



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 469-489

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p469

Published 15 July, 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Transforming the Political Public Sphere: The Media System of the Orbán regime in Hungary

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ABSTRACT: This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the anti-pluralist transformation of Hungary's political public sphere under the Orbán regime, embedding the developments within the broader historical and cultural context of the country. Firstly, the logic behind the transformation and the strategies of Orbán regime's media manipulations are scrutinized, revealing how economic and political interests intertwined, including institutional changes, third-party campaigns, the decreasing transparency of public interest information, and the allocation of state advertising with political bias. Secondly, the study examines the Orbán regime's growing influence over the media landscape, which resulted in massive media dominance by the late 2010s. This led to distorted public discourse with an increasing level of self-censorship and anticipatory obedience to the government's narratives and diminished media independence while maintaining the illusion of media freedom. Finally, the study also focuses on the ensuing implications of these changes for media polarization and the Orbán regime's autocratic resilience. Ultimately, the government-dominated public discourse, coupled with a highly partisan audience susceptible to elite manipulation, undermines citizens' ability to make informed decisions and hold the government accountable, as well as plays a crucial role in securing electoral victories and maintaining substantial social support.

KEYWORDS: autocratic stabilization, Hungary, hybridization, media system, Orbán regime, populism

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For my dad

1. Introduction

This study aims to contribute to studies on autocratization and populism research by providing a detailed analysis of the Orbán regime's political public sphere in Hungary. Examining the transformation of the broadly defined media system in a case that can be considered a textbook example of contemporary populist autocratization (Benedek 2024) provides valuable insights into the functioning and stabilization strategies of the current hybrid regimes in general. These strategies not only hollow out meaningful political contestation and citizens' political participation, but also enable these regimes to garner significant social support, even (or especially) during times of severe crisis. In my view, this stems not only from the undermined civil society's autonomy but also from the systematic transformation of the political public sphere. Through this transformation, autocratic regimes can establish hegemonic positions of their frames, narratives, and political messages in public life. As a result, the popular will is not spontaneously formed within the framework of a largely free and fair political contestation but artificially created in a top-down manner by using regime-level resources, which undermines the foundations of democratic accountability and, hence, democracy itself. Therefore, the political public sphere holds particular significance in contemporary hybrid regimes, as the systematic distortion of the public sphere (i.e., the autocratic general conditions) in these regimes can intertwine with moralized political identity-generating populist discourses (i.e., the actual populist contents), amplifying their impacts on voter behavior beyond what they would achieve separately. Consequently, examining the coexistence and interplay between "autocratic hardware" and "populist software" in a paradigmatic case's media system can be of paramount importance in understanding the functioning of contemporary hybrid regimes and grasping the ongoing "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Therefore, this study, building on an extensive review of existing literature to offer a systematic and refined analysis of the transformation of the Hungarian media system and its role in autocratization, provides new perspectives even for readers who are well-informed on the subject.

This complex approach places emphasis on the advantages of bridging the gap between the literature on hybrid regimes, which focuses on the structural (polity) dimensions of political regimes, and populism research, which delves into the dynamic (politics) elements of political systems. Agreeing with scholars who combine these two research areas (Castaldo 2018; Levitsky and Loxton 2013), it can be argued that while populism alone does not offer a regime-level explanation (Urbinati 2019), its judicious application can enhance the explanatory power of autocratization studies. Indeed, authors studying the Orbán regime typically either draw upon the concepts of "hybridology" (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018; Kornai 2015; Magyar and Madlovics 2020) or the use of the term "populism" (Batory 2016; Csehi 2019; Palonen 2018), even when the latter is integrated into a more comprehensive framework (Antal 2019; Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020; Scheiring 2022). However, the combined and systematic use of these two approaches is less common (Bozóki and Benedek 2024), which, considering that their separate use has already yielded valuable findings, appears to be an untapped area in the literature. This study aims to address this gap while providing a comprehensive analysis of the anti-pluralist transformation of Hungary's political public sphere under the Orbán regime, embedding the developments within the broader historical and cultural context of the country.

