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Autocratic Nationalism in Hungary: Viktor Orbán as a Hegemonic Actor

Luke Cooper

“The regime of Viktor Orbán is post-ideological.” This is a common refrain of contemporary Hungarian opposition leaders and activists, but is it correct? They argue the system created by Orbán is not underpinned by a coherent ideological worldview. Instead, it constitutes a vehicle for the extension of his personal power through the control of the governing party, Fidesz, which holds an increasingly vise-like grip on the Hungarian state itself. When I met the Hungarian academic and former politician András Bozóki in the fall of 2018, he reflected this wider sensibility found in Hungary, describing Orbánism as “postmodern despotism”¹—that is, a vision that deliberately avoids building upon a firm foundation within a particular ideological family. In written form, Bozóki has elaborated further on this point: “Instead of ideas, Orbán believes in maximizing power, because for him it is not freedom but tight-fisted leadership that can assure order.”² Distinguishing this from conventional conservatism, he adds: “Viktor Orbán is in no way a conservative politician; he is a nationalist and populist leader who prefers confrontation to compromise. He thinks that competition is always a zero-sum game in which ‘either-or’ choices cannot be transformed into ‘more or less’ kinds of solutions.”³ Orbán’s somewhat flexible ideological history often serves to underpin this perspective. A one-time liberal student leader and activist in the peaceful revolution of 1989, Orbán would turn the Fidesz party towards conservatism after its unsuccessful campaign in the elections of 1994. Zsuzsanna Szelenyi, a fellow veteran of 1989 who left the party at the time of its conservative turn away from liberalism, recalls how Orbán had already exhibited autocratic tendencies from the moment he assumed the presidency of the party in 1992: “When Orbán took over the party he changed the internal structures very quickly.” And there was a similarity, she argues, to his eventual takeover of the Hungarian political system: “it was completely the same story.”⁴ This emphasis on Orbán’s personal ruthlessness, ambition, and lust for power is common among the liberal opposition in Hungary. Yet there is also a recognition by Hungarians and other Europeans alike that the rise of authoritarianism is an international phenomenon, requiring reflection on its structural qualities. In this respect, the global significance of Orbán lies in the ideas that he has promoted internationally: the ideological ambitions that he advocates other states take up.

This poses the question of whether there is indeed such a thing as “Orbánism.” Opponents of the Hungarian government tend to eschew this claim, instead arguing that Orbán’s rule is characterized by three main features. Firstly, Orbán is represented as holding a preference for maximizing personal power and control more than any specific ideological commitment or vision. Secondly, he is seen as a chameleon character who is able to adopt different ideological standpoints as and when necessary in order to maintain and extend his power. Thirdly, he rejects seeking consensus through deliberation; instead, politics is treated as a zero-sum game to maximize personal power and vanquish political opponents. In what follows, I will offer a broader conceptualization of Orbánism that treats it as a coherent ideological movement, rather than a kleptocratic enterprise for the expansion of Orbán’s personal power (although, as we shall see, these two possible characterizations are far from mutually exclusive).

¹ András Bozóki, Professor in the Department of Political Science at the Central European University, interview with the author, November 5, 2018, Vienna.

² András Bozóki, “Broken Democracy, Predatory State, and Nationalist Populism,” in *The Hungarian Patient: Social Opposition to an Illiberal Democracy*, ed. Péter Krasztev and Jon Van Til (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 15.

³ Bozóki, “Broken Democracy,” 15.

⁴ Zsuzsanna Szelenyi, interview with the author, September 19, 2018, Vienna.

Drawing on Orbán’s speeches since the Fidesz party’s return to power in 2010, as well as a 2019 interview with the Hungarian government’s international spokesman Zoltán Kovács, I question the claim that the love of power alone drives Orbán forward and argue there is ideological coherence to the political system Fidesz has created. At the heart of this lies Orbán’s rejection of liberalism and advocacy of an “illiberal state.”⁵ Strikingly, Orbán’s original take up of this term in a 2014 speech⁶ was novel in its embrace of a term that has primarily been used pejoratively to describe formally democratic states with weak constitutional and rule-of-law protections.⁷ In contrast, Orbán has positively vaunted his illiberalism in Hungary and overseas. In doing so, Orbán has become, I argue, a hegemonic actor in the Gramscian sense: that is, he has sought to bind Hungarian society around a new ideological framework counterposed to the *status quo ante*.⁸ This, in turn, made Orbán a counter-hegemonic actor within the broader international scene as he openly rejected the liberalism that has been a central assumption of post-war European governance.

