustainable and just future. That is, however, only possible if it is resilient. And resilience comes from internal effort and external support alike. I wish I could say with certainty that both will come. But in times of increasing uncertainties, I would rather say that I believe in continuing to play my part in it.

Bernd Holznagel

# THE STATE OF MEDIA PLURALISM AND THE INITIATIVE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

## State of Media Pluralism in Europe

In order to measure and evaluate the state of media pluralism in the member states of the European Union, the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom of the European University Institute in Florence has been presenting an annual Media Pluralism Monitor since 2013/2014.<sup>1</sup> The monitor examines 200 indicators in order to identify and evaluate threats to media pluralism in the respective countries.<sup>2</sup> The survey covers four areas: Fundamental Protection, Market Plurality, Political Independence and Social Inclusiveness. The data and analysis presented in the report are an important basis for the Commission's actions in the media sector, such as the recent draft Media Freedom Act (MFA).<sup>3</sup>

The Executive Summary of this year's Media Pluralism Monitor summarizes the findings. The overall risk score for basic media plurality protection for 2021 is in the medium risk range across Europe at 35%. In contrast, the areas of market plurality (Market Plurality) with 66 % and political independence (Political Independence) with 49 % are rated as high. In the case of political independence, eight countries have a high risk, three of which are EU accession candidates (Albania, Serbia and Turkey) and the other five belong to the group of newer EU member states that joined in 2004 (Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia) and 2007 (Bulgaria). In this area, the score was found to have deteriorated slightly in recent years, although the risks have been known for a long time.<sup>4</sup>

The impairment of media pluralism is particularly severe in Hungary compared to many other European member states.<sup>5</sup> The report rates citizens' trust in news media as low and notes a high level of polarisation in public discourse.<sup>6</sup> Media pluralism in Hungary has steadily deteriorated since 2014. The Pegasus spyware scandal in 2021 revealed significant surveillance of journal-

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<sup>1</sup> European University Institute, Bleyer-Simon, K., Brogi, E., Carlini, R., et al., *Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey in the year 2021*, 2022, available at: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74712/MPM2022-EN-N.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (retrieved on 22.11.2022).

<sup>2</sup> EUI, *Media Pluralism Monitor 2022*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Proposal of the European Commission from the 16.09.2022 for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market (European Media Freedom Act) and amending Directive 2010/13/EU, COM (2022) 457 final, 2 footnote 7.

<sup>4</sup> EUI, *Media Pluralism Monitor 2022*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> European University Institute, Bátorfy, A., Bleyer-Simon, K., Szabó, K., et al., *Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era: application of the Media Pluralism Monitor in the European Union, Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia & Turkey in the year 2021: country report: Hungary*, 2022, available at: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/74692/MPM2022-Hungary-EN.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (retrieved on 22.11.2022).

<sup>6</sup> EUI, *Country Report Hungary*, 6.

ists, which threatens the security of the press and its sources and thus may have a significant chilling effect on journalistic work in Hungary. Risks to media pluralism resulted mainly from a lack of transparency in ownership, a high concentration of ownership and commercial dependence of news.<sup>7</sup> The Commissioner for Media, Věra Jurova, has assessed the situation in Hungary as critical for some time.

## European Countermeasures

Increasing polarisation, interference in elections, the spread of manipulative information and the intimidation of journalists pose threats to European values and democracies. In order to strengthen democracies in Europe, the European Union has adopted an Action Plan for Democracy<sup>8</sup> in 2020. The plan aims to empower citizens in the Union. It contains proposals for numerous measures, including new legislative initiatives.

Although the MFA is primarily justified by internal market considerations, it obviously also serves to safeguard media pluralism. This measure is not only important for the situation of the media in the current EU member states. Rather, it is an important point of reference for the legislation of states that have applied to join the EU, such as Ukraine.

The requirements of the MFA apply to all media services. The term media service is broadly defined. It includes services where the principal purpose of the service, or a separable part thereof, is to provide, under the editorial responsibility of a media service provider, broadcasts for information, entertainment or education to the general public, by whatever means (Art. 2 No. 1 MFA). Unlike the AVMS Directive, the MFA is thus applicable not only to television and on-demand services, but also to radio, audio podcast and press. Media service providers are responsible for the selection of the content of the media service and the way it is presented. Thus, compared to the AVMS Directive, the scope of application of this European measure is extended to include radio and press. User-generated content only falls under the MFA if it is produced professionally and for remuneration, like professional blogs. Offers from video sharing platforms and social networks are covered if they are media services in the sense of the MFA.

The MFA has four central areas of regulation. Firstly, a special concern of the MFA is the protection of media users. This is a novelty in media law. In national media laws, the focus is usually on securing the diversity of providers and offerings. In the MFA, recipients of media services are granted the right to receive, for the benefit of public discourse, a variety of news and content on topical information produced with respect for the editorial freedom of media service providers (Art. 3 MFA). However, this provision does not create an enforceable right of the user community against a media service provider in court. Rather, it is an objective that the member states must take into account when shaping their media regulations (Recital 11). Furthermore, the MFA contains transparency obligations to enable users to make critical use of the media. First of all, media providers must provide information about their shareholdings (Art. 6 para. 1 MFA). In addition, the state authorities must give an account of their advertising expenditure and the media companies that benefit from it. Furthermore, the users are granted the right to individual adaptation of the audiovisual media offer (Art. 19 para. 1 MFA). In order for the offer

<sup>7</sup> EUI, *Country Report Hungary*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan\\_en#media-freedom-and-pluralism](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en#media-freedom-and-pluralism) (retrieved on 22.11.2022).

to be in line with their interests and wishes, the default settings of devices or user interfaces used to control access to media services must be easy to change.

Secondly, the independence of the media from state and commercial interference is strengthened. Firstly, there is a prohibition of interference for the member states. The member states must respect the actual editorial freedom of media service providers (Art. 4 para. 2, 3 MFA). The protection of sources is extended and the use of spying software is limited. In order to ensure the independence of individual editorial decisions with regard to news and current affairs content, media service providers must take such measures as they deem appropriate (Art. 6 para. 2 MFA). Recommendation (EU) 2022/1634 lists several measures for this purpose, such as participation rights for the appointment of editors-in-chief or the adoption of a code of conduct. In addition, the position of media service providers against very large online platforms is strengthened and they are granted a so-called media privilege. If content is deleted because of a violation of the platforms' community standards, they will be informed about this and can object to it. Media service providers have a right to initiate dialogue with the major online platforms if the providers allege that their content is, in their view, being restricted or suspended frequently and without a reasonable cause (Art. 17, 18 MFA). Safeguards are also created for public service broadcasting to ensure independent selection of management staff and funding (Art. 5 MFA). Finally, criteria for measuring audience ratings are introduced to counteract opacity and possible distortions in this area (Art. 23 MFA).

Thirdly, European control of media markets is strengthened. National regulations that may potentially affect the internal market must be sufficiently justified and proportionate (Art. 20 para. 1 MFA). For media service providers whose subjective rights are affected by this, a separate complaints procedure is established. This will supplement the legal remedies provided for in the Member States. Government agencies and the Commission can issue opinions on government measures. However, no new possibilities for the Commission to intervene are created. If necessary, it must take action against a national measure by means of infringement proceedings. Furthermore, provisions are created to ensure the assessment of the admissibility of mergers on the national media market which may have a significant impact on media pluralism and editorial independence (Art. 21 MFA). This assessment refers to the impact of the merger on media pluralism. It is therefore carried out according to journalistic criteria and differs from the assessment under competition law, which is carried out on the basis of the merger control provisions. The Commission may draw up guidelines for this assessment, which are to be taken into account by the national regulatory authorities.

Fourthly, cooperation between national regulators will be improved. A European Board for Media Services is established, which is composed of representatives of the national governmental bodies and replaces the previous ERGA (Art. 8, 10 MFA). The administrative council of the Board shall act in full independence in the performance of its duties and exercise its powers. In particular, the committee shall neither seek nor take instructions from any government or any institution, person or body in the exercise of its functions or powers (Art. 9). The European Board has the task, alongside the Commission, of promoting effective and uniform application of the MFA and the AVMSD (Art. 12 MFA). It also advises the Commission on all media-related issues, provides statements on national measures affecting the activities of media service providers and on media concentration. The European Board is also responsible for conducting a structured dialogue between the very large online platforms, media service providers and civil society (Art. 18 MFA). In addition, it coordinates measures against foreign offerings that pose a serious and grave threat of harm to public security and defence (Art. 16 MFA).



## Conclusion

With the MFA, the Commission for the first time presents a codification that provides a minimum standard for central areas of the protection of pluralism. Not only the national regulatory bodies are involved in the implementation of the MFA, but also the national courts (Art. 4 para. 3, 20 para. 3 MFA), newly established complaints bodies (Art. 4 para. 3, 20 para. 3 MFA) and also civil society (Art. 18 MFA). In some areas, there is also a strong reliance on the work of self-regulation of media service providers and creators (Art. 6 para. 2, 17 para. 1 MFA). Often the regulations are subject to strong interpretation. Thus, much remains to be fleshed out through recommendations and guidelines. Some critics therefore classify the MFA as pure symbolic policy, which cannot bring about any improvement in media pluralism in the critical member states.

Others, however, fear that the influence of the MFA and the European Commission in the implementation of the MFA is too far-reaching.<sup>9</sup> The new European Board for Media Services will play a central role in the application of the MFA. The European Board must be able to act independently of state authorities, but also of powerful private actors (Art. 9 MFA). Nevertheless, many decisions of the European Board may only be taken “at the request of” or “in agreement with” the European Commission. The German federal states now fear that their functioning national media system could be adversely affected by the MFA. They also doubt that the minimum requirements of the MFA can be justified on the basis of the EU’s internal market competence. This will probably lead to disputes in the coming months, which will have to be decided by the ECJ.

Democracy does not come for free. It must be shaped, protected and developed in each new phase of social development. The submission of the MFA has initiated a pan-European debate on the state of media pluralism in Europe and the instruments and regulatory bodies needed to safeguard it. Having achieved this is already an important step in strengthening the discourse on the preconditions of European democracy.

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<sup>9</sup> BR-Drucks. 514/1/22, Vorschlag für eine Verordnung des Europäischen Parlaments und des Rates zur Schaffung eines gemeinsamen Rahmens für Mediendienste im Binnenmarkt (Europäisches Medienfreiheitsgesetz) und zur Änderung der Richtlinie 2010/13/EU.

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## Chapter 2

# **Towards a New Geopolitical Reality**



Jackson Janes

## **THE FUTURE OF TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS AND THE BIDEN INITIATIVE ON THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY**

Winston Churchill famously said in 1947: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other form that have been tried from time to time”. In fact, healthy democracies are both structural as well as aspirational, constantly evolving, making mistakes and seeking to self-correct. That is what can make them successful. They are about enhancing an open society, governed by laws, protecting equality and liberty, with a strong voice from the governed to those governing in the form of elections. Democracies need time to evolve, to adjust to both change and demands, and to nourish the capacity to respond. Models of democracies can vary as they are shaped by history, traditions and political culture.

The alternatives to democracy - dictatorship, autocracies, oligarchies among others - represent hostility to liberty, representative government and freedom of choice and voice with effort to control all instruments of government.

As we look out on the world of the 21st century, there is a trend which depicts an increasing threat to democracies. According to a recent report by the V-Dem Institute:

“The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2021 is down to 1989 levels. The last 30 years of democratic advances are now eradicated. Dictatorships are on the rise and harbor 70% of the world population—5.4 billion people.”

The study found that liberal democracies can now be found in only 34 nations, down from its peak of 42 in 2012, which are home to only 13 percent of the world’s population.

### **Biden’s Summit for Democracy in light of the Russian aggression**

In this environment, President Biden convened a so-called Summit for Democracy in December of 2021. His announced purpose was to strengthen democracy at home and confront autocracies abroad while defending against authoritarianism, addressing and fighting corruption, and advancing respect for human rights. The combination of countries attending that (virtual) Summit reflected the varieties of approaches to those themes, with many critics pointing at inconsistencies in inviting some countries and not others. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Biden spoke in Warsaw in March of 2022 declaring that “We emerged anew in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force”.

And yet the response to Vladimir's Putin's war did not elicit a common global response to Biden's clarion call. The vote in the United Nations General Assembly against Russia's invasion was supported by 141 members but thirty-five abstained including China. Six months later, the Assembly voted to demand Russian reparations for the damage and loss of life in Ukraine. 94 supported the resolution but 73 abstained.

It appears that the Biden's efforts to frame the confrontation between democracy and autocracy is largely resonating in Western European allies and longtime U.S. partners such as Japan and Australia. And many of those abstaining are countries which cannot be labeled as flourishing democracies. Indeed, such issues were evident earlier this year, when Biden welcomed leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Many of those attending were not experienced and committed supporters of democracy, be it the leaders of Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, or Brunei.

