ILLIBERAL CONSERVATISM, CIVILIZATIONALIST ETHNOCENTRISM, AND PATERNALIST POPULISM IN ORBÁN’S HUNGARY

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues for an ideology-centered interpretation of the Orbán regime. I propose that those regimes that promote a particular worldview through their signatory policies and discourse, advantage a well-defined set of values through the allocation of resources, and enact policies on key ideological objectives with long-lasting impact should be considered ideological. In addition to demonstrating that Hungary after 2010 satisfies these criteria, I identify the principal ideological modules of the regime: illiberal conservatism, civilizationist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism.

KEYWORDS
Illiberalism, Hungary, autocratization, political ideologies, populism
INTRODUCTION

This article tries to answer two questions. First, does the Orbán regime have an ideology? Secondly, if it does, what are its fundamental characteristics? The implications of these questions are relevant for scholars interested in understanding the recent wave of illiberalism. Attitudes towards ‘Orbanism’ played an important role in recent elections in a number of countries, including Slovenia\(^2\) and Italy\(^3\), the behavior of the Hungarian government poses a major challenge to the operation of the European Union\(^4\), and high-ranking politicians talk about the dangers of the Hungarian model “creeping into the US”.\(^5\) In addition to the analysis of an important case, the article aims to contribute to the ideational explanations of the contemporary democratic malaise.

Concerning Hungary, my central claim is that the discourse and behavior of the regime make ideological interpretations not only possible but also necessary. The government invests unusually large efforts in establishing an elaborate worldview, there is a close correspondence between rhetoric and policies on several key ideological dimensions, and the official value-commitments manifest themselves in various rules and practices that shape the lives of individuals and institutions both within the borders of Hungary, and often also outside of it. Furthermore, I argue that the three principal ideological modules of the regime are illiberal conservatism, civilizationist ethnocentrism, and paternalist populism. I elaborate these concepts and I survey the real-life consequences of the regime’s ideological template.

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1 The paper was prepared as part of the 101060899 Horizon grant AUTHLIB. The author is grateful to Balint Mikola for his assistance.
3 https://www.euronews.com/2022/09/17/italy-election-orban
Finally, the article has the ambition to contribute to the discussion of the role and measurement of ideologies in the operation of political regimes. The Hungarian case is a hard case for those who emphasize the role of ideas in contemporary politics. Major authorities in the field explicitly argue against ideological interpretations of post-2010 Hungary (Magyar and Madlovics 2020, Muller 2020, Scheppele 2022, etc). While not denying the Machiavellian motivations behind many practical and rhetorical actions, nor the importance of the autocratic client-patron dynamics, I try to demonstrate the worldview-coherence of the regime's signatory policies and discourse. I propose a set of standards for estimating the role of ideological concerns that focuses on the long-term implications of the allocation of resources. To make the case for the relevance of ideology in the analyzed context I discuss governmental actions both in the domestic and the international arena and I link these actions to the discursive strategy of Viktor Orbán, his closest associates, and his party Fidesz. The correspondence of words and actions will be illustrated with quotes from major speeches, programmatic statements, and signatory policies, while the societal demand will be captured with survey results.

In the following sections, first, I contrast ideational and cynical approaches to the Orbán regime. Subsequently I introduce three ideological modules that are claimed to be central to the operation of the regime. Then I address the issue of temporal consistency, and I investigate how Fidesz achieves the image of authenticity. In the fourth section, I describe the efforts invested into the development of a radical ideological discourse and into the establishment of appropriate international intellectual networks. In the fifth part, I review policies that have both the explicit goal and the potential to shape the values for generations. Additionally, I present a set of unpopular policies that have been maintained for ideological reasons to underscore the thesis of value-commitment. Finally, I turn to the issue of what ideological labels best fit the regime and its protagonists, and how the state-society relations have changed in accordance with the new, innovative, and often paradoxical ideological choices.
VALUES OR GREED

Those authors who consider the Orbán regime to have an identifiable ideological orientation typically discuss it as nationalist, right-wing, populist, or conservative. The labels of neo-conservativism (Szelényi and Csillag 2015), national-conservativism (Buzogány and Varga 2018), ethnopopulism (Vachudova 2020), or right-wing populism (Jenne 2018) have also been applied. But many analysts argue that these labels are only marginally important, or are even misleading, because Viktor Orbán is a quintessentially opportunistic leader whose efforts are aimed at enriching his family and consolidating his personalistic rule.

Orbán’s claim to be a Christian or Christian-democratic politician in particular is often rejected, partly because of the eclectic mix of Christian and pre-Christian pagan symbols in his discourse (Ádám and Bozóki 2016), and partly because the government is often found to contradict fundamental Christian principles. According to Olivier Roy, for example, “In Hungary, what you have is a populist party who claims to be Christian” (Coakley 2021). Going further, Kim Lane Scheppele (2019) offers an astute analysis of the Orbanist rhetoric and politics, concluding that under the populist mantle “power is all that matters”. Generalizing further, she claims that “populism may not be what some of the populists are claiming at all. Instead, what we may find beneath the surface is the drive for power, plain and simple.” (Scheppele 2019: 330). In another piece (Scheppele 2022) she suggests that the culture war waged by Orbán was launched to distract defenders of democracy from creeping autocracy.

Scheppele’s Princeton colleague, Jan-Werner Muller (2020) agrees. As he put it, concerning the departure of Fidesz from the European Peoples Party (EPP), “Orbán’s posturing has seduced conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic. But the image he is projecting is false advertising. It would be a mistake to think that the Fidesz-EPP conflict is mainly about political principles; it is about power, plain and simple. … The sad, sordid truth is that Orbán and his ilk are trying to wage an EU-wide culture war because they have found this to be an effective way to distract domestic and international attention from the kleptocratic autocracies
they have created”.