In combination, these kinds of discourses can be labeled “autocratic nationalism,”⁹ a distinct amalgam of ideologies that constitutes a new rival hegemonic force in 21st-century Europe. This conception is consistent with what the editors of the present volume define as “illiberal democracy,” a mode of institutional politics that maintains the ritual of voting to confer collective legitimacy on governments but dispenses with a range of rights-based and rule-of-law elements associated with liberal democratic practices. However, the conception used here foregrounds the identitarian element in this political vision, highlighting the critical relationship between a form of legitimacy based on ethnic nationalism and a type of rulership that is highly centralized, illiberal, and corrupt. I pursue the argument for Orbán as a coherent autocratic nationalist in three parts.

First, I contrast the accounts of power offered by Bertrand Russell and Antonio Gramsci. While these two figures are rarely considered in combination, they are relevant to this discussion in the following respects: Russell argues that power must always be socially contextualized; Gramsci explores the modalities that govern how power is exercised and contested. Both suggest, correctly in my view, that power is always and everywhere an ideological phenomenon. I introduce through this discussion Gramsci’s three-part distinction between *hegemony*, *fraud/corruption*, and *domination* as distinct forms of power maximization. Second, I use this framework to distinguish between the hegemonic side of Orbánism, which derive from his specific articulation of illiberal, conservative, and nationalist themes, and the autocratic side. The latter is closer to what Gramsci referred to as fraud and corruption as tools of power that lie between force (domination) and persuasion (hegemony). Third, I argue that autocratic nationalism represents a coherent set of ideas that constitutes a new ideological challenge to the dominance of liberalism in Europe and elsewhere.

⁵ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” website of the Hungarian Government, July 26, 2014, http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/prime_minister_viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_25th_balvanyos_summer_free_university_and_student_camp.

⁶ “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.”

⁷ Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November–December 1997): 22–43; Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Revised edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

⁹ The present piece was originally written in 2020. In my 2021 book, *Authoritarian Contagion*, I advanced the concept of “authoritarian protectionism” as an analytical formula for the phenomena of contemporary anti-democratic trends. See Luke Cooper, *Authoritarian Contagion: The Global Threat to Democracy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

Gramsci and Russell: Power Is Always and Everywhere Ideological

Orbánism is generally cast as an exercise concerned above all with the love of power. It is a depiction that recalls Bertrand Russell's statement that "[p]ower, like vanity, is insatiable."¹⁰ For Russell, this desire was impossible to ever satisfy, yet was also the animating force in the lives of elites across a variety of fields. The dark side of power lay in the satisfaction derived from inflicting pain or discomfort, a pleasure that might be attained from saying "no" to the requests of those over whom power is exercised.¹¹ But Russell argued that power also has positive potential: seeking influence, and pursuing scientific discovery, education, or knowledge in whatever form could all be seen as motivated by a desire to hold power, at least in the form of desiring authority and standing. And this nuance led Russell to strictly qualify his critique of power in two ways. On the one hand, he argued that the desires animating the pursuit of power were context-dependent: the environment mixed symbiotically with the interests and motivations of those seeking power to determine the form it took.¹² This context was as important as the desire itself to whether power would be pursued in a self-serving or socially productive fashion. On the other hand, in relation to politics specifically, he argued actors were also motivated not only by the trappings of power but also the "desire to see some state of affairs realized which ... [they] prefer to the status quo."¹³ Such ideological coordinates therefore go hand in hand with the pursuit of power.

Through these steps Russell suggests that love of power alone is insufficient to capture the modalities governing its use. To explain a particular strategy for power, one is forced to return to the ideas mobilized by those seeking it *and* the social and institutional context they inhabit. In short, in any particular circumstance, strategies for power maximization require a set of justifications. The harshest act of brute force and oppression, for example, is always combined with a language justifying its use. Even though such discourses may themselves entail a violent othering of the victims they are, nonetheless, mobilized to create support amongst the populace for these hateful acts. In other words, power is always and everywhere ideological. Orbán's desire for power is evident from his personal history. He shifted pragmatically from young liberal (1989) to conservative (1994) and authoritarian (2010). But to understand how he secured and consolidated his dominance of the Hungarian political scene requires an exploration of the links he serviced and maintained in the country's body politic.

