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Hungarian Historical Hysteria

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**Hungarian Historical Hysteria;
Analyzing the Deployment of Hungarian National History by Viktor Orbán and the
FIDESZ Party**

Kris Bohnestiehl

How powerful are the people in a democracy? When the votes are cast and elections have run their course, what role do the people serve? On January 6th of 2021, thousands of Americans descended upon the United States Capitol intent on testing the reaches of their power. Fueled by nationalist and populist rhetoric by then President Donald Trump, these people sought to save their vision of America, a vision steeped in nationalist folklore and a historical memory which contrasted with their reality. The Capitol siege represents the first casualties of the Populist war for the heart of America; however, outside the United States the pressures of Populism have already debilitated democracies around the world, serving as an even sterner warning for Americans.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the effects of Populism on the decline of democracy in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, and specifically the ways in which the national history of Hungary and its historical memory have been deployed by Mr. Orbán to foster the creation of his "illiberal democracy". Over the last decade Mr. Orbán and his party FIDESZ have dismantled the democratic checks and balances on the power of the Prime Minister, granting Mr. Orbán near dictatorial power despite the regime still being classified as a democracy. This dramatic seizure of democratic powers has been accomplished by the calculated deployment, manipulation, and censorship of Hungarian historical memory, through which Mr. Orbán has revived the spirit of Hungarian nationalism and conjured historic threats to this national identity in order to polarize Hungary from its western neighbors. By harnessing this polarization in elections, Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ have entrenched themselves as the moralistic savior of Hungary. Although Hungary is formally a democracy and Mr. Orbán is an elected leader, this utilization of history has allowed FIDESZ to take control of the collective identity of the Hungarian nation, and operate as the gatekeepers of what it means to be Hungarian. Thus the fundamental relationship of a democracy has been shifted, as Mr. Orbán and his government have unprecedented control of the Hungarian people in a democracy, where the relationship should be converse.

When one thinks of political pathbreakers, Eastern Europe tends to lie lower on the list of innovators. Hungary itself is a nation of only 10 million people, and up until the reelection of Viktor Orbán to the post of Prime Minister in 2010 the nation had done little to garner significant international attention. Entering the 21st century, Hungary had one of the most stable and competitive democracies in Europe, as the 2002 election cycle had nearly 70% voter turnout, with an independent judiciary and media.¹ Today however, Hungary has a Freedom House Democracy Score of 3.71 out of 7, placing Hungary in the category of “Hybrid Regime”, meaning that while the regime does practice some democratic actions such as elections, they are neither free nor fair as the country slides towards an autocratic future.² The dramatic about turn of the democratic fortunes in Hungary over the last decade has been one of the most puzzling contemporary queries of students of Democracy, since the backslide of Hungary seems to go in the face of a substantial portion of established democratic theory. While many point to the 2008 global financial crisis as the catalyst for this backslide, in order to fully understand the variables which allowed the rise of Hungary’s “illiberal democracy” and to give some context to those unfamiliar with the history of this country, our story begins with the foundation of the Kingdom of Hungary nearly a thousand years ago.

The Magyars were a tribal people who were pushed westward by the stronger tribes of the Steppes, eventually settling in the Carpathian basin in the 9th century. After a century of western raiding, the tribes were eventually brought together and created the Kingdom of Hungary in 1000 A.D.. Signified by the crowning of the first Hungarian King Saint Stephen, the Kingdom of Hungary was a fundamentally Christian kingdom, and the entwined nature of Church and State was a fundamental aspect of civil society in the Kingdom. Being a Christian Kingdom, Hungary was heavily involved in the conflicts between Christians and Muslims to the East, and the Kingdom took great pride

¹ Lili Bayer, “Inside the Hungarian Campaign to Beat Viktor Orbán,” POLITICO (POLITICO, July 26, 2021), <https://www.politico.eu/article/inside-the-hungarian-opposition-uphill-battle-to-beat-viktor-orban-fidesz-party/>.

² “Hungary: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report,” Freedom House, n.d., <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2021>.

from their role as the frontline defense for the Christians. This pride would eventually result in their downfall as in 1526 the Hungarians were soundly defeated in the Battle of Mohács by the Ottoman Empire. Following this defeat portions of Hungarian territory was taken by the Ottomans, while the rest and majority of Hungarian territory was taken over by the Austrian Habsburgs and incorporated into their empire.

