Orbán, iliberalism and Democracy in Hungary

Marco Gabbas

ABSTRACT: The article presents a historical, political and ideological overview of Viktor Orbán's rule in Hungary, which started in 2010 and which shows no signs of weakening. Specifically, the study seeks to ascertain the relations between Orbán's ostensible ideology – illiberalism – liberalism, and democracy. The article also explains how Orbán's anti-migrant measures are linked to the infringement of more general democratic guarantees.

KEYWORDS: Hungary. Orbán. Illiberalism. Democracy.

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RESUMO: O artigo apresenta um panorama histórico, político e ideológico do governo de Viktor Orbán na Hungria, iniciado em 2010 e que não mostra sinais de enfraquecimento. Especificamente, o estudo busca averiguar as relações entre a ideologia ostensiva de Orbán – o illiberalismo – o liberalismo e a democracia. O artigo também explica como as medidas anti-imigrantes de Orbán estão ligadas à violação de garantias democráticas mais gerais.

ALAVRAS-CHAVE: Hungria. Orbán. Illiberalismo. Democracia.

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1 Introduction

In 1992, the American scholar and former State Department functionary Francis Fukuyama published a seminal book which struck many and which unleashed many debates: *The End of History and the Last Man*. The USSR and its satellite states in Eastern Europe had fallen between 1989 and 1991. Precisely, the official dissolution of the Soviet Union which took place on December 25, 1991, seemed the end of an era. Fukuyama's book was an expansion of an essay published in 1989, where he stated that the world was witnessing "not just [...] the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (FUKUYAMA, 1989, p. 4).

Yet, a few decades after Fukuyama's statements, not many would consider them realistic, probably not even the author himself. On the contrary, over the first two decades of the 21st century there has been a growing concern about serious threats to democracy worldwide. The debate is wide and varied, and it is impossible to fully summarize it here. While these concerns are by far not limited to peripherical and semi-peripherical countries, special attention has been given to Central Eastern Europe (CEE). One of the reasons probably lies in the strength of the end-of-history sort of illusions. After the fall of the evil empire – as Ronald Reagan famously defined the USSR – which oppressed the captive nations of the Warsaw pact, and after these nations liberated themselves through a wave of revolutions, these countries were expected to embrace Western-style democracy and to live happily ever after.

Within Central Eastern Europe, the country which puzzles many and which might probably be considered the most striking example of this crisis of democracy is Hungary. Its prime minister Viktor Orbán has been in power since 2010 with a two-thirds majority, enjoys huge popularity – bordering on a cult of personality – and plans to stay in power at least until 2030 (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 11). He has changed the constitution countless times; he has put the judiciary, much of the media, and many of the

educational-academic institutions under political control; and he has poisoned the Hungarian public sphere with a racist-xenophobic discourse verging on paranoid conspiracy theories which one would deem unthinkable in the 21st century.

2 Abuse of Constitutionalism

The first crucial cornerstone of Hungary's democratic backslide was the series of Constitutional changes made by the first of several Orbán governments, elected in April 2010 obtaining two-thirds of the seats in parliament. Crucially, Orbán benefited from a complicated electoral law which gave him a huge two-thirds parliamentary majority, even though his party obtained slightly more than half of the votes. To understand the subsequent sections of the story I am telling, it is important to keep in mind that Orbán's crucial victory in 2010 was possible thanks to a number of factors. Firstly, Hungary was hit especially hard by the 2008-2009 economic crisis (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 136-143). Therefore, the conditions were ripe for a substantial section of voters to opt for a force which promised a radical break from the past. Secondly, the socialist-liberal coalition which ruled before Orbán tried to implement several austerity-driven, blood-and-tears economic measures which were unpopular for a large section of Hungarian society. Thirdly, this unpopularity acquired a name and a face with Ferenc Gyurcsány, a Communist-turned-businessman who probably became one of the least appreciated leaders in Hungarian history also thanks to leaked speech where he said his government had lied to the people – in reality, his debatable speech was skillfully manipulated and taken out of context by the opposition, but there is no space here to assess the details (LENDVAI, 2017). In more general terms, one may say that in 2010 the state socialist period was probably seen negatively by a majority of the population. However, the basic concept of socioeconomic rights had been internalized by many Hungarians, and was not considered as a synonym of Stalinism or dictatorship.

As Kovács and Tóth (2011) explain, the Constitution in force before Orbán's changes merely required a two-thirds parliamentary

majority for modification. Considering that the Hungarian parliament only has one chamber, this procedure was relatively easy, and lacked the checks present in other countries like referendums. As it shall be clear in the following analysis, Orbán's goal was not that of making minor constitutional changes. Going much further, he had the clear and stated intention to establish a radically different political regime. As clarified by Bálint Magyar (2016, p. 62), "Orbán had declared even in advance of the parliamentary elections of 2010 that he was not planning on a mere change of government, but rather the creation of a 'central field of power' that would secure him the opportunity for decades of 'calm' governing undisturbed by rival political forces." These future decades of stable governance were supposed to differ radically from the "two troubled decades of transition" (MAGYAR, 2016, p. 62), as Orbán defined them.

Soon after winning the elections, several constitutional changes were made, which were then rewritten into the new Constitution, called Basic Law. Freedom of expression and media pluralism were endangered. The parliament no longer had to approve a statute preventing media monopolies. A politically dependent Media Authority was created, whose head was to be appointed for a nine-year term. The Media Council was entitled to "impose large fines on print, online and broadcast media or even to shut down an organ permanently, which could have the effect of discouraging the press from expressing criticism" (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 190-191). Several international organs expressed concerns about these restrictions. OCSE (apud KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 191) noted that the changes extended traditional control on the new media and predicted that they could foster the "conditions for the realization" of a "'winner-takes-most' or indeed 'winner-takes-all' scenario [...] in defiance of the principle of the division of powers and of the checks and balances typical of liberal democracy." The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (apud KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 191) added that the new media bodies lacked the "appearance of independence and impartiality." Finally, Constitutional Justices were to "be nominated by a parliamentary committee whose members are appointed from and by the parties

according to their share of seats in parliament" (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p.193). Thus, there was no longer a need for consensus even in the nomination process.