The case for categorizing the rule of Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, as ideology-less and narrowly motivated by power-grabbing appears to be strong. Fidesz was first a member of the liberal party family (and Orbán the vice-president of the Liberal International); then, between 2000 and 2019, it belonged to the Christian democratic alliance, and by 2020 it identified the anti-immigrant parties of the extreme right as its natural allies. This trajectory suggests an exceptional level of ideological flexibility. The original liberal, anti-Russian, and Europhile position was gradually replaced with an anti-liberal, pro-Russian, and Euroskeptic orientation. The rhetorical crusade against multinationals is contradicted by the large tax breaks given to many of them.

These seemingly erratic shifts and contradictions may betray non-ideological, opportunistic motivations. Additionally, Fidesz itself identifies as a pragmatic political force that is driven by pure common sense (Orbán 2018a, B. Orbán 2021). Both Orbán and his most ardent critics agree on the fundamentally non-ideological character of the regime.

To consider the role of ideologies, I take the recently developed typology of Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics (2020) as the point of departure. The appeal of their model is that they establish a sharp contrast between those regimes that are driven by ideologies and those that use ideological phrases instrumentally and opportunistically. They consider a political actor to be ideology-driven “if (1) the fundamental character or the defining/constituting elements of his actions can be derived from his communicated ideological panels, (2) he varies his ideological positions rarely and (3) any varying is followed by a change in his actions accordingly (value coherence).” (p. 575) Communist dictatorships are, for example, ideology-driven because “the main features of the regime follow from the basic tenets of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism” (ibid., p. 87). But the post-2015 Polish regime is also considered to be ideology-driven. The close symbiosis of church and state, based on a solid value basis, and the government's insistence on unpopular strict abortion regulations betray the ideological commitments of Jarosław Kaczyński and his colleagues (ibid., p. 189).
Ideology-driven actors also make compromises, but they “are willing to pay a political price for insisting on certain policies” (ibid., p. 575). The elites of ideology-driven systems are ready to give up power if their ideological goals can no longer be met.

In contrast, in ideology-applying systems all attributes of the regimes, including its discourse, are a function of elite interests, namely the accumulation of power and wealth. The actions of an ideology-applying politician “cannot be derived from his communicated ideological panels, (2) he varies his ideological positions frequently and (3) varying is not followed by, but rather follows, a change in his actions accordingly” (ibid., p. 576).

The typology formally doesn’t address the question of whether politicians privately believe their discourse. The authors argue that this is not something an analyst can know, and anyway the goal is to decipher the functioning of the political system and not the psychology of the individual leader. But when they posit a “cover” role for ideology in ideology-applying systems they come close to characterizing the mentality of the political leaders: “By “cover,” we mean that the actor chooses ideological panels to hide his actual goals, demonstrating a rational and functionally cynical attitude” (ibid., p. 576). In this framework, ideology has a purely instrumental role and the politicians pick tenets exclusively for strategic reasons, preferring those that hide their ambitions and help them in power-maximization. Contradictory positions and double standards are the giveaways of such a mentality.

According to Magyar and Madlovics, nowadays the authoritarian (“patronal”) ideology-applying regimes naturally gravitate towards populist discourse. Populism is a conveniently thin and vague ideology and yet it can create a strong identity for the leader’s followers and it helps in maintaining animosity against the regime-outsiders. It is, therefore, particularly useful for rulers trying to avoid accountability. Populism tends to be accompanied by traditionalist social views because the image of the patriarchal family supports the role of the leader as the
patriarch of the nation. “Therefore, a mafia state mostly ends up picking bits and pieces from the ideological inventory of right-wing authoritarian systems” (ibid., p. 583).

The work of Magyar and Madlovics is relevant not only because their typology garnered much attention (see e.g., Fisun at al 2022), but also because they present the most detailed argument for the manipulative role of ideology in the context of Orbán’s Hungary. Their original description of the regime (“mafia-state” or “Hungarian polyp – the organized over-world”) had no room for ideology. In their more recent publications, they classify Hungary as a typical case of an ideology-applying patronal regime, assigning, in line with the argument described above, an instrumental function to ideology. Ideological discourse is there to provide a “cover” for real ambitions and to obtain legitimacy for a range of actions aimed at the concentration of power and money.

Magyar and Madlovics acknowledge that the repeated references to “sovereignty” and “national interest” in the rhetoric of the Orbán regime may create “the appearance of a constant vision about society’s proper functioning, as if the actor indeed had an ideology that motivates him.” (ibid., pp. 576-577). But the behavior of the actors cannot be derived from this discourse (ibid., p. 577). At the superficial level the rhetoric of the Polish and the Hungarian governments are similar (both are focused on Christianity, nation, people, traditional family, etc), but while Poland is led by puritan politicians who are ready to sacrifice their popularity if these values are at stake, the Hungarian government adjusts its policies to opinion polls and international bargains, thus never risking the loss of power for ideological reasons.

The reason why God, nation, and family are the focus of the regime’s discourse is partly explained by the fact that these phrases mark pre-existing foci of identification, which tend to become particularly important during crises (ibid., p. 593). The collapse of communism shattered the security of significant segments of the population, and patrons like Orbán could take advantage of the widespread anxiety by evoking symbols that project security. But the regime disregards Christian teachings whenever they are inconvenient (consider solidarity, mercy,
or the humane treatment of refugees), showing that the identification with these values is not genuine. According to Magyar and Madlovics even Orbán’s anti-liberalism is fake, otherwise he would not make deals with foreign businessmen (ibid., pp. 586-593). They warn us that if we take the officially promoted ideological values seriously then we fall into the regime’s propaganda trap.

It would be difficult to disagree with the claim that there is a great deal of cynicism in the way Orbán uses ideological slogans and that he has sacrificed hitherto defended ideological positions several times. But I argue below that Magyar and Madlovics and the other cited observers underestimate the ideological coherence of the regime and the consequential nature of the ideological values promoted by the regime-discourse.