Most recently the G20 meeting in Bali was another demonstration of an assembly of autocracies, dictatorships and democracies, many of which do not affiliate with the struggle between Russia and the West. Indonesia had even invited Putin to the G-20 Summit who did not attend. Or take India as an example led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi who has had no hesitation watching clashes between Hindus and Muslims while nurturing relations with both Moscow and Washington. For Modi it is about securing gas and oil from Russia and sustaining border security with China and Pakistan. And then there is China which is now in the total grasp of President Xi Jinping for a third term and possibly for life and is increasingly authoritarian. Also, China is a country that looks at Taiwan as Putin looks at Ukraine.

Meanwhile, there are also critics of Biden's approach to the democracy vs autocracy slogan who claim that the United States needs to address its own problems with democracy at home. The recent mid-term elections would seem to suggest that Americans are alert to those challenges following the 6 January, 2021 riots in Washington DC.. But the fact that Donald Trump has announced his candidacy for president again reminds others that the threats have not subsided. Since then, those concerns have only been exacerbated by the refusal of many Americans — fed lies by their political leaders — to accept election results, the continuing threats and actual acts of political violence by right-wing individuals and groups, and by primarily Republican state governments to limit voting rights access. According to a report by Freedom House, "Reversing the Decline of Democracy in the United States," "[A]mid a 16-year decline in global freedom, democracy in the United States has suffered serious erosion." The report found that the United States had dropped to level of flawed democracies like Panama, Romania, and South Korea and concluded, "The weakening of American democracy did not start with [former U.S.] President [Donald] Trump's direct pressure on democratic institutions and rights, and his departure from the White House has not ended the crisis. Disturbing problems that predated his administration — legislative dysfunction, partisan gerrymandering, the excessive influence of special interests in politics, ongoing racial discrimination, and the spread of polarisation and disinformation in the media environment — remain unaddressed "

The clash of democracies and autocracies is not new to the global arena. The realities of global politics are going to require democracies and autocracies interacting with each other on issues of common concern. That was true in the period of the Cold War, and it remains today a necessity in global relations. Compromise on values is not foreign to foreign policy. In the Summit for Democracy, the Biden administration did not include Hungary and Turkey, allies in NATO. Yet, others were invited who were not illustrative of democratic values such as the Philippines,

Brazil, and India. Yet the argument of the Biden administration was that the Summit created openings for the civil society groups in each of these countries to reference the Summit as a benchmark for their domestic debates. This might echo the experience of the Helsinki Accords almost a half century ago which opened doors to those Eastern European and Russian dissidents. They believed that their respective countries had an alternative future and they led their countries to the revolutions of 1989.

The Copenhagen Democracy Summit (building on past summits) in June of 2022 was designed around building an alliance network of democracies and define tools to respond to authoritarian systems, convening political, business, non-profit and civilian activists from all over the world. The United States has been actively present in that series.

## **Steps toward the future - the role and responsibilities of the US**

When President Biden announced his intention to hold a Summit for Democracy, he emphasized that he was not going to repeat the democracy promotion pursued by the George W. Bush administration which involved military engagement. Nor was he interested in boasting about an American model of democracy for other nations to copy. His goal was to emphasize that democracies needed to be defended, strengthened and sustained but also reformed and to be responsive to their shortfalls. They are challenged to prove that they can deliver to those who support them and solve the problems which confront them. Finally, he was aiming to make the case that the United States was prepared to stand with other democracies in these efforts to meet the expectations of their citizens, including Americans. We can and must join in helping each other to be better and stronger.

The war in Ukraine has shown a bright light on the need for countries to join in confronting the existential threats to freedom and democracy, and that need is being met today by the efforts of those supporting Ukraine against the aggression of Vladimir Putin. But it is not only Ukraine that represents that need. The breeding ground for autocracies and dictatorships is seeded with inequity, poverty, terrorism and insecurity among millions of people who are fearful about their futures. Seductive messages from leaders who proclaim “I alone can fix it” are delivered in exchange for forfeiting democracy. Fiona Hill described this danger in her recent book *There is nothing for you here*: “Populism is a political approach with no fixed ideology. It can pop up on both the left and the right of political thinking, and pretty much in any setting. The essence of populism is creating a direct link with “the people” or specific groups within a population and either bypassing or eliminating intermediaries like political parties, parliamentary representatives, and established institutions. Referenda, plebiscites, direct appeals, and executive orders form the substance of populism.” She goes on with a warning: “Russia is America’s Ghost of Christmas Future, a harbinger of things to come if we can’t adjust course and heal our political polarization”

## **What are - should be - our shared responses to these challenges?**

Ukraine is a test of the political will to sustain the resilience of democratic societies. It matters to the present and the future when it comes to protecting a rules-based order which secures stability and security for the global community. Yet, the war in Ukraine and its outcome is a challenge to the leadership of those democracies that are facing efforts to undercut that narrative. Such voices are present in many democracies including the United States and in European countries. Confronting those voices requires naming and shaming those who spread such arguments which nourish the populism infecting national debates.

This clash of ideas comes at a pivotal moment when global instability is increasing whether it be in seen in worldwide climate change, global epidemics such as Covid 19, food insecurity or fear of war, even nuclear war. Fear is a fertilizer for autocracies.

The response to that challenge was eternally framed by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 when he sought to assure a nervous nation caught in the depths of a national economic depression. He proclaimed “let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

That clarion call was also to inspire Americans after 7 December 1941 to turn their commitment to fighting and winning a brutal war against tyrannical dictatorships. A year earlier Roosevelt called America an “arsenal of democracy”. Roosevelt’s address was a call to arms for supporting Europeans in total war against Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

Almost seven decades after that victory, today’s challenges to democracies require additional and different arsenals protecting democracies from different threats involving attacks by the poison of disinformation, along with the dangers of inequity, poverty and famine.

In the case of the United States, the ability of Americans to find a path through their current polarized environment will be of critical global importance given its leadership role as proclaimed by President Biden at his Summit for Democracy. The worry generated around the world in wake of the riots in January 2021 were indicative of the influence events in the US have on the global debate. That event delivered fodder to autocrats arguing democracy is in decline. The fact that many Americans in far-right groups show admiration for autocrats in Europe and even for Putin, enhanced by pundits on television and radio, and is indicative of the seduction of autocracies among those who subscribe to conspiracy theories or distrust institutions. That is an American dilemma which will play out during the next two years in advance of the presidential elections 2024. But the developments, such as the investigations into the events of January 6 2021 as well as the recent elections suggest that there is a recognition of dangerous trends undermining support for and belief in democratic norms and institutions. The ongoing debate is how to respond to these trends. The US does not have an unblemished track record in its foreign and domestic records to which critics in autocracies can point in the effort to highlight weaknesses in our democracy. We Americans are not alone with that problem. But the response cannot be to become overly defensive but rather to share the search for strategies to respond. This was the intention of the Summit for Democracy in 2021, to emphasize the fact that the United States has a leadership

role to play in not just conferences, but actions taken to support democracies in the global arena. The recent mid-term elections in the United States are a preview of the debates to follow. In the coming years - beyond the mid-terms and the presidential elections in 2024 - a fundamental debate will be unfolding over the role of the United States on the international stage. It will be shaped by arguments around what we can and most to engage in the world. The realization that the United States faces global challenges that cannot be met alone is a very different approach expounded by Donald Trump's rhetoric in the phrase "America first". It has been described in the recent National Security Strategy of the Biden administration:

"our alliances and partnerships around the world are our most important strategic asset and an indispensable element contributing to international peace and stability. A strong and unified NATO, our alliances in the Indo-Pacific, and our traditional security partnerships elsewhere do not only deter aggression; they provide a platform for mutually beneficial cooperation that strengthens the international order. We place a premium on growing the connective tissue — on technology, trade and security — between our democratic allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific and Europe because we recognize that they are mutually reinforcing and the fates of the two regions are intertwined. The United States is a global power with global interests. We are stronger in each region because of our affirmative engagement in the others. If one region descends into chaos or is dominated by a hostile power, it will detrimentally impact our interests in the others."

This need for alliances is recognized on both sides of the political aisle in the US. What will be in discussion, as it has been in the past, is a reset of burden-sharing and indeed also power sharing with our allies. The leadership in both chambers of Congress recognize the importance of the interdependence shared with those countries who are seen as partners. More expectations will be directed at them in the coming years. Given the weight and capacity of the European partners on the global stage in terms of their economic capacities as well as their engagement in international networks, there will be an increased emphasis on the need for European leadership in the strategic arena. That area remains an asymmetric equation in transatlantic relations. But the need for a stronger European capacity in transatlantic relations has become that much more evident in the wake of the war in Ukraine. Yet that should not result in zero-sum thinking on either side of the Atlantic. The strategic sovereignty debate in Europe is a distraction from the more important need to combine the resources of the transatlantic community in the global arena, across a wide roster of areas in which security is writ large.

The debates in the US take into consideration a clear connection between foreign and domestic policy interests and that will be reflected in the policies focused on Ukraine. That will also be the case in Europe.

Just as we must understand the war in Ukraine as the most dramatic case of the battle between democracies and autocracies, the battle is ongoing elsewhere. The efforts by Russia and China to use their resources to influence many countries in the global south continue. We need to only recall the nations which abstained from the votes against Russia in the United Nations General Assembly.

The weaponization of social media as well as direct messaging to countries in Africa, Asia and South America has expanded in the past two decades. The western democracies cannot only confront threats to themselves but they also have to recognize threats elsewhere. As in the past, the ability to forge alliances across national borders will be vital to building effective and credible arguments in the support of democracies still emerging.



As Nadiia Kovalainen has stated in her essay published in *The Future of Democracy* by the Hungarian Europe Society:

“Restoring international credibility, and not only internal soul-searching would be imperative for mending the past wrongs on the part of the promoters of the liberal world order. Strengthening the allies, convincing the unconvinced, deterring the oppressive regimes and bigger powers in the region of Africa, Latin America, East and South Asia is a key to the further development of the renewed liberal order and defining its geographical limits.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the war will change many things and to think that we would be able to fully reconstruct the liberal order after this heinous aggression is a self-delusion. The world of yesterday has passed away and to preserve the essence of the liberal order, the noble idea of freedom and democracy, it should be demonstrated that we are ready to defend it as a value and review its shortcomings and blind spots.”

This last reminder - to understand what is at stake by also understanding where the roots are of the threats to democracy lie - reflects a constant need for a degree of humility in the face of challenges. That begins with focusing on where democracies come up short and need to work toward a stronger capacity to strengthen trust and confidence. In the words of Madeleine Albright:

“we must recognize that democracy’s unique virtue is its ability—through reason and open debate—to find remedies for its own shortcomings. In a free country the solution to setbacks can be found—not by bowing to the false gods of nationalism and tyranny but by building better, more flexible, and responsive societies. That job is within our power to do, and we had better get on with it before it is too late.”

It is not yet late but the trends within democracies as well as the external threats facing them are growing.

Dóra Györffy

# THE REVIVAL OF THE WEST IN UKRAINE

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is the culmination of a decade of envisioning 'the decline of the West'. In this narrative the West is not a geographical entity but rather the alliance of free and democratic countries led by the US. As underlined by President Biden following the G7 meeting, these countries are „in contest with autocratic governments around the world.”<sup>1</sup> Within this context the idea of Western decline implies the worldwide diminution of freedom and the superiority of autocratic regimes.

Following the global financial crisis in 2008, the belief in the irrevocable decline of the West has strengthened in both China and Russia. In the 2010s, this narrative was reinforced by numerous events — Brexit, Trump's presidency, the handling of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, and finally the chaotic withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. All this together contributed to Putin's belief that he could attack Ukraine with impunity. In hindsight, we already know that he gravely misjudged the situation. Instead of further weakening, the war in Ukraine led to the revitalization of the West.

The paper is composed of three sections. First, I will discuss the apparent decline of the West through emphasizing the sharp power tools Russia and China have been employing towards this objective. In the second section I discuss Russia's aggression against Ukraine then consider its impact on the transatlantic alliance.

## The nature of power in the global order

At the end of the Cold War Joseph Nye published his famous article on the changing nature of power – in a period of increasing economic globalization and technological revolution, the main method of influencing the behavior of states is no longer military power, but soft power, which operates primarily through culture and ideology.<sup>2</sup> The freedom and prosperity conveyed by American films and music during the Cold War seemed incomparably more attractive than the everyday life of socialist regimes thus contributed to the victory of the US in the Cold War. The importance of soft power was also recognized by the rivals of the US, and in the 2000s, both Russia and China sought to develop an ideological narrative that could prove attractive to other countries around the world. Russia found this in traditional values of family and religion - while Western values were labeled as relativist.<sup>3</sup> Claiming spiritual superiority,

<sup>1</sup> Biden, Joseph (2021): Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference. Cornwall, UK, 13 June 2021. Available: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/06/13/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference-2/>

<sup>2</sup> Nye, Joseph (1990): Soft power. *Foreign Policy*, 80: 153-171., p.167.