Soon after the elections, a triumphalist ordinance was spread, which read that after

> 46 years of occupation, and 20 confused years of transition, Hungary has regained the right and power of self-determination [...] In spring 2010, the Hungarian nation gathered its strength once again, and brought about a successful revolution in the polling booth. Parliament declares that it recognizes and will respect this constitutional revolution [...] Parliament declares that [...] a new social contract was born [...] The pillars of our common future will be work, home, family [...] and order (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 196).

The new Basic Law was approved in March 2011 in only nine days, with no dialogue with the opposition. This was only one of the initial signs showing that Orbán did not consider the opposition a legitimate voice which should be listened to in such matters. According to the Basic Law, Hungary is no longer a secular state. The new National Creed emphasizes "family, nation, loyalty, faith [...] and is dominated by religious references" (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 198), not generally Christian but precisely Catholic. King Saint Stephen is praised for making Hungary "part of Christian Europe" (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 198), and Christian faith is given a nation-preserving role. The Basic Law clarifies that the "Hungarian constitutionalism [...] is based upon traditional Christian faith" (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011, p. 198). One chapter further allows life imprisonment, protects the fetus from inception, and rules out same-sex marriage. Crucially, the Basic Law also reduced and limited the independence of the Constitutional Court. Though forward-looking scholars like Kovács and Tóth (2011) warned about the risk of this constitutional turn, Orbánite organic intellectuals publicly defended the Basic Law in the media. These changes were a first, crucial step of a long march towards electoral autocracy.

3 Orbán Between Liberalism and Illiberalism

The term which is often used to define the Orbán era in Hungary is illiberalism. While this concept has been academically analyzed, what is puzzling about Orbán is that illiberalism is not a pejorative term applied by his detractors. By contrast, the leader willingly uses this term to describe himself and his political system. Orbán probably used this term for the first time in a path-breaking speech he delivered in Transylvania in July 2014. In Orbán's opinion, the 2008 economic crisis unleashed a radical crisis for liberal democracies. The leading country of Western liberalism, the US, was in decline precisely because of its liberal values, which included "corruption, sex, and violence" (ORBÁN, 2014). This somewhat gratuitous and paradoxical statement deserves some discussion. While the part on sex will be addressed later, suffice it to say that since 2012 Hungary managed to become the most corrupt country in the EU (TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL MAGYARORSZÁG, 2024).

Regarding violence, here it is not clear whether Orbán meant historic US liberalism towards firearms, US imperialism or violence in Hollywood movies. Certainly, however, committing systematic violence against trespassing migrants – as will be detailed later – , increasing military expenses, de facto supporting Putin's war on Ukraine and Israel's genocide against Palestinians does not really seem the behavior of a pacifist. In reality, it is difficult to judge this statement rationally. Possibly, Orhan Dragaš's (2021, p. 6) words may be borrowed, when he said that invoking "psychoanalysis," this sort of statements may be seen as "a form of projection, one of the most common mechanisms for defending oneself from one's own unacceptable subconscious." Following this interpretation, by lambasting the others for these evils, Orbán is "trying to defend himself from his own ego-driven subconscious" (DRAGAŠ, 2021, p. 7), which might tell him that he is actually guilty of these sins.

Orbán (2014) further claimed that Europe was so busy coddling migrants that it ignored the "white working class." Remarkably, Orbán openly said that the crisis of Western democracy was demonstrated by the success of Asia. Therefore, non-Western countries such as Russia, Turkey, India, China and Singapore should be taken as models. Some of them were not "liberal […]

possibly not even democracies" (ORBÁN, 2014), but they managed to become successful nations. Interestingly, in this list India is a democracy, while the other members – China, Singapore, Turkey, and Russia – have different ideological backgrounds, but all employ various levels of authoritarianism. In other words, Orbán (2014) wished to build an economically successful nation, even if this meant abandoning the "dogmas" of Western Europe. Finally, his project amounted to building no less than an "illiberal" system, "that is, not liberal" (ORBÁN, 2014).

However, Orbán did not specifically state he intended to build a dictatorship. Liberty would remain a crucial part of his system of government, but liberalism as an ideology would not be central: rather, he wished to find a "specific, national approach" (ORBÁN, 2014) to the country's problems. According to Stefano Bottoni (2020) – whose opinion is especially precious, since he used to be an Orbán supporter (BOTTONI, 2023) – the illiberal state Orbán has built is characterized by "conservative traditionalism," supposedly based on Christian values. However, one must note that the Christianity Orbán is inspired by is his justification for fundamentalism, homophobia and exclusivity. In other words, according to this sort of Orbán-style Christianity it is not so important who you are, but whom you exclude: migrants – generally identified with the Muslim faith – sexual minorities, etc. Paradoxically, Hungary is in many respects a highly secular society (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 95, 226) where even among believers, few actively practice religion. Half of the population is agnostic or atheist (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 235). One more remarkable paradox is that since the 1990s Hungary is the center of the European adult movie industry: "Nearly a quarter of all pornographic videos produced in Europe are made in and around Budapest, and most of the reigning Continental porn queens are Hungarian" (SZOVERFY MILTER; SLADE, 2005, p. 173).