Under the Habsburgs Hungary was governed semi-autonomously, however any inkling of a centralized Hungarian state or even independent Hungarian culture was not to be found. Although a Hungarian Diet managed many local affairs, the Austrian Emperor remained King of Hungary, and Magyar culture fell in decline with only 40% of the Hungarian population being fluent in Hungarian by 1840.³ Despite this decline, the spirit of nationalism was still alive and strong in the minority as evidenced by the revolutions of 1848. Known as the “Springtime of the Peoples”, the 1848 revolution was spearheaded by Hungarian nationalists seeking greater autonomy and more cultural freedoms from their Austrian rulers. The revolution exploded outwards as many other nationalities encompassed by the Habsburg Empire followed Hungary’s lead and revolted in the name of nationalism. While the Austrian military swiftly put a stop to the revolts by 1849 with help from the Russian military, they were unable to quell the national spirit, which in Hungary’s case would again emerge in 1867 with signing of the Dual Compromise. Also known as the Dual Monarchy, the compromise reached between the Habsburgs and Hungarians saw the Empire divided in half into an Austrian section and a Hungarian section, each to be independently governed and only answerable to the Emperor.

The national freedoms granted by the Dual Monarchy which included the right to teach the Hungarian language in schools saw an expansion of Hungarian nationalism.⁴ However, these new freedoms did not include an independent military, and this golden age of nationalism came to an abrupt end when Hungary, Austria and Germany were defeated by the Western Allies in the first World War in 1918. Following the war, the various nationalities of the Habsburg Empire were made to sign the Treaty of Trianon, which to this day is one of the central issues of contemporary Hungarian politics. The

³Steven Beller, *The Habsburg Monarchy: 1815-1918* (Cambridge etc.: Cambridge university press, 2018). 45

⁴Ibid, 48

treaty itself was humiliating for the various signees, as the terms were all but dictated by the Western superpowers who oversaw the affair. In effect the treaty established nation states for the various nationalities encompassed by the deceased Habsburg Empire, however it excluded any self-determination for these nationalities in the creation of these states. Hungary in particular was very hard done by the treaty, as the borders of the new Hungarian state was without nearly two thirds of its old territory including the province of Transylvania, and left over 6 million ethnic Hungarians outside of the borders of the new nation.⁵ The Treaty of Trianon represents the most significant break between Hungary and the West, and the resentment fueled by the unfair circumstances of the treaty has been revived by Mr. Orbán as one of his most prominent political weapons.

From 1920 to 1946 Hungary operated as an independent state for the first time in nearly 500 years. During the Second World War Hungary allied itself with the Axis, however Jews in Hungary were not sent to concentration camps until late in the war when the government was deposed and replaced with a fascist puppet regime by Hitler. 1946 to 1989 saw Hungary deep within the folds of the Soviet Union where it established itself as a primary nuisance for Stalin and his successors. In 1956 Hungarians took up arms in a revolution against its Soviet rulers, and although the revolution was brutally suppressed, Hungary became the source of "Goulash Communism" which was a more liberal form of Soviet socialism. 1989 saw the fall of the Soviet Union, and therefore the end of Communism in Hungary. The new Hungarian republic was formed along western style democratic values and remained a free and competitive democracy until 2010 with the reelection of Viktor Orbán.

Now to turn the man himself as the history of Viktor Orbán is just as significant to the story of Hungary's democratic backslide. In 1989, Viktor Orbán was a young liberal politician leading the small party named the Alliance of Young Democrats. Struggling to garner support, in 1995 Orbán switched sides of the aisle and began campaigning on a

⁵Edit Inotai, "How Hungary's 'Trianon Trauma' Inflames Identity Politics," Balkan Insight, December 2, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/11/25/how-hungarys-trianon-trauma-inflames-identity-politics/>.

more conservative front as the leader of the Hungarian Civic Party, eventually winning the seat of Prime Minister and a parliamentary majority in 1998. During this stint Orbán oversaw Hungary's entrance into NATO, and rolled back Social Security reforms installed by previous regimes. His time in office ended in relative disgrace as several corruption scandals in his cabinet prevented his reelection in 2002.

In 2003 following this defeat, Orbán once again showed his opportunistic malleability as his Hungarian Civic Party formed a coalition with the hardline religious conservative Christian Democrats to form the Hungarian Civic Union known by its acronym FIDESZ.⁶ As the leader of the opposition, Orbán's platform was based on undermining the socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyursány. While 2006 was not a good year for FIDESZ in the polls, the 2008 global financial crisis provided the catalyst which Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ had so desperately hoped for. Riding the tide of dissatisfaction with both the incumbent government who had so grossly mismanaged the crisis, and the rising feelings of resentment towards western liberals who had created the crisis in Hungarian eyes, Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ found success in the 2010 elections on their platform of rampant Hungarian nationalism and Christian fundamentalism.