The key term *populist autocratization*, according to Benedek (2024), denotes processes where violations of democratic criteria are driven by populists. Populism is defined here as an autocratic interpretation of democracy and political representation that embodies three core attributes: (1) people-centrism, (2) anti-elitism, and (3) a Manichaean outlook, all culminating in a moralizing and extremely exclusionary representative logic. Relying on the Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge et al. 2020), this study defines *electoral democracies* through five key conditions for democratic competition: i) universal suffrage, ii) elected officials, iii) procedurally clean elections, iv) the freedom of association (encompassing freedom for parties and civil society), and v) the freedom of the political public sphere. The first three conditions can be viewed

as “formal-procedural”, and the remaining two as “substantial” aspects of democratic competition (Benedek 2024). Regarding the political public sphere, the specific dimension in this study, we rely on the European Council’s definition. According to this approach, the “media are pluralistic if they are multi-centred and diverse enough to host an informed, uninhibited and inclusive discussion of matters of public interest at all times” (Haraszti 2011, 103). *Liberal democracies* are distinguished, beyond these conditions, by a robust implementation of liberal principles, including the rule of law, various civil liberties, and the separation of powers. The term *electoral autocracy* (Coppedge et al. 2020) or “electoral authoritarianism” (Schedler 2013) describes regimes that conduct real multi-party elections (in contrast to *closed autocracies*) and maintain democratic and representative institutions for legitimacy purposes, but hollow out their democratic and competitive essence through regime-level manipulation mechanisms. Finally, *populist electoral autocracy* (PEA) (Benedek 2024) refers to a regime subtype within electoral autocracies where substantive aspects of political competition are undermined by populists, although formal-procedural criteria of democracy are largely maintained. Populism enhances autocratic resilience by fostering identity-based divisive and repressive narratives, increasing polarization, and providing autocrats with charismatic legitimacy and moral justification, which could transcend democratic norms and framework. By fostering moral, emotional, and charismatic identification with the in-group and its leader, populism also simplifies the shaping of citizens’ political perceptions for autocrats, which is crucial for their social and electoral support (Benedek 2021, 216-218).

This complex approach is employed in this study not only to capture the current modus operandi of the Orbán regime but also its historical embeddedness. Bozóki and Benedek (2024) have identified two critical junctures in the process of populist autocratization in post-1989 Hungary. In democratization studies, the concept of critical junctures (Capoccia and Ziblatt 2010), borrowed from historical institutionalism, can be applied to relatively short and turbulent periods, marked by uncertainty and the potential for radical institutional transformations. The specific outcome leads to enduring effects on democratic institutions. According to Bozóki and Benedek, the first critical juncture occurred after the mid-2000s, resulting in the deconsolidation of liberal democracy, while the second juncture marked the rise of the Orbán regime as a populist electoral autocracy in the mid-2010s in Hungary.

Preceding the first critical juncture, liberal-technocratic politics characterized the post-1989 period (Korkut 2012), when the new elites sought to demobilize civil society movements that had played a pivotal role in ending previous communist rule. These “democrats against democracy” aimed to limit people’s demands to variants of neoliberal reform packages (Wilkin 2018, 17). The early signs of the strengthening populist autocratization emerged during Viktor Orbán’s first cabinet (1998-2002), when his government made attempts to centralize power, exert control over the media, favored specific business circles, and notably began referring to their political opponents as enemies of the people, particularly after facing a narrow electoral defeat in 2002. A few years later, Hungary’s political landscape was already characterized by toxic levels of populism-driven political polarization, which undermined the elite consensus even before 2010 (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2012), an essential factor for a healthy democracy. However, the collapse of the legitimacy of Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2006, the Prime Minister of the socialist-liberal coalition government, disrupted the era of “competing populism” (Palonen 2009), which based on the preceding rivalry between Orbán and Gyurcsány. The success of Orbán’s populism in channeling the growing public discontent over the impacts of the economic challenges, particularly after the 2008 global financial crisis, and the government’s austerity measures and technocratic reforms, set the stage for the 2010 critical elections (Enyedi and Benoît 2011). In 2010, by portraying itself as a force for ridding Hungary of communist-era political elites (Böcskei 2022), and promising democratic restoration through the re-politicization of society (Antal 2019), as well as law and order, Orbán’s Fidesz secured an unprecedented level of social and institutional authorization.