Gramsci was famously interested in these ideational relations that create a codependence between power and consent.¹⁴ Indeed, his famous distinction between dominance (force) and hegemony (persuasion) can be located within the logic of Russell's assumptions. For it provides an account of the tools of power that actors can draw on within particular settings to lead on the political terrain. Gramsci argued that domination (force) and hegemony (consent) "balance each other reciprocally."¹⁵ And these two elements, domination and hegemony, have occupied the focus of most readings of his work. However, there is a third element that Gramsci once ventured, fraud and corruption, which seems particularly relevant to the ideological form of Orbánism:

The "normal" exercise of hegemony on the now classical terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by the combination of force and consent, which balance each other reciprocally, without force predominating excessively over consent. Indeed, the attempt is always made to ensure that force will appear to be based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so called organs of public opinion newspapers and associations which,

¹⁰ Bertrand Russell, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 163.

¹¹ Russell, *Human Society*, 163.

¹² Russell, *Human Society*, 164.

¹³ Russell, *Human Society*, 164.

¹⁴ Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation Between Gramsci and Machiavelli* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 80.

therefore, in certain situations, are artificially multiplied. Between consent and force stands corruption/fraud (which is characteristic of certain situations when it is hard to exercise the hegemonic function, and when the use of force is too risky).¹⁶

Gramsci was, of course, analyzing the quite different political environment of the early 20th century. However, there are elements of this picture that resonate with the European context a century later. Notably, while the ways in which public opinion is constructed have been transformed by the digital age, those seeking power in democratic societies must still construct consent by building an apparatus of persuasion that is able to effectively project messages through the media, public associations, and all available communicative channels. Continuously measured, contested, and subject to interventions aimed at coalescing particular sensibilities and outlooks, this public sphere is critical to the democratic struggle for state power.

Drawing on Gramsci, we can identify three tools of power: firstly, the use of domination and force to secure control; secondly, the articulation of hegemony (persuasion and consent) to win popular support; and thirdly, developing Gramsci’s intermediate category, the use of corrupt practices to centralize power and assert greater influence in the conduct of public debate. While, as Max Weber long ago argued, all states ultimately rest upon the existence of force,¹⁷ it is notable that Hungary under Orbán has not witnessed the use of violent repression as a political tool—a contrast, for example, to Vladimir Putin’s Russia.¹⁸ Rather, the autocratic nationalism characteristic of Orbánism has focused instead on the two other tools. It has sought hegemony through the mobilization of ethno-nationalist conceptions of belonging and interest, and it has utilized corrupt practices at the intersection of the state and public to assert much greater levels of autocratic control on institutions and the media.

Ethno-Nationalism as a Hegemonic Tool of Power

Orbán’s ethno-nationalist rhetoric has radicalized over time, particularly following his second consecutive election victory in 2014. The hegemonic qualities of this intervention can be seen in how it was constructed as a radical alternative to the status quo order in Europe; he looked to change how Hungarians think about their community, sense of belonging, and the outside world. To use Chantal Mouffe’s term, this created a frontier of the political (that is, it established, in a typically populist fashion, “others” against which Orbán’s vision would be defined).¹⁹ The term *illiberalism* has, in itself, a strong counter-hegemonic quality. By subverting its pejorative analytical usage and positively embracing the term,²⁰ Orbán has used this concept as a point of critique for the rest of Europe. He could, potentially, have pursued more or less the same domestic policy with a euphemistic language, grounding his nationalist politics in traditional conservative rhetoric. Instead, by making this shift to illiberalism, he moved on to a more overtly counter-hegemonic terrain. Challenging the European status quo, he linked his efforts in Hungary to a global rise of authoritarian nationalism, citing Singapore, China, India, Russia, and Turkey as examples of the exhaustion of liberalism and backing an alternative to the 1989 paradigm.²¹

Orbán argued that his “illiberal state” constituted “a different, special, national approach,”²² which was

¹⁶ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 80.

¹⁷ Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in John Dreijmanis (eds), *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008): 155–208.

¹⁸ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, iBook edition (London: Bodley Head, 2018); Leon Aron, “Putin versus Civil Society: The Long Struggle for Freedom,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 11, 2013): 62–74.

¹⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, 1st edition (London: Routledge, 2005);

——— *For a Left Populism*, Reprint edition (London: Verso, 2019).

²⁰ Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.”

²¹ Orbán, Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.