Since his reelection in 2010, Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime has looked distinctly different from that of 1998-2002, or any regime which has come before. In Mr. Orbán's own words his vision of Hungary is as follows:

What is happening today in Hungary can be interpreted as an attempt of the respective political leadership to harmonize [the] relationship between the interests and achievement of individuals – that needs to be acknowledged – with interests and achievements of the community, and the nation. Meaning, that Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc.. But it does not make this ideology a

⁶László Kürti, "Orbánism: The Culture Of Illiberalism in Hungary," *Ethnologia Europaea* (Open Library of Humanities, December 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.16995/ee.1055>. 64

central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead.⁷

What does this “harmonized relationship” between the individual and the community look like in practice under Orbán? Having campaigned on a platform of Christian nationalism, Orbán has exerted his full power and even beyond to transform the Hungarian community and identity into a secular Christian state, where the goals of the individual align with the greater Christian agenda of the nation. The result of this has been the near totalitarian control of Hungarian ethos and identity by Orbán, as the state seeks to transform the Hungarian people into a confirming identity with Hungarian and Christian values. To oversee and control this identity, FIDESZ have dismantled various democratic checks on the executive power of Mr. Orbán, including the independence of the judicial branch and that of the media, and official FIDESZ history is now being taught in schools.⁸

Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ have also utilized select censorship to enforce their envisioned identity by silencing and imprisoning critics to the regime. The most prolific example of this is the “Child Sex Abuse Law” which was passed in Hungarian Parliament in June of 2021 despite significant international outcry. The law itself was initially designed to deal with public outrage over a series of child sex scandals involving several FIDESZ cabin members, but has taken on a new form to limit the expression of the LGBTQ community in Hungary. In several hurriedly added clauses, the law designates homosexuality and any content which promotes gender non-conformity as “not recommended for those under 18 years of age”, and as actively promoting anti-Hungarian sentiment.⁹ Since Hungary is a Christian nation the government has enabled itself to take action against any behavior they deem as non-Christian.

The people which Mr. Orbán and his regime represent is an imagined community of collective Hungarian identity, whose values and traditions are collectively defined. While Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ claim to represent the Hungarian people, they hold the

⁷ Viktor Orbán, “English and Hungarian Transcripts of Viktor Orbán Illiberal Democracy,” American Rhetoric, July 26, 2014, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/viktororbaniilliberaldemocracyspeech.htm>.

⁸Eva S. Balogh, “Hungarian Spectrum,” Hungarian Spectrum, n.d., <https://hungarianspectrum.org/>.

⁹ Benjamin Novak, “Hungary Adopts Child Sex Abuse Law That Also Targets L.G.B.T. Community,” The New York Times (The New York Times, June 15, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/15/world/europe/hungary-child-sex-lgbtq.html>.

power to decide the scope of that identity and can exclude or villainize any cultural or traditional phenomena that does not conform to their view. While clinging desperately to the title of democracy which remains a precondition for membership to the European Union, Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ have reversed the fundamental relationship between the people and their democratically elected government, as the regime now has the power to dictate the national identity of Hungary to the people, as opposed to that identity sourcing from the people and projecting onto their government. This transition has been accomplished through Mr. Orbán's mastery of creating a polarized identity with a prominent tool: Hungary's historical memory.

"In the land of Hungary the moon rides high above the lofty mountains, above spreading plains, above cities where mosques of the Crescent darken with their shadows cathedrals of the Cross."¹⁰

In order to comprehend Viktor Orbán's successful manipulation of Hungarian history it is important to first establish the characteristics which differentiate Eastern European national collective identity from Western conceptions. While many Western European states inside the EU have begun to embrace a more pan-European identity which defines their collective identity as civilizationally "European", the collective identity of Eastern European states such as Poland and Hungary have remained rooted in a sense of pure nationalism. The polarization taking place in broader Europe, which pits "European Civilization" against encroaching "foreign influences" such as Islam, has played out differently in Hungary and the rest of Eastern Europe where polarization is drawn along lines of cultural and societal levels nationally-defined rather than as the broader nature of European civilization.¹¹

Viktor Orbán's deployment of this national identity has been masterful, and using established populist methods he has succeeded in polarizing Hungarian's and their national identity from their neighbors. In order for a populist to succeed, three variables

¹⁰ May McNeer and Charlotte Lederer, *Tales from the Crescent Moon* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930). 3

¹¹ Rogers Brubaker . "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: the European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 40, no. 8, (2017), pp. 1191–1226.

must be present: a polarized population, an existential normative threat to that population's existence, and a charismatic leader to guide the threatened people to safety.¹² To achieve these goals Mr. Orbán has utilized the historical memory of Hungarian identity in three distinct ways: callbacks to a glorious past, the revival of timeless threats, and the deployment of traditional scapegoats to deflect negative attention. Working together these three methods have successfully polarized Hungarians from their international neighbors, emphasized existential threats to this polarized identity, and situated Mr Orbán as the charismatic savior of the Hungarian people.

