

A Hungarian Example Within a Global Trend:
How Populists Abandoned Liberal Democracy and Pivoted Toward Illiberal Governance

by

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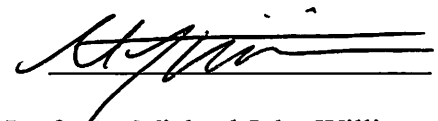
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Fousek', written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract:

Any analysis of Hungarian illiberal democracy should comment on the intended and unintended consequences of liberal democracy and neoliberal economic policies since 1989, with a particular focus on the period following 2008. Scholars should view the liberal regression as a pragmatic reactionary phenomenon to an idealized political and economic project in the post-WWII era. This investigation aims to emphasize the role of popular majoritarian support, which interacts through populism, and its contributions to illiberal development. To understand the impacts of populism and illiberal governance, this thesis interrogates Hungary's recent history.

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I. Introduction: Populist parts within a liberal whole

The world is in economic and political crisis, and as international politics wander into the twenty-first century, certain countries pursue or flirt with more pragmatic and less idealized policies. Even the United States, the polity which constructed the current global system, is experiencing a period of foreign policy reassessment, populist politics, economic nationalism, and illiberal temptation. Inside of the European Union, member states recalibrate their dependency relationships while the current international order retreats. Those who once led the free world, now stand in the shadows of leaders who pursue power politics akin to the twentieth century. The political analysts of our time often ask: Will EU renegades, like Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, dismantle the Union from within and replace the Liberal International Order with an illiberal one?¹ As the century progresses, the prospect seems to be more probable.

The Orbán-led Fidesz government in Budapest deviates from contemporary European political norms. Fidesz, like other revisionist parties, aims to return power from a supranational institution back to its national parliament. The EU mismanaged the 2008 financial crisis and failed to secure its borders as waves of migrants from the Middle East and North Africa approached. The EU response to both emergencies foreshadows a failure to create political and economic consensus concerning austerity, immigration, and more recently, telecommunications infrastructure as Chinese firms invest more heavily in Europe. The EU's political errors weakened its legitimacy, prompting governments in Central and Eastern Europe to reject pooled sovereignty along with the austerity measures and refugee quotas. According to Orbán, the EU is unfit to guide the political discussions held in Budapest. Orbán, in some sense, contributed and

¹ See for example, John Lloyd, "The New Illiberal International," *New Statesman America*, July 18, 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2018/07/new-illiberal-international>.

perhaps even sparked the populist uproar and subsequent illiberal pivot in Central and Eastern Europe. Orbán constructed a template for other populist leaders to use. Just as Cas Mudde argues through his well-respected definition, populism expresses itself as a set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which asserts that politics should express the ‘volonté générale’ or general will of the people.² Orbán creates a similar populist relationship between the Hungarian citizens he represents and EU bureaucrats in Brussels.

The disciples of Central and Eastern Europe’s populist and illiberal revolutions founded their movements in nationalism, in both the ethnic and economic sense. After 2008, Orbán’s war against cherished European values echoed and spread across the continent. The populist government in Hungary, a single case within a global trend, accentuated its individual interests within the EU through a rhetorical emphasis on populist politics. Fidesz consolidated power with an institutional and systemic pivot toward illiberal governance. However, while the Hungary case is unique, it is not alone. Populists across the continent argue on behalf of national interests over the EU’s centralized system of regulation, even at the expense of economic openness, political stability, and peace. The central presupposition is - what is right for Hungarians might not always be suitable for the EU, or vice versa. According to Fidesz, Hungary should secure national interests before addressing regional, continental, or global issues.

To repel populist alternatives, liberal democracy must offer political, social, and economic incentives that outweigh the cost of its ideals. If benefits are scant, states will conceive of new political models founded on proud national histories and tailor them to individual economic needs. The Hungarian case highlights a useful regional example as liberal democratic

² Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, 39(4) (2004): 541-563.

regression occurs on a global scale and societies prioritize domestic wealth and security over multilateral cooperation. Freedom House and V-Dem both claim that liberal democracy is retreating internationally, and the data indicates that fewer countries are free today than thirteen years ago.³ Recent successes of illiberal power tempt revisionist politicians to embrace its pragmatic approach to geopolitics. Illiberal power also seems strongest in the East.

The illiberal achievements of both China and Russia, along with smaller regional powers, provide a political alternative for less wealthy European states which feel constricted by EU regulations and unelected institutions. Revisionist powers, who seek rapid and significant political or economic change, perceive liberal democracy as inflexible. The restrictions of liberal democracy limit autonomy, agility, and efficiency, and when embedded in a supranational union, the limitations are more numerous and complex. When things go relatively well, states accept bureaucracy and regulation, but when economic or political security is less optimistic, they defy checks, balances, and the values of liberal democracy. For Hungary, defiance and both political and economic autonomy, but also ideological flexibility, allow for hybrid trade with both the East and West and a nationalist program. First, such arrangements allow for cheaper and less regulated outcomes. Secondly, in the context of both the 2008 financial and the 2015 migratory crises, nationalism adds an important ideological dimension which projects the threat of existence during flux on an ‘Other,’ and expands the regime’s mandate to social issues. Unfortunately, illiberalism currently seems more pragmatic and flexible than liberal democracy.

³ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: Democracy in Retreat*, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf.
 Freedom House, *Hungary Country Report*, March 11, 2019, Accessed April 15, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/hungary>.
 V-Dem Institute, “Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018,” https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

However, the conflicts between liberal and illiberal positions transcend economic and political questions. Their differences are greatest in ideological disagreements. Failures to prioritize financial and border security led populists like Viktor Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Matteo Salvini further toward nationalist stances on immigration and austerity. Economic nationalism and strict immigration policies morphed traditional conservatism into a new ideological position. In his 2012 book, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek dissects Europe's crisis and its role in ideological fractionalization:

What if Europe should accept the paradox that its democratic openness is based on exclusion: that there is “no freedom for the enemies of freedom,” as Robespierre put it long ago?... Although the ongoing crisis of the European Union appears as a crisis of the economy and the financial system, it is in its fundamental dimension an ideologico-political crisis: the failure of referenda on the EU constitutional treaty a couple of years ago gave a clear signal that voters perceived the EU as a technocratic economic union, lacking any vision capable of mobilizing people. Until the recent protests, the only ideology capable of rousing people was that premised on the need to “defend Europe” against immigration.⁴

Populists blame neoliberal economic policy as well as globalization for failing to provide real material wellbeing for ‘native Europeans.’ Žižek further illustrates the necessary role of economic incentive in ensuring the retention of liberal ideals in his quotation of Hungarian Marxist philosopher, Gáspár Miklós Tamás, who emphasizes that what is good for the neoliberal world order is not necessarily suitable for Hungary:

If the protection of democratic institutions necessarily goes hand in hand with continual impoverishment of the Hungarian people [as the result of the austerity measures imposed by the EU and IMF], we must not be amazed that Hungarian citizens show little enthusiasm for restoring liberal democracy.⁵

This investigation aims to extend the arguments of both Žižek and Tamás as it explains how Hungarian populists leverage material concerns to attack neoliberal shortcomings. Both the

⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, (London: Verso, 2012), 37-38.

⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

illiberal political consolidations and populism function within the prevailing liberal democratic system. When Viktor Orbán cracks down on the liberal media or forces the retirement of opposition judges, his ‘pivot’ to illiberalism goes unpunished unless it crosses significant red lines. He relies on his mandate to make real political change. Therefore, a majority of Hungarians disappointed by neoliberal failures, indirectly endorse populist politics which enforce illiberal political consolidation. In Fidesz controlled Hungary, the rights of the majority supersede the rights of minorities, and the European Union represents, for many Hungarians, an institution which fails to represent Hungarian interests. The entire region, due to a turbulent history and recent crises, is fertile for both populist politics and an illiberal pivot.

Any analysis of Hungarian illiberal democracy should comment on the intended and unintended consequences of liberal democracy and neoliberal economic policies since 1989, with a particular focus on the period following 2008. Scholars should view the liberal regression as a pragmatic reactionary phenomenon to an idealized political and economic project in the post-WWII era. This investigation aims to emphasize the role of popular majoritarian support, which interacts through populism, and its contributions to illiberal development. To understand the impacts of populism and illiberal governance, this thesis interrogates Hungary’s recent history.

Why do voters support populist politics, and how does populism function as a pivot toward illiberal governance? This thesis argues, similarly to Žižek and Tamás, that electorates feel ignored by neoliberal economic policy and sense that national interests are threatened during periods of European economic and political crisis. Career politicians, in cooperation with counterparts in Brussels, do not appear to represent these national interests in their parliaments. Therefore, antagonizing populist rhetoric and systemic illiberal pivots create the appearance of action during a time of inaction. The support populists received as a result of frustration with

inadequate EU responses to crisis allowed politicians to consolidate power through an illiberal pivot for long-term stability. Populism and illiberal democracy already changed the direction of European politics significantly, and results of the upcoming European Parliament elections will certainly reinforce their role. In investigating both populism and illiberal democracy in Hungary, Chapter 1 of this analysis establishes research goals and explains the paper's design. Chapter 2 interrogates the relevant scholarly debates concerning populism and illiberal democracy and relates both concepts to the Hungarian example. Chapter 3 applies the ideas developed in the literature review to the Hungarian economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical dimensions of analysis. Chapter 4 incorporates relevant data sets to reflect on the current state of Hungarian democracy. Chapter 5 comments on the paper's overall findings. Overall, the analysis studies the period from 1989 to the present with particular focus on the financial crisis of 2008.

1. Chapter One: Research goals and design

Since 1989, Hungarian politics slowly readopted certain elements of illiberal governance through the process of leveraging populism to gain legitimacy and consolidate power. Freedom House labels Hungary as only *partly free*, and scholarship can analyze the Hungarian case as a regional representation of a unique geopolitical trend.⁶ Hungary transformed its constitutional frameworks, civil society, and media landscapes to reduce levels of 'liberalness,' and facilitate an overall systemic pivot. While much of the literature concerning populism and illiberalism uses phrases like 'regress,' 'swerve,' 'shift,' or 'devolve,' all of which assign severity or moral value, this examination uses 'pivot' because it acknowledges that geopolitical and commercial trends

⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World: Democracy in Retreat*, 2019, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Feb2019_FH_FITW_2019_Report_ForWeb-compressed.pdf.

are in a period of flux, and therefore, wishes to project neutrality. While Hungary responded to European crisis with populism and illiberal democracy, how Hungary responded is unique to Hungary and dependent on its individual economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical experiences.

1.1 A brief word on key concepts

This study does not maintain that all populists pursue illiberal political change, and the critical concepts associated with the investigation are (1) populism, (2) liberal democracy, (3) and illiberal democracy. While the analysis will define neoliberalism in detail, it will not measure neoliberal economic policy in Hungary because almost all countries pivoting to illiberal governance still function within the prevailing framework of international commerce and receive support from institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Critics do not typically attack illiberal regimes for their economic systems. Instead, opponents criticize their dismantling of institutional checks and balances and treatment of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the media.

Concerning populism, the paper draws upon research from the *PopuList* project which is supported by The Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, *The Guardian*, and the European Consortium for Political Research Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy. The list consists of European populist, far-right, far-left, and Eurosceptic parties that obtained at least 2% of the vote in at least one national parliamentary election since 1998. The *PopuList* study found that 31 European countries - all EU members, in addition to Switzerland, Norway, and Iceland, broke the threshold according to data made available by ParlGov.⁷ The *PopuList*

⁷ M. Rooduijn et. al., *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*, (2019), <http://www.popu-list.org>.

academic collaboration is peer-reviewed by more than 30 academics and provides a valuable measure of the political leanings of Fidesz and its levels of Euroscepticism. The *PopuList* employs Mudde's definition of populism but characterizes populist parties as 'parties that endorse the set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups.'⁸ In applying Rooduijn's definition to public parliamentary data, the *PopuList* measures overall populist success and expansion.⁹ The *PopuList* also presents a brief history of populism in Europe over the decades with a focus on the founding of the Austrian far-right Freedom Party in 1956. In the 1990s, populists gained support in Norway, Switzerland, and Italy. With the turn of the century, and especially after the financial and migratory crises, populist parties thrived in Greece, the UK, and France. However, there are also many other examples, from Germany to Sweden, and Hungary to Italy, where populists won elections and influenced, or formed ruling coalitions, in government.¹⁰

Concerning democracy and liberalism, this paper will question the quality of Hungarian democracy by assessing the five Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) parliamentary election executive summaries.¹¹ OSCE will serve as a measure for analyzing participatory democracy, while Freedom House and V-Dem guidelines will assess the democracy's 'liberalness.'¹² In addition to determining the strength of liberal democracy, the research also determines its degree of 'illiberalness.' The analysis addresses several reports with a particular focus on the 2018 Democracy Report prepared by the V-Dem Institute.¹³ The V-Dem

⁸ Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition*, 39(4) (2004), 541-563.