²² Orbán, Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.

tailored to the experience of central and eastern Europe while also drawing on these other global illiberal models. Only later radicalizing his rejection of individual freedoms and minority rights, his focus in 2014 implied a preference for the conservative notion of organicity: “the Hungarian nation is not simply a group of individuals but a community that must be organized, reinforced, and in fact constructed.”²³ Nonetheless, the speech still defined what he meant by this in authoritarian terms, indicating the intended direction of the Fidesz government rather pointedly. Orbán denounced nongovernmental organizations as “paid political activists who are attempting to enforce foreign interests here in Hungary.”²⁴ This nationalist *Aufheben* of the conservative concept of organicity thereby departed from the classical notion considerably. Classical conservative political thought was hostile to “pure democracy” on the grounds that it could exercise “cruel oppressions upon the minority.”²⁵ Orbán, in contrast, declared for the *absolute* rights of the national majority. The hegemonic device lay in the mobilization of hostility to foreign interests and liberal thought, which then fed into the construction of an increasingly autocratic state domestically. A relationship between the use of hegemonic and corrupt practices thereby emerged; nationalistic rhetoric provided the legitimizing framework for state measures (see below) that closed down opportunities for public accountability.

Hegemonic interventions create narratives that seek to change how people think about state and society. In this respect, one can now see British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan as the exemplar cases of hegemonic transformation on the right. Both saw political conflict as “a war of ideas,” which was “an orientation that generated a particularly polemical type of politics.”²⁶ Recall how we noted that Bozóki described Orbánism in similar terms at the outset. This resemblance is indicative of how both Reagan and Thatcher shared with Orbán a hegemonic desire to change the rules of the game. They sought radical disruption of the status quo, not accommodation to existing mindsets. Thatcher, in particular, attempted to actively change how British citizens thought about their everyday lives and political community. The narrative focused on the failure of socialism and the tyranny of trade union organization at the close of the 1970s. This was attached to a political theory of conservative individualism. “We have a simple rule to guide us,” she wrote, during the election of 1979. “[If] there’s an argument about whether the State or the individual should decide, we give ... the benefit of the doubt to the individual. We believe that the very essence of freedom is individual responsibility—and we trust the creative majority to take sensible decisions for themselves and their families.”²⁷ Thatcherism “exploited the necessarily contradictory structure of popular ideology, playing the discourse of the liberal economy off against the discourse of the organic nation and the disciplined society.”²⁸ Drawing this close connection with the muscular individualism of the free market and the cultural image of the hard-working middle-class family gave Thatcher this fervent—indeed fanatical—moral agenda, which sought to recast the sensibilities of the British public around a new mission based on muscular capitalism.

Hegemonic intervention can therefore be distinguished from everyday politics by its strong focus on transforming what might be called the political assumptions underlying public consciousness. A similar focus on narrative and popular philosophy is found in Orbánism. Interestingly, while Thatcher showed a strong predilection for nationalistic and strong state (“law and order”) rhetoric, notably over the Falkland Islands (1982) and Brixton Riots (1981), her account of the centrality of the hard-working individual to the body politic of the nation was radically different from how Orbán has come to view this question. For Orbán departs significantly from the individualism that was so fundamental to the 1980s Anglo-American new right. Whereas Thatcher placed individualism, in a highly egotistical form, at the center of the hegemonic political practice she pursued, Orbán has completely rejected this. As he puts it:

According to the liberal notion of freedom, you can only be free if you discard everything

²³ Orbán, Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.

²⁴ Orbán, Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.

²⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Reprint, London: J. M. Dent and Sons, [1790] 1951), 121–22.

²⁶ Deudney, Daniel, and G. John Ikenberry, “Who Won the Cold War?” *Foreign Policy*, no. 87 (1992): 133.

²⁷ Margaret Thatcher, “Create Not Destroy,” *Yorkshire Post*, May 1, 1979, available at Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104058>.

²⁸ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 85.

that involves you in belonging somewhere: borders, the past, language, religion, culture, and tradition. If you can free yourself from all this, if you can leave it all behind, then you’re a free person. As tends to happen, the antithesis of this has also come into being, and this is what I call “illiberalism.” This way of reasoning states that the individual’s appeal to freedom must not override the interests of the community. There is a majority, and it must be respected, because that is the essence of democracy.²⁹

Through this reactionary rhetoric, Orbánism has created a new form of hegemonic thinking that offers a sweeping rejection of constitutional liberties and individual and minority rights in favor of a vulgar national-majoritarianism. Orbán’s historical narrative starts with the liberal transformation emerging with the fall of Communism in 1989 and the crises of the next decade. Fidesz’s electoral victory in 2010 is seen as setting Hungary on a new path to an era of “illiberal or national transformation.”³⁰ This self-consciously hegemonic reasoning seeks to put society on a new ideational grounding. As Orbán has put it, “similarly to that transformation [in the 1990s], we have put our thinking and culture on a new footing—also in terms of relations between individuals.”³¹ In short, this is conceived as a “new order” with its own political thought and promoted regionally and globally as a far-right alternative to liberalism.