By focusing on the political public sphere, this study will examine the period following the 2010 electoral victory, which led to a constitutional majority for Fidesz. Since then, the Orbán regime first dismantled the

crisis-ridden liberal democracy before it took a step further by transforming Hungary into a populist electoral autocracy during the second critical juncture in the mid-2010s (Bozóki and Benedek 2024). The changes aimed to both undermine institutional checks and balances and hollow out democratic political competition. The main targets of the institutional autocratic “U-turn” (Kornai 2015) include the constitution, the electoral rules, state authorities and companies, the Constitutional Court and the judiciary, the media system, and the cultural sphere (Bánkuti, Halmai, and Scheppele 2012; Tóth 2017). The result is an illiberal “Frankenstate” (Scheppele 2013), which, in its details, may resemble democratic regimes, but when viewed as a whole, it embodies an autocratic political system. During this transformation, “populist constitutionalism” (Müller 2016) played a significant role in justifying the completely unilateral and secret constitutional process (Tóth 2017) and other institutional changes by references to a majoritarian, later illiberal interpretation of democracy and the people’s will, as the ultimate and unquestionable source of legitimacy. Instead of real referendums, so-called “national consultations” aimed to demonstrate the homogenous and transparent will of the political community and served as a pseudo-democratic form of political participation (Pócza and Oross 2022; Körösenyi, Illés, and Gyulai 2020). Moreover, populism was also decisive in maintaining the anti-establishment narratives in power and creating pro-regime political identities by employing antagonistic divisions between “us, Hungarians” and “them, globalists”, embedding it in the broader narrative of defending the nation’s sovereignty (Batory 2016).

However, the populist autocratization (Benedek 2024) had reached extreme levels by the second critical juncture in the mid-2010s, resulting in the hollowing out of the substantive dimensions of political contestation by targeting both civil society and the political public sphere. This process was accompanied by the regime-level escalation of populism, especially since the refugee crisis in 2015. Regarding the first dimension, the Orbán regime has severely curtailed the freedom of association by subverting and restricting the autonomy of opposition parties (Unger 2018, 5-16) and attacking various actors of the autonomous civil society with legal measures and populist campaigns (Csehi 2019), especially foreign-funded NGOs (Gerő et al. 2020). Without delving into the topic of academic and cultural freedom, which would require a separate study, the present study focuses on the second dimension, namely the autocratic transformation of the political public sphere. This has a crucial contribution to the Orbán regime’s ability to effectively shape the people’s will from a hegemonic position, resulting in sustained high levels of social support and continuous electoral success.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Firstly, it outlines the logic behind the media system transformation and the key regime manipulation strategies. Then, it examines the Orbán regime’s growing influence over the political public sphere and the new media status quo. The final section will analyze the implications of these developments on media market polarization and citizen perceptions, as well as on the regime’s increased autocratic resilience.

2. The logic behind the media system transformation

The trends of the post-1989 Hungarian media system have been embedded in the broader patterns of East-Central Europe (CEE) (Hallin and Mancini 2012), aiming to establish constitutional liberalism with a pluralistic public sphere (Polyák 2019, 280). It was marked by rapid and significant changes, the central role of the media in shaping public opinion during both the communist regime and the phase of democratization, strong state intervention and foreign influence on ownership structure, and the politically dominant position of the socially weak parties in public life. Nevertheless, the CEE region is politically and economically quite diverse, with more profound differences among the countries than within Western European states. For example, expanding Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) classical categorization (polarized pluralist or Mediterranean, democratic corporatist, and liberal models), Dobek-Ostrowska (2019) identified four models of media and politics in CEE countries. These models are the politicized media model, the hybrid liberal (a mixture of the liberal and polarized pluralist models), the media in transition, and the authoritarian model.