⁹ M. Rooduijn et. al., *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*, (2019), <http://www.popu-list.org>.

¹⁰ Paul Lewis et. al., "Revealed: One in Four Europeans Vote Populist," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>.

¹¹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary, *Parliamentary Elections*, Warsaw: 27 June 2018.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ V-Dem Institute, "Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018," https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

liberal democracy index contain measures of inclusion of women and social groups, along with an in-depth analysis of the exclusion of others and findings concerning socio-economic inequality. Overall, the report presents tons of valuable datasets. Ironically, reports like those issued by V-Dem, which are in part funded and produced by the European Union, present an antithesis to what Prime Minister Orbán and his party represent. Assessing the report's findings, and reviewing Orbán's views, sets the stage for the populist relationship between the narrow concept of 'will of the people' and a corrupt European elite.

In sum, the literature and data assist in drawing a line from the populist politics of Fidesz to Hungary's illiberal pivot, which due to popular support, remains significantly unchallenged. This analysis focuses on the differences between liberal democracy and illiberal democracy because these terms are most relevant to the phenomena of global trends. However, before proceeding, an interrogation and defining of all relevant terminology within the context of the relevant scholarly literature is necessary. The scholarly literature provides insight in examining the populist politics of Fidesz and their path to illiberal reform and political consolidation, but first, we must identify terms and interpret them in ways helpful to the analysis.

2. Chapter Two: Literature review

The literature review aims to (1) define all terms central to the argument and (2) interpret definitions in ways that thrust the arguments forward. Since this investigation posits that inaction during the financial and migratory crises fomented support for populist politics, and that populists quickly consolidated power through illiberal measures, the analysis adopts or independently creates several points from the scholarly literature. First, liberal ideals and democracy are in the process of decoupling on a global scale. They are also two fundamentally

separate concepts. Second, liberal ideals are implemented in democracies to scale back majoritarian power. Third, neoliberalism and globalization are viewed as a threat to Hungary's sovereignty by a significant portion of the Hungarian electorate. Neoliberalism is also regarded as at fault for a significant portion of the financial pressures, and maybe even migratory stresses, experienced in Hungary. Fourth, while populism is difficult to define, the relevant schools of thought all make valid points which are included in this analysis. Lastly, illiberalism contains both economic and social dimensions which are equally important to the study. The following chapter will address these five points.

2.1 Decoupling liberal democracy

The liberal international order relies on collective agreement and prosperity, which electorates must associate with the systems and ideals of liberal democracy. For voters, if prosperity decreases, so does the credibility of liberal democracy. During periods of economic stress, constituencies sometimes demand a greater majoritarian voice through populist politics to oppose unelected institutional bodies. Why does illiberal power emerge? Majoritarian authority threatens the overall health of liberal democracy as liberal values and the democratic process decouple. The EU is a supranational project weaved together by unelected courts, commissions, and regulatory bodies, among other foci of power. Member states like Hungary view the role of unelected institutions as harmful to individual sovereignty and therefore deviate from liberal values to pursue a populist path of nationalism. Democracy and liberalism exist as two separate concepts, which only by mindful accommodation, can meet in duality.

In other words, democracy not need be liberal. Following the OSCE as well as Freedom House, this study employs a definition of contemporary democracy drawn from the works of

Joseph Schumpeter. Böcskei characterizes Schumpeter's conception of democracy as procedural and rooted in leaders gaining institutional positions through competition for votes.¹⁴ Böcskei's definition also includes Schumpeter's criterion of free competition for political support.¹⁵ Free, in this case, only exemplifies the ability to compete for electoral votes without obstruction, coercion, or restraint. Therefore, democracy is both a method for acquiring political support and the process of granting support to a particular political representative in their campaign for public office. The only value-based requirement in Schumpeter's definition is that democratic competition ought to be *free*, but this very freedom of genuine democratic competition cannot prevent the persecution of minorities or the rejection of oppositional media. Quite the contrary, free democratic competition can presumably result in gas chambers and labor camps. Democracy is a process of measuring the value of individuals within the context of politics, and attributing that value to their representative or political ideas - nothing more, nothing less. In a winner take all majoritarian system, it can be frightening on the losing side.

Yet, in a world of increasing complexities, theorists and political scientists go further in interrogating the definition, and politicians adjust to both cultural and technological change. Bozoki elaborates his definition to include the valuable concept of campaigning, and emphasizes that modern political participation occurs within a media democracy. Politicians must communicate political ideas via media platforms. Political discourse, therefore, requires the simplification of complex ideas for a broad general public understanding.¹⁶ Populists also rely on media tools to convey their Manichean formulations to 'the people.' Illiberal populist politicians

¹⁴ Balázs Böcskei, "From Liberal Democracy to Illiberalism New Authoritarian Regimes, Hungarian Illiberalism and the Crisis of "Real Existing Liberalism," *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 16 (3) (2016): 412.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ András Bozóki, "The Illusion of Inclusion: Configurations Of Populism In Hungary," In *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, edited by Kopeček Michal and Wciślik Piotr, *Central European University Press* (2015): 296.

strengthen control over that same media to suppress opposition and maintain public support. In sum, all politicians simplify political language, but not all politicians use populist rhetoric. As technology allows for more direct relationships between representatives and their constituents, populists gain increased legitimacy through their emphasis on the general will of the people. Democracy does not need to be liberal in any real sense. Democracy is exclusively a process.

2.2 Morally rooted limitations of liberalism

To combat potential majoritarian excesses, liberal ideals soften democracy. While democracy is an electoral process which serves the majority, liberalism, in the context of liberal democracy, is an amalgamation of limitations designed to curb majoritarian excesses against minorities. Minorities are not just ethnic, racial, or religious, and liberal values simultaneously create opportunities for oppositional political ideas and promote human rights. Truly, liberal democracy is an expanded and moralized version of democracy which includes “the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.”¹⁷ Liberal democracy is, therefore, a system of democratic participation combined with morally rooted limitations to protect against majoritarian excesses and what Alexis de Tocqueville labeled the ‘tyranny of the majority.’ Contemporary populists emphasize the role of the majority to reclaim national political and economic sovereignty from unelected institutions like central banks, independent courts, and supranational polities. In Hungary and elsewhere, recent populist victories are significant because they are democratically legitimate and capable of dismantling the restrictions constructed by liberal democracy. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the ‘best government,’ as determined by the North-Atlantic consensus and

¹⁷ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, doi:10.2307/20048274.

supported by the United States and Brussels, was and still mostly is, both liberal and democratic.¹⁸ Liberal democracy divides power into distinct branches, typically the executive, legislative, and the judiciary, in a society in which private individual freedoms and property rights are sacred.¹⁹ The sanctity of private property and material freedom furthers the arguments designed to protect against majoritarian excesses, and allows for the equal allocation of inherent value to all people. Therefore, liberalism protects against the overall harshness of democracy.

When in 2015, Freedom House classified Hungary as a “semi-consolidated democracy,” it was not because elections failed to fulfill the procedural criteria of democracy, but because nationalist and intolerant public sentiments toward refugees and others indicated that the Hungarian majority dismissed the political ideals of minority positions.²⁰ Freedom House’s guidelines state that relegation to a semi-consolidated democracy requires government decisions that “run contrary to international human rights practices and undermine the democratic functioning of society.”²¹ Therefore, Freedom House’s criteria place liberal ideals and human rights ahead of the quality of the democratic process. Fidesz exemplifies this decoupling of democracy and liberalism in its electoral victories and deviations from liberal values. Bugaric also notes that “organizing free and democratic elections is easier than creating constitutional democracy based on the rule of law.”²² Constitutional democracy or liberal democracy, which is designed to protect individual freedoms from majoritarian excesses, requires homegrown development within institutions which are conscious of regional peculiarities and history. Setting

¹⁸ T. Csillag and I. Szele’nyi, “Drifting from Liberal Democracy: Traditionalists/Neoconservative Ideology of Managed Illiberal Democratic Capitalism in Post-Communist Europe,” *Intersections, East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1(1) (2015): 25.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Balázs Böcskei, “From Liberal Democracy to Illiberalism New Authoritarian Regimes, Hungarian Illiberalism and the Crisis of “Real Existing Liberalism,” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 16 (3) (2016): 412.

²¹ Ibid., 413.

²² B. Bugaric, “The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 175, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

up free and fair democratic elections is simple in comparison, and can occur even in the most illiberal of societies. Liberal democracy is a political system in which majoritarian democracy prevails while a constitutional framework ensures the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of fundamental liberties such as speech, assembly, religion, and property. Liberal democracy, since the 1970s, has been substantially reshaped by neoliberal economic policies. Often, the credibility of liberal ideals hinge on the successes of neoliberal economic policies. Recently, the failure of neoliberal economic policies pushed the electorate in Hungary to support populism and facilitate a pivot toward illiberal governance.

2.3 Neoliberalism: Contributions to populism and illiberal governance

The neoliberal failures of recent decades contributed to the rise of populism and the subsequent pivot toward illiberalism in Hungary and surrounding countries. Neoliberalism refers to the economic policies associated with the late twentieth century inclusions of Latin American and post-communist or post-socialist states in the global capitalist system. Böcskei describes neoliberal policies as rooted in technocracy and rationalization rather than the revitalization of the welfare state, and the abandonment of the welfare state alongside calls for refugee quotas, pushed the majority in Hungary toward less liberal positions.²³ In his critique of the 1989 democratic transition, Bugarcic blames the “one-size-fits-all ideology of the Washington Consensus which implemented (1) free democratic elections, (2) the constitutional rule of law to protect minorities from popular majoritarian excesses, and (3) neoliberal economic policy. The Washington Consensus placed these reforms on Central and Eastern European countries without

²³ Balázs Böcskei, "From Liberal Democracy to Illiberalism New Authoritarian Regimes, Hungarian Illiberalism and the Crisis of "Real Existing Liberalism," *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 16 (3) (2016): 421.

considering their historical, institutional, and cultural complexities and the lack thereof strong rule of law traditions in the centuries prior.²⁴ However, how did Hungarian populists push through their illiberal agenda so convincingly – with clever populist ideals, strategy, and discourse. The following section will completely explain populism from the perspective of its dominant schools of thought.

2.4 The three schools of thought on ‘populism’

Three schools of thought dominate the discussion concerning populism’s current definition: ideological or ideational, politically strategic, and the discursive.²⁵ Neoliberal economic failures contributed to the recent rise in global “populism,” and populism facilitated the decoupling of democracy and liberalism. Therefore, populism is a potential path to securing political capital for the consolidation of power. Like anything, it can be operationalized for both good and evil and fluctuates between the authentic and inauthentic. Kôrôsényi and Patkós identify a consensus in the populist literature of all three schools and argue that populism contains the following elements (1) an assumption of a central antagonistic relationship between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite,’ (2) an attempt to give power back to the people and restore popular sovereignty, and (3) a perception of the people as a homogeneous unity.²⁶ For example, Orbán emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between Christian Hungarians and the technocratic bureaucrats of the European Union who wish to destroy the Hungarian identity. Second, Orbán pledges to fight the EU, waves of exploitative migrants, greedy domestic traitors, and capitalist

²⁴ B. Bugaric, "The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 178, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

²⁵ These are outlined in-depth in The Oxford Handbook of Populism published in 2017.

²⁶ András Kôrôsényi and Veronika Patkós, "Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán)," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015): 318.

financiers to liberate Hungary from the grip of imposed globalization and economic and political colonization. Lastly, Orbán cherishes the Hungarian people, a single living unit, which value traditions, language, religion, and identity in a world attempting to dismantle it.

The expression of populism is almost necessarily configured to fit the local culture and history, and perhaps, this is why it is currently successful in combating liberal globalization and modernity. There is often comfort in the past, and populists know that. However, how and why do politicians adopt populist platforms? The three schools of thought: the ideological or ideational, politically strategic, and discursive school all present relevant explanations.

Cas Mudde, the leading scholar of the ideological school, defines populism as a division between ‘the pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite.’ Mudde argues, through his emphasis on the general will of ‘the people,’ that populism is itself a thin ideology which resides in a host ideology. Therefore, populism exists within socialism, fascism, or liberalism, because populism, according to Mudde, is too weak to exist alone and needs ideological reinforcement to maintain legitimacy.²⁷ Mudde’s definition also labels ‘the people’ and the elite as morally opposed. His arguments rely on four core concepts: ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will.²⁸ Unlike socialism or nationalism, which construct opposition with class or national identity, populism distances ‘the people’ and the elite through moral difference. In populism, the people and their interests are virtuous, while elites covet what is not theirs and are thus immoral.²⁹ The people identify needs and interest through common sense, while elites pursue nefarious special interest at the expense of society as a whole. Mudde, inspired by Schumpeter, argues that populism and elitism both damage liberal democracy and compromise:

²⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristobel Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012.)

²⁸ Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*: Oxford University Press, (2017), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198803560-e-1>.