In the spring of 2019, I interviewed Zoltán Kovács, the Hungarian government’s international spokesman. He emerged as the face of the Hungarian government as it entered the international spotlight due to its absolute opposition to refugee protection in the course of the 2015 migrant crisis. According to his office, he gave between 5,000 and 6,000 interviews between 2015 and 2018.³² Like Orbán, Kovács attempts no concealment of the Hungarian government’s complete opposition to liberalism. But he also frankly locates this within the 1990s experience of post-Soviet transition: “the connotation, the memories of liberalism as a political ideology are bad in this region.”³³ Thus in the minds of this new far right the hegemonic shift they are seeking from liberalism to authoritarianism emerges strongly out of the popular resentment over the disappointments of post-Communist society. Highly solipsistic reasoning is used to justify the rejection of a rights-based order. Kovács argued, for example, that the very concept of NGOs was undemocratic because they wield influence in the public sphere despite “never [having] been elected ... never [having] tested themselves at democratic elections.”³⁴ NGOs are, of course, simply associations whose activity constitutes the civil society so important to the free public discussion and enquiry on which fair democratic elections depend. They are the lifeblood of this democratic culture that has been brought into question by Orbánism. A form of regulatory repression, which we will come to below, has been used as a political tool to squeeze the space available for public criticism of Fidesz.

Another element of Orbánism’s hegemonic intervention lies in a highly racialized vocabulary regarding immigrants and alleged foreign interference in Hungary. A central figure in Orbán’s ideological attack on civil society has been George Soros, the Hungarian-American financier and philanthropist. During the 2018 Hungarian elections the Fidesz campaign focused overwhelmingly on his alleged influence in Hungary. Fidesz argued his philanthropic support for the Central European University and Hungarian civil society organizations was part of a conspiracy against the interests of the Hungarian majority. The campaign aggressively mobilized anti-Semitic and Islamophobic rhetoric to make its case. This involved the ancient anti-Semitic canard of a Jewish financial oligarchy controlling global political events. “We must speak frankly and unequivocally,” Orbán argued in the closing speech of the campaign, “about the future that is

²⁹ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp,” website of the Hungarian Government, July 27, 2019, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-30th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/>.

³⁰ Orbán, Speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp.

³¹ Orbán, Speech at the 30th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp.

³² Fidesz international department, email message to author, March 28, 2019.

³³ Zoltán Kovács (international spokesman, Hungarian government), interview with the author March 27, 2019.

³⁴ Zoltán Kovács, interview with the author.

intended for us in Brussels, in the United Nations, and in the *alchemical* workshop of George Soros.”³⁵ (emphasis added) He argued these groups were part of a global elite conspiracy to flood Hungary with immigrants:

[W]e must tell everyone about the danger that threatens our country ... Look around: the world we live in is not exactly peaceful. Europe is afflicted by a number of conflicts: armies are fighting immediately to the east of us; and there is the threat of a trade war between the European Union and the United States. But the greatest threat of all is posed by the millions of immigrants coming from the South, and Europe’s leaders—in partnership with a billionaire speculator—have no intention of defending the borders, but want to let in the immigrants. This is the truth of the matter ... Everyone who wants to preserve Hungary as a Hungarian country must go out and vote, and must cast both their votes for Fidesz.³⁶

In this speech, Orbán made reference to the liberation from Turkish rule to make clear he was referring above all to Muslim immigration to Europe.³⁷ But elsewhere his government has been more explicit still. Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén said bluntly in 2017, for example, that Hungary “defines itself in the face of Islam as the protective shield of Christian Europe.”³⁸ A classic far-right trope is present in these narratives, which invoke a picture of a Jewish, globalist elite conspiring to flood Europe with non-white immigrants. Indeed, many of Orbán’s discourses closely resemble claims of the extreme right—in particular, that the global elite is conspiring to destroy the white majority under the guise of multiculturalism and human rights.³⁹ In Orbán’s version of this idea, Christianity is used as a substitute for white ethnicity and to legitimize ethnic exclusion. “If we fail to defend our Christian culture we will lose Europe, and Europe will no longer belong to Europeans,” as he has put it.⁴⁰

These narratives form the cornerstone of the Orbán project of hegemony. Highly racialized images are mobilized to secure popular support. Hungary is envisioned as a white Christian space at risk from Muslim invaders supported by a globalist, Jewish elite represented by the totemic image of George Soros. Notably, this project departs from the free-market individualism of the Anglo-American new right. In its place it promotes a vulgar national majoritarianism, which openly opposes the rights of minorities. This is the hegemonic, legitimizing core of the project. As we shall now see, these hegemonic devices are used in tandem with the other element of autocratic nationalism: corrupt practices that employ regulatory repression and clientelist measures that deliberately close down opportunities for public scrutiny.