While I intend to demonstrate a considerable degree of consistency, the emphasis will be on revealing the consequentiality of the ideological discourse. This is so because the application of rigid standards of consistency to regimes and to political actors is problematic. For a regime (or for a politician who rules across many years) adaptability is key. Stalin’s Soviet Union, for example, underwent many U-turns on central issues such as collectivization, religion, German-orientation, etc., yet it is virtually by consensus, and rightly, considered to be an ideological regime.

Additionally, expecting compliance with textbook criteria of particular ideologies is not an appropriate standard for judging politicians. The combination of, for example, left-wing and right-wing positions may appear to be perfectly coherent for the actors themselves even if it contradicts academic stereotypes. To insist on the reproduction of scholarly definitions of socialism, conservatism, or Christianity in political life is not reasonable. One may criticize, for example, Tomás de Torquemada, Dietrich Boenhoffer or Girolamo Savanarola from a religious point of view, but a historian must accept all of them as Christian actors.

6 Magyar and Madlovics demand “logically coherent and consistently applied” ideological tenets (ibid. 576).
Denying the presence of ideological components simply because a different assembly of tenets appears to be more authentic or consistent for the observer is not compatible with treating political actors as autonomous agents.

How should one, then, calibrate the ideological nature of regimes and actors? I suggest considering those regimes that promote a particular worldview through their signatory policies and discourse, advantage a well-defined set of values through the allocation of resources, and enact policies on key ideological objectives with potentially long-lasting impact to be ideological. Below I will try to demonstrate that according to these criteria the Hungarian regime is ideological.

THREE IIDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS

Before arguing for these standards, and before reviewing the evidence in favor of consistency and consequentiality, I introduce three constructs that, in my opinion as substantiated below, play a central role in the discourse and in the functioning of the Orbán regime – they may also have some general relevance. Their selection follows the logic according to which political actors with ideological ambitions primarily need to address three questions: what is a virtuous life, what is the nature of the represented community, and what is the relationship between citizens and the state. I will demonstrate below that Orbán gives consistent – albeit in terms of textbook definitions paradoxical – answers to these questions. The answer to the first question can be classified as illiberal conservatism, the second as civilizationist ethnocentrism, and the third as paternalist populism.

Illiberal conservatism, like most conservative traditions, promotes traditional family structures, social order, and religious (Christian) legacies. But this type of conservatism is not satisfied with the protection of inherited socio-cultural structures. In contrast to many versions of conservatism, it is hostile to checks and balances, state neutrality, and the ability of the mass media and civil society to hold decision-makers accountable. It aims to replace the individual with the hierarchical, male-centered nuclear family. It is particularly active on the cultural front, demanding formal compliance with official cultural norms from anyone in
need of public support.

Civilizationist ethnocentrism answers the question about the nature of the political community. This ideological construct combines the anti-globalist idea of national sovereignty with loyalty to the circle of white Christian countries that are ready to defend themselves against migration and cosmopolitan discourse. The principal units are ethno-cultural with boundaries defined by lineage and certain attitudes, not citizenship. These units are expected to work together against the challenges coming from rival civilizations.

Paternalist populism primarily addresses the interaction and the relative power of people, elites, and the state. Populism, in itself, is either not an ideology or an extremely simple one (Freeden 1998). Due to its opposition to elite privileges, ossified structures, and sociopolitical hierarchies some scholars appreciate its emancipatory, progressive potential (Mouffe 2018). Another group of academics, however, equate populism with anti-pluralism (Muller 2014) or democratic illiberalism (Pappas 2016). Indeed, the undifferentiated understanding of the “people” and the questioning of the legitimacy of political opponents typical to populist movements point to their illiberal and anti-pluralist potential. These definitional approaches, however, logically exclude from the scope of populism those movements that support the emancipation of some marginalized groups and accept some power-sharing, even if otherwise they are characterized by anti-elitism, people-centeredness, or distrust in representative institutions and free markets. This results in a too narrow operationalization of populism: not even the 19th century U.S. Populist party (Canovan 2004) can then be considered properly populist.

Therefore, a middle way needs to be followed, one that conceptualizes populism as having at its core a rejection of elite-led political structures in favor of bottom-up, majoritarian, and in this very narrow sense, democratic modes of governance (Mudde 2004). The central principles of liberal democracy, like checks and balances, state neutrality, individual rights, and non-discrimination are of no value to populism.
Paternalist populism contains the view of the state as guardian and educator of citizens. It is characterized by the endorsement of a redistributive government engaged in social transformation programs with a long time horizon. It is also associated with qualified people-centrism and qualified anti-elitism (Enyedi 2016): not all elites are bad and the people are not necessarily perfect. It goes beyond the anti-individualism of ideal-typical populism by emphasizing not only the rights but also the duties of the citizens. In the world of paternalistic populism elections are a crucial source of legitimization, while other channels of political participation are either marginalized or replaced with elite-controlled mechanisms.

This ideological construct is populist in the sense that its representatives speak on behalf of the people against the corrupt international elite, have a Manichean worldview, and justify policies by frequent references to the people's will and to common sense. But the bottom-up logic is overshadowed by a top-down perspective that goes beyond simply accepting the authority of the charismatic leader. Paternalist populism considers the state and the various national authorities and spiritual leaders linked to the state as a legitimate elite. The local and partial social institutions (schools, churches, cultural bodies, etc.) are not given the freedom to express the values of their immediate constituencies but are expected to follow centrally endorsed guidelines.