²⁹ Ibid.

After all, compromise can only lead to the corruption of the pure. But in contrast to populism, elitism considers the elite to be pure and virtuous, and the people to be impure and corrupt. Hence, much elitism is anti-democratic, while democratic elitists only want a minimal role for the people in the political system (e.g. Schumpeter, 1976).³⁰

Valuable distinctions exist between left-wing and right-wing populism. However, this analysis focuses on the forms of populism which result in illiberal democracy. Given recent developments inside of the EU, most pivots toward illiberal governance occur under right-wing populists. However, both right-wing and left-wing populists are critical of neoliberal economic policies which they claim do not secure prosperity for ‘the people.’ For left-wing populists, the concept of ‘the people’ is expansive and retains minority minded limitations on majority rule, while right-wing populists employ a narrower ethnic or national definition for ‘the people.’ Mudde cites political scientist Paul Taggart, who claims that populism often “requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary of people.” Taggart’s point relates to the solutions provided by populist politicians in response to the financial and migratory crises. The populists became extraordinary in their solutions to extremely complex problems as common Europeans looked for assistance during economic and social catastrophe. Mudde makes similar points in reference to the use of referenda. Mudde, in 2004, noted that populists frequently use referenda as an instrument to overcome the will of elites. For example, when immigration became a critical political issue in Hungary, Fidesz pushed for an immediate referendum to ask the people directly how they felt about the EU imposed quotas. In 2016, 98.36% of Hungarians voted against with 44.04% turnout. Through the referendum, Orbán claimed he prevented a loss of Hungarian identity to external forces that attempted to impose global governance and ruin Hungary’s national sovereignty. Archetypical stories draw people in, and Orbán often provides

³⁰ Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*: Oxford University Press, (2017), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198803560-e-1>.

untrue explanations for the continent's genuine crises.³¹ The ideological school, as presented by Mudde, explains how populists, especially those devout to nationalism, know how to turn a crisis into palatable ideological formulations for the public.

However, Weyland, a member of the school of political strategy, emphasizes that ideational notions highlight the direct-democratic façade but overlook the essence of populism, which revolves around top-down leadership. The school of political strategy explains why a politician would pursue populist politics in the first place, and defines populism as a method for acquiring power. However, the political strategy school also emphasizes the unmediated nature of the political relationship between the populist and his or her followers. This relationship is equally crucial given technology that allows a politician to communicate with his or base directly through the Internet or social media platform. Therefore, as a strategy, populism is grounded in personalistic leadership rooted in direct, unmediated, and un-institutionalized support from masses of unorganized followers. The strategy school suggests that populists are ideologically flexible and inherently opportunistic. For example, Orbán is ideologically inconsistent on the left and right political spectrum. Fidesz is conservative on social issues but considerably statist and liberal with the economy. The willingness to adapt and form hybrid political platforms suggests that populists are keen on maintaining power by catering to the complex needs of their societies. Furthermore, in constructing unique programs, populists can please electorates and simultaneously consolidate power via an illiberal pivot towards consolidation.

The political strategy school also analyzes the processes by which populists mobilize voters through coalition building across convenient groupings of 'the people.'³² Through

³¹ The BBC, "Hungary PM Claims EU Migrant Quota Referendum Victory," *BBC*, October 3, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37528325>.

³² Kurt Weyland, "Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press, (2017), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198803560-e-2>.

extensive coalition building, the populist becomes the voice box for ‘the people.’ While top-down conceptualizations disregard the importance of the people’s general will and dismiss the ‘implicit dance’ between the people and the populist, populism is an effective tool for pivoting toward illiberal governance. The political strategy school, with its focus on leadership, suggests that the consolidation of power in the executive is inevitable.³³

While the ideational school focuses on relationships and the political strategy school emphasizes motives and outcomes, the discursive school focuses on populist speech and its effects. Laclau, a primary figure of the discursive school, labels populism “the simple opposite of political forms dignified with the status of a full rationality.” He defines populism as political expression designed to manipulate uninformed masses with ‘common sense’ arguments rather than rational logic.³⁴ Laclau attributes populism’s effectiveness to groupthink and mob mentality caused by populist discourse which is ultimately the “structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice.” The discursive school, like the school of political strategy, is relevant in assessing the technological phenomena of social media because discursive totality includes any form of populist communication with ‘the people.’ For followers of discourse analysis, the relationships between entities of communications are the primary unit of analysis.³⁵ Concepts like ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ are ‘empty signifiers,’ which represent societal realities through simplified representations. For example, the complexities of the EU migrant crisis are diluted into a simple triadic populist relationship – corrupt elitist globalists intentionally flood Europe with Middle Eastern and North African migrants to destroy the sovereignty and identity of the pure Hungarian people. The discursive school is relatable to the modern media landscape and is

³³ Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford University Press, (2017), <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780198803560-e-2>.

³⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Popular Reason*, (2005).

³⁵ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (2001).

effective in providing explanations for contemporary populist rhetoric and articulation. In the era of technocratic political convergence when the left and right are indistinguishable, there is something fundamentally endearing to the ‘common citizen’ when they watch political representatives speak and behave like plebeians.

All three school of populism are relevant to the analysis of Hungary as a case study. First, Mudde’s ideological approach emphasizes the role of morality and the proximity between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ which sits within an antagonizing relationship. In the case of Hungary, the antagonizing relationship is rooted in a complex series of factors. European bureaucrats do not just seek to exploit Hungary economically or politically; they seek to destroy its authenticity and autonomy because they wish to eradicate civilizational differences. Here we can imagine Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, where more traditional civilizational identities divide the world.³⁶ On Huntington’s map, Hungary sits on the fault line between Western and Orthodox Europe, and a short way across the Balkans from the Islamic world. Since Huntington’s writing, the Orthodox world has come to represent the illiberal aspects of Old Europe, a degree of conservatism which still heavily relies on Christianity, familial values, and tradition. The negative expressions of these values typically manifest in xenophobia and homophobia, and Hungary, given its location, mixes the two civilizational identities. In the *Clash of Civilizations* context, Mudde’s populism functions within Christian conservatism because it requires ideological reinforcement. Hungarian populism represents the last fortress of European conservatism in the Western world. Orbán and Fidesz are moral because they protect what is rightfully theirs and do not covet what does not belong to them. The rule is - Hungary belongs to

³⁶Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

Hungarians, just as Afghanistan belongs to Afghanis and Libya to Libyans. The ideological school relies on a relationship between people who respect this law and elites who do not.

However, the political strategy and discursive schools of thought are less ambiguous than the ideological. Weyland provides an explanation of populist motives – populist politicians utilize enticing rhetoric to mobilize the uninformed masses for an inevitable turn toward top-down leadership. Once again, the school of political strategy helps to examine the Hungarian case study because presents populism as a potential avenue toward illiberal power consolidation.

Concerning the discursive school, Laclau, emphasizes the role of populist articulation that is crucial in understanding speeches, media representations, and physical presentation of populist leadership. The concept of ‘empty signifiers’ is helpful in identifying instances when populists intentionally simplify complex issues into slogans – think ‘build the wall.’ Therefore, all three schools contain valuable insights and assist in examining the Hungarian case and the rise of Fidesz, which is certainly threatening the overall legitimacy of the European Union. Often, populists identify crisis preemptively, and adjust platforms to anticipate shifts in public sentiment to ‘give the people what they want.’ This analysis will outline a similar progression in Hungary over the last few decades.

2.5 What is illiberal about illiberal democracy?

The revival of conservative populism in Europe, as the literature will illustrate, is a reaction to fundamental inaction on the part of liberal democracy. Populists look back into history for a return to some better time where national sovereignty overshadowed multilateral cooperation and supranational institutions. The role of unelected institutional bodies causes protesters to feel that though they have a vote, they lack a voice capable of inducing real political

change. But if the current global order is broken, what do the populists give constituents in return? The preceding sections briefly described the trends of Hungary, and outlined the calls for a return to the past - to God, country, and tradition. For supporters of global liberal democratic cooperation, the primary concern is that concentrating identity to the nation-state limits focus to a single country and places emphasis on domestic economic development rather than a focus on global development. While the nation-state categorization is itself a liberal formulation, a return to nationalism in the current system jeopardizes both globalization and neoliberalist economic policies due to the temptation to politically rely on a 'Hungary First!' platform. How can Hungarians assist starving children in Africa if they are too concerned with the opportunities of farmers in Hungary's countryside, or worried about the voting status of ethnic Hungarians in neighboring Romania? The answer is they cannot. The fundamental dilemma arises from the fact that as long as one state is more important than the next, constituents will focus on domestic issues before looking outward for people to help. Only when a substantial portion of the electorate feels that their country is well off enough will they start considering the external. That is why the disappointments associated with the outcomes of the neoliberal experiment are so devastating. Most constituencies in Europe believed, if Europe, along with its liberal and globalist values provides enough economic incentive, states will sacrifice some sovereignty in return for the greater good of Europe. Unfortunately, the EU did not provide enough material security to maintain such a relationship of give and take. Member states began to look inward.

However, why is the resurgence of conservatism strongest in Central and Eastern Europe where nations experienced significant destruction and humiliation under Nazi occupations and Soviet control? Geography is certainly relevant, but Irina Grudzinska-Gross attributes blame to (1) the post-1989 transition tendency to revert back to old party structures in an effort and (2) the

“decoupling of democracy and prosperity” that occurred after the economic crisis of 2008.³⁷

These two realities pushed Central and Eastern European states toward ethnic and economic nationalism. In many ways, states like Hungary simultaneously returned to conservative social policies held during the interwar period and the centralized decision-making style of communist Hungary. Grudzinska-Gross’ analysis further illuminates how populism in Central and Eastern Europe can easily morph into illiberalism which (1) digs into history for a common majoritarian past (in this case the interwar period) and (2) abandons multilateral economic policy when it does not fulfill the expectations of a national majority.³⁸ As Grudzinska-Gross argues, the desire to “Return to Europe” suggested that states formerly under Soviet control dive into the histories of the pre-war period and skip over the “humiliating experiences of” 1945-1989. To add to conservative success, right-wing political parties labeled the socialists as successors to the Soviet occupiers, effectively delegitimizing the left. Grudzinska-Gross also solidifies the proclivity for conservative appeal through her quoting of Gabor Demszky, the former dissident and mayor of post-1989 Budapest, who mentioned “the fall of the Communist dictatorship in 1989 compromised the left wing intellectually and morally.”³⁹ Furthermore, during the 1989 negotiations and transition, the left swiftly adopted neoliberal policies which later failed to benefit majority electorates and led to the dismissal of the EU as a sensible project. While suspicion of neoliberalism existed early on, the recent financial crisis buried its credibility.

However, while neoliberal failures played a significant role, the lack of real institutional history and liberal tradition also contributed to the populist rise and its illiberal consolidation. Bugaric cites Jan-Werner Müller in arguing that illiberal democracy emerged in Central and

³⁷ Irina Grudzinska-Gross, Irina, “The Backsliding,” *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28(4) (2014):664.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 665.

Eastern Europe because populists used electoral success to dismantle already weak institutional checks and balances.⁴⁰ Therefore, perhaps the neoliberal failures sparked a successful populist uproar which then tore down underdeveloped constitutional institutions and reinstated top-down decision-making. In a sense, populism is a sort of pandering to the economic desires and internal prejudices of the majority. The intense promotion of national pride and fanning of preexisting animosities creates a visceral and almost biological response to injustice. Populist rhetoric is also more personal and entertaining than the stale political plans of contemporary technocrats.

Therefore, the progression from populism to illiberal democracy is a voluntary and conscious pivot of preference. Populists, whether genuinely or opportunistically, engage with majority needs and interests and consolidate their power after achieving real democratic victory. But how? Bustikova, Lenka, and Guasti cite journalist Eszter Zalan in her providing of a reasonable ‘playbook’ for the shift from liberal to illiberal democracy. It includes the following steps: prevail in elections through a campaign which promises glory or revitalization of society, dismantle the judiciary and courts, modify the constitution, exert influence and control over state media, eliminate the power of foreign investors, discredit opposition along with civil society, and alter electoral rules to preserve and guarantee future political success.⁴¹ It seems, populism is the genuine struggle to achieve popularity through the general will of the people, while illiberalism is the reward of staying in power forever. However, the Zalan-developed playbook does not explicitly mention any of the striking characteristics of populism, except perhaps the ‘glory or revitalization’ of society, but the concept of revitalization suggests society formerly experienced decay at the hands of someone or something. In this case, the neoliberal political and economic

⁴⁰ B. Bugaric, "The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 176, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

⁴¹ Bustikova, Guasti, and Lenka, "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* 5 (4) (2017): 170, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>.

policies prescribed by the IMF, World Bank, and EU are to blame. In her work, Grudzinska-Gross illustrates majoritarian shifts in thinking during economic strain, and it is evident that when the economic benefits of the European Union ceased to outweigh the urge to revert to pre-war nationalist identities, majoritarian politics became more intellectually profitable and thus overshadowed the values of liberal democracy. Populism, with the intention of shifting to illiberalism, seems to be an implicit dance between the populist and the people. The populist politicians and his or her followers are in silent agreement. The populist is aware of general grievances, animosities, resentment, frustration, and hate emanating from a ‘silent majority.’