The first way which Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ deploy the historical memory of Hungary is by invoking a glorious mythical past which modern Hungarians can identify with. However before moving forward it must be established that the revival of historical symbols and identities has been a commonplace practice in many post-Communist states in Eastern Europe, and Hungary was no different before the rise of FIDESZ. A prominent example of this is the use of the ancient Crown of Hungary as a symbol of the modern state's power. The crown was used in the coronations of Hungarian Kings since the first King Saint Stephen, and today sits in the Parliament building where it has been for over 20 years, signifying the continuity of power and values which the young nation shares with that ancient kingdom.

While not a new phenomena, Viktor Orbán has accelerated the process of revival and has conflated this search for identity with a poll driven agenda in a process known as mnemonic populism. Mnemonic populism means a pole driven, manifestly moralistic, anti-pluralist imaginings of the past, which seeks to divide people based around their imagination of this conjured past identity.¹³ What Mr. Orbán wants to invoke in the Hungarian community is the secular traditional Christian identity of the old Kingdom of Hungary, an identity he claims has been suppressed for generations but has been reawakened in his illiberal state. In his speeches to the Hungarian people, Viktor Orbán speaks of a lost vocation or a greater purpose, stating: "We Hungarians

¹² Jean-Paul Gagnon, "What Is Populism? Who Is the Populist?," *Democratic Theory* 5, no. 2 (2018). xi

¹³Kornelia Kończal, "Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and Its Afterlife." *European Review*, 2020. 4

have always thought that we were not just born into the world. If you were born Hungarian, you also have a mission.”¹⁴ Emphasizing the damage of the global financial crisis which had humbled all of Europe to the shortcomings of the liberal capitalist system, and supplementing this with the rising anger around the influx of refugees from the east, Mr. Orbán lays out his vision for Hungary.

In this European situation, it is clear to Hungarians what our European vocation is. To bring the uncompromising anti-communist tradition into the common European treasury... to show the beauty and competitiveness of the political and social order based on Christian social teachings. To understand... that there is a Christian model of social organization in Central Europe that is based on teachings and is independent of the weakening or overturning of personal faith.¹⁵

To revive this idealized lost identity, Mr. Orbán and FIDESZ have emphasized symbols and characteristics of continuity between the past and present, while also seeking new avenues to inflate this identity. This manifests itself in a variety of forms such as monuments and idols such as the Holy Crown of Hungary, or dramatized and picturesque “recreations” of early Hungarian society found in school textbooks and museums.¹⁶ However this manipulation can take several other forms. A favorite technique of FIDESZ has been the use of state sponsored researchers to “discover” new connections between the old Kingdom and the current regime, or bolst the sense of national pride. For example, history textbooks for students in the 5th grade in Hungary contain this gem of historical inaccuracy: “According to our ancient legends, Hungarians are related to the Huns.... But linguists list Hungarian as a Finno-Ugric language.... The archaeologists cannot say anything definitive about the origins of the Hungarian people because, on the basis of the objects found in those graves, we can’t determine what language people spoke.”¹⁷ The study which is referenced as proof for this data is even brash enough to claim that : “The Hungarians formed a tribal union but arrived in the frame of a strong centralized steppe-empire under the leadership of prince Álmos and

¹⁴ Viktor Orbán, “Viktor Orbán: ‘Fulfilling Our Vocation,’” Orbán Viktor: "Betölteni a hivatásunkat", February 17, 2021, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemeny/2021/02/orban-viktor-betolteni-a-hivatasunkat>.

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶Balogh, “Hungarian Spectrum,”

¹⁷Balogh, “Hungarian Spectrum,”

his son Árpád, who were known to be direct descendants of the great Hun leader Attila".¹⁸ Despite any "new" evidence which has been uncovered by researchers, the Finno-Ugric origins of the Magyars has been established fact for decades, and the basis for these new claims is self-stated: legends.¹⁹

A similar study conducted around the original crowning of Saint Stephen the first King of Hungary speaks to the underlying goals of FIDESZ's use of history. In 2020 Hungarian historian György Szabados in association with the FIDESZ government published a report stating that the crowning of Saint Stephen had not occurred in the city of Esztergom as had been believed. Rather Szabados declared that the actual sight of the coronation was in Székesfehérvár (Fehérvár), which happens to be the birthplace of one Viktor Orbán.²⁰ In an almost biblical fashion, FIDESZ are trying to situate Viktor Orbán as the heir to the second coming of the lost Hungarian Kingdom, establishing him as the gatekeeper and ultimate source of this ancient Hungarian identity.