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, Jeanne (2017): The Russian pursuit of regional hegemony. *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 2(1): 7-25., p.13.

Russians could thus compensate for inferiority in economic performance. China also distinguished itself from Western values in two ways: i.) instead of the neoliberal Washington Consensus it has promoted the Beijing Consensus, which is a program of rapid growth and ideological flexibility; ii.) it has also placed great emphasis on the dissemination of Confucianism, which aims to convey the values of a harmonious social order, such as loyalty and forbearance.<sup>4</sup> From 2004 onwards, a global network of Confucius Institutes was established, which, in partnership with Western universities, were intended to introduce the Chinese language and culture to the world.<sup>5</sup>

The common feature of Russian and Chinese state soft power aspirations is that they are far from being as successful as the American model associated with the private sector. Russian soft power aspirations are too Russian-centric, and do not have the type of universal message that the ideology of communism had before. For other peoples in the region, these efforts are more fearful than attractive.<sup>6</sup> Chinese efforts have not become much more successful either – as early as the mid-2010s, it was noticeable that financial support and cooperation came with constraints on discussing uncomfortable topics such as Tibet, Taiwan, or the Tiananmen Square massacre. By 2022 Confucius Institutes have been closed in 11 countries – all in Sweden and more than 100 in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The failure of soft power attempts led Russia and China towards using the tools of sharp power. These focus on coercion, rather than attraction, and seek to undermine trust in society. According to Walker and Ludwig<sup>8</sup>, for Russia this means primarily disinformation campaigns to undermine the attractiveness of democracy and increase social polarization. China, on the other hand, has focused on increasing its economic power, using it to suppress critical voices in the media, universities, and research institutes. Both countries are exploiting the openness of democratic systems for their influence operations.

In addition to disinformation campaigns, Russia and China are using the tools of strategic corruption. The method was first described by Conley et al., who showed how corrupt deals in strategic sectors (energy, banking system) allows Russian intrusion, which is entrenched by the compromised actors, who increase the network of influence through further corrupt transactions.<sup>9</sup> China's Belt and Road Initiative can work similarly, as it also provides a good opportunity to bribe local leaders – the result of unconditional lending in the spirit of the Beijing Consensus is the significant corruption that accompanies investments.<sup>10</sup>

Until the outbreak of COVID, Western countries did little to curb authoritarian influence. The influx of Russian and Chinese money and cheap energy into Europe and the United States offered attractive business opportunities in a wide range of sectors, from real estate markets to tourism, audit, and lobbying firms to banks. Analysts, political and media figures also benefited

<sup>4</sup> Lahtinen, Anja (2015): China's Soft Power: Challenges of Confucianism and Confucius Institutes. *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, 14(2): 200-226., pp.209-10.

<sup>5</sup> Gil, Jeffrey (2022): The fall of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms? An analysis of closures and future directions. Available: <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-fall-of-confucius-institutes-and-confucius-classroomsan-analysis-of-closures-and-future-directions/>

<sup>6</sup> Wilson (2017), p.19

<sup>7</sup> Gil (2022)

<sup>8</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (2017): The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence, *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Conley, Heather, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov (2016): The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>10</sup> Balding, Christopher (2018): Why Democracies Are Turning Against Belt and Road: Corruption, Debt, and Backlash. *Foreign Affairs*, 24 October. Available: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-24/why-democracies-are-turning-against-belt-and-road>.

from the flood of money that has engulfed the system. There was no decisive action taken even in cases of war: the Russian invasion of Georgia, Moldova, Syria and then the occupation of Crimea did not end the cooperation of Western actors with authoritarian regimes.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, assassinations carried out in Britain, such as the Litvinenko or the Skripal murders, remained unanswered. Russia could interfere in the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US elections with impunity – and due to the close results of the two votes, this interference may have been decisive in the outcome. Following the votes, Brexit and Trump's presidency caused a major break in the transatlantic alliance in line with Russian interests. Another fundamental factor contributing to the fracture was the fact that in 2020 China became the EU's most important trading partner, ahead of the United States.<sup>12</sup>

The persistent weakness shown by the West to authoritarian sharp power underpinned the narrative that took root after the 2008 global financial crisis: the West is in decline and the East is rising. Initially, this also seemed to be supported by the handling of the coronavirus pandemic – which, although it originated from China, had the highest number of deaths in the Western world, further undermining confidence in democracy. The West reached its symbolic nadir during the withdrawal from Afghanistan, when the Afghan state and army, built for two decades with significant Western resources, collapsed like a house of cards — a story that simultaneously radiated the fallacies and limitations of US power as well as the disintegration of the West.<sup>13</sup> Putin could feel that the time had come to take advantage of the situation.

## The turning point: Russian aggression against Ukraine

The US completed the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan by August 31, and then, according to an investigative report in the Washington Post, intelligence signals began in October that a Russian invasion was about to take place in Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Initially, this was difficult for the European partners to believe. The solution to the situation was that, although both sides were sure of their own truth, they accepted the possibility that they were wrong – accordingly, European leaders tried to negotiate with Putin in the knowledge that perhaps the American was right, while the Americans were preparing for war without being entirely sure that there would be an attack. The onset of the invasion on February 24 decided the question of who was right, but by this time the Western alliance was ready for the situation.

The fall of Kiev was expected within 72 hours of the Russian attack. Few people realized the significance of the fact that in a corrupt system, the capabilities that exist on paper and those in reality can be completely different – when money is stolen from every military purchase, quantity dominates over quality. Corruption explains why the tires of Russian military vehicles are cheap, low-quality, Chinese products that quickly break down on bad roads; why soldiers receive canned food that had expired years earlier as supplies, and vests advertised as bullet-

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<sup>11</sup> Belton, Catherine (2020): *Putin's people: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West*. London: Williams Collins.

<sup>12</sup> Leali, Giorgio (2021): China topples US as EU's top trade partner over 2020. Available: <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-topples-us-as-eus-top-trade-partner-over-2020/>

<sup>13</sup> McKinley, Michael (2021): We All Lost Afghanistan: Two Decades of Mistakes, Misjudgments, and Collective Failure. Available: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-16/we-all-lost-afghanistan-taliban>

<sup>14</sup> Harris, Shane, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashley Parker and Liz Sly (2022): Road to war: U.S. struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion. *Washington Post*, 16 August. Available: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/>

proof are lined with cardboard.<sup>15</sup> All this is compounded by centralized decision-making, poor leadership, lack of independent initiative and the lack of motivation of soldiers to fight.

Russia's military performance, far below expectations, is associated with a series of war crimes and immeasurable human suffering. The Russian aggression against Ukraine displays the distinguishing characteristics of genocide: 1. all strata of society – men, women, children – become the target of atrocities, 2. the goal is to destroy the people, not just subjugate them.<sup>16</sup> The Russians' campaign against Ukrainian identity and language, the indiscriminate killing of civilians, the systematic rape of Ukrainian women and the forced deportation of Ukrainian children are aimed at the extermination of the Ukrainian people. However, Hill and Stent (2022) also point out that Putin's war has backfired — the more he tries to kill Ukrainian national identity, the stronger it becomes.

The heroism of the Ukrainians led by President Zelensky represents a stark contrast to the barbarism of the Russian attack. The resilience of the Ukrainian people during the invasion also shows a significant difference from the behavior of the Afghans a year earlier. All this greatly helped Ukraine to win the information war, which in turn contributed strongly to the uniting of the West and lead to previously unimaginable military, economic and humanitarian assistance. Until 2021, Ukrainians received primarily military training and non-lethal equipment to help them fight the Russians, such as protective gears, communication devices and medical supplies. As the war progressed, they received increasing lethal military support<sup>17</sup>. At the beginning of the war, defensive weapons played the greatest role, while after stopping the invasion, offensive armament became necessary to retake the territories occupied by the Russians. In this regard, the delivery of American missiles with a range of almost 100 km in the summer of 2022 represents a turning point – HIMARS missiles allow the targeting of Russian depots close to the front thus they are forced to store their ammunition and other assets far behind. With the help of these weapons, it became possible to liberate Kharkiv and Kherson counties during the fall of 2022.

Western arms shipments of increasing intensity indicate Putin's miscalculation about their response to his aggression. He was similarly wrong in judging how much economic sacrifice the West is willing to make because of Ukraine. Instead of the reluctant, cumbersome, bureaucratic decision-making of the previous decades, the West has succeeded in successively adopting wide-ranging sanctions – including restrictions on investment, exports, imports, and travel, freezing of foreign exchange reserves and personal assets, and exclusion from the international financial system. In addition to official sanctions, consumer pressure from Western society also contributed to the isolation of the Russian economy. More than 1000 Western firms have given up their investments in Russia, from the automotive industry to trade to IT – companies, which have remained in Russia could worry about a possible consumer boycott in other markets. Several hundred thousand of Russians also left the country, a process, which was accelerated by the forced mobilization during the fall of 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Aslund, Anders (2022): Putin is going to lose his war – and the world should prepare for instability in Russia. *Foreign Affairs*, 25 May. Available: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-05-25/putin-going-lose-his-war>

<sup>16</sup> Hook, Kristina (2022): Why Russia's War in Ukraine Is a Genocide – Not Just a Land Grab, but a Bid to Expunge a Nation. *Foreign Affairs*, 28 July. Available: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-russias-war-ukraine-genocide>

<sup>17</sup> Millis, Claire and John Curtis (2022): Military assistance to Ukraine since the Russian invasion.

UK House of Commons Research Briefing. Available: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9477/CBP-9477.pdf>

The most comprehensive study in assessing the consequences of sanctions has been written by Sonnenfeld et al.<sup>18</sup>, who concluded that Russia is facing an economic decline in both the short and long term. As an energy exporter, it has lost its major market, as EU member states have realized how dangerous Russian energy dependence is for them. The collapse of Russian imports means the decline of critical sectors such as car and plane manufacturing – in addition to making it very difficult to replace advanced military technology.

Although the outcome of the war is still in question at the time of writing, one thing is likely: Russia will be extremely weakened after the war, it may even fall apart or might become a kind of vassal of China. Based on this outcome, it is already possible to speculate about what the post-war world order will be.

## Towards a new Cold War?

The immediate consequence of the war was the expansion of the transatlantic alliance. Sweden and Finland applied to join NATO, something few would have bet on even in early 2022. The European Union also opened the door to further enlargement by granting Ukraine and Moldova candidate status. If Putin did indeed attack Ukraine to stop Western expansion, he has achieved the exact opposite. The situation created by the war is increasingly reminiscent of the Cold War period. As the war progressed, opinion of Russia deteriorated dramatically in the entire transatlantic alliance – in July, 92% in the United States, 97% in Poland, 94% in Sweden, 83% in Italy, 81% in Germany and France viewed Russia negatively.<sup>19</sup> The revival of Western cohesion thus came through the strengthening of its foundational principles – the fight against a genocidal dictatorship evoked the value system on which the post-World War II world order was built.

The sharpening of the fight against authoritarian regimes will bring novelty compared to the pre-war period in at least three areas: curbing strategic corruption, combating disinformation, and preventing the emergence of economic dependencies. Russian and Chinese practices sought to maintain an environment favorable to their rise through corrupting Western politicians and interfering in elections. In the aftermath of the war, these interventions are expected to be much more closely watched by Western governments. Already in 2021, the fight against corruption was made one of the core principles of US foreign policy, and in December 2021, the State Department published a voluminous strategy on the issue.<sup>20</sup> A strong crackdown is also expected against authoritarian disinformation, which has already reached a new level at the beginning of the war with the banning of Russian propaganda channels. such as Russia Today and Sputnik. In addition to these two areas, much more emphasis is expected than in the past on preventing economic dependence on authoritarian countries. This means not only reducing Russian energy dependence, but also ensuring self-sufficiency in semiconductors, quantum computers, batteries in electric cars, and overcoming dependence on China<sup>21</sup>. In critical sectors, the West cannot be vulnerable to authoritarian powers, which can abuse this vulnerability at any time.