Populists and their constituents perceive the financial and refugee crises in fundamentally different ways. In the case of Hungary, the transition of 1989 and subsequently the economic crisis of 2008 destroyed the notion of prosperity traditionally associated with western models and the European Union. The refugee crisis, however, though exaggerated by politicians to further their legitimacy and preserve power, also destroyed the notion of security and competence of the EU. While state media skewed public opinion, the crisis did illustrate to many Hungarians that the EU wished to impose refugee quotas on Hungary and surrounding countries. In response, populists rejected calls for pluralistic society typically championed by liberal democracy.

Earlier, this analysis emphasized the role of Hungary as a deviation, and Orbán as a first mover in the areas of European populism and illiberal democracy. Rupnik similarly argues that Viktor Orban’s successes in Hungary in 2010 are “the harbinger of all this,” and that the regional departure from the rule of law and the utilization of nationalism as a source of political legitimacy divides the European Union on an East-West split with austerity and migration policy at the focus.⁴² Rupnik, in agreement with this investigation’s findings, also declares that the EU

⁴² Jacques Rupnik, "Surging Illiberalism in the East," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (4): 77-87 (2016), <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/docview/1843039581?accountid=12768>.

inadvertently contributed to the crisis through its economic policies after the Eurozone dilemma, appearing to act as a tool of market globalization. Also, the Union's impotence in securing external borders, resulted in a rise in nationalist and populist rhetoric in several European states. However inconceivable, constituents began to view populist reactions to the crisis as virtuous rather than just as reactions, solely because of the EU's inability to act at all. The less the EU addressed the problems with real action, the more constituents believed it played a malicious role in ruining their ideas of 'Europe.' Therefore, populists, through their action in the face of complete inaction, became defenders and Orbán became their leader. The same process occurred concerning the financial crisis. Orbán, after his conservative transition, fundamentally rejected the 1989 mantras of 'well-functioning market democracies.' In his infamous speech on illiberal democracy, Orbán stressed an economic model removed from Western political ideals.⁴³

Orbán gave his 'illiberal democracy' speech on July 24, 2014 in the Romanian town of Băile Tușnad to members of the Hungarian diaspora. First, he thanked Hungarians in Romania for their support in propelling Fidesz to a two-thirds supermajority. Second, he designated the 2008 financial crisis as a moment that changed global economic and political power and confirmed a decline in American soft power. Further discrediting US-led modernization, Orbán described liberal values as corrupted by sex and violence.

In response to this perceived liberal crisis, Orbán offered a solution. He praised China, India, Russia, Singapore, and Turkey as viable alternatives to the decaying Western European dogmas of global economic and political interaction. He emphasized that liberal values prevented Hungary from remaining in the great world-race of economic development, and presented democracy and liberal values as two exclusive ideas. However, why did Orbán

⁴³ Jacques Rupnik, "Surging Illiberalism in the East," *Journal of Democracy* 27 (4): 77-87 (2016), <http://proxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu/docview/1843039581?accountid=12768>.

abandon liberal values? He claimed, in his speech, that liberal democracy failed Hungary in key ways. First, liberal democracy abandoned and perhaps even denied the existence of national interests altogether. Second, liberal democracy failed to protect public wealth. Third, the liberal state did not protect Hungary from indebtedness to foreign institutions. Fourth, because of indebtedness, liberal values did not defend Hungarian families from bonded labor. In response to these liberal failures, Orbán declared an ambition to create an illiberal nation state within the EU. In closing, Prime Minister Orbán urged the Hungarians of the Carpathian Basin and throughout the world, to accompany him on his illiberal journey of restructuring the Hungarian nation-state to serve its national interests and Hungarian majority.

No speech better illustrates the economic motivations for Orbán's political development. Orbán presented fluid and flexible economic policies and indicated that his social views are entrenched in traditionalism, almost as if he does not wish to do the work of developing positions at all. He once said, "Hungary is a serious country. It is based on traditional values. Hungary is a tolerant nation. Tolerance, however, does not mean that we would apply the same rules for people whose lifestyle is different from our own. We differentiate between them and us."⁴⁴ As a political deviation from the European status quo, Fidesz pivoted Hungary toward (1) executive aggrandizement, (2) contested sovereignty that increases polarization, and (3) dominant party winning two consecutive elections, which Bustikova, Lenka, and Guasti outline as qualifications for illiberalism.⁴⁵ Hungary is the only nation in the EU which fulfills all three requirements.

Support for populist politicians occurs on pace with a global decline in trust in institutions within democracies. This goes hand in hand with issues of indistinguishability

⁴⁴ Bustikova, Guasti, and Lenka, "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* 5 (4) (2017): 170, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.17645/pag.v5i4.1156>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

between political parties and the sense of overall political helplessness and lack of true debate. In the era of 2008 global financial crisis, the Eurozone debt crisis, and significant migration flows, centrist political parties continue to struggle in the midst of these challenges. A 2019 Brookings Institution report frames the rise of illiberal states in the EU and NATO in the context of an era of great power competition between the liberal west and the already illiberal governments of China and Russia.⁴⁶ Fringe parties, through populist rhetoric, prioritize topics of basic material security that are most important to average people. Politicians use populist rhetoric to mobilize public support through democratic elections, and once in government, reorganize institutions to consolidate control and claim popular mandate. In the EU and Hungary, moves toward illiberalism are justified in the name of protecting sovereignty from encroaching immigrants or Brussels bureaucrats. Therefore, illiberal democracy is a political system which prioritizes majoritarian interests. This unchained version of democracy either homogenizes minority political views or dismisses their concerns altogether. Within populist politics, minority interests are painted as nefarious to polarize society and elevate the apparent will of the majority. The Hungarian example is one in which Orbán began his pivot in economic terms and then subsequently used social strains caused by the migrant crisis to further his mandate. During periods of crisis, populists move swiftly to consolidate power through illiberal measures. The following sections will reassess the Hungarian example through the economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical lenses in the context of the relevant scholarly debates. As the investigation argues, the credibility of both the liberal international order and the EU are in crisis and Hungary serves as a relevant case study within the context of a global trend.

⁴⁶ Foreign Policy at Brookings, "The Anatomy of Illiberal States: Assessing and Responding to Democratic Decline in Turkey and Central Europe," February 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/illiberal-states-web.pdf>.

3. Chapter Three: Economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical dimensions

In attempting to explain political phenomena, scholars must understand when to apply concepts on a large scale and when to pinpoint problems to specific causes. The analysis of populism in Hungary and its common proclivity to pursue a right-wing illiberal pivot requires a dual approach which first, as done above, presents the relevant global and regional scholarly debates and then discusses the relevant peculiarities of the given case in their very context. The following sections seek to provide a detailed explanation for the variables that pushed Hungary toward its current fate and how a similar outcome can occur in similar places under similar circumstances. In addition, Hungary's story is one worth reading for its unique and isolated eccentricities on a continent with no shortage of dangerous political ideologies. While hypotheses concerning economic inequality and reactionary cultural backlash phenomena exist, this investigation addresses Hungary from multiple dimensions of analysis to illustrate the complexities which certainly occur in all cases of a populist induced illiberal pivot

A summary of the dimensions of analysis and their potential conclusions are as follows: first, one can attribute the rise of illiberal democracy in Hungary to exclusively to economic origins. Second, illiberal democracy can derive from the influence of geopolitical trends and the benefits Hungary and other states identify in such trends. Third, Hungarian illiberal governance can exist as a product of Hungarian national politics, the transformation of its institutions due to the electoral process, or the specific behavior of its governing elites toward the European Union. Lastly, the development of both populism and illiberalism in Hungary could have resulted from the historical and cultural underpinnings of the Hungarian people. All of these dimensions of analysis play crucial roles in developing our understanding of populism and illiberal governance within the more global trend. Their synthesis involves complex and multifaceted relationships,

and therefore, requires a detailed explanation of how Prime Minister Viktor Orbán developed Fidesz and created an illiberal populist state in the heart of the European Union.

3.1 Economic and material realities

The 1989 transition to a well-functioning market economy required a painful and expensive social transformation. The shortsighted policies of the Washington Consensus included economic liberalization, privatization of state industries, fiscal austerity measures, and reductions in government spending to increase the role of the private sector in economic life, and was “initially designed in the 1980s and 1990s by the IMF, the World Bank and the US Treasury to respond to the economic crisis in Latin America.”⁴⁷ The West later extended the same approach to the post-communist and post-socialist societies in Central and Eastern Europe. In transitioning societies, legislation converted public property into private wealth, and mechanisms within the free-market economy, specifically, bankruptcy laws, central banks, labor, and capital. These mechanisms facilitated and incentivized economic processes. However, due to a desire to transition quickly, the foundations for these economic practices were not sufficiently established in Central and Eastern Europe before 1989, or even really after. The failures of the neoliberal implementation, in addition to inadequate responses to the economic crisis of 2008, led electorates to abandon liberal democracy for a nationalist and populist agenda. The ethnic and economic nationalism of political parties like Fidesz resonated with majorities who felt abandoned by neoliberal globalization and the unelected bureaucratic EU institutions.

⁴⁷ B. Bugaric, "The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 178, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

In Hungary, poverty, social inequalities, and unemployment increased, and these conditions pushed Hungarians to seek employment abroad. It is possible that the transition sowed the first seeds of contemporary populism when progress did not live up to the expectations shared by a majority of the Hungarian public.⁴⁸ Before joining the EU, much of the ‘silent majority’ also believed that the EU represented an economic project which would benefit the national economy in exchange for limited sovereignty.⁴⁹ These assumptions are problematic in two ways. First, the EU should not have marketed itself to the Central and Eastern European countries as a quick and easy economic road out of development. As Grudzinska-Gross states, the decoupling of liberal democracy and prosperity occurred soon after expectations in the early 1990s, and later after 2008, plummeted and populations reprioritized national sovereignty in looking back to pre-war identities.⁵⁰ Second, the populations themselves did not commit to the transformative growing pains of democratization. While the government developed institutions, societal changes did not and could not take place in such a short period. That is why country can establish constitutional courts or free and fair elections, but corruption still runs rampant.

Aside from the initial dissatisfaction of the 1989 transition, demand for additional welfare measures came during the period between 2000 and 2001. The austerity-focused Bokros package of 1995, and the successes of political consolidation and economic development led Orbán, and later, the social democrat Péter Medgyessy, to push for welfare reform. By the late 2000s, Hungary became the largest welfare spender relative to GDP among the newly admitted EU states and was unprepared for the global financial crisis of 2008. The IMF issued new loans which undermined the notion of market economies and liberal democracy, and many inside

⁴⁸ Bustikova, Guasti, and Lenka, "The Illiberal Turn or Swerve in Central Europe?" *Politics and Governance* 5 (4) (2017), doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.17645/pag.v5i4.115>

⁴⁹ Irina Grudzinska-Gross, Irina, "The Backsliding," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28(4) (2014).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Hungary simply wanted increased state interventionism on behalf of economic nationalism to mitigate the associated financial issues.⁵¹ To impress the electorate with action during economic hard times, Orbán implemented the statist and China and Russia-inspired ‘Eastern Winds’ policy.⁵² In further opposition to neoliberalism, Prime Minister Orbán declared his suspicion of business elites and large capital, and since 2010, Orbán pushed for state intervention and ownership of the energy, telecommunications, and public utilities sectors.⁵³ The Fidesz government also sponsored a ‘workfare state’ and promoted full employment over welfare.⁵⁴ Other measures were implemented to restructure socio-economic redistribution in the long term, and for example, the controversial “crisis tax on banking was designed to both balance the budget and limit foreign ownership of the banking sector.”⁵⁵ Therefore, almost all Orbán’s economic policies are statist by nature. This allows for the presentation of autonomy to the electorate, a degree of actual economic autonomy from the European Union, an indication to other illiberal powers in the East that Orbán is willing to challenge the prevailing norms in Europe, and that Orbán is willing to use his economic nationalism to threaten European consensus and spread his illiberalism to neighboring states. In addition, he sets a crucial precedent for future acts of economic nationalism within the European Union.

⁵¹ András Bozóki, "The Illusion of Inclusion: Configurations Of Populism In Hungary," In *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, edited by Kopeček Michal and Wciślik Piotr, *Central European University Press* (2015): 290.