Despite Hungary being one of the leaders in democratization after 1989, its media system – along with Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, Serbia, and later Poland – belongs to the politicized media model in this categorization (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015). Indeed, the activity of Hungary’s supervisory authority resembled more “Mediterranean” practices, as party delegates indirectly influenced the public media through the selection of their management and directors (Polyák 2015, 282). These countries share the common characteristics of low media freedom, extensive political parallelism, and a blurred line between political actors, business, and media groups.

However, interpreting media systems and political regimes simultaneously presents a significant challenge for scholars. This is largely due to categorization issues that have arisen in regime classification, leading to the rise of literature on hybrid regimes, similarly influencing studies on media systems. That is, the difficulty lies in the ambiguity and complexity of empirical cases as opposed to pure theoretical ideal types, pushing media system researchers towards hybrid approaches as well. The concept of *hybridity*, originally from natural sciences and denoting the offspring of different species, is adapted in regime and media-system studies in three ways: (a) to challenge the clear-cut division between democratic and undemocratic regimes, (b) to challenge the distinction between old and new media logics, and (c) to suggest blurring of boundaries between a system’s key components (Rantanen 2021, 268). Andrew Chadwick’s (2013) book brought the concept of hybrid media systems to the forefront of media studies, arguing that media systems are evolving into hybrids, much like political regimes. Despite its limited reception in the CEE region, Witschge et al. (2019) contend that the term hybridity has been overemployed in journalism studies, suggesting that a shift towards new concepts is needed. While not endorsing its overuse, the concept of hybridity could be relevant in CEE not only at the regime level but also within media systems, because “the type/degree of hybridity of a political system has consequences for the media system and the relationship between the political and public spheres” (Peruško 2021).

This insight has led researchers to explore new dimensions beyond Hallin-Mancini’s comparative media systems model, focusing on media systems’ struggles with political independence and government influence (Dobek-Ostrowska 2015; Peruško 2016; 2021). In media systems in East-Central Europe, especially in Hungary, there is growing recognition of the need to study hybrid media systems along with the concepts of *media capture* and *asymmetric parallelism* (Polyák 2015; Bátorfy and Urbán 2020; Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo 2021). The impact of these dimensions is clear: media systems characterized by high media capture and high asymmetric parallelism tend to have underdeveloped media markets and restricted media freedom (Peruško 2021, 40). Asymmetric parallelism reflects a situation where one political side benefits from media outlets that align with its views, while the opposing side lacks comparable media support and relies on mainstream media for impartial coverage. This imbalance, which undermines media pluralism, is not only observed in the US but also in Southeast Europe’s non-consolidated democracies (Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo 2021), where government influence often sways even mainstream legacy media and leaves independent media on the fringes. Media capture, contrasting with the media autonomy outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), signifies the state’s ability to shape voter’s perception, described as the “undue influence of the state over the media and its democratic role” (Peruško, Vozab, and Čuvalo 2021, 219). Building on these insights, the third section of this study delves into the Orbán regime’s growing influence on the media landscape, with a specific focus on the unilateral “basification” of the public sphere (asymmetric parallelism) and the process of media capture, shedding light on the new status quo.

Within this theoretical and wider regional context, this study now shifts focus to Hungary’s unique post-1989 trajectory. Following the media war in the early 1990s, the Hungarian media system showed signs of consolidation (Bajomi-Lázár 2017b), underscored by the adoption of new media regulations in 1996. Naturally, minor challenges continued to persist. For example, the balance of the representation of parliamentary forces in the public media started to be disturbed during Viktor Orbán’s first government (1998–2002). Orbán called for a “better balance” of public media offerings (Konarska 2022) and sought to establish