TEMPORAL CONTINUITY, AUTHENTICITY AND THE PARTY-VOTER LINKAGE

Fidesz is one of the most successful parties in Europe even if one disregards the 2014, 2018, and 2022 elections as unfair. The party has been supported by around 30% of the population since 1998. Given the turbulent Eastern European context, this achievement is truly exceptional. Across the last quarter-century the party has been able to rely on the support of masses of active citizens, sustained by the voluntary work of tens of thousands during its time in opposition between 2002 and 2010. While many voters choose Fidesz for materialistic reasons, the core electorate has stable ideological features. The typical Fidesz voter places herself on the right or extreme-right end of the left-right scale and prefers to self-identify
as “believer”, “conservative-traditionalist”, “nationalist”\(^7\) and “supporter of order and stability”. Among the frequent church-goers 70% vote for Fidesz (Enyedi and Tardos 2018). The assumption of indifference towards ideological goals on Orbán’s behalf would compel us to classify these supporters as misguided and gullible.

The somewhat more palatable position, namely that Orbán’s ideology has been designed to provide symbolic compensation for the victims of the post-communist crises doesn’t fit the trajectory of events either. The right-wing authoritarian ideology was offered to the voters by Fidesz well before the party’s historical victory in 2010. Those who responded positively to this ideology were not the poor, the unemployed, or those whose social status was under any particular threat. The backbone of the Fidesz constituency was provided by the Christian middle classes: doctors, lawyers, teachers, and agricultural entrepreneurs (Greskovits 2020). Once in power, Fidesz managed to get the vote of the least educated and most marginalized groups too, but the regime’s culture war-centered ideology continues to target the educated conservative middle classes. These voters were promised that the country will move in a right-wing direction once Fidesz takes the government back. The achievements of the Orbán regime, as discussed in more detail below, from the reconstructed Transylvanian monuments to the flat tax, or from the clerical control over large segments of social care and education to the increase in the number of marriages, proved them right.

The followers can consider Fidesz’s ideological position to be authentic because the party has occupied the same end of the nationalist-internationalist, conservative-progressive and clerical-secular continuum for almost 30 years. The authenticity of the ideological narrative is helped by the fact that much of it was in place prior to Fidesz acquiring governmental power. Interest in the support of Hungarians living in neighboring countries is present from the very beginning of the party’s career. The famous Transylvanian summer camp where Orbán

\(^7\) Literally “erős nemzeti érzésű”, that is, one with strong national(ist) feelings.
regularly delivers his most important speeches began in 1990. The alliance with the historical churches dates back to 1996. In the mid-1990s, while still nominally liberal\textsuperscript{8}, Fidesz emphasized family-values and adopted a Christian-nationalist rhetoric. Already in the mid-1990s Orbán argued that the state should differentiate between churches and should support only those who “do not contradict our values on the issues of family and nation” (Orbán 2006: 132).

István Hegedűs, who was the Fidesz MP responsible for foreign relations left the party in 1994 because he could not accept the new strategy. But when he was asked whether the leaders of Fidesz quit the liberal party family out of opportunism, he rejected the claim, confirming that the ideological turn to the right was, regrettably, genuine and profound (Hegedűs and Földvári 2001).

For continuing electoral victories authenticity is key. This is not an authenticity determined by external observers but one assessed by the supporters. In order to keep their loyalty, the party needs both to reiterate its commitment to core values and to explain the policy shifts on secondary issues. So far, Fidesz has been remarkably successful in maintaining such a narrative. The most glaring U-turn, the move from a Western orientation towards an Eastern (Russia, China, Central Asia) alliance was, for example, explained at two levels. The first level was one of practical necessity: cooperation with rising powers brings economic benefits for the nation. The second level was cultural and focused on the betrayal of traditional Western family values by the current West and the commitment of the East, particularly Russia, to the maintenance of the very same ideals: there was a time when Adenauer was the representative of conservative values, now it is Patriarch Kirill, and therefore value-consistency demands a shift from Western to Eastern orientation. While the West has begun to disintegrate under the influence of the growing (Muslim) immigrant population, the Russian leaders have turned to traditionalist values. This interpretation chimes well with the little discussed but long-standing anti-Americanism of the right as Russia has the potential to limit the harmful U.S. dominance of the world (Marantz 2022).

\textsuperscript{8} Although note that Orbán began to use the “national liberal” phrase already in 1993, distinguishing Fidesz from the main liberal party.
BUILDING AN IDEOLOGICAL NICHE

Fidesz's ideological framework owes a lot to the writer and politician Istvan Csurka who re-established and modernized Hungary's radical-right traditions in the 1990s. Fidesz gradually adopted Csurka's perspective, without its most blatantly anti-Semitic aspects. During the 1998-2002 governmental period the official discourse was relatively moderate, but the public media already served as a safe haven for Csurka's followers. Then, after the loss of office, the party revealed its readiness to pursue a radical agenda. When the new Socialist-Liberal government made an attempt to re-organize the museum called the “House of Terror”, the landmark project of Fidesz-style anti-communism, Orbán threatened mass demonstrations. The government backed down. The issue of whether the museum should be kept under the old management and whether its exhibition should be redesigned concerned only a very small percentage of the society, and the government had a comfortable majority in the legislature. Yet Fidesz's radicalism won. This assertive, in some cases even extremist, commitment to certain ideological symbols remained afterwards as a staple of the Fidesz strategy.

In the subsequent years the party's rhetoric was further adapted to the concerns of the 21st century. Bits of this discourse have been imported from the U.S., others from Russia, but they were all carefully integrated into the traditionalist Hungarian self-image. Since the mid-2010s, Hungary has appeared in the official discourse as a bastion against transgender operations, critical race theory, leftist

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9The effort to bring together American and Hungarian discourse has some parodistic aspects. When a prominent representative of the Fidesz regime, Miklos Szánthó, gave a speech at the 2022 CPAC in Florida he complained to the audience about the attacks of the left, as a result of which “We are not allowed to be proud of our flag, our nation, our history. They take the knee during our anthem, set fire to our churches, desecrate the memory of our national heroes” with the obvious intention to sound more American than the Americans.
cancel culture, woke demands in higher education, aggressive homosexual propaganda, multiculturalism, and the expansion of Islam. Accordingly, it would be difficult to find a leading politician today whose discourse is as much dominated by radical right-wing references as Orbán’s. He is one of the world’s few leading politicians who is openly speaking about the “Great Replacement” (Political Capital 2022), or recommending racist literature such as Jean Raspail’s infamous *The Camp of the Saints*. The radical message is disseminated through a wide range of journals, media-outlets, and educational institutions sponsored by the state.