⁵² B. Bugaric, "The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 181, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

⁵³ András Kőrösnéyi and Veronika Patkós, "Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán)," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

3.2 Geopolitical trends

In 1989, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe desired political democracy, a functioning market economy, a national identity, and the ultimate honor of joining the European community. However, as mentioned previously, these desires were founded on the overarching wish for economic prosperity for the average citizen. Hungarians wanted living standards which mirrored that of Austrians.⁵⁶ In addition to the desire for wealth, a yearning for a national identity existed. These countries lived like unsovereign people under Soviet dominance for decades and wished to live as citizens of their respective countries first and then as members of the European family.⁵⁷ The longing for economic prosperity with an elevated national identity followed the constituents of Hungary until their admission into the European Union in 2004. However, after experiencing disappointing results, the Orbán regime pursued policies which prioritized national sovereignty within the institutional framework of the EU and within the even greater structures of the globalized world economy.

While Hungary benefited from EU funds to the tune of 23 billion euros between 2007 and 2013, Orbán's anti-EU aspirations to create an illiberal democracy are attractive to other politicians in the bloc, mainly due to anxieties concerning the migrant crisis. An illiberal Hungary is setting the tone for other member states on topics concerning natural resources and foreign investment, and its mixed foreign policy and conservative positions on social issues are changing both regional and geopolitics significantly. Since 2015 and during periods of EU uncertainty, Orbán came to represent a rightwing trailblazer for other leaders in East-Central Europe. The election victory of Jarosław Kaczyński of the right-wing populist Law and Justice

⁵⁶ András Bozóki, "The Illusion of Inclusion: Configurations Of Populism In Hungary," In *Thinking Through Transition: Liberal Democracy, Authoritarian Pasts, and Intellectual History in East Central Europe After 1989*, edited by Kopeček Michal and Wciślik Piotr, *Central European University Press* (2015): 300.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

Party in Poland indicated another victory for Orbán, and political scientists across Europe agree that his “reading of the refugee crisis” caught the attention of the post-communist states of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary.⁵⁸ “It is reasonable to [also] conclude that the majority of Romanians and Croatians think similarly.” Concerning the refugee crisis, the Bulgarians too, “feel they are represented by him.”⁵⁹

However, if Orbán’s positions are popular and legitimate, why is the EU aggressive in their efforts to stomp out the budding of ‘illiberal democracy?’ Particularly because of the aforementioned judicial changes, but also media laws and the government’s tight control of the press. Viviane Reding, the Vice President of the European Commission for Justice, Basic Values, and Citizenship from 2010 – 2014, battled Orbán during her tenure. She is also a member of the European People’s Party (EPP), the strongest faction in the European Parliament.⁶⁰ Reding consistently forced Orbán to retreat on particular financial, judicial, and media policies. Nonetheless, Fidez pushed through judiciary adjustments and changes to state media which strengthened Orbán’s grasp on power. In addition to the purchasing of media groups by Fidesz-loyal financiers, liberal media outlets are under attack. Most notably, *Népszabadság*, an influential left-leaning independent daily, which shut down in 2016, due to government pressure.⁶¹ The communist legacy did not reduce nationalism in the post-Eastern Bloc countries, and since 1989, it likely augmented it. The descendants of communist and socialist parties also fell prey to poor political calculations that embraced neoliberal economic policies and compassionate positions toward migrants. According to Judis, “the decline of European leftism after the Soviet Union’s collapse allowed for the opening, particularly for right-

⁵⁸ The following analysis relies on large parts of Lendvai’s historical interpretations. However, most of the chapter simply utilizes the statistics and facts presented in his two books.

⁵⁹ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 199.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 161.

wing populism, [and] was enlarged by an additional factor – the rapid growth of a non-European immigrant population at the same time job opportunities were no longer plentiful.”⁶²

Unfortunately, the influx of a non-European labor force to Europe frightened the constituencies of both Hungary, and the surrounding region, leading the middle-class electorate to the right on topics such as immigration and austerity. As emphasized by Lendvai, the Hungarian Socialist Party became “a disgusting snake pit of old Communists and left-wing careerists posing as Social Democrats.”⁶³ Hungarians are strangely nostalgic of the Kádár regime, not for ideological reasons, but because most remember his rule as stable. Orbán’s successes indicate that a significant portion of the electorate supports his consolidation of power, perhaps for reasons of stability.⁶⁴ In 2009, only 56% of those questioned considered the multi-party system desirable and only 46% of respondents believed that the transition to democracy after 1989 was the ‘correct course.’⁶⁵ Orbán, or no Orbán, these statistics question the legitimacy of Western liberal democratic and economic systems, especially in the post-communist states of East-Central Europe. Orbán furthered this geopolitical trend.

Since 2017, Orbán’s central offensive against the EU contains several clear-cut grievances. He argues that the EU allegedly plans to impose more utility prices, taxes, and illegal immigrants on Hungary.⁶⁶ In addition, Orbán created an environment which shut down the Central European University founded by George Soros, and limited the role of NGOs within the country.⁶⁷ Orbán blamed Soros for most of Europe’s current issues. He claimed, “it is absurd that a financial speculator decides the way ahead of Brussels. The European leaders are kowtowing to

⁶² John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, (Columbia Global Reports, 2017), 95.

⁶³ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 74.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Ibid., 214.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

György Soros, who can say what Europe should do.”⁶⁸ In a way, Soros serves as an ‘empty signifier’ for all the negative outcomes associated with global capitalist irresponsibility and greed. A poll conducted in June 2017 by the independent Republikon Institute in Budapest revealed that 28% of Hungarians believe Soros has ‘considerable influence’ over Hungarian politics, while 12% believes he has some influence.”⁶⁹ Many accuse Orbán of anti-Semitism, often citing his Soros remarks. However, it is important to note that Orbán avoids mentioning Soros’ Jewish background, and his political marriage with Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, complicates the accusations of anti-Semitism.⁷⁰

Orbán’s infamous ‘illiberal democracy’ speech, in which he expressed admiration for the politics of China, Russia, and other illiberal forces, is responsible for much of the uproar surrounding his leadership and the general geopolitical shift. As emphasized, the Fidesz regime actively seeks to consolidate power and dismantle constitutional and institutional blockades and safeguards to expand its influence. However, Orbán believes he knows best and publicizes his views on the European Union, democratic systems, national identity, and sovereignty, through heavily state-influenced media. He also exports his ideas to other Central and Eastern European states, through his tough stances on refugees and defiance toward Brussels bureaucrats. In the summer of 2014, he “described Turkey, alongside Russia and China,” as success stories, prompting many to label Orbán as “one of Vladimir Putin’s best friends inside the EU.”⁷¹

Orbán reiterated on March 15, 2011, on the national holiday commemorating the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, “Hungary is not a colony... after the occupation of the country by the Turks, the Hapsburgs, and the Russians, will not itself be oppressed by Brussels.”⁷² No

⁶⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 217.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 114.

single quotation illustrated Orbán's position more clearly, the European Union, an external force on par with the Turks, Hapsburgs, and Russians, will not diminish the importance of Hungary's religious and national sovereignty. Orbán consolidates power and acts in the 'national interest' to reform the EU from within and constructs a Hungarian political position which serves as an illiberal alternative in the heart of Europe for other East-Central European states wary of neoliberal economic policies and massive migration to mimic.

Just as populism in splitting Europe into an East and West divide, illiberal democracies are causing similar divisions on the globe. In an article titled, *The Populist Surge and the Rebirth of Foreign Policy Nationalism*, Ted Galen Carpenter emphasized the role of populism in creating illiberal democracies which subsequently engage in nationalist foreign policies. Carpenter argues that the decisions for some nations to formulate hybrid regimes between the East and West will lead to a fractured and fractious international system, which will "more closely resemble 19th and 20th-century systems" rather than the US-constructed and led multilateral world order.⁷³

Hungary is a case study within a global trend, and illiberal waves inundate political discussions in Brazil, India, the Philippines, the United States, and Western Europe. Populism is inherently both transnational and trans-regional in scope. Additionally, it is evident that populists across cultures promote economic nationalism devised from a middle-class focus on the domestic economy and flexible trade policies. In diverse societies like the US, populists replace ethnic nationalism with civic nationalism, while in homogenous states populists promote forge nationalism through cultural, ethnic, or linguistic connections.

⁷³ Ted Galen Carpenter, "The Populist Surge and the Rebirth of Foreign Policy Nationalism," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* 37 (1) (2017): 33-46.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1353/sais.2017.0003>.

Hungary is more “eager to deepen ties with the U.S.” on topics like defense and will continue to remain a member of the European Union, but will simultaneously continue its economic and energy policies with the East. Previously, Prime Minister Orbán rejected US demands to distance Hungary from Russia and China and repeatedly told US diplomats that he would pursue a neutral foreign policy.⁷⁴ Hungary is also involved in a deal with Russia’s state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom, to build a \$13.6 billion power plant funded with long-term loans from Moscow, and in 2019, Russia will provide approximately 75% of Hungary’s oil and 60% of its natural gas. Central Europe is becoming a battleground for world energy exporters and local politicians understand that they can leverage this to cement domestic power.⁷⁵ The hybrid systems, absent of any real ideological consistency, also understand that conservative social policies and statist positions on the economy and welfare allow for additional popular support. Mitchell A. Orenstein, in his article, *What Europe’s Populist Right is Getting Right*, described the hybrid systems developed by leaders like Orbán, who simultaneously criticize immigration from the Middle East and North Africa and deliver economic policies to benefit the middle class. This combination creates a threatening ‘Other’ while also projecting an image of investment in the average citizen.⁷⁶

For example, concerning the domestic middle class, Fidesz tackles the issue of low Hungarian birth rates by providing tax breaks and cheap loans for women who commit to having children. The populations of former communist countries have been shrinking since 1989 and previously relied on extensive social support to families during the communist and socialist era.⁷⁷ Populist rhetoric asserts while Hungarian birth rates decline, the EU is supportive of refugee

⁷⁴ Leonardo Dinic, “Will Hungary’s Foreign Policy Encourage a Neutral Europe?” *China US Focus*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/will-hungarys-foreign-policy-encourage-a-neutral-europe>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mitchell A. Orenstein, “What Europe’s Populist Right is Getting Right,” *Project Syndicate*, March 15, 2019, .

⁷⁷ Ibid.

quotas. The populist logic follows that only larger Hungarian families and tight borders can sustain the Hungarian nation from Brussels imposed multiethnic cosmopolitanism. Hence, populist electoral gains allow Fidesz to invest in the middle class through state intervention packages while demonizing an ‘Other.’ But though the policy is populist in nature, and only emphasizes the importance of increasing the birthrates of ethnic Hungarians, it does in fact provide additional economic security to families.⁷⁸ The Western media covered the proposal extremely negatively. A *Guardian* reporter stated that “the idea that assistance for those in poverty is conditional on obedient reproduction is verging on the dystopian.” Princeton Professor, Kim Lane Scheppele interviewed on *National Public Radio International*, warned that “women are going to bear the burden of Orbán’s failed economic policies.” Swedish Social Affairs Minister Annika Strandhäll, also against the policy, stated that, “this kind of policy will harm the autonomy for which women have struggled for decades.”⁷⁹ However, Orbán’s critics forget the examples of Poland and Russia which implemented similar natalist policies that increased Russia’s fertility rate up to 1.75 children per female from 1.17 in 1999. In Poland, the government increased support to in 2015 to help families with school supplies, clothes, and vacations. Since, the Polish public deficit decreased and it is said that the policy stimulated overall economic growth while reducing child poverty and increasing school enrollment.⁸⁰ To be clear, critics from the West either dismissed Orbán’s ‘middle class economic nationalism’ as either (1) too expensive or (2) too patriarchal. In the case of Poland, the numbers indicate that the return on investment might be worth it. However, the plan surely encourages traditional norms of family and childrearing along with an emphasis on marriage, home ownership, and family.

⁷⁸ These quotes are cited in by Orenstein in his piece:

Mitchell A. Orenstein, “What Europe’s Populist Right is Getting Right,” *Project Syndicate*, March 15, 2019,

<https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/viktor-orban-family-policies-western-criticism-by-mitchell-a--orenstein-2019-03>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

However, if a woman should choose to balance family and professional lives, the plan would lessen her financial burdens. Overall, Orenstein argues that the primary beneficiaries of the program will be women who work because it is implemented as a lifetime income-tax exemption. Simply, women who do not work, do not benefit.⁸¹ That being said, the program hopes to assist women who balance both professional and family lives. This middle-class emphasis, alongside a projection of willingness to fight the external authorities in Brussels and Washington, keeps Orbán in power as a stable strongman.