the own media of the right-wing segment of society. In Fidesz's narrative, state resources were seen as strategic means to counter the left-liberal media dominance and ensure diversity. Therefore, the first Orbán-government employed public funds to bolster the *Magyar Nemzet* newspaper and initiated the *Heti Válasz* weekly using taxpayer money, while public media underwent personnel changes to align with the government's views (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020). Following its electoral defeat in 2002 and concluding that its media control efforts were not radical enough, Fidesz continued to establish an alternative media empire to counter perceived left-liberal preponderance. This included outlets like the TV channel *Hír TV* and the radio station *Lánchíd Rádió* through the party oligarch Lajos Simicska. In addition, Fidesz used its overwhelming victory in the municipal elections in 2006 to launch many propagandistic local newspapers using public funds (Kitta 2013, 250).

Despite these dynamics, prior to 2010, Hungary had experienced a relatively high level of media freedom and a diverse political public sphere (Bajomi-Lázár 2017b). For example, the left-liberal governments between 2002 and 2010 seemed less determined to exert influence over the media landscape compared to their predecessors, as they retained even a pro-Fidesz bias in various programs in the public media (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020, 50). A similar conclusion can be drawn by the examination of conventional press freedom rankings. The *Freedom of the Press*, compiled by Freedom House, has categorized the country's media system as "free" until 2011, and as "partly free" since then. Similarly, in the global ranking by *Reporters Without Borders*, the country's ranking declined from 25th place in 2009 to 87th in 2019. The reason is the same: the media landscape in Hungary has undergone a massive anti-pluralist transformation since Viktor Orbán came to power again in 2010. In the rest of this section, I delve into the Orbán regime's institutional and economic strategies that have led to the growing influence of the Orbán regime on the Hungary's media landscape.

2.1 The strategies of media system manipulation in the Orbán regime

The anti-pluralist transformation of the Hungarian media system encompasses systematic manipulation of the key institutions, massive distortion of the media market, and increasing domination of the political discourse, where pro-government media enjoy almost unlimited access to resources, enabling the governing party to tightly control the political narratives (Polyák 2019). Regarding the first dimension, initially, the Orbán government's actions after 2010 focused on adopting new media regulations, notably the Act CLXXXV of 2010, gaining control over media supervisory bodies, the state press agency, and public media by appointing party delegates (Gyulai 2017; Bajomi-Lázár 2017a). The 2010 media law and subsequent amendments established a new media authority – *National Media and Infocommunications Authority* and its *Media Council*, both under the control of a single person appointed by the prime minister –, combining the regulatory and supervisory functions. The direct dependence of the new authority on the political elite is evident in its decisions, favoring ruling parties by controlling market entry for new media players and restricting existing ones (Konarska 2022). Favorable decisions from regulators are granted to media aligned with the ruling party, while critical or unaffiliated media face obstacles. Examples include hindering the merger between the German company *Axel Springer* and the Swiss *Ringier*, which aimed to acquire the leading daily *Népszabadság* and several regional newspapers through indirect channels and proposing an advertising tax targeting the independent and market-leading Bertelsmann's *RTL Klub* TV channel. These processes led to the intensification of the exodus of Western media companies from the Hungarian media market (e.g. the Finnish *Sanoma* or the German *Funke Medien Gruppe*), which had already commenced after the 2008 financial crisis, enabling investors tied to Fidesz to acquire media groups. This happened with the prominent online news portal *Origo.hu* and the second-largest TV channel, *TV2*, as both were sold (by the German *Deutsche Telekom* and *ProSiebenSat1*) to government clienteles in the mid-2010s. Moreover, public media underwent significant

changes with the creation of the *Media Services and Support Trust Fund* in 2011, enabling direct political supervision. Later, in 2015, another round of concentration processes took place.