The 2014 adoption of the illiberal label was well prepared. From the end of the 1990s, the principal target of Orbán’s criticism was modern liberalism. The regime’s problem with liberalism is primarily cultural: “Liberal democracy is in favor of multiculturalism, while Christian democracy gives priority to Christian culture; this is an illiberal concept. Liberal democracy is pro-immigration, while Christian democracy is anti-immigration; this is again a genuinely illiberal concept. And liberal democracy sides with adaptable family models, while Christian democracy rests on the foundations of the Christian family model; once more, this is an illiberal concept” (Orbán 2018b).

Elsewhere he elaborated further that “...liberal democracy doesn’t strengthen families: it maintains that there are many varieties of family, there are many varieties of lifestyle, and we mustn’t make distinctions between them – in fact, if possible, they should be granted equal status in the eyes of the law. One of the consequences of this is that we are living through a period of demographic decline. I think that in terms of Christian culture we also have problems, because liberal democracy doesn’t recognize the existence of an outstanding, leading culture of determinative power. Compared with this there are, of course, other cultures in a society; and as we’re tolerant people there’s room for them. But all the same our lives have a foundational culture which needs to be protected – and this is Christian culture” (Orbán 2018c).

One of the ideologues of the regime added that “[n]ot all illiberals are Christian-democrats, but all Christian-democrats are illiberals; illiberals so conceived
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protect their homeland, preserve national culture, oppose external interventions, as well as empire-building aspirations, aim at protecting Christian liberty, i.e. at preserving all that liberals abandon, forget, and disdain”. (G. Fodor 2021: 242)

The party’s international relations are adjusted to this ideological message. Even during the mid-2010s, while Fidesz was still a member of EPP, it cultivated close relationships with the radical parties of Europe. After it was forced out of the EPP it has tried to build an effective new alliance out of the members of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Identity and Democracy (ID) blocs, so far without success. The cooperation with the latter federation is particularly problematic because it contains Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and Orbán openly stated that he must sacrifice his sympathies for AfD in order to maintain a working relationship with the German government. But when the members of the ID bloc met in June 2022 to formulate the alliance’s position on European politics, their guest speaker was the Hungarian minister of justice.11

The autocracy- and clientelism-focused explanations of the Orbán regime don’t help us to understand why so much energy is invested in the build-up of an international network of illiberal intellectuals. Populists, from Trump to Bolsonaro, or conservative authoritarian leaders, from Jarosław Kaczyński to Janez Janša, typically make only occasional references to intellectual debates. In contrast, Orbán has built a veritable royal court out of dignitaries such a Rod Dreher, Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony, Geert Wilders,12 Roger Scruton, Douglas Murray, Jordan Peterson, Frank Furedi, John O’Sullivan, Tucker Carlson, Vaclav Klaus13 and others, achieving considerable prestige in certain conservative circles (Chotiner 2021, Rone 2021). The support for this group of anti-liberal intellectuals

12 Geerd Wilders was not only welcomed many times by the Prime Minister but he also received a high state award.
13 The list of notable people invited to Budapest is in fact much longer, including among others Jeff Sessions, Mike Pence, Candace Owens, and Rick Santorum.
goes beyond occasional invitations; an elaborate set of institutions, from the Danube Institute to the Mathias Corvinus College, cultivates the linkages.

**FUTURE-ORIENTED, SIGNATORY POLICIES**

As suggested in the introduction, we should consider a regime to be ideological if it implements policies that have long-lasting consequences in line with the official world-view of the rulers. The number of such Hungarian policies abound. The citizenship law that resulted in 1.2 million new citizens, the church law that created a hierarchy among the churches, the school curricula that reflect a nationalist-conservative understanding of the world, the imposition of this curriculum on all public schools, the state-sponsorship of culture that leaves only marginal room for dissident artists, and the codification of a particular type of historical memory in museums and in state-run exhibitions all consistently support core cultural right-wing values. The fence erected around the southern borders, the rejection of virtually all Muslim asylum seekers, the banning of the display of books about homosexual relations, or the lavish spending on family-support schemes are all socially consequential policies that can be well interpreted as ideological.

Many of these policies can be traced back to the constitution introduced unilaterally by Fidesz in 2011. The so-called ‘Foundational Law’ had no pretense of being neutral in terms of world-views and values (Uitz 2019). The document has been modified several times, but these modifications have made it resemble an ideological manifesto even more. As a result of the latest changes, the constitution does not only exclude the possibility of same-sex marriage but it also states that “Hungary shall protect the right of children to a self-identity corresponding to their sex at birth and shall ensure an upbringing for them that is in accordance with the values based on the constitutional identity and Christian culture of our country.” Nothing short of a two-thirds majority in favor of the contrary policy will be able to relax these rules, and, as the above cited example of the House of Terror indicated, not even such a radical change may suffice.

The government’s measures and rhetoric have a tangible impact on the everyday lives of citizens. Family allowances have tripled across the 12 years of the Orbán
government, the number of divorces has declined, the number of marriages has
doubled, and the fertility rate has increased substantially. Mothers of four or more
children and those who give birth before 30 are exempt from any personal income
tax. Giving birth can exempt one from paying back student-loans. Through tying
social citizenship rights to having children, the regime’s pro-natalist policies have
led to a redistribution of workload across social groups defined by sex, gender,
and social status (Fodor 2021).