<sup>18</sup> Sonnenfeld, Jeffrey, Steven Tian, Franek Sokolowski, Michal Wyrebkowski and Mateusz Kasprowicz (2022): Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4167193>

<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center (2022): *International Attitudes Toward the U.S., NATO and Russia in a Time of Crisis*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center. Available: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/international-attitudes-toward-the-u-s-nato-and-russia-in-a-time-of-crisis/>, p.26.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State (2021): *United States Strategy on Countering Corruption*. Available: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Strategy-on-Countering-Corruption.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Breton, Thierry (2022): Neither autarchy nor dependence – more European autonomy. *I Blog of Commissioner Thierry Breton*, augustus 25. Available: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT\\_22\\_5173](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_5173)

However, the Cold War analogy is not entirely accurate in relation to the geopolitical situation of the present. While the West shows considerable unity, the same cannot be said of its rivals. China and India have condemned Putin's war and warned him about using nuclear weapons. China refuses to jeopardize its European relations by exporting advanced technology to Russia in violation of Western sanctions – already in the first three months of the war, Chinese exports to Russia fell by 50%.<sup>22</sup> China is particularly sensitive to a possible further deterioration in relations with the European Union, as it seeks to ensure that the EU does not stand firmly with the US in its rivalry with the United States and acts as a kind of third pole – and an accessible export market for China<sup>23</sup>.

Overall, the revival of transatlantic cooperation strengthens the West's leading position in global governance, while the opposing forces merely form a much looser alliance. Their economic power is lagging the developed world, and it is questionable whether their convergence process will be sustainable. The war has shown how dangerous it is to do business with undemocratic countries – in the event of sanctions getting out of such investments might entail significant losses, which is likely to make investors cautious. Under such circumstances continuation of high rates of growth is at least questionable.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has successfully achieved what the West has not been able to do on its own over the past two decades: instead of short-term business considerations, its core values have once again become the focus of politics. The war thus led to the revival of the West rather than its further decline. Stronger action against authoritarian influence, strategic corruption and authoritarian propaganda are also likely to strengthen the cohesion of the West further, thus making the economic environment more predictable and reducing its vulnerability. In the longer term, these developments will improve the economic outlook and ensure further development. This does not mean, of course, that another crisis or recession cannot come, but it does mean that the system will continue to be able to cope with economic fluctuations. Meanwhile, Russia has isolated itself from Western markets and technology. It has become vulnerable to China, which is not interested in its rise and counts on it primarily as a cheap source of raw materials, an export market, and a political supporter.

At a time of growing separation between democratic and authoritarian countries, Hungary is also at the crossroads. Unlike in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is a member of the victorious alliance. As the governmental rhetoric repeatedly channels Russian propaganda narratives and acts as if it did not belong to the West, it is fundamental to underline that there is no Hungarian national interest in choosing the losing side. Such a choice could only be described as moral insanity and a betrayal of the nation.

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<sup>22</sup> Sonnenfeld et al., p.40

<sup>23</sup> Zhang, Yaning (2022): The War in Ukraine Is Not a Watershed in China-EU Relations – Yet. *The Diplomat*, 17 August. Available: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/the-war-in-ukraine-is-not-a-watershed-in-china-eu-relations-yet/>

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István Gyarmati

## THE FUTURE OF NATO IN A NEW POLITICAL CONSTELLATION

„Winston is back” – shouted Churchill, when he was reactivated in the run-up to the war. „NATO is back” – could we shout after the historic Summit in June 2022, but the joy is bittersweet. Although we, who have continuously stressed in the past decades that NATO is the cornerstone of (European) security, are happy that this, beyond doubt proved to be true again.. We can rejoice that the „brain dead” Alliance is back in the centre of security in Europe. But we are sad to see the reasons: that the Russian, formerly Soviet, threat is back too. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has overnight redrawn the security landscape in Europe – and indeed, in the entire world. And NATO, again, has become the centerpiece of our security posture. It would be futile to spend too long time to show how some of us – especially in the region of Central and Eastern Europe – understood the looming and ever more obvious Russian threat and how we were stamped as „old warmongers” who did not understand the positive changes in the world in Russia. Just for illustration, a quote from an open letter that we, Eastern and Central European experts sent to President Obama as early as 2009:

‘Our hopes that relations with Russia would improve and that Moscow would finally fully accept our complete sovereignty and independence after joining NATO and the EU have not been fulfilled. Instead, Russia is back as a revisionist power pursuing a 19th-century agenda with 21st-century tactics and methods. At a global level, Russia has become, on most issues, a status-quo power. But at a regional level and vis-a-vis our nations, it increasingly acts as a revisionist one. It challenges our claims to our own historical experiences. It asserts a privileged position in determining our security choices. It uses overt and covert means of economic warfare, ranging from energy blockades and politically motivated investments to bribery and media manipulation in order to advance its interests and to challenge the transatlantic orientation of Central and Eastern Europe. We welcome the “reset” of the American-Russian relations. As the countries living closest to Russia, obviously nobody has a greater interest in the development of the democracy in Russia and better relations between Moscow and the West than we do. But there is also nervousness in our capitals. We want to ensure that too narrow an understanding of Western interests does not lead to the wrong concessions to Russia. Today the concern is, for example, that the United States and the major European powers might embrace the Medvedev plan for a “Concert of Powers” to replace the continent’s existing, value-based security structure. The danger is that Russia’s creeping intimidation and influence-peddling in the region could over time lead to a de facto neutralization of the region. There are differing views within the region when it comes to Moscow’s new policies. But there is a shared view that the full engagement of the United States is needed!’

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<sup>1</sup> Full text see: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,6825987,an-open-letter-to-the-obama-administration-from-central-and.htm>

Unfortunately, these words proved to be visionary: the Russian aggression in February 2022 shows that we must – again – face a direct threat from the East. Yes, Russia is not the Soviet Union and things have, indeed, changed since the fall of the Soviet Empire. But the nature of the threat, as the nature of the Russian Empire turned Soviet Empire, has changed very little. Moreover, we can safely say that while the Soviet Union was a relatively predictable enemy, today's Russia is not: it is no exaggeration to suggest that the danger therefore is not less, to the contrary: we believe, in many respects, it is even more menacing.

In the decades following the fall of the Soviet Union and of Communism in Europe, for some two decades we enjoyed a relatively calm and stable security situation. Russia seemed to have accepted the new status quo, being a regional, but not a superpower. Although a more thorough and objective analysis could have revealed the real nature of the Putin regime – for some of us it did, but for most it did not, or they did not want to believe it. Instead we were busily trying to appease Russia, by NATO-Russia Councils and „resets”. Even in 2007, when Putin, for the first time on the international stage, revealed his vision of the world, it was widely ignored. Moreover, we submitted to Russian imperialism, when basically ignored the fact that Russia invaded a sovereign country – that time Georgia – and hectically tried to find good excuses, why the reality was not what actually it was: the blatant and open violation of international law, an aggression of its worst kind, thus making international actors become „partners in crime” with Putin's Russia.

We, especially the Europeans – enjoyed the long awaited peace and busily earned the peace dividend. That made many European allies significantly reduce their defence capabilities with the goal of reducing military spending – that obviously (( )) most important part of military posture. And then came 11 September. It has transformed the security landscape fundamentally. The change was justified, but exaggerated. The danger was real, but the reaction excessive. And, most importantly, it drove the attention of the United States almost entirely away from other threats and challenges.

And then came China. President Trump has rightly recognized that the real challenge for the US and the entire world is China. The reaction was also more or less correct – no sheer coincidence that the Biden administration de facto continues Trump's China-policy – and we must agree with that.

All these changes have had inevitable implications for NATO. The Alliance tried to find new missions – most of them very much necessary and justified , but in parallel – while paying lip service to and keeping up the rhetoric of maintaining collective defence as its core mission – to focus on capabilities to defend ourselves against the „traditional” Soviet/Russian threat was sinking into oblivion. President Obama was busy concentrating on domestic issues – even in those committing a number of mistakes and he seemed to be, wrongly, uninterested in European security. Rightly, however, he implemented a pivot to Asia, which, however, mistakenly proved to be dead letter rather than deeds, In addition, it was implemented one-sidedly: turning away from Europe, yes, but turning seriously towards Asia, no! In addition, the Trump presidency's, hopefully single, interlude, further weakened transatlantic relations and exposed NATO almost a paper tiger „or „brain dead”, as President Macron characterized it with the usual French charm.

True, the world has become much more sophisticated and complicated as regards security. The challenges and threats are much more multifaceted and – let’s face it: the instruments at our disposal, which had been invented and introduced before the new era began, are inadequate, or at least insufficient. International institutions can not bear the responsibility for all those threats. International public law in many cases, does not offer a lawful solution. Means at our disposal, including military capabilities, are challenged in an unprecedented way – let just quote cyber-warfare, hybrid warfare, drones, etc., in addition to the still existing threat by weapons of mass destruction and the increasing threat of their proliferation.

Accordingly, we should not be too much surprised that NATO almost became obsolete in the last decades. The Russian aggression therefore was a tragic, but necessary wake-up call. And NATO reacted surprisingly well: the historic Summit in June 2022 in Madrid reflected the recognition that we must act, act decisively and act now. The Summit offered conceptual and pragmatic solutions – while the test of the pudding is in the eating, even the longest road starts with the first step. And the Summit – we can safely say – did make the very significant first steps on a, most probably, very long road.

The Summit had to handle an unprecedented complexity of threats and challenges. During the Cold War, the Soviet threat was so overwhelming that no other danger appeared on the radar screen of the Alliance. Accordingly, the Alliance’s strategy and, consequently, its military posture concentrated on this threat. There were different iterations of it and the Alliance continued to adopt them. Its nuclear and conventional doctrine remained in balance, complementing each other, only the proportions changed, in accordance with the threat perception of the day. There were, of course, other challenges alike and they were addressed by the Alliance, but compared to the main strategic threat, they proved to be minor.

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty, the situation changed radically. The remaining Russian empire neither seemed to have the ambition of its predecessor, the Soviet Union, as it lacked the ideology that would drive those ambitions, nor did Russia have the capability to maintain armed forces comparable to the Soviet forces.

One extremely important component of the Soviet arsenal, however, remained intact: the nuclear forces of the Soviet Union remained in the possession of Russia. It was quite pleasant a situation – or at least that is how we thought – to suppose that they will never be used, neither in a war, nor as a means of political pressure. We ignored one basic principle of defence: it is not intentions, but capabilities that really matter, as intentions may and do change quickly, while capabilities take a much longer time to have an impact.

And so it happened: the existing capabilities of Russia, inherited from the Soviet Union, proved to be very useful for the Russian leadership, when they – Putin – decided to change the basic political line of Russia, or rather, presented it openly. Russia became, again, a revisionist and imperialistic power – reflecting the equally negative changes in the internal situation, as Russia changed into an openly and brutally dictatorial regime.

NATO’s June 2022 Summit Communiqué and the New Strategic Concept constitute the new political and military strategy of the Alliance. As they are well-known, we will not go into detail, but limit ourselves to pointing out the most important and forward-looking elements of it.

1. By far the most important statement is that „the Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”<sup>2</sup>.

The Strategic Concept then develops the idea further: „The Russian Federation, which shattered peace in Europe by waging a war of aggression against Ukraine, is recognised as the most significant threat to Allied security”<sup>3</sup>,

We could say: we are back to normal. Although Russia is clearly not the Soviet Union, the (military) threat coming from it is only comparable to the threat that the Soviet Union used to pose. It is, of course, quite different, at the same time. There is no Warsaw Treaty behind Moscow, which means that NATO is in a much more advantageous strategic situation, but the threat is nevertheless there. Another difference is that there is no Communist ideology behind Russia. But it would be a big mistake to ignore that there is another – probably no less dangerous and aggressive ideology that rules the Kremlin: nationalism, racism and xenophobia, all condensed in the concept of „Russkij Mir”<sup>4</sup>.

2. The Summit had to face the fact that although the most dangerous and most imminent threat comes from Russia, the world is full of other threats. As the Strategic Concept says: „Other identified threats and challenges include: terrorism; conflict and instability in the Middle East and Africa; pervasive instability and its impact on civilians, cultural property and the environment; China’s stated ambitions and coercive policies; cyberspace; emerging and disruptive technologies; the erosion of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architectures; and the security implications of climate change.”<sup>5</sup>.
3. The Summit determined NATO’s core tasks as deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management and cooperative security and added another area that is not determined as one of the core tasks, but when you read the text it turns out almost as if it would be: resilience. Resilience has been – in one form or another, directly or indirectly – present in NATO’s posture from the very beginning, as Article 3 of the Washington Treaty states: „In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack”<sup>6</sup>.

NATO, however, made another very important step: when it states that these core tasks are based on common values, such as individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It is interesting and constitutes an innovative approach that NATO more or less directly addresses non-military threats too and emphasizes the values that are the basis of the very existence and functioning of the alliance. This is all the more important and timely as NATO and its members also have to face another threat: the threat of authoritarianism and dictatorships.