As the gatekeeper, Mr. Orbán can decide who can be identified as Hungarian, and who can be excluded. This has created an interesting situation in the territories which were lost by Hungary in 1920 through the Treaty of Trianon, most prominently in the borderland of Transylvania. For hundreds of years after the formation of the Kingdom of Hungary, Transylvania remained a semi-independent crownland which managed local affairs through a Diet. Due to the extreme rural nature of the territory, both industrial development and any sense of national sentiment were very slow to emerge in Transylvania, with the area gaining the reputation in Europe of a folklorish fairy land untouched by the modern world.²¹ In 1920 Hungarian influence was cut off to Transylvania, as the Treaty of Trianon placed the territory inside of the borders of the new state of Romania. Although in their own words, the majority of people living inside Transylvania identify as neither Hungarian or Romanian, the people inside Hungary protested strongly to what they felt was the separation of millions of ethnic Hungarians

¹⁸ Endre Neparáczki et al., "Y-Chromosome Haplogroups from Hun, Avar and Conquering Hungarian Period Nomadic People of the Carpathian Basin," *Nature News* (Nature Publishing Group, November 12, 2019), <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-019-53105-5>.

¹⁹ Janos Nagy, *Friends and Relatives: Finnish-Hungarian Cultural Relations* (Budapest: Corvina, 1985).

²⁰ Balogh, "Hungarian Spectrum,"

²¹ Kürti László, *The Remote Borderland: Transylvania in the Hungarian Imagination* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2001). 6

from their nation.²² The interwar period did not see much development of a national sentiment inside of Transylvania, as the population formed a diverse community uninterested in higher politics, as class took precedence over ethnicity in the community.²³

Thus Transylvania remained without a strong national attachment through 1989, and ethnic Hungarians within Transylvania rejected the “meaningless” Romanian citizenship they were offered. However these disgruntled Hungarians were not without hope, as in 2004 a referendum vote was held to give citizenship to any Hungarian nationals living outside the borders. The newly formed FIDESZ campaigned strongly for the referendum, and when it eventually failed FIDESZ began leveling attacks against the political left who had voted no, stating that they had betrayed the nation and abandoned the Hungarian people.²⁴ When he again reached the post of Prime Minister in 2010, one of Mr. Orbán’s first actions was to decree citizenship for all those marooned nationals. The vision of a greater Hungary expands past the borders of the state, and Mr. Orbán has promised to bring them home.

For a Populist to succeed, the three aforementioned factors of polarization, normative threats, and a charismatic leader must all be present. By reviving the lost identity of Hungarian nationals and championing himself and FIDESZ as the leaders of this identity, Viktor Orbán has succeeded in creating a nation polarized from its neighbors, and has provided a charismatic leader for the nation in the form of himself. In order to legitimize this new identity and his totalitarian hold over it, Mr. Orbán has revived historical threats to this reawakened identity in order to justify his illiberal response. Convincing Hungarians that their way of life is under threat has allowed Mr. Orbán to take drastic illiberal measures in the name of protecting Hungary and its values. To convince Hungarians of this looming danger, Mr. Orbán has again turned to history by emphasizing historical threats to Hungarian identity whose influences are still prominent today, namely Western colonialism and the threat of an Islamic invasion in the Christian state of Hungary.

²²Ibid, 28

²³Ibid 33

²⁴Inotai, “Tianon Trauma”.

Hungarian history provides a multitude of ideological enemies for Mr Orbán to invoke as a modern existential threat, however one stands out above the rest, the injustice imparted in Hungary by the Western powers through the Treaty of Trianon. The loss of territory has resulted in a long history of hostility between Hungary and the neighboring states which absorbed the lost territory such as Romania and Germany, but in the last decade Mr. Orbán has shifted the focus of this anger towards the Western states who put the treaty together, such as the United States, Britain, France, ect.²⁵ According to Orbán, the modern manifestation of these powers resides in Brussels at the headquarters of the European Union, an institution of Western colonisation.²⁶ While the EU provides significant economic assistance to its member states including Hungary, Mr. Orbán feels that this assistance comes with a cultural price, and the Unions values of multiculturalism and liberal individual independence are significant threats to his secular Christian state identity.