From the western geopolitical perspective however, there is also some misunderstanding concerning the current international crisis. For example, the previously mentioned Brookings Institution report characterizes illiberal democracy properly and even alludes to complimentary relationship between populism and illiberalism, but discusses the problem strictly in the context of the “strategic vision embedded in trans-Atlantic principles and values.”⁸² The very reality that Hungary looks to the East on issues concerning natural gas, foreign investment, and diplomatic engagements indicates that the trans-Atlantic project is threatened. The recommendations of the report hinge on a free and fair liberal and democratic Europe, a unified NATO, and the importance of the Copenhagen Criteria. However, parts of Europe are trending illiberal, even the President of the United States questions the overall usefulness of NATO, and the Copenhagen Criteria are in jeopardy in most of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, Chinese and Russian emergence or reemergence is further exacerbating all of these realities. Projects like the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which Hungary is an enthusiastic endorser, fundamentally challenge the overall structure of the trans-Atlantic system and strength of both the European

⁸¹ Mitchell A. Orenstein, “What Europe’s Populist Right is Getting Right,” *Project Syndicate*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/viktor-orban-family-policies-western-criticism-by-mitchell-a--orenstein-2019-03>.

⁸² Foreign Policy at Brookings, “The Anatomy of Illiberal States: Assessing and Responding to Democratic Decline in Turkey and Central Europe,” February 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/illiberal-states-web.pdf>.

Union and NATO. As Hungary engages in increased state intervention and a mixed foreign policy, and prides itself on proclaimed neutrality, the rest of Europe will need to decide how it will react. Models of state intervention seem to be a convenient tool for satisfying popular demand and Orbán's mixed foreign policy is tempting in an era of relative American decline and the Chinese and Russian impulses to invest in European infrastructure. The Hungarian case offers an intriguing look into the broader geopolitical trend, but only time will determine if Orbán's model is here to stay.

3.3 Importance of decisive domestic victories

How did Orbán consolidate power to constrict a hybrid regime which emphasizes the interests of the majority, and demonizes external minorities? Put simply, he won elections. Orbán won by using Hungary's political history against the suggestions put forth by Washington, the European Union, the IMF, and the World Bank. First, Orbán decided to deal with a familiar foe, and those who refused to act during periods of necessary action.

Indicative of his 1989 speech, Orbán, like many other Hungarians, demanded to settle scores with Hungary's communist past, specifically the post-1956 Kádár regime, which according to more recent polls, is ironically popular. Support for the Kádár regime is likely because income tripled in real terms between 1956 and 1989, while the post-communist transition did not fulfill public expectations of economic and political promise. However, Orbán inherited the appeal for stability and centralized decision-making but forcefully abandoned all aspects of the old vanguard of Hungarian communism.

In March of 1988, Viktor Orbán and 36 of his peers founded the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) as an independent youth organization in the Great Hall of Bibó College.⁸³ Many of these college friends, who like Orbán, came from modest financial backgrounds from marginalized provinces, currently hold high positions within Fidesz, and initially promoted politics of classical liberalism.⁸⁴ In its debut elections of 1990, Fidesz won 22 seats and 8.95% of the vote.⁸⁵ In 1994, Orbán and his party experienced defeat, in effect losing two seats and finishing in last. However, by 1994, it was clear that the socialists, due to the sad outcome of the transition, would do poorly without an economic upturn or increased public benefits. Orbán identified a political opportunity. He entered Hungarian politics after the collapse of the center-right Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), in which he re-positioned Fidesz as a moderate right-wing party. Already by 1998, Orbán was the face of the Hungarian right. “Since the SZDSZ, the larger liberal party, joined the Horn government and entered an enduring political alliance with the Socialist Party, the left/right conflict became a persistent divisive dimension. Hence the liberal center disappeared from Hungarian politics.”⁸⁶

In assessing the foundations of the blocs of the Hungarian Parliament at the seventh party congress in 1995, Orbán reasoned “in the center we have, if we stand alone, no chance against either left or right. To my mind, there is no possibility of cooperating with the left. My answer is that Fidesz must seek cooperation with the forces politically right of the center.”⁸⁷ Although the left criticized Fidesz for political pandering and labeled them chameleons, Lendvai argued that Orbán’s turn to the right derived from the national traumas associated with the Trianon Treaty

⁸³ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 21.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

⁸⁶ András Kőrösnéyi and Veronika Patkós, “Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán),” *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015): 320.

⁸⁷ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 36.

and the forty years under Soviet rule. In the 1980s, 70% of people polled expressed bitterness about the Trianon Treaty.⁸⁸ The Hungarian diaspora, separated by the treaty, quickly became a central issue. Orbán pushed for their autonomy in neighboring countries, and in 2010 went further and granted passports for all Hungarians living abroad. Ninety-five percent of this new electorate would vote Fidesz in 2014.⁸⁹ Former health minister, István Mikola stated “if we win for four years, and then, let’s say, grant the 5 million Hungarians citizenship and allow them to vote, then everything would be decided for the next 20 years.”⁹⁰ Orbán’s behavior supports the idea that only a ‘homegrown strongman’ can right the wrongs of Hungary’s past, and vows consistently, to prevent foreign infiltration of Hungary’s political and economic systems, regardless of its EU membership.

When the conservatives remerged in 1998, Orbán consolidated rule and substituted a majoritarian vision for the country which was in direct opposition to the Hungarian Socialist Party. Orbán’s opposition to the socialists and his classification of them as the successors to the Communist Party is central to his populist rhetoric which essentially demonizes them as former occupiers of Hungary. In 1998, Fidesz entered into a conservative coalition with the MDF and the Smallholder’s Party to secure an absolute majority: 148 of 386 seats or 38%.⁹¹ Over time, Orbán successfully weakened his coalition parties and absorbed their constituencies or pushed them farther to the right of him, which gave rise to Jobbik.⁹² This ultimately led to the bipolarization of Hungarian politics on the eve of the critical 2010 election. After attaining a supermajority, Fidesz ultimately destroyed the bipolar party system and absorbed the former

⁸⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 37.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 43.

⁹² András Kőrösnéyi and Veronika Patkós, “Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán),” *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015): 320-321.

electorate of the socialist party. In doing so, the far-right Jobbik made significant gains. This dance to the center ultimately ensured national consolidation by Fidesz with Orbán at its helm.⁹³

The first Orbán government from 1998 to 2002, consolidated decision-making in the Office of the Prime Minister and weakened the parliamentary system.⁹⁴ The Prime Minister also became the leading figure of government communications. Fidesz ministers began to rise whenever Orbán entered the room, and the government stopped recording minutes of cabinet meetings, an uncommon practice absent in even the communist era.⁹⁵ Orbán promoted his friends to key media positions throughout the country.⁹⁶ In 2001, wages and income increased, special allowances and soldier salaries improved, and interest rate credits for private loans and home building increased.⁹⁷ However, consumption growth surpassed gross domestic product, and other economic indicators indicated deterioration.⁹⁸ While Orbán remained popular throughout his first term, the center-left won a narrow victory in the 2002 elections, and nothing too significant occurred in Hungarian politics until the socialists nominated Ferenc Gyurcsány as Prime Minister in September of 2004. Gyurcsány pledged to reform the corrupt and fractured Hungarian Socialist Party. In 2006, he led the socialists to a narrow victory over Orbán.⁹⁹

Gyurcsány's political career looked promising until an audiotape released in which Gyurcsány was heard, in a profane and passionate manner, admitting to the lies of the left. In the tape, he stated that the socialists had been "lying morning, noon, and night" throughout their entire time in government.¹⁰⁰ Orbán immediately issued an ultimatum for Gyurcsány to resign

⁹³ András Kőrösenyi and Veronika Patkós, "Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán)," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015): 320-321.

⁹⁴ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 44.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-63.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

and called for mass demonstrations against the government in front of Parliament.¹⁰¹ One-hundred thousand people, through mass protest, supported Orbán's call to fight against the 'illegitimate dictatorial government.'¹⁰² On the 50th anniversary of the 1956 uprising on October 23, 2006, riots peaked, and scenes of police brutality tainted Budapest. Three-hundred and twenty-six civilians were injured, as well as 399 members of the police. Orbán and Fidesz both identified the 'Lie Speech' as critical in leveraging the radicalization of Hungarian politics to their benefit.¹⁰³ They referenced the violence of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 revolution to no end, further emphasizing history's significance to Orbán's rise and rule.

After gaining its first supermajority in 2010, the Fidesz government reconstructed the country's judiciary, legislative, and executive branches to preserve power for years to come. Orbán first mentioned his wish to create a central political force field in 2009, through which he claimed he could "replace the dual system for fifteen to twenty years."¹⁰⁴ Shortly after, Orbán's first parliament convened and the two-thirds Fidesz supermajority abolished the safeguard clause which required the preparation of a new constitution to be approved by a four-fifths majority of parliament.¹⁰⁵ An accelerated system of legislation allowed for the passing of 26 reforms and 12 constitutional amendments in 19 months.¹⁰⁶ On January 1, 2012, the new constitution came into force, which among other things, consolidated Fidesz power and allotted 9-year term periods for Orbán appointments. It also assigned a central role to Christianity and Hungary's national traditions and customs.¹⁰⁷ The Crown of Saint Stephen, previously suppressed by the Soviets, represented the sovereignty of the Hungarian nation and assumed a central role. The new

¹⁰¹ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 70.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

constitution also proclaimed Hungary as occupied from March 1944 until the first free elections of 1990.¹⁰⁸ Orbán and Fidesz seemed to be rewriting the Hungarian collective memory to bolster its power and delegitimize past foreign influence altogether. In addition, Fidesz amendments allowed for the selection procedure for justices of the constitutional court to be decided by a simple majority vote in parliament, increased the number of justices, appointed pro-Fidesz individuals in the civil service, media, financial sector, and judiciary, modified term limits and retirement ages to weed out non-Fidesz judges, centralized the school system, built a fence along the southern border, passed the practical nationalization of tobacco shops, and according to many, completely eradicated Hungary's system of separation of powers.¹⁰⁹

During the 2010 – 2014 government, Fidesz decreased the number of MPs from 386 to 199 and redrew constituent boundaries which resulted in a decreased popular vote threshold necessary to preserve the two-thirds supermajority. The 2014 – 2018 government further focused on consolidating power, developed a hegemony over the rightwing and conservative media, and controlled financial and credit policy.¹¹⁰ Fidesz, under Orbán's leadership, created a more 'agile' government in the name of illiberal democracy, its policies targeted efficiency and used parliament as a tool of government and not a mirror of public representation. This approach ensured quick decision making for the 'rule of men' rather than the 'rule of law.'¹¹¹ As long as Fidesz continues to win elections through populist politics, Orbán will view his power grabs as legitimate and will further illiberalize the government to streamline the decision-making process and ensure flexibility and stability within the realms of both political and economic policy.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 102.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-110.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127-129.

¹¹¹ András Kőrösnéyi and Veronika Patkós, "Liberális és illiberális populizmus. Berlusconi és Orbán politikai vezetése (Liberal and Illiberal Populism, Political leadership of Berlusconi and Orbán)," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 24 (2) (2015).

But more importantly, Orbán, in the early days of Hungarian transition, identified the fatal mistake of the prevailing political system when all mainstream parties began to converge. After the 1989 transition, and before Hungary joined the EU in 2004, no political party on the left or right would have opposed trans-Atlantic integration, EU membership, or the liberal international order. Orbán reacted to the inaction expressed by all Hungarian political figures. He created his own space and expanded with populism, only to subsequently create his own convergence which feeds off populist antagonization between ‘real’ Hungarians, the elites of Brussels, and waves of migrants. However, the neoliberal order did fail in accounting for deficiencies on the periphery of Europe, among other places. In a 2016 Foreign Affairs article, Mudde attributed Europe’s populist surge to the deindustrialization that occurred after the 1960s.¹¹² Mudde cites a decline in religious observance and weakened support for center left and right parties which relied on working class and religious workers. The political realignment occurred in most European countries and resulted in working class support shifting to new parties which distinguished themselves from the muddled center. Mainstream parties welcomed multiethnic societies, neoliberal economic reform, and cosmopolitan business friendly technocracy, which resulted in a convergence of social democrats and center right parties. This indistinguishability led to a push outward toward the fringes. Such political convergence on topics concerning ‘a return to Europe’ and EU membership was present in Hungary during the post-1989 period. Also, official EU positions on both the Eurozone crisis and refugee pressures forced all mainstream parties to converge on pressing issues, which Orbán recognized and leveraged for his own political gains.¹¹³

¹¹² Cas Mudde, “Europe’s Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making,” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-10-17/europe-s-populist-surge>.

¹¹³ Ibid.

During periods of perceived political inaction, domestic politicians in their respective parliaments look helpless. A progression of the populist surge in EU states during periods of crisis goes as follows: First, mainstream parties of both the left and right converge on pressing issues concerning topics surrounding the Eurozone crisis and migratory crisis. These converged political positions seem completely dictated by Brussels. Second, distinguishability between mainstream parties, on the issues in question, recedes and fades, and everyone essentially becomes a centrist and Eurocrat. Third, neoliberal technocracy becomes the prevailing political direction. Fourth, national governments, within a supranational union like the EU, begin to look helpless or are perceived as coconspirators by more radical political actors in the given state. Fifth, radicals push further into the fringes of both left and right to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties. In places like Italy, this occurred during the more recent EU crises on both the left and right so that they formed a coalition government on the foundation of criticizing Brussels because no one else dared to.