Beyond the superficial religious-puritanic discourse, this situation came about because of economic, political and infrastructural reasons, as Csányi, Dés and Gregor (2022) clearly demonstrated. Firstly, women working in pornography are not mere victims, but make rational choices based on the relatively advantageous labor/pay ratio – that is, relatively good pay compared to relatively

few working hours (MILLER-YOUNG, 2014). Therefore, it is easy to understand that this profession might have been appealing to many women in a relatively poor country. But, as Csányi, Dés and Gregor (2022) explain, there are also other reasons. To embrace pornography in Hungary also meant making a radical cut with the past of the prudish state socialist regime: embracing liberal capitalism also meant that to perform in, to buy and to produce adult movies was a personal and economic liberty which should not be infringed. Finally, Hungary is "infrastructurally one of the most developed countries in the region" (CSÁNYI; DÉS; GREGOR, 2022, p. 2).

Following Orbán's self-definition – but also the growing scholarship which studies Hungarian illiberalism and sometimes takes his statements at face value – his political system is an absolute outlier, which stands out from liberal Western values – like ethnic inclusion, tolerance towards sexual minorities, rule of law and democratic institutions, secularism – and more specifically from the European Union (EU). In fact, Orbán has developed a growing anti-EU rhetoric which blames it for virtually any possible evil, whether real or imagined. The EU – which lately is euphemistically referred to simply as Brussels – is depicted as a supranational, dictatorial institution which wants to destroy Hungary with its "liberalism," which includes colonizing the country with migrants – who are also potential terrorists – and spreading gender propaganda – that is, that non-heteronormative sexualities are better than heterosexuality. In Orbán's propaganda, real or supposed EU supporters are even labeled "brusselites" – *brüsszeliták* – an offensive neologism probably created to recall *moszkoviták* – Muscovites – as the hated pro-Soviet Hungarian leaders were called (MAGYAR NEMZET, 2020).

However, Martino Comelli (2020) gives a groundbreaking interpretation according to which, Hungarian illiberalism – but this also applies to another country often compared to Hungary: Poland – has in reality much in common with European Christian Democracy, ordo-liberalism and some EU tenants. In fact, while Hungary may wage endless "cultural battles" against a supposedly despotic EU, it "simultaneously" does not challenge "economic

integration, austerity-driven European policies, and the entailed process of liberalization" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 3). In Hungary, "economic liberalism is accompanied by the resurgence of a reactionary wave" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 3). After further clarifying that liberalism and democracy are not necessarily synonyms – one can actually counter the other (COMELLI, 2020, p. 3-6) – Comelli (2020, p. 11) aptly notes that though Hungary may "rhetorically try to break with neoliberalism," it is "in fact dependent on it [...] when it comes to following EU's economic parameters oriented toward austerity, lowering the deficit, and [...] parsimonious social spending". From this point of view, Hungary "could be considered" one of the "best in class" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 11)

Let us take one more of Orbán's talking points, which is often considered specific to Hungary: anti-migrant discourse. While it is probably true that the level of anti-migrant slander in Hungary is unparalleled in other European countries – and made even more paradoxical by the fact that the migrant population in Hungary is insignificant, one of the lowest of the EU (EUROSTAT, 2023) – this kind of discourse and policymaking is by no means unique to Hungary. Citing Brubaker, Comelli (BRUBAKER apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 12-13) notes that this Christian identitarian discourse which sees aliens as a threat has been growing everywhere in Europe in the past few decades. This sort of Christianity may in fact have little to do with actual religious practice or with the belief in transcendent, supernatural beings; it is rather the symbol of a different civilization and identity. Though Brubaker (apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 13) states that "civilizationalism" is uniformly Islamophobic in Eastern and Western Europe, it somewhat "internalized liberalism" in the West, seemingly caring about free speech, gender equality, and gay rights. By contrast, in Eastern Europe civilizationalism is apparently "more national and critical of liberal democracy" (BRUBAKER apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 12-13).

Comelli (2020, p. 13), however, notes that this new category of West-European civilizationalism, supposedly different from more outspoken East-European nationalism, does not hold water. Western exclusivist discourse is not "any less nationalist, Islamophobic, or xenophobic" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 12-13). It is

enough to look at Angela Merkel who announced the failure of multiculturalism (COMELLI, 2020, p. 12). Her emphasis on culture – migrants cannot adapt to German culture – masks the economic necessity of foreign workers used to perform the most underpaid, dangerous and backbreaking jobs. But Comelli (2020, p. 12) gives further examples like the Swiss constitution, which explicitly prohibits the building of minarets; laws banning facial veils and headscarves in Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and France; the 2002 draconian Italian law against migrants. Finally, Brubaker (apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 13) contradicts himself by saying that West-European "'liberalism is deeply illiberal." In other words, this false

> dichotomy rather echoes the common orientalizing discourse, according to which "the East" is always more nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and "illiberal" than Western Europe, even though Western Europe shows identical tendencies, not only in parties labeled as populist but in center-right Christian Democratic parties (COMELLI, 2020, p. 13).

Racist laws approved by leftwing parties in Western Europe would deserve separate discussion. By contrast, Ivan Kalmar (apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 13) notes that racism in the East and West of Europe is very similar and can even be found in the same demographic strata. According to Kalmar (apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 13), "the difference in xenophobia is in the degree of it, which is structurally explained by the fact that the aggressive, capitalist transition generated deeper social woes, poverty, and resentment in CEE than in western Europe, and this radicalized the population further." Overall, Orbán's antidemocratic, discriminatory and homophobic policies "do not challenge the economic model, which remains the neoliberal subsidization of foreign direct investment in manufacturing appreciated and encouraged by core countries" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 13).