Viktor Orbán has not always been opposed to Hungary's involvement in international coalitions with the West as he was Prime Minister when Hungary was admitted into NATO in 1999. That said he campaigned strongly against Hungary's entrance into the EU, and in 2008 he and his supporters were finally given legitimate ammunition to criticize the Union in the form of the economic meltdown prompted by the global financial crisis. In his campaigns and speeches, Mr. Orbán has constantly heaped blame for the economic catastrophe on the European Union and the United States as well, claiming that the liberal, capitalist, and democratic values and institutions which emerged in Hungary after the collapse of the Soviet Union was an attempt by the West to colonize Hungary with their incompatible values and destroy the Hungarian state and culture.²⁷ To emphasize this point to the Hungarian people, Orbán frequently references the difficulties faced in Western states, saying things along the lines of: "Not everything is going well in the West, why should we follow them?"²⁸

Viktor Orbán's most famous clash with the EU revolves around the immigration policy of Angela Merkle in response to the refugee crisis in the Middle East, a crisis

²⁵ Kurti *The Remote Borderland*. 29

²⁶ Orban 'Fulfilling Our Vocation,'

²⁷ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin Books, 2020).

34

²⁸ Kurti, "Orbanism" 65

which Orbán likens to a cultural invasion. Invoking the old conflict between Christian Hungarians and the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the East, Orbán has stated that the wave of refugees being brought into Europe is the second coming of the Islamic invasion of the Middle Ages, saying: “Migrants now seek to take what our ancestors fought them for, to surrender (to the EU) will destroy [our Hungarian] world”.²⁹ The narrative that Orbán is trying to create is one in which the EU has sponsored the destruction of Hungarian culture by means of a proxy army: the refugees fleeing to Europe in search of a less violent existence. Using Hungary's conjured identity of a fundamental Christian state as leverage to turn away the largely muslim migrants, Orbán's government have built barbed wire fences at the borders of the nation to keep out any immigrants who might corrupt the culture of Hungary.³⁰ Many of FIDESZ's campaign slogans promote this secular view of immigration, and express support for Orbán's defiance in the face of the EU.



Let's Stop Brussels! National Consultation 2017 (photo: cyberpress.hu)

²⁹ Orban 'Fulfilling Our Vocation,'

³⁰ Janosch Delcker, "Viktor Orbán, Bavaria's Hardline Hero," POLITICO, September 25, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-bavaria-hardline-hero-seehofer-migration-borders/>.



Stop Migrants FIDESZ Billboard (Source Orange Files)

While Orbán's attacks against the EU are dressed up in his mission to save Hungary, it serves the dual purpose of legitimizing his illiberal regime and leadership to Hungarians who have bought into his vision of Hungarian identity. By emphasizing the historic injustices imparted on Hungary by the West and the disastrous consequences of the financial crisis brought about by Western economic institutions, as well as the Western sponsorship of the Islamic migrant invasion, Orbán seeks to convince Hungarians that an illiberal regime is the only way to protect Hungary from the encroaching threats which surround the nation and seek to destroy its ancient ways of life. Similarly, Orbán has proven to the Hungarian people that he is willing to stand up to the EU and go about business the "Hungarian way" rather than be bullied by the superpowers as weaker leaders before him have. Thus by invoking the historical threats of both Western liberalism and the ancient conflict between Christians and Muslims which Hungary has historically played a large role, Mr. Orbán has closed the populist circle by legitimizing his charismatic illiberal rule over a Hungarian population polarized from their international neighbors.

In the formation of any national identity, ever present are events or narratives present in the national history which can be particularly damaging or detrimental to the character of this identity. As he has gone about restoring the national identity of

Hungary, Viktor Orbán has reckoned with several influences and factors which undercut Hungary's commitment to a secular Christian identity. To circumvent these difficulties, Orbán and FIDESZ have utilized traditional scapegoats to lessen Hungarian historical guilt, emphasize Hungary's role as a victim of history, and undermine anyone who challenges his polarized picture of the past or any aspect of his view of national Hungarian identity.

One of the greatest obstacles facing Viktor Orbán and his vision for Hungary is that the values which he has promoted as fundamentally Hungarian have not always been present in Hungarian history. The period of 1939 to 1945 come immediately to mind, as during this period Hungary was a willing conspirator with Nazi Germany and remained one of its closest if incompetent military allies throughout the Second World War. While the independent Hungarian government at the time did not participate in the extermination of Europe's Jewish population, they did provide ready military assistance to the Nazis, and Hungarian troops fought on the Eastern Front. However in Viktor Orbán's eye, the idea that an independent Hungarian state supported a fascist movement is an unacceptable smudge on Hungarian national pride, and the narrative of collaboration has been replaced by one of foreign occupation and subjugation by the Nazis. To supplement this new narrative, in 2014 in a closed door meeting a monument Memorial for Victims of the German Occupation was designed and constructed in Budapest.³¹ A gross icon of historical manipulation and irresponsibility, the monument shows Hungary as the Archangel Gabriel desperately warding off vicious attacks from an eagle, meant to represent Nazi Germany. Of all of Orbán's attempts to change history for his own uses, this monument has seen the most significant public pushback, and the monument in its current form still stands but has been covered in personal mementos left by people who would not forget the horror of the Holocaust and the legacy of that terrible war.³² This outcry aside, Mr. Orbán has made clear the position that Hungarians should feel no sense of guilt or wrongdoing when they reflect on their national history.