In Hungary, Orbán transformed Fidesz so that it expanded the center, adopted right wing cultural positions and implemented statist economic views on the premise of combatting EU bureaucratic technocrats to salvage Hungarian sovereignty. In many ways, the convergence of mainstream political parties, along with increased power transfers to unelected officials like central bankers, EU bureaucrats, and judges, caused a reaction to reclaim power and give back to national governments. The perceived absence of ‘real debate’ on political and economic topics concerning the ‘life and death’ of national identity forms fertile ground for populism.

3.4 Cultural and historical underpinnings

In Hungary's case, a thorough discussion of its history and recent cultural shift are necessary in understanding the populist surge and subsequent illiberal pivot. A lack of liberal rule of law tradition in Hungary certainly decreased the probability of cementing a liberal democratic model. According to Bugaric, "the rule of law in Western Europe pre-dated the development of democracy by many centuries."¹¹⁴ Bugaric also cites Ivan Berend's arguments which state that the countries of the former Habsburg Monarchy "never fully modernized their legal and political institutions and remained on the periphery of the advanced Western world: 'Both the states and the governments were traditionally autocratic and remained authoritarian, with an autocratic interpretation and practice of law and civil rights.'"¹¹⁵ Then, in the 1930s, most of the region turned to 'anti-liberal' regimes only to become Soviet satellites after World War II under the shroud of Communism, which as Bugaric advances, "almost completely destroyed the last remains of the rule of law tradition and replaced it with the 'socialist' concept of legality."¹¹⁶ Ultimately, due to the relevant history, while Central and Eastern European countries adopted the rule of law institutions to curb majoritarian excesses, the lack of broad political support and history mostly weakened their efficiency and potential successes.¹¹⁷ To make matters worse, Bugaric notes that most of the region experienced a horrific history for the protection of human rights. Nearly the entire region contains a past of ethnic conflict and nationalism aimed at suppressing neighboring minorities rather than accommodating their differences. The institutional weakness and a tendency to give in to majoritarian impulses can

¹¹⁴ B. Bugaric, "The Rule of Law Derailed: Lessons from the Post-Communist World," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 7 (2) (2015): 187-188, doi:<http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/10.1007/s40803-015-0016-4>.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

likely explain at least a piece of the puzzle associated with Central and Eastern Europe's proclivity toward populism and illiberal democracy.

The preventive policies concerning the migrant crisis relate to past national insecurities and catastrophes. For example, Lendvai emphasizes the Magyar fears "of a slow death for a small nation and the loneliness of a people with a language unique across the Carpathian Basin."¹¹⁸ Sándor Petőfi, Hungary's national poet, expressed that, "we are the most forsaken of all peoples on the Earth," a sentiment of national defenselessness and pessimism.¹¹⁹ The Hungarians experienced a long list of catastrophes which include: the Mongol invasion in 1241, the defeat at Mohács in 1526 and the subsequent Turkish occupation, the joint Austrian and Russian crushing of the 1848-1849 national uprising, the separation of the Hungarian people by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, communist rule after the Second World War, the suppression of the October Uprising in 1956, and the formation and establishment of the Soviet-influenced puppet government of János Kádár until 1989.¹²⁰ To Orbán and his followers, the migrant crisis is yet another test of national competence, defended against with politics that serve the Hungarian national interest. András Lángi, president of a Fidesz think tank, once stated that "if something is done in the national interest, then it is not corruption."¹²¹ This convenient proposition is central to Orbánism and runs in contrast to the professed values of the European Union because it allows for the prudent executive and his loyal followers to make decisions to prevent future tragedies with little deliberation or outside consent. The perceived threats to national interests are also likened to past cultural catastrophes.

¹¹⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 112.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., 151.

Péter Tölgyessy, a conservative political analyst, attributes the lack of support for European solidarity and Hungary's voluntary cultural isolation to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, which in an effort to grant self-determination to Hungary's Slavic and Romanian neighbors after WWI, allotted the new independent Kingdom of Hungary only 93,000 of the 282,000 square kilometers of the old kingdom, and 7.6 million inhabitants of the prewar population of 20.9 million.¹²² Hungarians on both sides of the borders sought to revise the treaty, and orchestrators of the WWII alliance with the Third Reich hoped to establish the pre-1920s boundaries with Hitler's help.¹²³ Virtually all historians studying the 1956 revolution and the rise of Orbán attribute vital importance to the Treaty of Trianon and the Hungarian feelings of injustice surrounding it. The Fidesz focus on past injustices bolsters preventive politics in the present, but Lendvai also makes the point, that "the corruption prevalent in [Hungarian] daily life, in the economy and in society is in no way a product of the Orbán era."¹²⁴ Orbán is portrayed, especially in the West, as a *Putinesque* character who is individually responsible for the degradation of Hungarian democracy and the rule of law. However, his politics seem to be in an implicit agreement with the Hungarian political culture developed in the 20th-century, which appears to value decisive, aggressive, nationalist, and predictable leadership. Even concerning corruption, a societal sin often associated with Orbán and Fidesz, Hungarians seem to accept it. Comparative surveys indicate that only 30% of Hungarians would report a case of corruption to authorities, and 69% of those questioned in 2014 regarded their government as corrupt.¹²⁵ This is not the case, in let us say Germany, or even neighboring Romania, where 90% and 59% of those

¹²² Paul Lendvai, *One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 25-26.
 Ibid., 194.

¹²³ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁴ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

questioned said they would report corruption.¹²⁶ The truth is that both corruption and a proclivity to reject both European integration and foreign migrants is not a product of Orbán, but a trend prevalent in Hungary, which Fidesz cunningly leverages to its political advantage.

However, Fidesz also exploits the fear and anxieties associated with a changing Europe and a world order in flux. The hundreds of kilometers of fence along the border with Serbia and Croatia and the deportation and punishment of refugees are popular policies in Hungary.¹²⁷ A poll conducted in September of 2015, indicated that two-thirds of those questioned supported the fence, 79% supported harsher treatment of asylum seekers, and 41% advocated for the use of weapons against illegal immigrants along the border.¹²⁸ During the same month, Orbán's popularity rose from 43% to 48%.¹²⁹ In 2016, a U.S.-based Pew Research Center poll conducted in ten European countries found that 76% of those questioned worried about a terrorist attack and 82% feared that refugees would take employment opportunities away from native Hungarians.¹³⁰ The statistics also placed Hungary at the top of the list for the expression of anti-Muslim sentiment. Only Greece beat Hungary in anti-Semitic and anti-Roma sentiment.¹³¹ Given Hungary's history, the statistics presented, and the overwhelming successes and popularity of Fidesz, it is clear that the country's 'illiberal tendencies' are not the making of one single man or party. What seems to be occurring is something reminiscent: a nation economically and politically dependent on great powers, with a collective sense of embarrassment, grasping to nationalism as a defense against the alleged foreign intrusion of its identity. Hungarians are

¹²⁶ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

looking for a common cause to grasp to during periods of global uncertainty, and this is precisely the populist rhetoric which assisted in the pivot toward illiberal governance.

4. Chapter Four: Measuring democracy, populism, and illiberalism in Hungary

In exploring the causes of contemporary Hungarian populism and its illiberal pivot, this analysis dismisses the limited approaches of the wealth inequality and cultural backlash theses, which alone, are insufficient in explaining populist and illiberal phenomena. First, it is a commonly held view that wealth inequality, in addition to technological automation, the collapse of the manufacturing industry, unrestricted global flows of labor, goods, capital, and information, the erosion of organized labor, and the implementation policies associated with the shrinking of the welfare state and neoliberal austerity measures all contribute to popular resentment toward political classes. Subsequently, low wage earners with lower levels of education fall prey to populist arguments in their disadvantaged situations.¹³² This economic-centric position contains value but cannot possibly explain the surge of Hungarian or European populism in full. It is a brief exposition belonging to a greater story in the book of history. That is why in discussing the Hungarian example, it is essential to mention all relevant dimensions of analysis.

A second thesis might aim to explain populist developments as dependent on a type cultural backlash concept, which would suggest that populist support is a reaction to the development of progressive values. Essentially, the theory holds that the postwar decades allowed for a shift toward post-material thinking that allowed for greater expressions of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, along with environmental protection, human rights, and gender equality. This ‘cultural shift’ triggered a counterrevolution among “older generation,

¹³² Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” *Harvard Kennedy School*, 2016.

white men, and less educated sectors, who sense decline and actively reject the rising tide of progressive values, resent the displacement of familiar traditional norms, and provide a pool of supporters potentially vulnerable to populist appeals.”¹³³ This argument is rooted in ideology and intentionally narrow in intellectual scope. The purpose of introducing both the economic insecurity and cultural backlash perspectives is to reiterate how easily academics can fall into explanations which are too narrow or ideologically driven.

The rise of Hungarian, European, and worldwide populism is influenced by the history of geopolitical and economic transformations which culminate in a shift of global zeitgeist. The real-world consequences of the 2008 financial crisis and decades of shortsighted military involvement by the US and its allies in the Middle East which led to the migratory crisis of 2015 and the years to follow both contributed significantly. In many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, governments are experiencing brain drain and population decline. To address demographic concerns, Hungary must employ state economic intervention and civic or ethnic nationalism should Hungary remain as Prime Minister Orbán envisions it. Labor shortages are, and will, continue to be a problem in Hungary if young professionals continue to move to western EU states for employment. Orbán’s state-led policies, should they be effective, need quick, agile, and decisive leadership. Countries like Hungary cannot transform their domestic economies or foreign policy through incremental change limited by liberal democracy. As a result of political convergence of the contemporary era, populations expect politicians to present new economic and political solutions to pressing global issue. Populists promise, and often overexaggerate, either good or bad programs for change. In truth, Europe is not alone, Brazil, China, India, Israel, Russia, and Turkey, among other global and regional powers, are all

¹³³ Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” *Harvard Kennedy School*, 2016.

pursuing either populist politics or illiberal political positions. None of the states mentioned above are examples of true liberal democracies. Hungary is perhaps more of a shock because it resides inside the progressive European Union, but given its turbulent history, illiberalism and strongman politics are no stranger. That is why the relevant dimensions of analysis play a crucial role – they all contribute a chapter to the current state of Hungarian populism and its illiberal trends. The following section will present the relevant data.

4.1 The quality of Hungarian democracy in the 21st century

To demonstrate the progression of Hungarian elections, this thesis presents key points from the OSCE executive summaries of all parliamentary elections since 1998 and findings contained in the V-Dem and Freedom House reports which evaluate the ‘liberalness’ of Hungarian politics. In addition to confirming the democratic quality of the Hungarian electoral system, the executive summaries can serve as examples of how international standards shifted and where the Hungarians deviated over the last two decades. The Freedom House material provides solid data for reasons why Hungary is seen as only *partly free*.

After the 1998 parliamentary contest, the OSCE praised Hungarian elections as professional, transparent, and in line with OSCE commitments. The OSCE described the election process as active and in full confidence of the public and among political parties in Hungary’s third multiparty elections since 1989. The integration of IT in the voting and counting processes allowed for an open environment.¹³⁴ Fidesz’s success in the 1998 elections allowed Orbán to form a ruling coalition with the MDF and the FKGP. Therefore, after the 1998 Fidesz victory, no substantial international criticism of the elections emerged.

¹³⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary. *Parliamentary Elections 1998*.

In response to the 2002 parliamentary elections, the OSCE published a generally positive summary which claimed that the elections were “transparent, accountable, free, fair and of equal process. Despite some shortcomings, the elections strengthened the democratic election environment in Hungary. Note that these were the first elections after the first Orbán government. However, even as early as 2002, the OSCE noted some areas for improvement, precisely, the early establishment of the National Election Committee (NEC) without approval from opposition parties. The summary also stated that state television demonstrated a bias in favor of the government and Fidesz. The criticisms also included a lack of opportunities for smaller and minority parties. Nonetheless, Fidesz narrowly lost the 2002 elections.¹³⁵ In sum, the first sound of concern surrounding Fidesz began after Orbán’s 2002 loss.

On the eve of the first Fidesz supermajority in 2010, the OSCE characterized the parliamentary elections as democratic and conducted in a pluralistic environment characterized by overall respect for fundamental civil and political rights and high public confidence in the process. The OSCE also claimed that the competition took place on a generally level playing field. The summary, however, did suggest that “certain specific provisions would benefit from a review, most notably on full respect for the secrecy and equality of the vote, campaign finance, limitations on suffrage and timely implementation of respective decisions of the Constitutional Court.”¹³⁶ The OSCE also only criticized the anti-Roma rhetoric used by Jobbik, which it declared as contrary to OSCE commitments.¹³⁷ Therefore, without a Fidesz controlled government, general criticism of Orbán’s party was light while Jobbik received disapproval. However, the 2010 elections set the stage for Orbán’s political transformation of Hungary.