Focusing on Orbán's anti-gender agenda, Kováts (apud COMELLI, 2020, p. 14) clarifies that "'gender policy was reformulated by the government as family policy, and family policy was reformulated as demographic policy." In reality, Bottoni (2020, p.

165, 245) clearly shows that Orbán's much trumpeted emphasis on family welfare is grossly hypocritical, since this social policy privileges a minority of rich families and moreover, was undone by wild cutbacks – ranging from 30 to 40% – on healthcare, education, and public administration. Some even call this model "welfare for the wealthy," since it favors those with privileged, stable jobs, and not the precariat. This sort of Bismarckian welfare, perfectly consistent with the Christian Democratic social-policy package, is based on a traditional, heteronormative family implying a female caregiver and a male breadwinner (COMELLI, 2020, p. 14). Therefore, it is no surprise that hundreds of thousands of children who grow up with single mothers suffer disproportionately in this unequal welfare model (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 245). By contrast, Eastern Europe under state socialism "showed a much better record of gender equality in terms of access to the labor market and parity of wages. In the case of motherhood, families could benefit from an extensive network of social services that were scarce in Western Europe" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 15).

Following this paradox, in 1994 the then Minister for Women and Youth Angela Merkel clearly saw the high level of female employment in the former GDR as a problem. Unemployment should be tackled by women from the Eastern part of Germany learning to stay home and letting their husbands work instead (COMELLI, 2020, p. 15). This attention to families could actually be an answer to socialist gender policies. On its part, Hungary "adopted political strategies and legislations to support" a "traditional gender order by adopting the classical Christian-Democratic script, which has recently been re-baptized as 'family mainstreaming'" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 15). The term "family mainstreaming" was first used by the sociologist of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Pierpaolo Donati in 2010. In 2011, the Hungarian presidency of the EU endorsed this term. As we can see, the Christian Democratic principle that "care over the individual should take place mainly at the level of the family without state interference" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 15) was smoothly adopted by Orbán's Hungary.

Furthermore, the "flexibilization of labor and workfare programs in the EU" changed the Bismarckian pattern "without

moving away from it [...] once again" bringing "countries together across the supposed West–East divide" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 16). The EU's austerity actually contributed to polarization, because its victims tend to vote for parties outside of the mainstream. Huebscher, Sattler and Wagner (2020) came to this conclusion through a thorough study of several European countries: the UK, Spain, Portugal, and Germany. Comelli (2020, p. 16) rather sees differences in timing, not in substance, since Eastern Europe went through austerity in the 1990s-2000s while it came later to several Western countries. After 1989, Hungary still had a "relatively generous" welfare system, but its nature greatly changed after joining the EU, "marking a radical departure from the previous universalism of the socialist period" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 16). With the regime change, Hungary lost 1.2 million jobs. Moreover, to join the common European market, Hungary had to abide by severe rules on state deficits and spending. These reforms "were almost universally impacted by the EU-imposed austerity," and welfare had to be strongly downsized (COMELLI, 2020, p. 16). To meet the EU's requirements on debt reduction, Hungary had serious issues of soaring public debt, public revenues and public spending.

The Bismarckization which took place in Eastern Europe put work and families at the center, promoting private roles in previously public sectors. The problem is that the OECD and the EU have long emphasized the need for job flexibility – i.e., precarity – even though there is no or scarce evidence that these policies promote growth and employment. By contrast, the detrimental socioeconomic consequences are evident, especially in Eastern Europe, which suffered the worst precarization. Precarization "was [also] implemented faster" in Eastern Europe "because of the low trade union density" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 17). Comelli (2020, p. 17) concludes his analysis by saying that Orbán's "attacks against the EU," and his

> cries to protect the national population from Brussels, are [...] rhetorical, while neoliberal labor policies and the Bismarckian welfare system remain unchallenged. Even beyond that, the adaptations of Bismarckian welfare, which itself is inseparable from Christian identity politics, are common

in the EU. These adaptations "are historically infused with" Christian Democratic thought and "essentially differ only in periodization and degree" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 17). In a way, Orbán's Hungary is the product of "culturalization of discussions of essentially economic problems," and of the "employment of antagonistic demagogic rhetoric" directed at "internal and external enemies" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 19), including Brussels. "The strengthening nationalism, Christian identity politics, and an anti-Brussels narrative, however, are not a sign of a desire" of Orbán's conservative regime to "challenge neo-liberalization; rather, they [...] merely [...] create an illusion of solidarity, direction, and shared destiny while simultaneously increasing the hardship for their marginalized populations" (COMELLI, 2020, p. 19).

Comelli's (2020) analysis questions Orbán's claims of illiberalism and shows that it was in fact influenced by a particular strand of West-European Christian Democratic thought. To further this analysis, Losurdo's (2014) work on the development of classical liberalism is also instructive, noting that liberalism evolved as the ideology of a wealthy, European white minority, and was always characterized by crucial exclusion clauses. While one of these clauses was meant to exclude the propertyless classes from political participation, another was based on race, and aimed to exclude non-European peoples. As we can see, these characteristics of classical liberalism are largely compatible with Orbán's regime. We have seen that Orbán's much trumpeted family welfare is, in reality, directed at the privileged and the rich. However, the gist of Orbán's ultra-bourgeois regime does not lie in one single hypocritical policy. Rather, what he calls the System of National Cooperation – slightly reminiscent of fascist corporatism – is really a well-working, well-thought out and well-organized system of oligarchic ultra-capitalism, partially modelled on the Russian example. Bottoni (2020, p. 179-181) clarified that Orbán partially sought to model his political-economic system on Putin's Russia. Orbán and his advisors carefully studied how Putin strengthened his power in the 2000s, by establishing a power vertical which subjected the oligarchs to the political elite while substantially keeping the profound oligarchic nature of the system. Interestingly,

this studying and friendship-building relationship was built not only through personal meetings between Orbán and Putin. In fact, just a few weeks before the 2010 elections, two businessmen close to Fidesz, Lajos Simicska and Zsolt Nyerges, visited the headquarters of the FSB – the Russian secret service heir of the KGB – in Moscow, and had a meeting with one high-ranking official (SZABÓ; PETHŐ, 2018).