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<sup>2</sup> Madrid Summit Declaration 2022.

<sup>3</sup> NATO Strategic Concept 2022., <https://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> More about Russkij Mir see <https://uacrisis.org/en/russkiy-mir-as-the-kremlin-s-quasi-ideology>

<sup>5</sup> NATO Strategic Concept 2022.,

<sup>6</sup> The Washington Treaty, 1949. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_67656.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_67656.htm)

4. For the first time in NATO's history, China appears as a preoccupation in NATO's policy: „The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. ... We remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests.”<sup>7</sup>

It is of special importance that NATO included China in its strategic political posture, but stopped short of calling it a „threat”, or name military measures that it will use to deal with this challenge.

In conclusion, it is no exaggeration to call the Summit „historic”. The real challenge is still ahead of us: the implementation of the decisions. A process that started already – and is making significant progress –, but that will last years, maybe even a decade or more. The most serious challenge at present is, of course, how we – the Alliance and its member states – will be able to implement immediate decisions. At present, in the middle of many other challenges that states have to face: the COVID pandemic, climate change, the changes in globalisation, etc. And all that against the background of a genuine and bloody war: the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

But it will be no less important that we remain united and determined when the war is over. Should we try to return to „business as usual”, we will be doomed to fail. And then the Summit will cease to be historic. More crucially, the crises and dangers will return in a strengthened form. It will require determination, imagination, commitment and leadership to master these too.

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<sup>7</sup> NATO Strategic Concept, 2022.



## Chapter 3

# Authoritarian Challenges to Liberal Democracy



Szabolcs Panyi

## **THE POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL METHODS OF THE ORBÁN GOVERNMENT TO INCREASE ITS GLOBAL INFLUENCE**

The government of Hungary, and especially Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have an outsized presence in international media and public discourse about world politics. Of course, this is mostly due to some newsworthy and controversial developments in Hungary, or some remarks made by the Prime Minister. However, some of the international attention, especially media coverage, is a direct consequence of the Orbán government's soft power influence.

As an investigative journalist, I have been closely following the Hungarian government's lobbying efforts since 2014 and wrote multiple articles on the subject. In this current analysis, I will summarize what I have learned during my years reporting on Hungarian lobbying and foreign influence operations, or soft power influence. However, I prefer to call these lobbying efforts influence operations, as they are essentially supplementing the Hungarian government's traditional diplomacy and intelligence operations carried out by its national security agencies.

Usually, the aim of soft power influence operations is to de-politicize the image of a certain country through emphasizing culture, history, or gastronomy, while advancing political influence. In Hungary's case, the message conveyed during its influence operations are purely political, by both stressing divisive political topics and using harsh political language. There's nothing 'soft' about it.

In this analysis, I will mostly focus on influence operations aimed at shaping a more favourable image of Viktor Orbán in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in Brussels, as well as in English-language media and international right-wing circles.

Motivations behind these influence operations vary, but they largely stem from Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party leadership's longstanding belief that they have been 'treated unfairly' by 'Western political elites' and the 'mainstream Western media'. Building a network of foreign supporters is partly a pre-emptive strategy to defend the Orbán government from future 'negative portrayal' and 'attacks'. (Which is usually just reaction to the government's certain domestic measures eroding the rule of law, human rights, or press freedom.)

Vehicles of these foreign influence operations are either Hungarian state institutions or Hungarian government-funded proxies – think-tanks, propaganda media, GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations), astroturfing/front groups, and paid lobbyists. However, due to Hungary's current political system, it is not entirely clear what kind of interests are being advanced through these influence operations. In many cases, it is not so much the interest of the Hungarian nation or the Hungarian state, but the interest of the governing party and its leaders.



Most of the time Hungarian influence operations seem to be rather partisan and transactional. For example, a high-ranking Hungarian diplomat to the US once told me that, in Washington DC, their strategy is to try killing any bipartisan initiative in Congress which are seen as ‘criticizing’ the Orbán government. If such initiative is only supported by Democratic members of Congress, it is fine with the Orbán government, and could be shrugged off as a ‘partisan attack’.

The targets of influence operations – those who are courted or lobbied – are usually politically like-minded individuals or organizations. Their interaction with the Hungarian government, or its proxies, involve money, generous fellowships, lavish trips and other benefits, or political favours. Since huge amounts of Hungarian taxpayer money are involved in the process, these efforts deserve to be scrutinized.

The Orbán government’s foreign influence operations are aimed at:

- Dividing foreign countries’ political elite by sowing distrust, undermining bipartisan efforts, and creating a distraction by pushing partisan, culture war issues (migration, white nationalism, LGBTQ+ rights etc.).
- Creating a network of foreign ‘fellow travellers’, politicians, retired politicians, academics, pundits and intellectuals, whose articles or expert quotes in Western media can be cited as examples of international support for the Orbán government. Also, creating an international network of like-minded political actors – mostly on the fringes – that could still prove useful in the future. However, forging a closer cooperation between these political actors has not come to fruition yet.
- Shielding the Orbán government from specific types of criticism, such as alleged anti-semitism within their ranks (by courting Israel’s right-wing and far-right, as well as orthodox Jewish religious organizations).
- Manufacturing the image of the Orbán government as ‘Defender of the Faith’, portraying Hungary as a haven for Christianity and Conservatism, as well as a ‘non-mixed race’ population as opposed to Western multiculturalism.
- In doing all this, these influence operations also serve as important distraction from some of the Orbán government’s more controversial positions that would otherwise make it impossible for them to build ties with right-wing forces and intellectual circles in the US and Western Europe. Namely: trying to distract from the Orbán government’s pro-Beijing and pro-Kremlin attitudes.

The number one target country for these influence operations is the United States, which also continues to serve as a role model to some extent, and a place from which the Orbán government imports political technology and ‘know-how’. US Republican Party affiliated spin doctors, pollsters, and other types of political operatives have been instrumental in the Fidesz party’s consecutive election victories.

Beside their services during the election campaigns, their personal network within the US has also been utilized for Hungarian foreign influence operations.

## Undermining US government officials through lobbying

The best example is former Republican congressman Connie Mack<sup>1</sup>, a protégé of Viktor Orbán's late US spin doctor, Arthur J. Finkelstein. For years, Mack worked as the Hungarian government's hired US lobbyist – foreign agent – in Washington DC. He even labelled himself as “Spokesperson for the Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary”. In reality, he mostly just used his old connections in the House and courted Republicans on the fringes of the party to try to undermine US government officials. According to FARA filings, a consortium of Mack's lobbying firms and Hungarian pro-government think-tank Századvég received \$5 million for their services.<sup>2</sup>

Under the Obama administration, Mack's lobbying efforts resulted in Congressional hearings<sup>3</sup> where Republicans were lashing out at US Ambassador Hungary Colleen Bell and Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland. Both of them, especially Nuland, were vilified in Hungarian pro-government media. The organizer of these hearings was Dana Rohrabacher, dubbed as ‘Putin's favourite Congressman’, who chaired the House Foreign Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats.

As Mack's main contact point in Congress, Rohrabacher even travelled to Hungary and met with Orbán himself.<sup>4</sup> (Interesting to mention that both Rohrabacher and one of his aides, Paul Behrends, have been scrutinized by the FBI because of their ties to Russia.) To sum it up, during the Obama years, Hungarian influence operations were mainly focused on encouraging Republicans to come out in defence of the Orbán government and undermine the Democratic administration.

Later, under the Trump administration, things had become more complicated, as there was a bipartisan consensus among the US foreign and security policy establishment that Hungary is somewhat of a liability for the Western alliance. Hence the strategy of Hungarian lobbying changed. Connie Mack infamously waged a smear campaign against a high-ranking Trump administration official Fiona Hill, Senior Director for Europe and Russia in the National Security Council, because she was seen as an obstacle for a possible Trump-Orbán meeting. “Fiona Hill needs to be exposed. Her CV says it all. She is bought and paid for by George Soros,” Mack once Tweeted.<sup>5</sup>

His effort was helped by Trump campaign operative Roger Stone and far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. “This is very hard to believe, but I confirmed the facts again this morning. Soros has planted a mole infiltrating the national-security apparatus—a woman named Fiona Hill,” Stone told in Alex Jones' TV show.<sup>6</sup> Later, during the 2019 impeachment hearings of Donald Trump, Hill claimed that, as a result of Mack's smear campaign, she was seriously harassed:<sup>7</sup> “I received, I just have to tell you, death threats, calls at my home. My neighbours reported somebody coming and hammering on my door.”

<sup>1</sup> [https://index.hu/kulfold/2015/09/28/uj\\_amerikai\\_szovivoje\\_szerint\\_orban\\_peldat\\_mutat\\_az\\_eu-nak\\_hogyan\\_kell\\_a\\_migransokkal\\_banni/](https://index.hu/kulfold/2015/09/28/uj_amerikai_szovivoje_szerint_orban_peldat_mutat_az_eu-nak_hogyan_kell_a_migransokkal_banni/)

<sup>2</sup> <https://budapestbeacon.com/former-us-congressman-connie-mack-paid-5-million-to-lobby-for-hungary/>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/ConnieMackIV/status/1495432012286631936>

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Eventually, both Mack and his principals in Hungary got away with these questionable methods. Not necessarily as a result of these lobbying efforts, but Viktor Orbán did receive an invitation to the White House in May 2019, and a new era in Hungarian-US relations begun.

## **Intermediaries channelling Hungarian government money to the US**

In recent years, Hungarian foreign influence operations were mostly trying to ride the 'Trump wave'. In the US, this means that lobbying efforts are almost laser-focused on courting Trump supporters, both politicians and right-wing media pundits. The target is not the Republican party anymore, but only the Trump wing of the party. For example, in May 2019, when US senators from both parties condemned the decline of rule of law in Hungary on the eve of Orbán's visit to the Trump White House, Hungarian international government spokesman Zoltán Kovács did not hesitate to claim<sup>8</sup> that all of these senators – including Republicans Marco Rubio and Jim Risch – received campaign contributions from George Soros.

One of the main advocates of Hungary in the US is Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who not only continuously gives airtime to Viktor Orbán, or foreign minister Péter Szijjártó, but regularly praises Hungary. For a few days in the summer of 2021, he even broadcast his show from Budapest. As it was previously reported, the father of Tucker Carlson, Richard Carlson is a director at Policy Impact Strategic Communications, a lobbying firm that had also been contracted by the Orbán government. As the New York Times pointed out<sup>9</sup>, in 2019, the company disclosed in a lobbying filing that they “coordinated an interview of Minister Szijjártó on the Tucker Carlson show”. Both the company and Fox News denied that Carlson's father had anything to do with the lobbying effort.

Meanwhile, American PACs and Super PACs, dark money groups seem to have been the blueprint for utilizing new vehicles for Hungarian influence operations. These are organizations that can channel Hungarian government money into the US, or any other country, paying foreign individuals or organizations who then spread Hungarian government propaganda. But since the Orbán government uses proxies instead of direct financial support by the Hungarian state itself, cooperating foreigners – for example, US citizens – can avoid being labelled as foreign agents.

CPAC, or Conservative Political Action Conference, has become one of those US organizations that maintain close ties with the Orbán government. More precisely, a Hungarian government-funded think-tank or GONGO called the Center for Fundamental Rights, is the one that became a co-sponsor of CPAC events<sup>10</sup>, like CPAC Hungary in May 2022, and even another CPAC event in Texas in August 2022, where Viktor Orbán was one of the invited speakers. Only this year, the Center for Fundamental Rights received \$5 million extra funding from a foundation financed by the Orbán government.<sup>11</sup> However, due to these foundations and think-tanks being used as intermediaries, Orbán's spokesman could still claim about the Prime Minister's speaking opportunity at CPAC that “the Hungarian state has neither paid nor asked for anything”.

<sup>8</sup> [https://index.hu/kulfold/2019/05/12/kovacs\\_zoltan\\_szerint\\_soros\\_all\\_a\\_magyarorszagot\\_biralo\\_republikanusok\\_mogott\\_is/](https://index.hu/kulfold/2019/05/12/kovacs_zoltan_szerint_soros_all_a_magyarorszagot_biralo_republikanusok_mogott_is/)

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<sup>11</sup> <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/19/ujabb-ketmilliard-forint-kozpenzbol-mukodhet-iden-az-alapjogokert-kozpont>

Another government-funded organization involved in foreign influence operations aimed at courting US right-wingers is the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a so-called “talent development institution” or “college of advanced studies” which, for example, paid Dennis Prager \$30,000<sup>12</sup> for two appearances at their festival called MCC Fest in 2021.