¹³⁵ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary. *Parliamentary Elections*, 2002.

¹³⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary. *Parliamentary Elections*, 2010.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

The OSCE summary for the 2014 parliamentary elections listed a detailed list of concerns which included: an undue advantage given to the governing party, biased media coverage for Fidesz, criticisms of the legal framework and amendments passed during the first supermajority government which affected the electoral process and removed checks and balances, the reduced number of parliamentary seats from 386 to 199, alterations to constituency boundaries, a general lack of women candidates, the inclusion of the Hungarian diaspora, different treatment of minority electorates, and a blurring of party and State.¹³⁸ The 2014 summary listed all criticisms most news outlets would attribute to Fidesz and Orbán today.¹³⁹

Concerning the 2018 elections, the conclusions identified:

a pervasive overlap between state and ruling party resources, undermining contestants' ability to compete on an equal basis. Voters had a wide range of political options, but intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, media bias and opaque campaign financing constricted the space for genuine political debate, hindering voters' ability to make a fully-informed choice.¹⁴⁰

Therefore by 2014, the overall electoral process in Hungary came under harsh criticism and Orbán and Fidesz became primary culprits.¹⁴¹

With respect to the Freedom House data, the methodology includes 25 indicators for political rights and civil liberties to grant a categorization of either Free, Partly Free, or Not Free. The subcategories include electoral process, political pluralism and participation, the functioning of government, freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, the rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual right. According to Freedom House, Hungary, which became free in 1990, fell back to partly free in 2019 after five consecutive years of decline and 13 years without improvement.¹⁴² Therefore, to the combined analysis of the OSCE and

¹³⁸ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary. *Parliamentary Elections*, 2014.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Hungary. *Parliamentary Elections*, 2018.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Freedom House, Hungary Country Report, March 11, 2019, Accessed April 15, 2019.

Freedom House data, both the electoral quality of Hungary's democracy and its liberal nature declined significantly over approximately the last ten years.

4.2 Populism, illiberal governance, and how to categorize Orbán

While definitions are relative, the primary concern surrounding Rooduijn's *PopuList* and its assessment of Hungarian politics is that it presents Jobbik and Fidesz as equals. Given the analysis, it is evident that Orbán knew to carve out a political space from the carcass of the Hungarian left and the somewhat respectable center right. He needed Jobbik to serve as a less acceptable anti-capitalist and xenophobic alternative on his right flank. Fidesz, as Orbán envisioned in 1995, would expand from the center toward the right as long as the Hungarian electorate supported it. Also, the statist economic policies would absorb voters who felt abandoned by the convergence of the political left toward the center.

Rooduijn appropriates Mudde's general will definition and classifies both Fidesz and Jobbik as simultaneously populist, far-right, and Eurosceptic. While *PopuList* uses Mudde's definition of far-right and defines it as a political ideology that is fundamentally nativist and authoritarian, it also defines nativism as "an ideology that holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group and that nonnative elements are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state."¹⁴³ In addition, authoritarianism "is the belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements of authority are to be punished severely."¹⁴⁴ The Eurosceptic parties are said to "express the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration. This

<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/hungary>.

¹⁴³ M. Rooduijn et. al., *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*, (2019), <http://www.popu-list.org>.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

includes both “hard Euroscepticism” (i.e., outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one’s country joining or remaining a member of the EU) and “soft Euroscepticism” (i.e., contingent or qualified opposition to European integration).¹⁴⁵ It is safe to say that Orbán is certainly a right-wing populist and soft Eurosceptic. However, comparisons between Jobbik and Fidesz are concerning, because Jobbik is significantly further to the right and more Eurosceptic than Orbán and Fidesz.

In analyzing data compiled by the 2014 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, Jobbik appeared far to the right of Fidesz on almost all relevant issues. The analysis placed Fidesz on the right end of the political spectrum for the following reasons:

- Promotes strict measures to fight crime;
- Supports nationalist conceptions of society;
- Advocates for the restriction of immigration;
- Strongly opposes the European Union;
- Favors assimilation over multiculturalism;
- Protects rural interests over urban ones;
- Has an extreme-right ideological stance (relatively closer to the center);
- Anti-elite rhetoric extremely important (relatively closer to the center); and
- Opposes progressive policies on social lifestyle.¹⁴⁶

Concerning economic issues, Fidesz appeared left wing for the following reasons:

- Extreme left stance on economic uses;
- Favors state intervention in the economy; and

¹⁴⁵ M. Rooduijn et. al., *The PopuList: An Overview of Populist, Far Right, Far Left and Eurosceptic Parties in Europe*, (2019), <http://www.popu-list.org>.

¹⁴⁶ Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right Is Redrawing the Map of Europe,” *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

- Corruption issue is not seen as important.¹⁴⁷

Therefore, Fidesz is populist in its construction of a triadic relationship between the elite, ‘the people,’ and foreign migrants. Mudde’s definition of right-wing populism contains elements of nativism and authoritarianism which Fidesz’s popular base fulfills. Remember, 79% of those polled in 2015 supported harsher treatment of asylum seekers, and 41% advocated for the use of weapons against illegal immigrants along the border.¹⁴⁸ Such public sentiment strongly indicates dimensions of both nativism and authoritarianism. Given Hungarian economic history throughout the 20th century and since 1989, the left-wing preferences for state intervention in the domestic economy and flexible trade also come as no surprise.

It is also important to note that the CHES data placed thirteen or so European populist parties to the right of Fidesz. Nonetheless, Hungarian society is generally conservative, at least in recent decades. Approximately 65% of the Hungarian electorate voted for either Fidesz or Jobbik in 2014. According to the Eurobarometer in May 2017, 78% of voters had negative views toward immigration from outside the European Union, 45% were pessimistic about the future of the EU, and 29% stated that globalization was not an opportunity for economic growth.¹⁴⁹ Therefore, while Jobbik and Fidesz can both be populist, far-right, and Eurosceptic, it is unclear how helpful this comparison is. Perhaps the most significant difference is that Orbán constructed a political style from the characteristics of existing regimes like China and Russia, to formulate an example for others. Orbán delivered his infamous illiberal democracy speech in the context of trade and economic policy within the framework of global capitalism, while Jobbik rejects global capitalism in its entirety. Orbán used populism to create a more flexible government apparatus to

¹⁴⁷ Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right Is Redrawing the Map of Europe,” *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

¹⁴⁸ Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 173.

¹⁴⁹ Andre Tartar, “How the Populist Right Is Redrawing the Map of Europe,” *Bloomberg*, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-europe-populist-right/>.

pivot toward illiberalism, while Jobbik is less prepared for the real world of geopolitics and international trade. Orbán, in many ways, is a functional populist, while Jobbik represents a less practical and extreme right-wing version. Nonetheless, Fidesz is undoubtedly a populist political party and Orbán is its leader.

4.3 The wearing down of democracy

The 2019 Freedom House Report claimed that Orbán and Fidesz worked methodically to deny critical voices a platform in the media or civil society since gaining power.¹⁵⁰ The government subsequently “forced the closure of Central European University, asserted control over the opposition, the media, religious groups, academia, NGOs, the courts, asylum seekers, and the private sector since 2010.”¹⁵¹ The report emphasized that while the effects of attacks on democratic institutions are not immediately apparent, they are devastating over time.

However, while the OSCE reports chart a degradation of Hungary’s procedural democracy and Freedom House emphasizes Orbán’s deviations from liberalism, the 2018 V-Dem report provides in-depth data which specifically illustrates noticeable declines in particular aspects of the political system. The report charts democracy from 2007 to 2017, and argues that during this period, Hungary transformed from a liberal democracy into an electoral democracy.¹⁵² During the ten-year window, Hungary declined in its liberal democracy index (LDI) and its electoral democracy index (EDI). The V-Dem standard for classification as an “electoral democracy” requires national fairly free and fair multiparty elections along with an Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) above .5, which relies on prerequisites concerning democratic

¹⁵⁰ Freedom House, Hungary Country Report, March 11, 2019, Accessed April 15, 2019.
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/hungary>.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² V-Dem Institute, “Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018,” 2018,
https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

institutions. The LDI is made up of the electoral democracy index, liberal component index, egalitarian component index, participatory component index, and the deliberative component index. The data shows that Hungary declined in LDI because of declines in EDI, specifically in the sub-indices of freedom of association index, clean election index, and freedom of expression index.¹⁵³ This corroborates much of the information outlined in the OSCE reports and Fidesz's consolidation of state media apparatuses. To reiterate, from 2007 to 2017, which contained nearly two of Orbán's three supermajority governments, the most significant decline occurred in the index concerning freedom of expression and alternative sources to information. Also, five sub-indices declined, specifically, clean elections, freedom of association, the rule of law, participatory component, and deliberative component.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, similarities exist between the different sets of qualitative and quantitative data. As populist rhetoric, as indicated by the OSCE reports, resonated during elections, an illiberal crackdown on the media apparatus occurred. The progression from populist uproar to illiberal consolidation is supported by the reports and data indices, and illustrates just how populists can leverage crisis to ensure regime sustainability through illiberal systemic changes that prevent electoral losses. As indicated by his personal story and the OSCE data, Orbán views politics as a long-term endeavor, and used electoral gains to pivot toward illiberal governance for the longstanding preservation of power and Hungarian stability in a changing world.

¹⁵³ The 2018 V-Dem Annual Democracy report differentiates between liberal democracy and electoral democracy with the following explanation: "The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index reflects both the liberal and electoral principles of democracy, each of which constitutes one half of the scores for the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) is the first systematic measure of the de facto existence of all institutions in Robert Dahl's (1971, 1989) famous articulation of "polyarchy" as electoral democracy. For details about the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of all V-Dem's democracy indices, see Coppedge et al. (2018b) and Pemstein et al. (2018)."

V-Dem Institute, "Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018," 2018.

https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/3f/19/3f19efc9-e25f-4356-b159-b5c0ec894115/v-dem_democracy_report_2018.pdf.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

5. Conclusions

Populism and illiberalism will continue to influence Hungary in the near future. In an effort to discuss the crisis in which the world finds itself, the analysis interpreted the fundamental concepts of democracy, liberalism, neoliberalism, populism, and illiberalism within the context of Hungary's recent political transition from a liberal democracy. The V-Dem study concludes that Hungary is now an electoral democracy, while Freedom House describes it as partly free.

However, while the neoliberal failures of the early twenty-first century contributed to the rise of Hungarian populism and illiberalism, they acted as seeds within a unique Hungarian political garden. The economic, geopolitical, domestic, and cultural-historical dimensions are specific to Hungary. While the scholarly debates assist in explaining the macro societal shifts during periods of economic and social stress, the country specific details further complicate but simultaneously color in the remainder of the story. While the mainstream media paints Hungary as a swift regression back to intolerance and executive decision-making because of xenophobia and personal greed, populism and illiberal governance are largely a response to the European debt crisis. These trends are global in scale as economic nationalism, bilateral diplomacy, and an emphasis on the domestic retake the political space between many foreign policy actors.

However, the primary goal of this investigation is to illuminate the potential reasons for the populist surge and its subsequent illiberal pivot in Hungary. Confronted with regional and global crisis, Hungary deviated from liberal values to restore levels of national sovereignty at the expense of European unity. The crisis, a product of inaction in the face of financial and migratory pressures, turned European politics closer toward China and Russia. Neoliberalism ceased to serve small domestic economies and systems while increased state intervention became a viable alternative. The Eastern systems, now in many ways, compete with those of the West,

while countries like Hungary interestingly carve out a new ‘Third Path’ of hybrid governance. Fidesz acquired support through populist politics and subsequently legitimized its pivot toward illiberal governance through electoral gains. The ‘people’ voted for populism because real debate vanished in a political space of complete convergence and subordination to Brussels.

Material interests and anxieties are at the forefront of the populist debate. While left-wing and right-wing populists differ on their conceptualizations of ideology, the people, the elite, and the general will, their arguments center on material security. Anti-EU positions in Budapest center on economic autonomy and the right to reject asylum seekers, migrants, and refugees. A lack of debate on topics like austerity or immigration led to the populist and illiberal transition and the convergence of all politicians to Brussels-backed positions abandoned deliberation and forced support to the fringes. However opportunistic, populism at least focused on the crises.

As indicated by Hungary’s story, Orbán watched convergence develop and acted accordingly to succeed and consolidate power. The lesson? The EU, as a political actor, cannot expect loyalty if it so evidently fails to act during periods of significant crisis. The moral of Europe’s current populism chapter, is that inaction to financial and social pressures will also entice a response, and perhaps, a fatal one. As Europe approaches decisive parliamentary elections later this month and the relevant debates continue to focus on economic and migratory policy, the world will see just how successful Orbán and his illiberal comrades are in persuading the people against EU ideals. If the illiberal coalition wins by a large margin with its populist rhetoric, the decoupling of democracy and liberalism may prove final. Regardless of the outcome, scholars of European democracy will remember May 2019 as a month of change.

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