Autocratic Power and the Authoritarian Social Contract

The rise of Fidesz to power in the 2010 general election is inseparable from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, which had a pronounced effect on Hungary (GDP fell by some 6.8% in 2009 alone). However, it also reflected a longer-term disenchantment with the Hungarian Socialist Party. This had particularly set in after the 2006 Ószöd speech crisis—mass protests prompted by the leaking of an expletive-laden private speech

³⁵ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the Final Fidesz Election Campaign Event,” website of the Hungarian Government, April 6, 2018, emphasis added, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-final-fidesz-election-campaign-event/>.

³⁶ Orbán, Speech at the Final Fidesz Election Campaign Event.

³⁷ Orbán, Speech at the Final Fidesz Election Campaign Event.

³⁸ Zsolt Semjén, “Brussels Cannot Tell Us Who Should Live in Hungary,” website of the Hungarian Government, October 9, 2017, <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/prime-minister-s-office/news/brussels-cannot-tell-us-who-should-live-in-hungary>.

³⁹ Abby L. Ferber, ed., *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁴⁰ Viktor Orbán, “Without Christian Culture There Will Be No Free Life in Europe, If We Fail to Defend Our Christian Culture We Will Lose Europe, and Europe Will No Longer Belong to Europeans,” website of the Hungarian Government, March 15, 2019, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/without-christian-culture-there-will-be-no-free-life-in-europe-if-we-fail-to-defend-our-christian-culture-we-will-lose-europe-and-europe-will-no-longer-belong-to-europeans/>.

by the prime minister that had frankly admitted the party’s failings in government.⁴¹ Orbán successfully capitalized on these moments of crisis. He both promoted, and benefited from, a dramatic rise of nationalist sentiment in Hungary in the face of these events. Indeed, in the 2010 election, which brought Orbán back to power, the combined vote for Fidesz (53%) and the far-right Jobbik party (17%) came to a quite extraordinary 70%. Hegemony is, in this respect, a two-way process: the very idea of consent and persuasion as a moment in the construction of leadership involves reciprocity between political elites and citizens. But while there is an important element of Orbánism that is responsive to nationalistic and anti-immigrant feelings in the population, Orbán is also filtering and calibrating these inchoate sensibilities around a codified set of political meanings based on anti-liberal thought.

Orbán’s autocratic practices emerged out of the opportunity provided by the 2008 financial crisis. What Juliet Johnson and Andrew Barnes refer to as Orbán’s “financial nationalism” utilized economically interventionist policies to overcome the fallout from the global economic downturn.⁴² These policies went in tandem with the discourses described above and the effect was a strengthening of the state in relation to the market. While the policy mix had some resemblances to Keynesianism,⁴³ Orbán ultimately pursued a form of state intervention that was highly autocratic and clientelist, with an eclectic mix of left- and right-wing economic policies. He nationalized a series of private assets including pension funds, shares and properties. He also introduced a windfall tax on other economic sectors; notably, in the banking sector after the financial crash, but also in energy, telecommunications and retail. But these leftist measures were coupled with targeted austerity towards parts of the public sector that Orbán associated with his political opponents, notably universities.⁴⁴ As Bozóki notes, “Orbán skillfully attacked the banks (most of them being in foreign hands), the multinational corporations, the foreign media, and EU officials on the basis of [his own preference for] economic nationalism and sovereign independence, but he also combined this with business-friendly domestic policy, such as the introduction of a flat tax, reduced employment rights, and attacks on the homeless, unemployed and trade unions.”⁴⁵

To the surprise of the IMF and European Union, Orbán’s interventionist policy was successful according to most economic indicators. Hungary even left the EU’s Excessive Deficit Procedure in 2013, which it had been subjected to since joining in 2004, as its budget deficit fell below 3%.⁴⁶ This has created the basis for the construction of an authoritarian social contract in Hungary. After the sharp collapse following the 2008 financial crisis, Orbán and Fidesz were able to create a hegemonic legitimacy through this combination of interventionist economic policy and ethnic nationalism. Yet, he also transformed the state in such a way that it became a vehicle for his private interests, rather than a protector of the public interest. Under Orbán, a new crony capitalism emerged, at the center of which was his own on power.