The “churchification” of social care and educational services has advanced in giant
steps (Pusztai 2013). The proportion of secondary schools governed by churches
has increased from 10 to 25%. The clerical supervision of child protection-related
services has increased from 7 to 75%. Virtually all activities concerning foster
parents have been attached to churches (Dobszay 2022).

In many segments of the economy the ratio of domestic and local capital has
changed significantly since 2010. In the banking-sector, energy-sector, and media-
sector, for example, domestic ownership has increased by around 20%. The
amount of Hungarian public funds spent on supporting the Hungarian diaspora
has sky-rocketed. The Bethlen Foundation, the agency dedicated to supporting
Hungarians abroad, spent 12 times more in 2020 than in 2011 (Sipos 2019, Előd
and Czímer 2021). In 2020, the amount devoted to this purpose reached €383
million, and the Foundation is only one of the channels through which support
arrives for the diaspora communities.

These achievements are highlighted by Fidesz both in their electoral campaigns
and in their continuous communication with supporters. To dismiss them as
simple distractions from the real story (that is, the centralization of power and the
enrichment of the Orbán clan) implies a disregard for the voter-party linkage and
for tangible social reforms.

Not all promises given to the right-wing core electorate have materialized but a
surprisingly big proportion of them have done so. The strengthening of
conservative institutions, the marginalization of foreign capital in specific sectors,
or the increase of xenophobia through the governmental anti-foreigner campaigns (Barna and Koltai 2019) will alter Hungarian society for decades in line with the ideological promises.

The importance of ideology-sensitive issues is revealed by the changes in spending on recreation, religion, and culture. Hungary spends three to four times more in these categories than the EU average.

**Figure 1. Expenditure on culture, recreation, and religion within the European Union, 2011-2020**

![Chart showing expenditure comparison between EU countries]

*Source: Eurostat (2022)*

Moreover, the tendency is towards further increases (Figure 2).
Figure 2. Expenditure on culture, recreation and religion in Hungary, 2011-2020

As Figure 3 shows, the expenditure expanded in all of the areas of religious, cultural, and recreational and sporting services.

Source: Eurostat (2022)
Figure 3. Expenditure on culture, recreation, and religion in Hungary per category (2012-2020)

Source: Eurostat (2022)

While the pooling of sport and religious activities may look like an arbitrary statistical decision, in the case of the Orbán regime they are inherently related. The cult of sport (especially competitive sport, particularly football) is elevated to one of the the defining markers of “Hungarianness” and is frequently given an ideological interpretation. Sport is often combined with religion, as shown by a stadium built by the state and then given to the Catholic church. A portion of the money going to assist Hungarians in neighboring countries is dedicated to churches to build football pitches (Markovic 2021). The “spiritual unification” of the nation happens largely through these two mediums.

UNPOPULAR POLICIES

One of the central criteria of ideology-driven systems, according to Magyar and Madlovics, is whether they launch ideologically-motivated policies even if they run counter to public opinion. The Orbán regime meets even this standard, in several issue areas. While it is true that Orbán didn’t go as far as Kaczyński in restricting abortion, he does maintain several unpopular policies. The financial privileging of
churches, the extension of voting rights to Hungarians living in post-Trianon territories, the generous support of their institutions, and the constraints on local governments or on the autonomy of schools have all been unpopular.

In many instances the government was able to win the public over with the help of intensive propaganda, but such policies were typically kept even if these efforts were unsuccessful. The central message of the government’s massive anti-LGBTQI campaign (Benedek 2021) was that homosexuals pose a threat to children, and school lectures touching on homosexuality may affect the pupils’ sexual orientation. According to polls, these claims were rejected by 73% and 83% of respondents respectively (Bernáth 2021), but the government did not reconsider the restrictions. Similarly, the government's preferential treatment of religious schools in terms of the allocation of public funds is opposed by a majority: 74% agreed that students in public and religious schools should receive the same funding (Republikon 2017).

The pronounced legal and financial support for the Hungarian minorities living in neighboring countries is especially noteworthy considering that the 2004 referendum on extending citizenship to diaspora members failed to produce a binding outcome due to low turnout, and the results showed the deep (52-48%) division in Hungarian society. Despite its polarizing nature, adopting a bill on simplified naturalization was one of the first undertakings of the Orbán cabinet. The fact that the majority has reservations against the voting rights of those who do not live in the country,14 and it is particularly against the lavish sponsorship of Hungarian sport clubs functioning abroad,15 has been disregarded by the government.

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14 According to 2011 data, the popular support for extending voting rights was as low as 15%. See: https://www.origo.hu/itthon/20110801-a-median-felmerese-a-hataron-tuliak-valasztojogarol.html
15 According to 2017 data the majority opposed the government’s generous donations to diaspora communities. See: https://24.hu/kozelet/2017/08/20/nem-tamogatjak-a-magyarok-a-hataron-tuliak-szavazati-jogat/
Of course, some of the ideologically interpretable gestures cited above may have had some returns in terms of power and wealth as well. The generous support of Hungarian institutions in the neighboring countries, for example, contributed to Fidesz’s electoral success among Hungarians living there. But this “investment” never promised more than one or two extra seats in the legislature. Narrow office-focused rationality doesn’t appear to be a satisfactory explanation.

The same claim can be made concerning foreign policies. The “Eastern opening” – the affiliation with countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey – or membership of the Turkic Council, have always been at odds with the voters’ preferences. The various steps made on the international scene have led to a dramatic loss of allies. These losses were predictable. Manifestly provocative and ideological gestures like Orbán’s statements that Fidesz is to the right of the European People’s Party, and of the CDU/CSU17 and even the Brothers of Italy (Orbán 2019),18 may be factually correct, but they don’t fit well into office-seeking, pragmatic strategies. Spectacular symbolic gestures like Hungary’s veto of the European Council’s decision to ban patriarch Kirill from entering the EU bring no material gains to Orbán and are inconsistent with a realpolitik approach. They are not important enough for Russia, who would rather profit from a veto on economic sanctions, while they are seen as scandalous by most EU partners. If, however, the government’s behavior is interpreted through the lens of the culture war, then these gestures make perfect sense. The head of the Russian Orthodox church, with whom leaders of the Hungarian government have a long-standing warm relationship, is a leading representative of the traditionalist side in European cultural debates: loyalty to him follows directly from these debates.