³¹ Patrick H. O'Neil, "The Obscure Object of Decline: Locating Hungary's Illiberalism," SSRN, May 19, 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3583026. 34

³² Ibid 37

While Orbán and FIDESZ have not looked to punish critics of the Occupation Memorial, they have been significantly less kind to academics willing to challenge them on other instances of historical mismanagement. For example, in the summer of 2020 Nóra Berend, a professor of history at Cambridge University and Hungarian national was asked to review sections of Hungarian school textbooks by the Society of History Teachers, a government sponsored society. Her review, titled “Little Hungarian Mythology,” accused the textbooks of instilling Hungarian children with a conflated sense of national pride derived from the glorious Hungarian past depicted in the books.³³ In response, both the Hungarian government and state sponsored researchers began leveling attacks against her, challenging her credibility and stating that she was in the pay of certain liberal billionaires who wanted to harm Hungary’s national spirit.³⁴ Rather than engaging in constructive debate with academics who present alternate perspectives to the government’s polarized view of history, the Orbán government has turned these voices into scapegoats which can be utilized as threats to the national mission.

In any discussion of historical scapegoats in Europe it is impossible to avoid discussing the difficulties faced by Jewish people and the stigma which historically surrounded them. It should therefore come as little surprise that in Orbán’s Christian state Jews have come under fire, taking on the role of the liberal denizens who promote immigration which is meant to destroy traditional Hungarian culture.³⁵ Traditionally Jews have lived on the fringes of Hungarian society, and this unfamiliarity has caused Jews to historically be blamed for the trials of the Hungarian people. Following the second World War, Jew’s role in society shifted dramatically, and as Communism wrapped up Hungary, the Hungarian people began to conflate Jewish identity with that of the Communists, with both being viewed as untrustworthy.³⁶ This conflation continued after the fall of the Soviet Union, and today Jews in Hungary have come to represent the forces of liberal multiculturalism which Orbán claims is hellbent on destroying Hungarian culture.

³³ Balogh, “Hungarian Spectrum,”

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Gabor Forgacs, The Orange Files, <https://theorangefiles.hu>.

³⁶ Karpalski 44

The most prominent scapegoated figure is that of George Soros, a Jewish Hungarian billionaire with close ties to the United States. Since the end of Communism in Hungary, Mr. Soros has been Hungary's greatest sponsor of liberal style education, supporting and funding a significant number of educational institutions inside Hungary, notably Central European University, a private research university founded by Mr. Soros in 1991. Despite being hailed as one of the most prestigious universities in all of Europe, CEU was bombarded by attacks from Orbán and his supporters, who claimed that “Soros University” was corrupting Hungary with its Jewish Liberal influence.³⁷ The attacks reached their zenith in 2017, when a law was passed restricting foreign researchers in Hungary and all but forcing CEU out of Hungary all together.³⁸ CEU currently operates its main campus out of Vienna, Austria, and has almost no influence inside of Hungary. Perhaps the University’s vested interest in research around nationalism and historical memory might have prompted this abrupt exit? We may never know.

Mr. Soros has been the target of the Hungarian government over another prominent contemporary issue, that of immigration. Being a vocal supporter of both the EU and immigration, the Orbán government have created an entire anti-immigration campaign focusing of Mr. Soros. In 2017 FIDESZ ran a “Stop Soros” campaign which eventually culminated in a “STOP Soros” law on immigration which classified the “promotion of illegal immigration” as a misdemeanor punishable by a prison sentence.³⁹ “The STOP Soros legislation serves this purpose by making the organization of illegal immigration a punishable offense. Through this proposed legislation, we want to prevent Hungary from becoming a country of immigration.” said FIDESZ Interior Minister Sándor Pintér in 2018.⁴⁰

³⁷Tamas Székely , “PM Orbán: ‘CeU Enjoyed Unfair Advantage Over Hungarian Universities,’” Hungary Today, March 26, 2018, <https://hungarytoday.hu/pm-orban-ceu-enjoyed-unfair-advantage-hungarian-universities-63942/>.