The form that Orbán’s state intervention took was highly autocratic and clientelist. Indeed, it is reminiscent of what Gramsci referred to as the use of corruption as a political tool that stands between domination and hegemony as tools of power. As Dániel Bartha, Director of the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy, put it to me in Budapest: “Orbán’s goal was always to change the playing field ... to create a new [Hungarian] elite ... they created their own media ... their own businessmen, the oligarchs, and did so

⁴¹ András Bozóki, “Hopes and Illusions: The Farewell to Idealism in Hungarian Politics” (paper presented at the conference “The ‘Brave New World’ after Communism—1989: Expectations in Comparison,” Vienna, Austria, June 15, 2009), ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andras_Bozoki/publication/292352269_Hopes_and_Illusions_The_Farewell_to_Idealism_in_Hungarian_Politics/links/5bea8ad092851c6b27ba5cdd/Hopes-and-Illusions-The-Farewell-to-Idealism-in-Hungarian-Politics.pdf.

⁴² Juliet Johnson and Andrew Barnes, “Financial Nationalism and Its International Enablers: The Hungarian Experience,” *Review of International Political Economy* 22, no. 3 (May 4, 2015): 535–569, doi:10.1080/09692290.2014.919336.

⁴³ For example, Robert Skidelsky’s discussion of job guarantee programs as an answer to unemployment: see Robert Skidelsky, “The Case for a Guaranteed Job,” World Economic Forum, August 27, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/the-case-for-a-guaranteed-job/>.

⁴⁴ Johnson and Barnes, “Financial Nationalism,” 551.

⁴⁵ Bozóki, “Broken Democracy,” 15.

⁴⁶ Johnson and Barnes, “Financial Nationalism,” 551–552.

quite self-consciously.”⁴⁷

The very relationship between the public and private spheres has been blurred by these practices.⁴⁸ Although Orbán has not generally used raw domination or violence, he has utilized the political tool of corruption in order to turn the state into a vehicle for the simultaneous accumulation of economic and political power. While nonviolent, these measures have substantially corroded the norms of democratic political functioning. Under the Orbán regime, EU-funded public procurement contracts have been used to create a class of friendly oligarchs. The Orbánist elite receive 90% of their income from these tenders, which, according to the Corruption Research Centre Budapest, are over-priced at a ratio of between 1.7 to 10 times their true value.⁴⁹ Lőrinc Mészáros, a gas fitter from Orbán’s hometown, has become Hungary’s richest man, rising to number 2,324 on the Forbes Rich List, as a result of government procurement contracts.⁵⁰ Hungarian opposition leaders and activists believe his personal wealth to be the informal property of Orbán himself. Orbán’s own father and son-in-law have also personally profited from the tendering of government contracts.⁵¹

Ethnic nationalism has been mobilized to justify this creation of a new Hungarian economic elite based on corrupt and autocratic practices. For the internal life of the state, Orbán’s dramatic pursuit of power centralization has called into question the ability of public authorities to check and constrain his personalized power. Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi describe this retreat from liberal constitutional norms as “exceptional—at least in European terms,” adding that, “Orbán and his party not only keep a firm grip on the legislative and executive branches, but also dominate virtually all spheres of social life, including commerce, education, the arts, churches, and even sports.”⁵² Orbán’s favored method is through the appointment of cronies to positions of state power and public authority; notably, he controls the Public Prosecutors’ Office, which protects him and his supporters from criminal sanction.

This has eroded what John Keane calls “monitoring democracy”: the postwar system that combined representative democracy with “new ways of publicly monitoring and controlling the exercise of power.”⁵³ The latter has historically involved a plethora of bodies that provide independent oversight of the government from within the state itself; the rules, behaviors, and norms that underpin the independence of public authorities; and the civil society and media institutions, networks, and groups that monitor such institutional and social arrangements of power. Taken together they provide the basis for the self-limitation of government power in relation to the public and private spheres on which the rule of law depends.⁵⁴ While Orbán has used these informal practices of corruption as a tool of political and social control, it is still noteworthy that his political theory of illiberalism *openly*—and as such, *hegemonically*—states his rejection of the constitutional systems that protect against autocratic power through the construction of independent monitoring institutions. Thus, hegemonic rhetoric and autocratic practice are brought together to forge a powerful symbiosis.