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16See public opinion data from 2017: https://index.hu/tudomany/2017/04/13/a_fideszesek_a_legnagyobb_oroszbaratok_de_a_tobbseg_szerint_nyugaton_a_helyunk/


THE PILLARS OF THE IDEOLOGY

Finally, I turn to the question of how the ideological constructs introduced in the theoretical section fit the Hungarian case. The discussions above already contained many examples of illiberal conservatism. The illiberal nature of this conservatism is underlined by the hate-campaigns against sexual minorities and by the imposition of centrally defined cultural codes on educational institutions and on state-dependent media. The colonization of a significant sector of civil society and the discrimination against religious communities that are not willing to provide political support to the regime provide further evidence for the applicability of this concept.

The Hungarian version of illiberal conservatism seems to be particularly concerned with strength. As Orbán famously put it: “I might say that the most dangerous combination known in history is to be both rich and weak. There is no combination more dangerous than this. It is only a matter of time before someone comes along, notices your weakness, and takes what you have.” The argument runs that the universalist leftists and liberals have undermined the capacity of the communities to defend themselves, but luckily the next decades will belong to the right. Körösényi, Illés, and Gyulai (2020:131) argue that Orbán approaches conservative ideas through a realist lens, justifying them from the point of view of survival, stability, and sovereignty. This includes appreciating social units like the family primarily in terms of their contribution to the biological survival of the community.

19 In the 15 March 2022 speech, for example, (Orban 2022) the words “strength” and “strong” appear 21 times.
20 See http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_14th_kotcse_civil_picnic
21 “...in Europe, a new era has begun, and this will be a right-wing era”, see https://g7.hu/kozelet/20180802/ot-vizio-amely-kisertetkent-uldozi-Orbant-tobb-mint-egy-evtizede/
In line with civilizationist ethnocentrism, the regime considers ethnic homogeneity, and homogeneity in general, as major assets. According to Orbán, “conflicts in Europe were not caused by nationalisms, but by empire-building aspirations which did not respect national identities. And accordingly, in our view, the greatest danger in Europe was – and remains – any attempt to build empires. This is a stark warning to Brussels that it should not seek to turn itself into an empire along the lines of a United States of Europe. For in doing so it is making exactly the same mistake made by leaders in 20th century Europe, from Hitler to Stalin” (Orbán 2018a).

By rallying against empires, the discourse emphasizes the benefits of organizing the world around relatively small homogenous ethnic units, but these units are then expected to coalesce around civilizational values, more specifically in the defense of white Christian culture. Cooperation between nations that share these characteristics is welcome, and even some mixing is allowed. But those who represent different cultures must be kept out. In his 2022 speech Orbán predicted that Hungarian border guards will soon need to stop non-Christian EU citizens wanting to come to Hungary, while they will need to provide shelter to those Christians who no longer find a place within the European Union. He is ready to offer “a home to European citizens who do not want migrants, who do not want multiculturalism, who have not descended into LGBTQ lunacy” (Orbán 2021). The civilization to be protected is sometimes called the West, but with the understanding that much of the challenge to it comes from countries like Germany, France or the United States. When Argentina won against France in the 2022 World Cup the vice-president of Fidesz celebrated on Facebook with the comment “A white, Christian nation that represents European values became the

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23 Ruzha Smilova recently advanced the idea that it is possible to distinguish a distinct illiberal ideology whose main elements are unrestrained popular sovereignty, ethno-nationalist “common good” anti-individualism, anti-pluralism, and anti-liberal anti-globalism. She finds Hungary to score high in all dimensions.
world champion”,24 in a clear contrast with France and its players with African background.

Illiberal conservatism and civilizationist ethnocentrism are united by their opposition to universal norms. Although in general the regime tries to respect the letter of the law and exerts a subtle, behind-the-door influence on the functioning of the judiciary, Orbán attacked publicly those judges who penalized the Hungarian government for segregating Roma children, for not implementing European standards in prisons, and for mistreating asylum-seekers. In all these instances he considered the local and particular necessities as having precedence over universalistic considerations.

The other bridge between illiberal conservatism and civilizationist ethnocentrism is the reliance on conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories can be considered to be ideological modules as they contain suggestions about how the world works and who are the relevant actors, and they even contain some guideline about what to do against them. In this case the conspirators are foreign or foreign-hearted groups motivated by greed and by hatred against organic nations. They are helped by the deep state (Washington and Brussels) and by their mercenaries who masquerade as civic activists.

Finally, in line with the principles of paternalist populism, emphasis is placed not on rights but on the duties of citizens, and social care is primarily channelled to those who meet the criteria of the ideal citizen: living in marriage, having children, belonging to the middle or upper classes, and ready to cooperate with the regime. Legitimacy stems from elections and from top-down “national consultations” – other channels of political participation are marginalized.

In the Hungarian case the politics of paternalist populism are embedded in longstanding cultural dispositions. Surveys show a general disposition towards

24https://telex.hu/english/2022/12/19/hungarian-mp-szilard-nemeth-white-christian-european-values-won-the-world-cup
reliance on state resources and state guidance, even in the new entrepreneurial class and among intellectuals (Rádai and Tóth 2010). Based on World Values Survey data, Bíró and his colleagues concluded that “demand for paternalism is at the foundation of Hungarian society's value structure” (Bíró et al. 2016:14).