Henceforth, to build his quasi-regime, Orbán borrowed ideas and techniques both from the Western, supposedly "liberal" world, and from Putin's oligarchic capitalism. It is almost as if he aimed to build a perfect capitalist system mixing the methods of both worlds. In a way, Hungary has become a smaller example of Russian oligarchic capitalism, meaning that a significant share of the economy is controlled by a small mafia-like (MAGYAR, 2016) gang of oligarchs like Zsolt Nyerges and Lőrincz Mészáros, who were able to accumulate much of their wealth thanks to their personal friendship with the prime minister. This original situation can probably be explained by ideological affinities – Orbán appreciates the reactionary, ultra-nationalist, anti-gender and Christian fundamentalist nature of Putin's regime – but also by sheer political cynicism and opportunism. While berating the "brusselites," Hungary is still a major recipient of EU funds (BAYER, 2018), and does not yet show serious signs of leaving the EU or NATO – though its position on the war in Ukraine stands out from all other EU members. Remarkably, in 2022 Hungary was the NATO member which spent the highest percentage of its state budget on military equipment (PORTFOLIO, 2023).

4 Anti-Migrant Discourse in Hungary and Democracy

Since Hungary's treatment of migrants is usually considered one of the elements of its democratic backslide (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2022), a reflection on the general meaning of democracy and on its relation to migration is in order. A comparison is also needed between Hungary and other Western countries which often accuse it of violating migrants' rights. Democracy is usually explained as "people's power," yet many do not emphasize that in the classical Athenian democracy *demos* meant the

enfranchised community, those enjoying political rights. This category consisted of approximately half of Athens's population, since women, foreigners and slaves were excluded from political rights. Moreover, Losurdo (2014) emphasized that the development of liberalism as an ideology and of liberal democracy as a concrete form of government de facto resulted in a master-race democracy on a planetary scale. Classical liberal thinkers theoretically justified slavery and colonialism, while both were applied by European liberal democracies. In other words, the modern liberal master-race resembled the Athenian *demos*: full political rights and human dignity were the privilege of a specific group. Finally, Carol C. Gould (2000, p. 426) noted that "formal democracy and especially the procedure of majority vote, not only disregards underlying racism, but in fact exacerbates it in practice, because votes can give enormous power to an absolute majority of one race" thereby permitting a "tyranny of the majority."

In reality, Hungary's behavior towards migrants cannot be assessed without putting it into an overall EU framework. The EU is often praised for the right to free movement it guarantees to its citizens thanks to the Schengen Agreement. Yet, since its very first version signed in 1985, the Schengen Agreement was meant to grant freedom of movement to the citizens of the signing countries, while jointly organizing to protect the common borders from external aliens (KORTE, 2022, p. 466-467). With the EU's economy becoming more and more dependent on migrants' labor and with their number growing, a status quo developed which is sometimes called fortress Europe. All EU member states apply similar forms of state racism (BASSO, 2010) to non-EU migrants, and this institutional discrimination is based on citizenship, not on biological race. In other words, all non-EU citizens are discriminated against within the EU, and this legal discrimination is difficult to gauge for many precisely because it is not based on biology or on color. Today, to explicitly do so would not be acceptable. This state racism mainly works through the extremely arbitrary power that allows single member states to grant or deny the residence permits that non-EU nationals need to legally reside in EU territory.

Since residence permits can be difficult or impossible to obtain – and they usually have a limited validity, requiring continuous renewals over time – non-EU migrants are caught into an eternal limbo where they can become "illegal" at any time, and consequently detained and expelled. Comparing Western Europe and Hungary in this respect is a very interesting example of two cases where similar patterns of institutional discrimination are used for different reasons. While Western Europe has become heavily dependent on migrant labor, this is not quite the case in Hungary. Hungary is a smaller economy, and it has sufficient native labor to satisfy most of its labor demand. In other words, in Hungary there is not the double job market typical of West-European countries, where migrants can usually only find the most menial jobs. A serious demographic crisis, coupled with Hungarian emigration, forces the country to silently invite migrant workers (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 247-252), but they are not numerically significant. Therefore, institutional discrimination against migrants in Hungary (KALMÁR, 2019) cannot be explained by the organic, economic necessity of exploiting an internal colony.

What is remarkable about Hungary is the high level of anti-migrant hysteria – probably unparalleled in other European countries – given that the number of migrants in the country is very low (EUROSTAT, 2023). Henceforth, how might this hostility be explained? As stated above, Orbán's ultra-nationalist turn did not start with the famous 2014 speech, but as early as 2010, when his Fidesz party won the first of several consecutive terms. Certainly, the Transylvanian speech indicated a radicalizing turn of the nationalist, ethnicist pattern set in the new Basic Law (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011). When talking about the "white working class" supposedly ignored by Western liberalism to favor migrants, Orbán (2014) made the first step in mainstreaming what is sometimes termed Redbrownism. In this expression, red symbolizes the radical left, while brown, reminiscent on Hitler's brownshirts, indicates the radical right. Orbán's (2014) use of the term "working class" had even a Marxian flair. However, by restricting this category to its white members, Orbán (2014) gave a further hint as to what his future politics would be.