⁴⁷ Dániel Bartha, Director, Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy), interview with the author, March 21, 2019.

⁴⁸ Dorottya Sallai and Gerhard Schnyder, “What Is ‘Authoritarian’ about Authoritarian Capitalism? The Dual Erosion of the Private-Public Divide in State-Dominated Business Systems,” *Business and Society*, no., pre-publication draft as accepted and placed on SSRN (May 17, 2019), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3373637.

⁴⁹ Corruption Research Centre Budapest, “The EU Funds, Viktor Orbán, and Lőrinc Mészáros, the Hungarian Gas Fitter,” March 2019, <http://www.crcb.eu/?p=1791>; Corruption Research Centre Budapest, “The Detection of Overpricing at EU Funded Public Procurement in Hungary,” September 2016, <http://www.crcb.eu/?p=1076>; Balint Magyar and Balint Madlovics, “Hungary’s Mafia State Fights for Impunity,” *Balkan Insight*, Reporting Democracy section (June 21, 2019), <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/21/hungarys-mafia-state-fights-for-impunity/>.

⁵⁰ Forbes Rich List, “Lorinc Meszaros,” *Forbes*, real time net worth as of September 29, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/lorinc-meszaros/>.

⁵¹ Magyar and Madlovics, “Hungary’s Mafia State.”

⁵² Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 12, 2018): 39.

⁵³ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, Reprint edition (London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2010), xxvi.

⁵⁴ Sallai and Schnyder, “What Is ‘Authoritarian’ about Authoritarian Capitalism?,” 3.

Autocratic Nationalism: Orbán’s Challenge to Liberalism

Autocratic nationalism has an internal and holistic consistency, which reflects its position on the far right of the political spectrum in Europe. Since 2010, Orbánism in Hungary has emerged as a formidable political force that has shown no willingness, let alone need, to engage in the compromises generally associated with the broader European Union political center. This has freed Orbán to shape a new ideological system. While power is always and everywhere ideological, requiring justifications rooted in the values and visions of political thought, not all power-seekers radically challenge the status quo and fewer still are successful in consolidating their hold on a state. Orbán’s triumph was, in Russell’s sense, to transform his love of power into an ideological force that Hungarians found compelling and purposeful after the financial crash of 2008. Orbánism pursued hegemony in the Gramscian mode by attempting to radically change the rules of the game, to shift the underlying assumptions behind everyday political norms. This hegemonic project is aimed at challenging the rights-based system on which liberal democracy depends. Attempting to radically shift the political center of gravity towards a highly racialized political authoritarianism, Orbánism represents a major ideological challenge to the status quo of the European political scene.

This is a hegemonic project, but one that has been especially well-tailored to the practical autocracy of the Orbán era. By openly attacking systems of checks and balances on executive power, the Orbánist framework has imparted a constitutional quality to its hegemonic claims: principles and practices thus exist in an unusually close interrelationship. Autocratic nationalism has been able to fuse together two distinct Gramscian tools of power—corrupt practices and a hardline nationalist ideology—to create political consent (hegemony). This brings into the foreground of the ideological landscape the role of elements normally left implicit in most political argumentation. For as Margaret Canovan argues, “nationhood is a tacit premise in all contemporary political thinking,”⁵⁵ but in many cases it remains at this unspoken level, as an underpinning assumption in the elaboration of other, overlying ideological positions. Orbán, however, substitutes this unspoken premise for the overt and absolute centrality of national sovereignty and ethnic homogeneity to all his political interventions, connecting this to a rejection of basic liberties and minority rights. If the latter is premised on the existence of a regulatory space protecting the distinction between the public and private spheres, Orbánism seeks to close it down.

Orbán’s project is also subjectively ideological and hegemonic. In this regard, it recalls strongly Stuart Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism. Orbán, too, has “attempted to impose a new regime of social discipline and leadership ‘from above,’ ” which required and was “rooted in popular fears and anxieties ‘below.’ ”⁵⁶ Yet, as we have seen, while the new right of the 21st century shares a hegemonic impulse with the past figures of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan, it departs significantly from their assumptions, creating a successor ideology that rejects liberal individualism in its entirety. Orbánism is, in this sense, a genuinely novel paradigm, one which has arisen out of the crises of globalization, notably the 2008 crash, but moves political and economic development in an altogether more autocratic, racialized and authoritarian direction. It represents a major, and rather ominous, challenge to liberalism in Europe.

⁵⁵ Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1998), 1.

⁵⁶ Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, 84.