Furthermore, through state-funded “public service advertisements” and third-party campaigns, often critical of opposition figures, institutional manipulation skewed the nature of political competition in favor of the ruling parties. This allowed them to circumvent campaign spending limits and reporting requirements (OSCE 2014, 17). OSCE observed in the 2018 elections that “throughout the campaign there was a ubiquitous overlap between the ruling coalition’s campaign messages and the government’s anti-migration, anti-Brussels, anti-UN, and anti-Soros information campaigns, evident, in particular, in outdoor and online advertising. The widespread government information campaign was largely indistinguishable from Fidesz campaigning, giving it a clear advantage” (OSCE 2018, 13). A notable example of this was the referendum on the so-called “child protection” law held concurrently with the 2022 general elections, allowing the government to legally bypass campaign spending restrictions. The referendum aimed to increase the government’s social support by shaping the political agenda and voters’ preferences around popular family-related issues.

Another practice of the 2010s involves the decreasing transparency of public interest information (Bajomi-Lázár 2019). Access to public information has become restricted, with classified documents and fees charged for requesting public information, often without substantial justification (Bajomi-Lázár and Stepińska 2019). The government even prohibits journalists from asking questions at press conferences and limits the areas in the Parliament where journalists can work, hindering their ability to report on public affairs. Selective access and bans on journalists critical of the ruling party contribute to a shrinking public sphere with diverse opinions. In 2020, “Authorization Act”, introduced as a measure to combat the pandemic, extended the government’s response time to questions and requests from 15+15 days to 45+45 days. During the pandemic, the government provided minimal information to the public, ceased holding press conferences, and frequently ignored inquiries and information requests from journalists (Bátorfy et al. 2022, 12).

To significantly distort the media market, government-friendly media outlets were supported through state advertising allocated to loyal elite groups (Mertek Media Monitor 2019), particularly since the National Communications Office, formally under the control of Antal Rogán, Minister of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office, and informally overseen by Orbán’s unofficial adviser Árpád Habony, has centralized the external communications of state bodies since 2014 (Bátorfy 2017a). This centralization is carried out through media agencies with close ties to the government, mainly owned by Gyula Balásy, which orchestrate the advertising campaigns, benefiting pro-government media outlets (Mertek Media Monitor 2023, 23). In 2010, the share of pro-government media companies in state advertising was only 26%, but this figure rose to 79% by 2019 (Bátorfy and Szabó 2020) and 86% in 2020 (Mertek Media Monitor 2021a, 43). This is especially noteworthy considering that while in 2006, state advertising accounted for only 6.6% of total advertising revenue in the newspaper market segment, by 2017, it had increased to 26% (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020, 53-54). This concentration of advertising spending allows the government to support favored media outlets at the expense of less compliant ones and maintain media products that might otherwise struggle financially. Furthermore, state-funded advertisements act as signals to private advertisers about which media outlets are preferred by the government, without clear or regulated criteria for selection (Polyák 2019). Another manipulation tool involves political influence over media agencies and media buyers (Urbán 2015). In summary, state advertising distribution is characterized by a direct dependency on the ruling elite.

Finally, it is important to highlight that these processes unfolded during the era of media market transformation driven by changing consumption habits and market dynamics, imposing significant challenges on media outlets, without any direct political intent. Notably, the share of advertising revenues attributed to online platforms (such as Facebook and Google) has steadily increased. While in 2016, these platforms accounted for 51% of digital advertising revenue, by 2021, this figure has risen to 65% (Bátorfy et al. 2022,

18). In this context, the enormous asymmetrical financial state support for pro-government media increases the risk of independent media outlets closing due to unequal resources (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020, 61).

3. The Orbán regime's growing influence on the media landscape

During the transformation of the political public sphere, economic groups closely affiliated with the ruling party acquired media outlets, often with the support of state-controlled banks (Gyulai 2017, 26), resulting typically in the conversion of these outlets into overtly pro-government propaganda platforms. However, “grey-zone” media (Polyák, Urbán, and Szávai 2022) such as the *Index.hu* news portal and the ATV news TV channel show more restraint in their allegiance to the government, allowing space for critical voices opposing the Orbán regime. These media outlets are used as strategic tools for government messaging to critical audiences, aiming to control and shape the regime opposition.