The exact political manifestation of paternalism has changed during the 12 years of the Orbán regime. In the first period the tendency was to extend the legal scope of the government as far as possible. The second period continued with the transfer of rights and resources from local governments to the central government, but many of these resources and even rights were then passed over to para-public institutions, that is, institutions that have considerable public financing but where private actors play a central role in governance. The typical para-public bodies are foundations established by the government but given freedom to govern themselves. The board and the management of these bodies are selected on a political basis. What looks like self-governance on paper means, in reality, that the interests of Fidesz and the preferences of Orbán can be pursued with even more vigor than in classical state bodies. Additionally, in contrast with the formal state, not even the victory of the opposition could put an end to this practice. Through a vast network of such organizations a veritable parallel state has emerged by 2023.

The creation of these new institutions can be explained with naked power-logic, but they typically have an ideological function too, and this function may easily outlast the designers. Such a potential is clearly visible in the flagship para-public organization, the Mathias Corvinus College. This college was established by a close associate of Orbán, and then it was elevated into the circle of state-sponsored but privately governed institutions, receiving more than €1.3 billion. A €90 million one-time donation in 2020 was financed from a special Coronavirus recovery fund (Lengyel 2022). Using these resources, the College acquired a share of over 30% in Libri, one of the largest commercial publishing networks of the country, therefore gaining influence in the local book market. As of 2022 this nominally private organization is chaired by a state secretary of the Prime Minister's Office (Kalan 2020, Preussen 2022).
Questioning of the autonomous functioning of social sectors is particularly visible in the fields of sports, religious life, and academia. Governmental interference in academic matters happens frequently. Ideologically colored textbooks have been imposed on all public schools. In some cases, ministers arbitrarily changed the national research grant rankings; in other instances they altered exhibitions about historical events that happened more than one thousand years ago. Perhaps even more symbolically, a key minister of the government was parachuted into the position of the lead bishop of the Calvinist church. In the world of paternalist populism even bishops need to be shepherded.

Following the logic of paternalism, economic policy that is otherwise fundamentally right-wing (flat tax, curtailed employees’ rights, central role of foreign capital, reduction of unemployment insurance from nine to three months, etc.) is complemented by various forms of state intervention, including caps on a wide range of prices (especially utilities and food), windfall taxes, large scale public works programs, and the occasional nationalization of private property. A significant part of welfare support is carefully targeted to social allies and it is often discretionary.

The text of the country’s constitution illustrates that both illiberalism and populism need a modifier in the Hungarian case. Pure illiberalism and pure populism imply lack of constraint. As Wagrandl (2021:111) put it, an illiberal constitution should reflect the concept of “unlimited and unchecked” power of the people, because the people cannot be wrong. In contrast, Orbán’s constitution presents a homogenous set of nationalist, Christian-conservative, and authoritarian values, and contains, in fact, multiple checks and balances. None of these counter-majoritarian institutions and mechanisms (the Budget Council, the National Bank, qualified majority for a large number of issue-areas, etc.) are effective if all authorities obey one leader, and therefore Orbán himself is not constrained by them. But, ironically, the legacy of his rule can easily be a multitude of veto points and various filters on the people’s desires, in line with the paternalistic aspect of his ideology.
To conclude this section, the Hungarian case provides plenty of evidence for the centrality of the three ideological constructs introduced in this paper. Together, they seem to provide the basic pillars of the discourse and operation of the regime.

CONCLUSION

Politics is always about power, and politics is always about ideas. The relationship between the two requires close examination, and as time passes the perception of their relative relevance may change. One cannot deny, for example, that the goal of power-accumulation was central to the actions Napoleon or Henry VIII. Their references to values, institutions, loyalties, and social goals were often instrumental. But through the Code Civil or through the Anglican church they left an ideological mark on history. These ideological landmarks rightly overshadow their immediate personal-materialistic achievements whether counted in the number of palaces, thrones, wives, or soldiers. Orbán’s legacy will not be comparable, but it is very important to acknowledge the cultural-ideological layers to which his actions contribute.

It has become almost mandatory among observers to deny the role of ideology in the Orbán regime. For example, an article by Benedek (2021) lists all the steps Fidesz made in the effort to advance the anti-gender agenda: the “child-protection” law that conflates LGBTQI people with pedophiles, the banning of gender studies master degrees, the legislative reform that made same sex marriage unconstitutional, the banning of changes to gender in official documents, the permanent exclusion of same-sex couples from adoption, and the rejection of the Istanbul convention. But then her conclusion, as expressed in the title of the work, is “Opportunism Not Ideology”. She denies the significant role of ideology simply because she assumes that the policies and campaigns listed above are vote-winning moves and that they allow Fidesz to divert attention away from various scandals. Consequently, the explanation is provided by the short-term PR logic of diversion and not by the ideological character of the regime.
Political analysts are often driven by the desire to show that under the surface there is something else (just like conspiracy theorists, by the way). Their motto could be "If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it is probably not a duck." Instead, I propose in this article that if a regime has stated ideological objectives and if it implements them, then ideology is important.

Orbán is one of the leading authorities of illiberal discourse. He heavily invests in knowledge production and implements ideologically justified policies that advance certain world-views and harm others. In order to understand how his regime functions and to arrive at a historically valid evaluation of his significance we need to go beyond cynical and short-term factors.

The ideational logic exemplified in this article is likely to be relevant for analyzing challenges to liberal democracy in general. The recent democratic setbacks are typically explained by social crises (inequality, migration, etc) or by the role of idiosyncratic leaders and power-coalitions. The ideological layers receive less attention because recently emerged neo-authoritarian ideas are not organized into a spectacular, comprehensive structure like, for example, Communism. But they nevertheless motivate citizens and politicians, weaken the resilience of democratic culture and, by amplifying each other’s strength, they undermine the liberal democratic world order. They deserve attention.
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