Orbán's next occasion to build the image of a dangerous external enemy came with the so-called 2015 "migration crisis." In reality, this was a perceived crisis when certain countries actually received less migrants than in previous years, and which could have been managed more rationally and with less panic. However, the fact remains that in 2015 Hungary – which has less then 10 million inhabitants – received an unprecedented number of migrants, more than 400,000. They were mostly coming from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (KORTE, 2022, p. 458-459). Recognizing the novelty of the situation, these migrants did not represent a threat to Hungary's security and public order. They were not terrorists, but men, women and children who mostly intended to cross Hungary to settle in other West-European countries. Though an active xenophile minority of Hungarians commendably organized to aid migrants, the majority were drawn to a xenophobic discourse strongly tied to conspiracy theories. To clarify, conspiracy theories are unfalsifiable, circular ideas which often contain a kernel of truth which is then brought to absurd extremes. One acute observer noted that conspiracy theories are often believed by frustrated individuals who find in them easy explanations for complicated problems, as well as an outlet for their anger (WU MING 1, 2021).

Today, conspiracy theories are often spread from below via cheap and immediate means such as the internet and social networks. What is remarkable about Orbán's exploitation of the 2015 "crisis" is that a grand migration conspiracy theory was spread from above, from the highest political powers and from the media it controlled. This theory included anti-migrant hatred, Islamophobia and antisemitism. Orbán started to accuse the Hungarian-American Jewish financier and philanthropist, George Soros, of being an occult conspirator who planned to destroy Hungary through mass migration. Fidesz vehemently opposed the mandatory EU refugees' quotas, however Hungary ended up accepting 1,300 refugees, slightly more than the required 1,294 (KALMAR, 2020, p. 188). Even after this deal and after Hungary built an infamous wall on its Serbian border to block further trespassers, Orbán continued to claim that Muslim migration threatened

Christian Europe. A phantomatic "Soros plan" would supposedly "force Hungary to accept migrants at its own expense. Soros was represented as the hidden master of all [...] NGOs and, indeed, of the forces" in the EU and in several national governments that "fostered the agenda of multiculturalism [...] gay rights and gender equality," an alleged "attack on the values of the Christian world. The settling of Muslims in [...] Hungary was seen [...] as part [...] of the same plot" (KALMAR, 2020, p. 189).

Clearly, this Soros Plan or Soros Myth is discursively linked to the countless Jewish conspiracy theories which have circulated over the eras, though Kalmar (2020, p. 189) sees it as a present-day version of the tsarist forgery *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, according to which a group of Jewish sages sought to conquer the world using both communism and capitalism. Kalmar (2020, p. 189-190) found precise analogies between the two plots, like the role of Jewish bankers – the chief of the Zion elders is Rothschild – and links with the Illuminati and the Freemasons. The Soros Myth also echoes the phantomatic Kalergi plan, aiming at racial-ethnic substitution. Even though legitimate criticism of Soros has been voiced (WU MING 1, 2021), Orbán's conspiracy is on an entirely different level. In 2017, Orbán even launched a "national consultation" on the Soros Plan, where Hungarians were supposed to approve or reject Soros's ideas. These ideas included that Hungary should pay migrants 9 million HUF in welfare, that European "languages and cultures" should be put "into the background so that integration of illegal immigrants happens [...] more quickly," and that "migrants [should] receive milder criminal sentences for the crimes they commit" (KALMAR, 2020, p. 193).

In 2018, Orbán (apud KALMAR, 2020, p. 193) even declared that Soros was an enemy

> unlike what we are. It is not national, but international. It does not believe in work, but speculates with money. It is not generous but vengeful, and always aims at the heart, especially when [the heart] is red-white-and-green [the colors of the Hungarian flag] Europe and Hungary are in the very midst of a civilizational struggle.

Again, this statement is full of antisemitic undertones, as well as anti-Soros posters echoing the Nazi trope of the laughing Jew (WU MING 1, 2021). Precisely, the apparent anti-capitalism of attacking one Jewish "speculator" while establishing oligarchic capitalism in one's country is disturbingly reminiscent of Hitler denouncing Jewish bankers while praising American industrialist Henry Ford in the *Mein Kampf*. However, Orbán was careful not to engage in extreme antisemitism, leaving that to more outspoken social-network hate speech. Bottoni (2020, p. 238-241) denies Orbán's use of antisemitism, rightly mentioning his opportunistic alliance with Israel and with Hungarian right-wing Jewish fundamentalism. This story is so paradoxical, however, that two Jewish propaganda experts, Birnbaum and Finkelstein, were responsible for Orbán's anti-Soros campaign. In Birnbaum's (apud WU MING 1, 2021) words: "Our campaign did not make anybody antisemitic who was not so already. Possibly it showed one more victim to anti-Semites, but nothing more. I would do it again." As Kalmar (2020) highlights, however, Orbán's anti-migrant, anti-Soros campaign was a masterful example of anti-antisemitism. In other words, one ostensibly rejects antisemitism – for example by boasting friendly ties with Netanyahu – to be able to implement a more sanitized, hidden version of antisemitism.

5 The Wall of Infamy

Since 2018, xenophobic discourse in Hungary has continued unabated. In this, the wall on the Serbian border had an important role which is often overlooked. Firstly, when teams of underpaid unemployed Hungarians started to build the double wire fence in 2015, the news shocked many who remembered the 1989 fall of the Berlin wall as the beginning of a new, freer era. Moreover, Hungary had always prided itself on the Pan-European picnic of August 1989, when peaceful demonstrators crossed the Hungarian-Austrian border, symbolically challenging the Iron Curtain. To be precise, the wall

> consists of two fences that are about four meters high and are fitted with barbed wire. Parts of it are electrified and reinforced with welded wire mesh and a concrete foundation, and it is also equipped with heat sensors and cameras. The border is controlled by the police, the army, and the newly created "Border Hunters." There have been numerous reports of extreme police violence against migrants at the border (KORTE, 2022, p. 463).