One of the other speakers was the above-mentioned Tucker Carlson, whose speaking fee had not yet been disclosed. Since 2020, MCC had received funding and assets<sup>13</sup> from the Orbán government worth more than \$1.2 billion. The institution’s de facto leader is Balázs Orbán, chairman of MCC’s Board of Trustees, who also happens to be the political director and close aide to Prime Minister Orbán (the two Orbáns are not related).

## Influencing Brussels and the UK

Aimed at extending its influence operations to the EU’s capital, MCC has recently opened its Brussels branch.<sup>14</sup> According to a Euronews report, MCC Brussels executive director Frank Füredi said that their main aim “is to offer an alternative narrative” to the EU bubble which he says “tends to be very conformist and... create a quarantine against views that are different.”

MCC Brussels follows two previously unsuccessful attempts by the Orbán government to carry out similar influence operations.

Previously, it was the Fidesz party-affiliated Foundation for a Civic Hungary that was tasked with a similar job in Brussels. For example they organized events<sup>15</sup> where conservative, right-wing politicians, political operatives and intellectuals could network. However, the suspension and then exit of Fidesz from the European People’s Party paralyzed their efforts. Another pro-Orbán think tank, the Antall József Knowledge Center, funded mostly by the government, has also operated an office in Brussels. However, after an investigation into the lavish spendings of the think-tank by Zsuzsanna Wirth<sup>16</sup>, the government suspended and eventually cut their funding to the Antall József Knowledge Center. The opening left by both of these formerly active Hungarian government-backed organizations is to be filled by MCC Brussels.

The US and the EU are not the only main targets of the Orbán government’s influence operations. Although its political weight is not comparable to America, the United Kingdom is also a battleground for the Orbán government to win over key figures in English-speaking right-wing and alt-right circles.<sup>17</sup>

The methods are similar but different. Traditional political lobbying – like in the US – is harder due to the different nature of UK political institutions. However, there are many similarities, including the use of lavish study trips, offers of generous speaking fees and fellowships by think-tanks and GONGOs financed by the Orbán government. What makes these influence operations in the UK especially ironic, is that they are mostly targeting self-proclaimed Thatch-

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2022/01/13/hungary-paid-dennis-prager-30000-hour-appearances-far-right-education-conference>

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<sup>17</sup> <https://bylinetimes.com/2022/10/18/strange-allies-hungary-russia-and-the-uk/>

erites who advocate for small government and cutting state subsidies. However, the Hungarian trips, speaking engagements, short- or long-term fellowships and employments are indirectly financed by Hungarian taxpayer money.

The most prominent example<sup>18</sup> is the Danube Institute, headed by the late Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's former policy writer and speechwriter, John O'Sullivan. The organization was established in 2013 by the Lajos Batthyány Foundation<sup>19</sup>, the same government-financed foundation that pours billions of forints of Hungarian taxpayer money<sup>20</sup> into the Center for Fundamental Rights. However, they have a different profile.

Unlike the Center for Fundamental Rights other Hungarian think-tanks directly linked to the Orbán government, Danube Institute and O'Sullivan are seen as less toxic for more moderate conservative and right-wing intellectuals, hence they are more likely to interact with them. In the end of the day, however, someone's participation at Danube Institute events – where pundits and officials working for the Orbán government also show up – still serves as an indirect legitimization of the Hungarian government's 'conservative credentials'.

Other initiatives targeting UK conservatives include the Scruton cafés, a small MCC-affiliated coffee shop chain named after Roger Scruton, the late Conservative philosopher. Scruton's former close friend, Douglas Murray – who once even met Prime Minister Viktor Orbán alongside former Trump advisor Stephen K. Bannon – has become a regular visitor and guest speaker at events financed by all the different front groups of the Hungarian foreign influence operations.

## Conclusion

Despite all the efforts described above, the successes of the Hungarian foreign influence operations are questionable, especially compared to the amount of public money spent. Moreover, the cosyng up to some more controversial US and UK right-wingers also continue to backfire and lead to scandals. In multiple cases, these influence operations hurt the image and reputation of Hungary, and they are even detrimental to the government's ability to manoeuvre and forge alliances in diplomacy.

Some of these damages seem to be calculated, because of the deeply partisan nature of these foreign influence operations. Nurturing closer ties with conservative or right-wing political forces and ideological allies is always more important than advancing bilateral diplomatic relations with non-conservative governments in the same countries. However, the types of 'fellow travellers', or foreign propagandists, that are available to the Orbán government, are themselves a liability in some cases.

For example, the 2017 invitation of far-right commentator Milo Yiannopoulos to a Hungary-funded Visegrád Group event created tensions, especially with Poland, a close ally of the Orbán government due to Yiannopoulos' controversial comments on paedophilia and his homosexuality. Poland's extremely religious right-wing government was fuming.

<sup>18</sup> <https://magyararancs.hu/belpol/orban-oreg-baratai-101748>

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More recently, another scandal erupted when one of Viktor Orbán's British fans, Eurosceptic historian and public intellectual John Laughland, was briefly detained and questioned at Gatwick Airport by UK anti-terrorism police because of his suspicious ties to Russian organizations. Laughland is a well-known Putinist propagandist who appears on Russia Today regularly and leads a Paris-based but Russian-funded pro-Kremlin think-tank. He also serves as international director for a Dutch far-right party, also with Russian ties. When Laughland was questioned by British police, he was flying to the UK from Budapest, where he is currently on a six-months fellowship generously paid by the Mathias Corvinus Collegium.

When evaluating the successes of these influence operations, the main problem is that all these efforts seem to be completely inadequate to counter any kind of 'unfair portrayal' by the so-called mainstream media and political elites. The alliances and partnerships forged through these influence operations are restricted to a small ideological bubble. At the end of the day, those who essentially act as foreign agents for the Orbán government are mostly fringe, radical, marginalized players in their own countries, who simply lack the ability to make any real impact in shaping Viktor Orbán's or his government's profile.

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## HUNGARIAN ‘ILLIBERALISM’ AND ITS IMPACT WORLDWIDE

In his annual speech in Băile Tuşnad in 2017, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán boasted how ‘twenty-seven years ago here in Central Europe we believed that Europe was our future; today we feel that we are the future of Europe’. Indeed, Hungary has become practically much “bigger”, more well-known, and more frequently in the limelight than its size would justify. For instance, in 2021 the country was, for a while, globally the very first – or the worst – with respect to Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. However, this piece of news is not what makes Hungary interesting for social scientists. It is rather the fact that during the last few decades, or even further back, Hungary has been an exciting laboratory for political ideas which have resonated well in a broader international context. Moreover, Hungary has become a focal point, a particular ideological role model for national conservatives and the far-right in the EU and even in the USA.

As unbelievable as it sounds, the similarities between various viewpoints and policies in Hungary and the U.S. have not gone totally unnoticed. For example, the *Washington Post* published a three-part analysis under the title “The Orbanization of America”. The articles claimed – among many things – that “[t]he Hungarian prime minister and his ruling Fidesz party has become a prominent source of inspiration for American conservatives” and that “[t]o right-wingers in the United States, steeped in anti-liberal grievance, Hungary offers a glimpse of culture war victory and a template for action”. Moreover, *The New York Times* wrote about this matter under the title “How the American Right Fell in Love With Hungary”. From an academic perspective, for instance Cas Mudde has recently written about the similarities of Orbánian and Trumpian politics. This connection was further strengthened by Viktor Orbán at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas in 2022. Finally, even the Hungarian Daily *Magyar Nemzet* has asked in its headline, how the American Republican Party could learn from the Hungarian Fidesz.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of paper is too short to discuss such an all-encompassing political system, like ‘the Hungarian System of National Cooperation’. Therefore, I will study Viktor Orbán’s self-images of the system first, then relate the content to international indices, and finally ponder the idea, whether the model itself could be exported to anywhere, particularly outside the European Union. Even without a proper exportation Hungary’s “national interest” is making an impact, usually critical, on the functioning of the European Union as a whole.

The main argument is that the current Hungary represents soft authoritarianism, in which its essence is to maintain power in the hands of Viktor Orbán and his allies. Thus, in historical context soft authoritarianism takes place after the stages of soft dictatorship and hard democracy.<sup>2</sup> “Illiberalism”, on the contrary, has belonged to Viktor Orbán’s own rhetorics of survival, and was used as a paradiastole aiming to stress positive features of the current system.

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<sup>1</sup> Tharoor 2022a; 2022b; 2022c; Zerofsky 2021; Mudde 2022; Orbán 2022b; Scheffer 2022; Nyyssönen & Metsälä (forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> *Népszava* 29.7.2019; Nyyssönen & Metsälä 2021; Nyyssönen & Metsälä 2022.



## Viktor Orbán speaks

From Castro to Chávez, from Putin to Trump, a dream for a populist leader is to be in direct contact with the audience, the people, without a mediator. In the U.S., President Donald Trump has called the media the enemy of the people. On Twitter he targeted *The New York Times*, *NBC*, *ABC*, *CBS* and *CNN* as the “enemy of American people”. Originally used in the French Revolution, it is astonishing that the concept did not refer to Stalin’s Soviet Union anymore, but to liberal western media. On the one hand, this reveals the “loss” of concepts in politics nowadays, but on the other hand, it is about politicians, who and whose actions are themselves a medium. As much as Donald Trump still had to participate in election debates, the Hungarian PM solved the problem differently. For many years Viktor Orbán has neither participated in election nor other public debates. Instead, he sends “letters”, like the National Consultations, or gives “interviews” in Kossuth Rádió. Moreover, already 23 annual evaluation speeches (frequently translated as ‘State of the Nation’ in the government media), and 31 addresses in Băile Tușnad ‘Open University’ in Romania, make international news regularly. The audience is mainly his supporters, at home and abroad, particularly in Transylvania, where he, for example, introduced the concept of “illiberal state”. It is notable that these latter addresses take place in another country, but in the region, where a considerable Hungarian minority lives. Thus, the next examples come mostly from these speeches and from his own views.<sup>3</sup>

In his annual evaluation in 2020 the PM touched upon the question of naming only a few weeks before the surge of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even if we know how a dear child has many names, it is still surprising that even the PM himself had not a proper name for the system:

For ten years we have been debating how to evaluate the economic and social model that we have built in Hungary: it’s been called illiberal, post-liberal, Christian Democrat, a “democratship”, an authoritarian and hybrid system, and goodness only knows what else. No wonder commentators are so vexed, because a convent like our state system cannot be found anywhere else in Europe today – perhaps only in Poland...<sup>4</sup>

As a background, Orbán became famous in 2014 by launching the concept of the “illiberal state” there in Băile Tușnad.<sup>5</sup> Hence, as opposed to the general interpretation of the speech, the PM defined the essence of the new state, and not of “illiberal democracy”. Mixing the state with democracy is a misunderstanding based on the reception of the speech, as well as Viktor Orbán’s own words a year later. In fact, he referred to the state but a year later claimed to have delivered a speech about “illiberal democracy”. However, soon the concept disappeared for a while, until it resurfaced again in the 2018 speech.<sup>6</sup>

A year later, in 2019, it was striking how Orbán admitted the negative connotation of “illiberalism” but used the concept as a paradiastole: “All we need to do is find the expression or phrase that gives a positive meaning to the essentially negative-sounding word ‘illiberal’, because it’s clear from what I’ve said that everything that we want to distil, into this concept is good”. Thus, the academic debate had exploded, and then the concept was repeated already 17 times

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<sup>3</sup> Nyssönen & Metsälä 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Orbán 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Orbán 2014; Nyssönen & Metsälä 2021; Nyssönen & Metsälä 2022; Bustikova & Guasti 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Orbán 2014; Nyssönen & Metsälä 2021; Orbán 2015; Orbán 2016; Orbán 2018.

in the 2019 speech. Despite this higher regularity, there was no unanimous definition for the concept, as the PM used the term in several meanings: as a concept, as an ideology, as a state, as a system, as an identity, as history, and finally as politics. In 2022 the whole concept had vanished, as on the first post-Covid-19 speech in Băile Tuşnad, there was not any single reference left to the concept anymore.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the PM has frequently defined Fidesz's own identity and identification through negation. In Băile Tuşnad the word liberal appeared more than one hundred times between 2014 and 2019. At the same time there was only one reference to "Conservatism", in relation to Donald Trump and his Presidential campaign. Moreover, a concept of "Christian Europe" appeared there in 2018, that is, before the EP elections. It seems evident that Orbán aimed to merge Christian democracy with his "illiberalism" by challenging the liberal-conservative views in the European People's Party. It was notable that meanwhile Orbán's relations with the European People's Party were critical, the Hungarian PM openly flirted with the far-right. This axis will plausibly strengthen as, particularly in Italy, Hungary's family policy was debated and already praised in the parliamentary election campaign of 2022.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the 2019 address the "Christian Europe" already disappeared and was substituted for Christian liberty and freedom instead. For Orbán, liberal democracy can only exist in a world in which Christian culture had existed before it.