As the media market distortion increased, so did censorship and self-censorship among journalists due to legal threats and economic pressures (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2016; Polyák 2019). By focusing on the systematic patterns of government advertising allocation and media content changes, Szeidl and Szűcs (2021) highlighted that government advertising is politically motivated, favoring media outlets with political connections. This dynamic explains why outlets more closely connected to the right-wing government start receiving advertising favors, which cease if the connection is lost (Szeidl and Szűcs 2021, 291). The case of the daily newspaper *Metropol*, acquired by party oligarch Simicska in 2011, illustrates this point vividly. Within a single month in 2011, *Metropol*'s portion of print advertising from state-owned companies surged from around 20% to around 50%. Later, when Simicska and Orbán had a public fallout in 2015, the share of Simicska's daily newspapers in the state-control print advertising decreased from 60% to 20%. Szeidl and Szűcs's findings also shed light on the implications for media independence and objectivity, revealing a tendency for media with closer government ties to cover less corruption, suggesting content favoritism towards the government. Urbán et al. (2017) discovered that after the 2014 elections, a third of journalists admitted to practicing self-censorship to maintain their jobs. Even opposition media outlets face the paradox of self-censorship, being “prisoners of their audiences' preferences” (Bajomi-Lázár 2017c, 57).

Bátorfy (2022) argues that state-supported “subsidized speech” can distort democratic public discourse without overt censorship, threatening democratic openness. Subsidized speech plays a dual role in the media ecosystem, ensuring government dominance in public discourse and mitigating the impact of unfavorable information on the government due to the increased media background noise. For example, government-friendly media often delay reporting on government-related scandals until they can amplify the government's official response. Other innovative practices emerged, such as passing on important material to colleagues in other outlets (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020). Additionally, “collaborative journalism” became prevalent, as pro-government media outlets are often working together with the ruling parties to create and disseminate centrally coordinated political messages.

This has led the Hungarian media system to resemble the Balkan (Urbán, Polyák, and Szász 2017, 159; Bajomi-Lázár and Stepińska 2019, 57) and Russian (Bajomi-Lázár 2021) media systems, where the concept of “adekvatnost” – a strategy allowing a degree of freedom and creativity within strong constraints – has gained significance (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020). When self-censorship becomes routine, journalists develop anticipatory obedience, instinctively understanding which questions to avoid and what not to write (Schimpfössl and Yablokov 2020, 31). Indeed, the Orbán regime's control over the media does not rely on open violence or explicit censorship but on strategically distributing media resources, gradually increasing pressure on journalists and newsrooms (Bajomi-Lázár and Stepińska 2019, 261). Again, it's important to emphasize that biased journalism is particularly characteristic of the pro-government side of the public sphere, a phenomenon previously captured by the term *asymmetric parallelism*. Furthermore, as Polyák (2019) notes,

the reach and impact of critical media outlets are significantly limited by their working and financial conditions and their access to information. Similarly, Bajomi (2019, 116) argues that “ethical journalism is the highest level of the “Maslow pyramid” of journalistic needs, preceded by acceptable work conditions, job security, a functional market and media freedom”, and ethical journalism remains elusive until these foundational needs are satisfied. Journalists lack special legal protections, as their general rights and responsibilities anchored in fundamental rights and media regulations (Bátorfy et al. 2022). Bajomi (2019) also points out that the challenges to implementing ethical journalism standards – such as truthfulness, accuracy, and impartiality – across CEE stem from historical instability, declining media freedom, and partisanship-driven market distortions that prioritize political loyalty over journalistic integrity.