However, the Hungarian government relevantly justified the building of the fence tying it to the aforementioned Schengen Agreement (KORTE, 2022, p. 466-467). Since the Agreement obliges the ratifying members to protect common borders, by building the wall Hungary was simply acting according to the Agreement's spirit. Korte (2022, p. 459), who specifically studied the political discourse around the building of the wall, notes that it was built while presenting migrants as threatening, culturally different, criminal and dangerous. After the fence was built, Orbán (apud KORTE, 2022, p. 459) clarified: "Hungary is encircled, and if things continue like this, we will be scalped by tens of thousands [...] who want to make off with Hungarians' money." In 2015, Hungary also passed new anti-migrant laws: housing and integration programs for refugees were cut, irregular border trespassers could be legally resent to Serbia without any formal procedure, and irregular border trespassing was declared a criminal offence punishable by incarceration. Moreover, Hungarian authorities now expel migrants to Serbia who did not even cross through the Serbian border.

In reality, the building of the infamous wall was driven more by internal political motives than by an objective security threat. Korte (2022, p. 461), who interviewed several Hungarian officials and activists on the issue, underscores that the fence was built in a "period of internal political tensions and power struggles." The wall was also used as an instrumental propaganda point to win the 2018 elections. As stated by Orbán (apud KORTE, 2022, p. 462), "if we end up with an internationalist government instead of a nationalistic one, they will dismantle the fence protecting Hungary." Apart from preventing some migrants from trying to cross the border, the fence has been a veritable discursive tragedy. Once built, it did

not calm Hungarians' fears, but fostered them. The wall was one crucial step in a long series of enemy-construction and fearmongering. The campaign around the wall also served as an excuse to exacerbate hostility against internal discriminated groups like the homeless and the Roma.

Furthermore, anti-NGO laws were passed in this anti-migrant frenzy, and this explains why many interviewees contacted by Korte (2022) were afraid of having their names published. Local researchers also noted that the wall-related xenophobic campaign had a negative impact on foreigners who had been living in Hungary for a long time (KORTE, 2022, p. 462). By bombarding the Hungarian audience, this expensive campaign somewhat closed Hungarian society in "into a cage" (KORTE, 2022, p. 463). According to several Hungarian organizations, however, the fence itself is not stopping trespassers. Rather, those who manage to cross are summarily pushed back, and Turkey also started keeping migrants in after signing an agreement with the EU (KORTE, 2022, p. 463, 466). Crucially, this conviction is not held only by a few pro-migrant organizations. Korte (2022, p. 467) clearly states that most of the interviewees – and this includes Hungarian officials – "agreed that the fence did not stop migratory movements but instead diverted them." What is more, Serbia did not seriously protest against the fortification. Serbia is a candidate to join the EU, and one of the prerequisites of admission is that new member states can protect the EU's sacred borders.

6 Is There an Opposition in Hungary?

The importance of the wall as a symbolic means to scare and embed Hungarian society cannot be overemphasized. Sadly, the wall is also one good example of the overall weakness of the Hungarian opposition, which is a motley crew ranging from Blairite socialists to former far-rightists. In the 2022 elections, the oppositional candidate was Péter Márky-Zay, a Christian right-wing conservative. Remarkably, in his official electoral program migration holds a microscopic spot on the very last page. The wall is not even mentioned. While vaguely promising more humanity and

justice for migrants, the program stresses that "illegal migration" must be strictly fought, but it does not mention that much discrimination is legal (MÁRKY-ZAY, 2022, p. 70). Márky-Zay (2022, p. 70) also rightly criticizes the Orbán regime's arbitrariness in managing migration, since it de facto sold permanent residence permits and citizenship to convicted criminals who had political connections in Hungary. However, in 2021 Márky-Zay made problematic and embarrassing statements about migrants, even displaying large "migrant counters" which were supposed to prove that Orbán – and not Soros – was responsible for bringing migrants into the country. He clarified that in the case of his victory, he would not tear the fence down. As he declared to journalists: "Orbán is not anti-migration, on the contrary, he organizes migration as George Soros's best pupil, nobody brought in more migrants than he [Orbán] did" (HVG.HU, 2021).

Though these statements may be interpreted as a provocation and as an attack to Orbán's hypocrisy, they are still dangerous because they build on the opponent's anti-migrant discourse. Foreigners living in Hungary would probably have preferred to hear Márky-Zay saying that migrants are not a danger, but their hopes were ill-placed. Does the opposition really believe that the fence is necessary to protect Hungary's safety? According to what a Hungarian Socialist Party politician declared off the record to a foreign journalist, voters are "not ready" to do away with the wall yet (GRIMALDI, 2023). From this sincere declaration, one implies that the opposition knows perfectly well that the wall is useless and/or harmful, but it does not dare to say so openly, evidently regarding Hungarians as incapable of understanding this simple reality.