And then there was the debate about what were these things called "illiberal democracy", or "old-style Christian democracy", or a "national system" ... And whatever way I look at it, I can't give a better definition of the meaning of illiberal politics than Christian liberty. Christian freedom and protecting Christian freedom. Illiberal politics working for Christian freedom seeks to preserve everything that liberals neglect, forget and despise.<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, the PM had set the horizon of expectation for 2030 by setting 12 goals for Hungary: to become one of the European Union's five best countries in which to live and work, and to figure among the EU's five most competitive countries. In Băile Tuşnad 2019 he estimated that there will be still some 15 years left until these achievements will have been reached.<sup>10</sup>

## The rhetorics of indices

The Rule of Law Index published by the World Justice Project places Hungary last in the group consisting of the EU, the EFTA, and North American states. In a similar vein, the Corruption Perceptions Index places Hungary as the second worst state in the group consisting of Western Europe and the European Union. One of the most serious hits is the US-based Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* ranking on which Hungary, in the aftermath of the 2018 elections, descended to the group of 'partly free' countries. Moreover, the government has boasted its economic success, which de facto is moderate – even the forint is essentially weaker now than it used to be some ten, twenty years ago. Finally, the biased public media has not let the opposition

<sup>7</sup> Orbán 2019; Plattner 2019, 17; Nyssönen & Metsälä 2022; Orbán 2022a.

<sup>8</sup> Orbán 2014; Orbán 2017; Orbán 2019; Nyssönen & Metsälä 2021; Népszava 25.4.2019; 3.5.2019; 7.5.2019; Dalma 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Orbán 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Népszava 29.7.2019; Orbán 2018.

message go through properly. Hungary's press freedom has dropped dramatically: among the eleven countries, which Steven Levitsky depicted as subverting democratic institutions, only Nicaragua has exceeded Hungary's downward rush during the *last* twelve years.<sup>11</sup>

A closer look at the annual reports of the UK-based Democracy Index indicates that among the post-2004 EU member states, democracy had declined the most in Poland and Hungary between the first survey in 2006 and the 2016 edition. If we broaden our focus until 2021, Hungary is the worst in backsliding in the whole Europe, after Russia, Ukraine and Turkey. In Hungary the problems are associated particularly with the functioning of the government, with the independence of the judiciary and with corruption.<sup>12</sup>

The Democracy Index of *The Economist's* Intelligence Unit categorises each country in one of four groups: *full democracies*, *flawed democracies*, *hybrid regimes* and *authoritarian regimes*. Hungary still belongs to this second best group, which is in contradiction to the recent political evaluation of the European Parliament, which stated that Hungary is an electoral autocracy. Moreover, it is notable that in the 2016 index the United States regressed one place and thereby an entire category. The report said that Donald Trump "is not to blame for this decline in trust, which predated his election, but he was the beneficiary of it."<sup>13</sup>

At the same time authoritarianism is becoming a more compelling political path. As for China, while it seems to be strengthening economically, it is getting antidemocratic politically. In March 2018, limiting the term for the presidency for two consecutive terms was removed, something that clearly sets the stage for autocracy in the increasingly influential Asian country. Still, others think that the whole discourse on the decline of democracy follows from a too narrow approach. Levitsky and Ziblatt have provided the best summary of the situation: "Since the end of the Cold War, most democratic breakdowns have been caused not by generals and soldiers but by elected governments themselves", like in Turkey, Poland and Hungary.<sup>14</sup>

We may also compare several indices and put them together, as our research group did a year ago in Finland. We examined altogether eight indices (in addition to those depicted here we had GDP, happiness, fragile states, and HDI), and ranked the countries on the basis of their average of those measured indices. There Hungary reached 56<sup>th</sup> position altogether, and its 44<sup>th</sup> position in the HDI, ranked right after Portugal, at its best mark. Contrary to these results, there is the "Black Swan", that is, Social Futuring Index, done by Hungarian Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies, in which they estimated Hungary and Poland to reach the surprisingly high, eight position. The study suggests that these two states are well prepared in managing their future good lives, even better than Sweden, for example. Thus, there is a clear contradiction to other rankings above, but it also matters, what topics were measured. For example, in HDI the situations of Russia and Belarus are completely different from the liberal democracy benchmarks.<sup>15</sup>

As such, the versatility of the various indicators might be challenged, but to paraphrase Pirandello freely: everything is what it seems. And it is not just about monitoring the competition between the countries and how they prosper, it is also about the company that surrounds them.

<sup>11</sup> Freedom House 2019; World Justice Project 2020, 19; WJP Rule of Law Index; Transparency International 2018: Corruption perceptions index; *Népszava* 20.10.2018; 7.11.2018; 1.12.2019; Czinkóczi 2021; Reporters without borders 2021; Reporters without borders 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Democracy Index 2006; The Economist intelligence unit; Democracy Index 2016; Diamond 2015; Democracy Index 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Democracy Index 2016; Nyssönen 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Levitsky & Way 2015; Carothers & Youngs 2017; Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Human Development Report 2015, 212; Metsälä, Nyssönen, Pitkänen 2021, 26; Social Futuring Index 2020, 36.

In Chaïm Perelman's rhetoric, there is an interesting view concerning comparison. Thus, in what company you can be seen in is decisive: "the inferior term is elevated and the superior term somewhat lowered". Thus, Hungary's "Central European" control group has shifted to the "Balkans" and is now included among Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia in an increasing number of benchmarking reports. We may, of course, criticize all those reports, for example for the lack of transparency and accountability, but here the argument is that they indicate something in the long run.<sup>16</sup>

## Implications beyond Hungary

In March 2016, an article in the daily *Népszabadság* claimed that Hungary's relations are not smooth with any of the neighbouring countries.<sup>17</sup> No doubt the migration crisis must have contributed to deteriorating relations with Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, which all also had tiny Hungarian minorities. Moreover, right-wingers in Slovenia and Croatia have supported Viktor Orbán in the EU's rule of law dispute. Slovenian relations particularly warmed up during the recent Janez Janša's premiership. However, Janša's two-year premiership ended in early 2022, when a leftist-liberal Freedom Movement GS defeated him in the elections.

In addition, Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić has similarly stressed "illiberal" and authoritarian topics, being the leader of most popular party, even if they lost a parliamentary majority in 2022. As Hungary supports EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, it is not difficult to guess that, in addition to Vojvodina, the question is about Serbia and other countries' rising authoritarianism. When exporting "illiberalism", there were also some speculations, in which sense Bucharest was on the Hungarian path, **when** Viorica Dăncilă's social democrat led government was inaugurated in 2018.<sup>18</sup>

Hungary has become more isolated in the European Union despite its contemporary allies Poland and most recently, once again, Italy. Even Orbán himself has recently considered the Czech Republic and Slovakia belonging to "post-West".<sup>19</sup> This, however, does not mean that Viktor Orbán, currently the longest serving Prime Minister in the European Union, has not got any influence on European topics. In 2020 *Politico* **chose Orbán as the fourth most influential person in the "Doers" category in its annual ranking of the most powerful people in Europe. The Hungarian PM was ranked higher than Emmanuel Macron, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. A hypothetical "what if" question would arise if a person like Orbán had a country like France, Turkey, or Britain under his thumb. The EU's consensus based foreign policy has challenges – to formulate it mildly.**

On the basis of Perelman and the Democracy Index, it is surprising that "superiors" (U.S. Republicans) are learning from their "inferiors" (Hungarian Fidesz). This kind of publicity is no doubt pleasing and elevating for the Hungarian government. However, we could revise the question of worldwide impact by turning it upside down: instead of backsliding and eroding the EU and the "West", the real target could be hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Instead of being the future of Europe there are plenty of countries and leaders, who are afraid of democratization and losing their personal power.

<sup>16</sup> Perelman 1982, 76; Nations in Transit 2017; Broome 2014; Metsälä, Nyssönen, Pitkänen 2021.

<sup>17</sup> *Népszabadság* 1.3.2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Magyar Idők* 14.9.2018; *Népszava* 6.2.2018; 2.6.2018, 9.7.2021, 27.2.2021, 31.1.2018, 4.10.2018.

<sup>19</sup> Orbán 2022a.

In 2010 the Hungarian government launched the Eastern opening and eight years later joined the Organization of Turkic States. There the real question is in which sense these openings are gradually making those countries “softer” or is it only Orbán, who is learning new tricks and becoming “tougher”? There is, for example, a peculiar phenomenon of “National Consultations”, which are not plebiscites, not necessarily even proper surveys, but means of political propaganda to set the agenda and manipulate potential supporters. All citizens receive a letter with a questionnaire - with an introduction and given options usually to some ten questions – a phenomenon known probably only in Singapore, a city state adored by Viktor Orbán in his “illiberal state” speech.<sup>20</sup> On the basis of the results, already more than ten consultations altogether, the government claims that it is listening to the people and its policies are based on this voice.

Secondly, even though the opposition can campaign openly in Hungary, as there is a functioning electoral system and even a tradition of democratic political culture, these are benefiting the strongest party and its leader. In addition to centralised media, my writings are also a criticism of a mixed electoral system, which was established a few years ago also in Russia, whilst another one, Ukraine, has rejected it since then. Thirdly, the government does not use the stick but also the carrot and subsidies, like authoritarian rulers do, to gain support from the core groups. In a system like in Hungary, not everybody needs to be convinced, usually one out of three is enough to maintain the current majority and power.

## Conclusion

In this study I have separated spatial impacts from evaluations, that is, rankings. Indeed, “Houston, we have a problem” as we could say, and it is particularly true if the country is a member in the European Union. In fact, the recent European Parliament resolution that names Hungary as a hybrid regime of electoral autocracy is a crucial reminder in this. After the 2022 elections, nobody should pretend that the problem does not exist, denial can also represent an ideological position. Somehow Covid-19 has been the last drop to unmask and reveal the true character of the system, its arrogance and indifference. In other words, we are dealing with blatant power politics, something where fact-based arguments or accusations of hypocrisy have become meaningless.

As the cynical U.S. political maxim goes, the leader may be a bastard, but he is *our* bastard. As a result, politics goes to the grey zone, in which those in power do whatever they are able to do, and rule because they rule. And when they cannot perform any better, they take recourse in whataboutism and show the shortcomings of the opponent. This is of course not only a Hungarian phenomenon, it is enough to think about the nominations to the U.S. Supreme Court, for example. Against the arguments that the Hungarian system is something extraordinary and unparalleled, I have related international indices, which have formed a kind of democratic stock-market to measure democracy and other political fields as well.

In the current European Union Hungary has been the sweet poison maker, which has a larger impact not only on the region but more broadly as well. Nevertheless, Orbán’s methods are softer than those applied in Russia or Central-Asia, or even in China and electoral process and pluralism still got the best marks in the Democracy Index ranking – elections are free, albeit not

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<sup>20</sup> Public Consultation 2022.

fair. As we know, authoritarian rulers learn from each other, at its best, Hungary could improve also the rankings of many hybrid or authoritarian regimes, whose positions are worse than Hungary's.

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Garvan Walshe

## POLITICAL ANTITRUST NEW TOOLS TO FIGHT ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY

“I know it when I see it” said the frustrated American judge<sup>21</sup> struggling to distinguish obscenity, which is not protected by the First Amendment to the American Constitution from indecency, which is. The line between imperfect democratic practice, of which almost any government may credibly be accused, and a fake democracy where the rules of democratic society are systematically subverted, is as difficult to draw. The types of government we call *democratura*<sup>22</sup> or hybrid regimes, exploit this to escape scrutiny and consolidate power, until it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to topple them by constitutional means.

Fake democrats can be found ruling from all parts of the political spectrum, whether national religious, as in Erdogan’s Turkey, far-left in Morales’s Bolivia, or economically liberal, as in Singapore, but some of the most successful in recent times have come from the national populist right. Law and Justice in Poland, the Lega under Matteo Salvini in Italy, Donald Trump in the United States and, of course, Fidesz in Hungary have all governed against the institutions of liberal democracy in their societies.

While their success owes something to the effects of globalisation and the overhang from what has been after all the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, it is also ideological. They share a common critique of liberal democracy that liberals have so far found it difficult to refute and use it to accumulate a monopoly of political power behind a facade of democratic public participation.

### Liberalism of truth

After the fall of Communism, liberal democrats lost the habit of ideological argument. Having seen off religious conservatism at the beginning of the century, and fascism and communism afterwards, it appeared sufficient to defend liberalism’s record in practice. Decades of ideological competition were replaced by a focus on ‘what works’<sup>23</sup> in which ideology was deemed to take second place to outcomes.