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Forgacs, Orange Files.

⁴⁰ Ibid



Screen shot from Orbán government “STOP SOROS! television advertisement.

Since 2010, Hungary has undergone an astonishing transformation into an illiberal regime, and the success which Viktor Orbán’s plan to take control of Hungarian national identity achieved in a relatively short period of time echoes the achievements of other prominent Populists such as Huey Long. Simultaneously, Hungary’s desertion of democratic values and institutions is an anomaly in democratic political theory, as competitive elections and international pressure usually result in further democratization rather than backsliding.⁴¹ Given that Populism is generally conceived as an economic phenomenon indicating the polarization of economic classes, it follows that much of the analysis of Orbán’s illiberal rise focuses on the disastrous outcome of the 2008 financial crisis and the anger which emanated from that catastrophe. However Populism in Hungary goes beyond this surface analysis because rather than being an isolated economic side effect, Populism has become a combined political, cultural and economic force inside of Hungary.⁴²

Above all else, Mr. Orbán must be seen as an opportunist who seeks to harness wherever the most prominent national sentiment might be and use it to leverage election success. In 2009 Mr. Orbán was one of the first people to grasp the rising anger of the Hungarian people in response to the global financial crisis, and he redirected it outward towards the western liberals who had laid out the blueprint for the economic

⁴¹ O’Neil, “The Obscure Object of Decline”. 8

⁴² Kurti, “Orbaism”. 63

system which had just horribly failed. Simultaneously, Orbán understood that Hungary was undergoing an identity crisis which had plagued it since the fall of the Soviet Union, when Hungarian culture all but vanished under the Communist dictatorship. As the new Hungarian state emerged in 1989, the nation's leaders needed to design a stable system of government which would immediately and permanently and stably function. Their failures to design such a system resulted in the co-optation of Western style capitalist democracy into Hungary which left a void of identity, and aware of this void Orbán has inserted himself and his illiberal vision.

After the Revolution of 1956 which resulted in the Soviet military occupation of Budapest and the execution of the revolutions leader Imre Nagy, nationalism in Hungary waned dramatically. Hungarian intellectuals silenced their dissent and went into quiet exile, making due with concessions offered under "Goulash Communism" rather than endanger themselves in futile attempts at change.⁴³ While the revolution sparked feelings of national unity, the Soviets snuffed out this optimism, and Hungarian's living outside the borders of Hungary felt that they had lost their national identity. This feeling was enforced by the Communist government's denial of the existence of Hungarian ethnic minorities outside of the country, since the national pressures which acknowledged those minorities were equivocated to a fascist dream by the Soviets.⁴⁴ When the Soviet Union fell, these intellectuals were called upon to recreate the Hungarian state from the top down, yet because the Soviets had refused to allow any revival of Hungarian nationalism, these intellectuals and their compatriots in the new Post-Communist states failed to imagine a unique system, settling on the raw importation of Western style democracies with capitalist based market economies.

Thus when the system collapsed in 2008 and people desperately wondered what had gone wrong, Viktor Orbán was poised to step in and direct their anger towards the Westerners who had historically run roughshod over Hungary, rather than the failures of the transitional government to create a sustainable system for Hungary.⁴⁵ Liberals had no response to Orbán's nationalism, and the institutions which might prevent the rise of

⁴³Andras Bozoki, "The Hungarian Democratic Opposition: Self-Reflection, Identity, and Political Discourse," *Political Science.ceu*, 2007. 6

⁴⁴ Bozoki "The Hungarian Democratic Opposition". 17

⁴⁵ Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed: A Reckoning* (London: Penguin Books, 2020). 23

illiberalism were not suitably entrenched in Hungarian society and culture to deal with the power of this revived nationalism. To Orbán, the source of nationalism was not the most significant factor as he has demonstrated that Hungarian national identity can be conjured from myths and legends as much from history, but rather this backwards looking identity polarizes Hungarians from their present circumstances.

The most significant characteristic of Mr. Orbán's vision of Hungarian identity is that it relies on a history without any living historical memory. The history which living Hungarians do remember is that of the decline of Hungarian nationalism under Soviet rule, and most would rather forget that. Meanwhile intellectuals who might have fostered a history worth celebrating during that time were in hiding and therefore have no standing credibility with modern Hungarians, as those intellectuals have been accused by Orbán and his government of betraying the interests of Hungarians. Orbán's rise therefore has been nearly unopposed, and Orbán can conjure a lost vocation for Hungary without any fear of opposition. While the world changed and obsolete ideologies faded and were replaced, the values of the past could be repurposed, but not abandoned.

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