One Hungarian radical leftist once wrote me that migrants cannot be defended in Hungary, since it would be "political suicide." To borrow this terminology, with this partial and accommodating strategy which parasitizes on the opponent's discourse, the opposition is systematically killing itself. No wonder that when offered a choice between the original and a bad copy, voters opted for the former in the 2022 elections. Moreover, there is no evidence that the Hungarian opposition tried to contact members

of the small migrant community living in Hungary, while developing its migration policy. This is no surprise. As in other European countries, non-EU migrants are a disenfranchised minority which is only spoken of, but which cannot speak. Following this pattern of epistemological violence, only the master race can produce truthful and credible knowledge about migrants, migrants themselves do not have a right to speak. They remain invisible or hardly visible. At most, they can be used as an abstract metaphor which can signify evil and danger or an Uncle Tom sort of pity, depending on the side of the native political spectrum. Sadly, the opposition did not understand the link between anti-migrant psychosis and Orbán's increasing attacks on formal democracy. By brainwashing the population about an imaginary external danger, Orbán further strengthened his position in 2018, and this allowed him to pass more anti-democratic laws which negatively affect all Hungarians.

7 Final Considerations

Hungary's democratic backslide since the beginning of Orbán's reign in 2010 can – and has – been interpreted in several ways, from the moderate nationalist (BOTTONI, 2020) to the liberal (MAGYAR, 2016) to the critical leftist (COMELLI, 2021). All these interpretations are useful to better understand what happened: a radical change like the one witnessed since 2010 cannot be interpreted through mono-causal explanations. While Orbán's shrewdness and lust for power bear enormous responsibility for what has happened, one must also acknowledge that by 2010 he had fertile ground for action. By that time, Hungarian multi-party democracy was young and fragile. Many Hungarians were sick and tired of corrupt "socialist" politicians who seemed to mostly care about their personal wealth and about the sale of Hungary's economy to foreign multinational companies (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 121-148; MAGYAR, 2016, p. 15-56). Moreover, there was a widespread, frustrated nationalism which only lacked a catalyst. This frustrated nationalism is linked to what Magyar (2016, p. 22) aptly calls "systematic expulsion of responsibility," and which is a sadly widespread characteristic of Hungarian political and popular discourse.

According to this discourse – which may also be called methodological nationalism or national victimology – Hungary is a "long suffering [...] nation" (MAGYAR, 2016, p. 22). That is, historical episodes when Hungary suffered at the hands of others are obsessively and endlessly repeated; episodes when others suffered because of Hungary are systematically ignored and deleted from history. For example, Hungary's unachieved independence in 1848, the territorial losses after World War I, the despotism of the pro-Soviet regime and the crackdown of the 1956 uprising are rightly remembered. On the other hand, Miklós Horthy's alliance with the Third Reich, his responsibility for the deportation of Hungarian Jews, and the crimes committed by Hungarian occupying troops in Soviet territory are either deleted from history or not equally emphasized. In reality, Orbán skillfully used history as a weapon, even putting historian Mária Schmidt – who also has the privilege of being Hungary's richest woman – at the head of a veritable program of historical manipulation and falsification. Those who initially voted for Orbán, thinking that there could be nothing worse than the liberal-socialist alliance which ruled previously, were proved wrong. While Bottoni (2020) defines Orbán a "despot," the European Parliament officially defined Hungary an "electoral autocracy" in 2022.

Though the importance of Orbán's victory in 2010 is sometimes minimized (BOTTONI, 2020, p. 12), it was thanks to that first victory that he could radically change the constitution in an anti-democratic, exclusivist and ethnicist way (KOVÁCS; TÓTH, 2011). This paved the way for future constitutional changes, or for what Sajó (2021) terms abuse of constitutionalism. Orbán's turn can be considered strongly anti-democratic if we look at the many clever tricks to legally manipulate the elections, at the erosion of checks and balances, at the attacks on freedom of opinion and at the limiting of the judiciary's independence. However, this soft regime is *democratic* in the sense that I elucidate above. That is, it privileges an enfranchised *demos* to the detriment of a legally discriminated minority of non-EU citizens. In this, it is not fundamentally different from other EU countries, though levels of specific anti-migrant violence may vary according to the given time and place. From this point of view, Orbán's semi-regime is a master-race democracy

compatible with the most reactionary forms of classical liberalism. Not incidentally, the European Parliament's (2022) communiqué labelling Hungary an "electoral autocracy" focuses on the violation of formal democratic rules, while the rights of "migrants, asylum seekers and refugees" come at the very end.

Even recognizing Orbán's skillfulness and ability, to state that he is a political genius (BOTTONI, 2023) is a gross exaggeration and an undeserved compliment. Orbán is not the first character in history who skillfully uses scapegoating and malevolent propaganda to increase his power, and who turns frustrated nationalism into megalomania. Certainly, from an amoral *realpolitik* point of view, Orbán achieved many successes. Beyond his personal declarations, an indispensable reading to understand Orbán is Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Through all his political career, Orbán was faithful to one fundamental principle: the ends justify the means. He caused an anti-migrant collective psychosis in a country without migrants; used Islamophobia as an ally of the Muslim conservative Erdogan; exploited antisemitic tropes while being allied with Israel; presented himself as the defender of Christian Europe against Western hyper-sexualized society while ruling Europe's porn heaven; made Europe's most anti-Russian country into the most pro-Russian; used a working-class rhetoric while fostering oligarchic capitalism and engaging in a ruthless class struggle from above; posed as a pacifist while increasing military expenses; attacked communism while somewhat repeating some of the most anti-democratic tactics of Stalinoid regimes.

Long-term forecasts for the future are obviously impossible. At the time of writing – July 2024 – Orbán still enjoys a high popularity rate (DNH, 2023), even though the capital is governed by the opposition. Even the war in the bordering Ukraine started in 2022 did not damage his popularity. In the shorter, foreseeable term, he may well fulfil his plan to rule until 2030, or even longer. The Hungarian opposition should take advantage of the remaining spaces of liberty to wage long-term resistance – political opponents and journalists are not yet murdered in Hungary, unlike in Russia. Hungary's anti-democratic turn should concern the international public opinion, because similar patterns are arising and may arise in the future in other parts of the world.

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