This suited the many moderate, centrist liberals for whom public policy was more a positive than normative science. Their hope was that freed of ideological conflict, it should be possible to focus on economic growth, addressing social problems, and removing restrictions to opportunity and of personal freedom. Liberalism itself was conceived of as a set of background institutions, neutral between different ways of life. The quite different philosophical projects of

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<sup>21</sup> *Jacobellis v Ohio*, 1964 (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobellis\\_v.\\_Ohio](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacobellis_v._Ohio) for a brief account of the case)

<sup>22</sup> a portmanteau of two spanish words: *democracia*, and *dictadura* (dictatorship)

<sup>23</sup> New Labour Election Manifesto, United Kingdom, 1997

John Rawls,<sup>24</sup> and Jürgen Habermas<sup>25</sup> conceive of themselves as procedural means for arriving at a consensus about the basic structure of society within which disagreement is managed and different ways of life are pursued.

But liberal societies are not as neutral as they conceive themselves to be. Liberalism allows people to pursue a variety of different ways of life, but rules others out (the life of a sincere theocrat for example, keen to impose their religious belief on the rest of society). A liberal political system may be freer and allow for more diversity than competing systems, but it is still a power structure that promotes, or at least facilitates, certain types of behaviour and disadvantages others.

The first people to notice the problems with this were the postmodernists. What we mean by evidence, and success, they observed, was itself constructed, and that construction reflected the power relationships among those doing the constructing of knowledge.<sup>26</sup> This process of knowledge construction should, postmodernists argue, be subject to intellectual critique.

The surprise, perhaps, is that this critique has been most successful not from the left, which is where postmodernists usually situate themselves, but from the national conservative right.

## Kryptonite for Liberals

Now suppose a hard right government decides, as many have done, that it wants to restrict asylum seekers' rights to have their asylum cases heard individually, by a fair process. One immediate liberal response is to claim that this policy denies them fundamental rights enumerated in the Refugee Convention of 1951 or Article 18 of the Charter of Fundamental rights. The trouble with this argument is that it carries weight only with people who value either the refugee convention or the charter.

To the illiberal opponent of migration, the fact that these rights are enumerated in these documents merely serves to discredit the documents, not to convince the illiberal to abandon illiberalism. It is an example of what might be called 'kryptonite for liberals', which is a strategy, to delegitimise the liberal claim to distinguish between those ways of life that may be pursued, and those that may not, that has been used very successfully in recent decades.

This attack has three prongs. First, it insists, liberalism is not neutral but is a power structure that should be critiqued as such. Second, this power structure is supported by influences the illiberal considers illegitimate (such as foreigners, NGOs, or multinational capitalism). It follows, third, that if those influences were removed the true instincts of the people would then be revealed, and the policies they want, not the policies imposed by the liberal superstructure, would be fulfilled.

The first argument is in fact correct. Liberalism is a power structure. Though it accommodates considerable diversity, liberalism still favours a certain range of views and seeks to marginal-

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<sup>24</sup> See both *A Theory of Justice*, 1971 and *Political Liberalism*, 1993 for versions of this project

<sup>25</sup> *Between Facts and Norms*, 1992

<sup>26</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, 1979 for example.

ise others. But an argument between a liberal and an illiberal power structure collapses into an argument between liberalism and illiberalism, leaving us, at best, just where we started. The liberal position is further weakened because some liberals refuse to admit they defend a power structure, and instead make the argument, unconvincing people at least open to illiberal arguments, that liberalism is neutral between competing social arrangements. If a significant proportion of liberals still insist on neutrality, not only do liberals look divided and confused, they also lose the ability to persuade potential supporters of illiberalism. If they are to gain illiberals' support, they need to make arguments from a position that can be understood outside the liberal tradition, namely politically competitive democracy.

This should not be confused with accepting illiberals' definition of what counts as legitimate. Thus, when Hungarian NGOs were forced to declare they were foreign funded, they were right to transform it into a badge of quality. One person's illegitimate foreign influence is the other's endorsement by the highest international standards. Moreover, at a European level a further argument is possible, which adopts a "nationalist" position, but expands the "nation" to include all Europeans equally. Just as the Fidesz-aligned Matthias Corvinus College operates in Brussels, so Unhack Democracy, which is registered in Brussels, was founded to protect the electoral rights of (European) Hungarians by improving the quality monitoring of elections here. Finally, it is possible to argue about the nature of foreign influences. I will just note for now that so many of these "nationalists" seem to be pro-Russian.

Illiberals' most important argument however is the one that the liberal power structure prevents us from acting on the true instincts of the people. Simply asserting that liberalism requires something (by reference, for instance to an international human rights convention), fails to convince, causing illiberals to question the human rights convention instead. Something similar happened with EU migration to Britain before Brexit. Instead of defending EU immigration, Gordon Brown and David Cameron merely said it was an unfortunate requirement of EU membership. The British decided to abandon EU membership instead.

In fact illiberal democrats are vulnerable not for their illiberalism, which they embrace, but their superficial (or perhaps insincere) conception of democracy. There is no need here for a detailed summary of conceptions of democracy here. It is enough to note that one of the understandings of democracy is as a process for competing for power, like market competition is a process for competing for customers. In an economic market a company can grow so strong that it can crush competition by predatory pricing, preventing compatible but competing components being made (think: printer cartridges or Nespresso capsules) or even just buying up rivals, like Facebook bought Instagram. In economics the end result of this uncompetitive behaviour is monopoly. By analogy, we can see describe facade democracies, like Hungary's, as *political* monopolies.

## Political monopoly

In constitutional governments, politics involves both regular administration and legislation, and what we could call, with a small “c”, constitutional activity — setting the rules of the competition for political power.<sup>27</sup> The economic analogue is the distinction between a market participant that has to work within the market’s conditions, and one with enough market power to affect the rules of the game. Naturally this is a continuum and business strategy as much as political tactics often involve ways to move along the continuum and shape one’s environment. Even in well-designed political systems the distinction is not entirely clear cut. While amending a constitution usually involves a specific, and cumbersome, procedure, other aspects of the accumulation of power such as the appointment of sympathetic (if still appropriately qualified) heads of independent government agencies allow a particular party to concentrate power over time even in well-ordered democracies. The question is when this goes so far that it endangers the fair political competition that democracy requires.

This allows us to think of a dominant position in a political market as one where a political movement (or group of movements) holds enough power to change the rules of the game on its own, without the cooperation of other political forces, and the *abuse of a dominant position* when it uses them to and undermine the separation of powers, or of offices, fundamental liberties, or other parts of the democratic framework, like the independence of media, business, civil society, from the state with the effect of biasing future political competition in its own favour.

Judgements about whether this abuse occurs, are then a higher level of constitutional review, one further level removed from ordinary politics than question of whether the constitution has been complied with. They need to assess whether the principles of political competition, and not just formal constitutional procedures, have been complied with. It is difficult to conceive of this as a judicial function because the process to appoint the judiciary is part of the constitutional process that political monopolists try to subvert. Supranational authorities, like EU institutions, may increasingly be willing to exercise such a reviewing function, as we have now seen with the Commission’s establishment of “milestones” — reforms Hungary must enact — before receiving EU money.

## Political antitrust

The existing approach of assessing compliance with pre-existing financial reporting and anti-corruption requirements, or rule of law jurisprudence is not however sufficient to prevent governments like Hungary’s from irredeemably distorting political competition. A new approach, which, in tribute to American anti-monopoly legislation, we may call ‘political anti-trust’ is needed. It could consist of the following elements.

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<sup>27</sup> This does not always involve changing a formal constitution. Democracies like the United Kingdom and Israel do not have their norms codified in a single document. Other democracies also evolve constitutional conventions that are not necessarily written down.

## **A. Abuse of a dominant position**

The main harm from economic monopoly is the abuse of a dominant market position. That is, a firm's use of market power now, to tilt the playing field against its competitors, distorting the competitive process that is supposed to generate improvements in consumers' standards of living.

Analogously, in a political market a dominant political party can abuse its position to distort the competitive political process and tilt the political playing field against its competitors.

In both cases, the problem is not the dominant position itself: a company can dominate a market by making better products, just as a political party can hold political power by winning elections, but abuse of the position to prevent the competitive process working as it should.

## **B. The meaning of political competition**

Because consumer decisions are necessarily individual, and political decisions by definition collective, competition works differently. In the economic realm, a consumer's willingness to demand a product, and the firm's willingness to supply it create the conditions for market exchange. In the political realm, it is possible to conceive of a vote as the currency that is spent; but what does the voter get in return? In a representative democracy, they do not vote on policy outcomes directly, but on people to implement policy outcomes, and the personal factor is at least as important as the policy factor.

Considering outcomes (personal or policy) allows us to create a concept parallel to the price. In competition economics, a firm with market power can raise the price of a good higher than it would be able to in a perfectly competitive market.

A political party with market power raises the extent to which their voters' personal or policy preferences are enacted by the political system beyond what it would be able to do if the political system were in a perfectly competitive market.

## **C. How to measure political market power**

The standard definition of market power is the ability of a firm to raise the price above some competitive level (the benchmark price). First order political market power is thus the ability to convert the votes it receives into its policy preferences or to put its own people into office, over and above the number of votes it receives. Second order political market power is the ability to use its dominant position to deter rivals from challenging it.

A key question is what counts as the abuse of political market power, and, relatedly, whether there is a level of market power that is too large, even if it not abused. Two important concepts here are network effects and vertical restraints.

## **D. The role of network effects**

Network effects occur when a product is much more valuable because everyone else is on it (e.g. Facebook). They create market power: as much as you might want to leave Facebook for a different social network, you would then lose contact with the much larger number of your friends who are still there.

In political systems, your chances of getting your outcome or person elected depend very much on how many other people vote the same way. The extent that they do can be quite considerable, particularly in majoritarian political systems, where a small number of votes can be the difference between total defeat and total victory.

## **E. Vertical restraints on competition**

Most products reach consumers through supply chains. You probably don't buy a washing machine directly from a supplier, and you certainly don't buy the parts and put it together yourself. Vertical restraints allow one component of the supply chain to exercise market power over another (e.g. by a manufacturer the retail price, or insisting on exclusive distribution deals).

In a political system, different institutions can exercise market power over each other, influencing which policy preferences are adopted or which party's people hold office. These institutions include the executive, judicial and legislative branches of government, the civil service, the media, state owned businesses, and other areas the government may choose to bring under regulation, such as civil society organisations. A political monopolist uses its power in one area, usually the executive or legislative branch, to excessively influence others (such as the judiciary or the public broadcaster)

## **F. Second order market power**

Second-order market power occurs when the fact that there is already a dominant player with market power deters competitors from challenging them, or entering the market at all (this is related to predatory pricing; the buying up of rivals, etc).

Market power can be a deterrent to competitors, who would be reluctant to compete against a deep pocketed rival who might sell below cost and so make the rival's entry into the market unprofitable. Political market power can act similarly: people who see the way the wind is blowing, could choose not to oppose a dominant party, and exit politics altogether. Patronage networks impose costs on people who oppose the government, deterring others (though political psychology is not the same as business psychology, and measures that are too heavy handed often backfire).

## Conclusion

Illiberal democrats have been able to undermine liberalism by successfully challenging liberals' claims to political neutrality. They accurately identify liberal institutions as a pro-liberal power structure which seeks to promote a liberal society. Illiberals, such as the self-described "illiberal democrat" Viktor Orbán use this fact to support an attack not only on the institutions that support a liberal society, but also those necessary to preserve the fair political competition that democracy requires, including an independent judiciary, pluralistic media, an civil society funded independently of party political affiliation, an independent civil service and business sector, and an electoral process in which state resources are not used to bias the outcome by giving the governing side free publicity.

In doing so they change the rule of the competition for political power to give themselves an unfair advantage in the political process, just like monopolists in an economic market give themselves an unfair advantage in economic competition while maintaining a superficial impression that a free market continues to exist. The similarity to economically monopolistic behaviour allows us to conceive of a new set of standards to assess when a political system has become biased in favour of one particular political force, and devise remedies to it.

The development of these concepts can provide a richer framework for detecting the operation of a 'hybrid regimes', and distinguish them from the functioning liberal democracies they disguise themselves than the relatively crude expert-opinion based indices of democratic quality or democratic backsliding that have been developed in recent years. Such a framework can yield interventions by, for instance, EU institutions, designed to increase political competitiveness and provide objective criteria for triggering their implementation. It deserves the name of "political antitrust"

Participants of

**‘THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY AND  
THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF A HUNGARIAN NGO’**

Conference

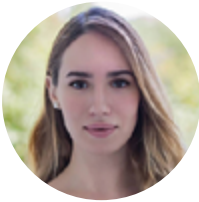
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