These processes often led to highly selective reporting of facts and smear campaigns initiated by pro-government media outlets against opposition politicians and critical intellectuals, frequently relying on the use of unverified or false information. The prevalence of this phenomenon is underscored by the fact that 41 percent of journalists were subjected to a smear campaign in 2018 (Mertek Media Monitor 2019, 10). By engaging in these practices, the Orbán regime not only undermines the credibility of independent media but also compromises ethical journalism standards. This limits journalists’ ability to provide comprehensive reporting on public issues, while still creating an illusion of media freedom and diversity through the existence of critical media outlets (Griffen 2020). Concurrently, lawsuits filed against and lost by pro-government media outlets began to sharply decline. The gap in journalistic standards between pro-government and independent media outlets (i.e., asymmetrical parallelism) is evidenced by the fact that in 2019, while “only” two-thirds of all cases involved pro-government media, 94% of the cases identified as actual legal breaches were linked to them (Polyák, Urbán, and Szávai 2022, 136). This indicates that pro-government newsrooms exhibit lower levels of professionalism and resort to double standards, including the conscious dissemination of fake news.

In this new “media war” (Urbán, Polyák, and Szász 2017, 137), a crucial episode was the conflict between Orbán and Simicska, once a key oligarch supporting the Orbán regime until 2015. Simicska, reacting to the government’s intention to diminish his influence, shifted his media empire (including news channel *Hír TV*, daily newspaper *Magyar Nemzet*, weekly newspaper *Heti Válasz*, and radio station *Lánchíd Rádió*) to an anti-government stance until the governing party’s electoral victory in 2018. In response, the Orbán regime ramped up its media domination efforts in the mid-2010s, including the increased centralization and “basification” of public media (OSCE 2018, 18). Following the 2018 elections and the fall of Simicska, the fragmented pro-government media portfolios were merged into the *Central European Press and Media Foundation* (CEMPF / KESMA) through the simultaneous and voluntary offer of the previous pro-government owners. This step demonstrated Orbán’s personal or “prebendal” authority (Csillag and Szelényi 2015, 21), solidifying his direct control over the regime’s media empire. This shift marked a departure from previous practices where pro-government “oligarchs owned and ruled media companies” (Mertek Media Monitor 2016, 69). The Prime Minister classified the CEMPF transaction as of “national strategic importance” and “public interest”, thereby bypassing Competition Authority oversight. This move not only further centralized media ownership but also aimed to prevent potential future rebellions. This can also be viewed as the culmination of asymmetric parallelism, as the pro-government media empire became capable of professionally disseminating extremely centralized and biased messages, proving immensely beneficial for autocratic resilience amidst the crises that emerged in the early 2020s.

3.1 The new status quo

Summarizing findings from relevant and publicly available empirical research on the anti-pluralist transformation of the Hungarian media system, it’s evident that due to systematic distortion of the media market, pro-government media achieved market dominance by the mid-2010s (Hegedűs 2017), and, as

Benedek's (2022) compilation illustrates, they reached market hegemony by the late 2010s, particularly in rural areas. The researches show that critical media remained competitive mainly in online platforms and the small market sector of printed weeklies (Bátorfy et al. 2022). While some researchers question the applicability of the concept of media preponderance due to theoretical and measurement challenges (Kiss and Szabó 2019), mainly because of the extensive lack of data, a vast amount of available data indicates the growing pro-government dominance in the Hungarian media market during these years. According to these data, the pro-government media reached nearly 60% of the aggregated audience by 2017, with 20% neutral and 21% critical media (Bátorfy 2017b). By 2020, pro-government media continued to maintain a significant audience reach, with TV channels' evening news at 52%, newspapers at 48%, regional newspapers at 100%, weeklies at 20%, radios at 93%, and online news sites at 35% (Bátorfy and Szabó 2020). In terms of revenues of news media outlets, the share of the pro-government media increased from 15% to 57% between 2010 and 2018 (Bátorfy and Szabó 2020) and to almost 80%, including public media (Mertek Media Monitor 2019). This proportion remained similar in 2022 (Mertek Media Monitor 2023, 29). Regarding the ownership, 55% of 241 media channels with national impact were "clearly Fidesz-oriented" by 2022, and 14% were "partially Fidesz-oriented" or "with uncertain backgrounds", indicating a clear pro-government media dominance (Bódis 2022).

In the online segment, the rise of social media has led to "attention-based political communication" in recent years, prompting political actors to disseminate their narratives through a networked logic (Merkovity 2022). Additionally, information consumption has dramatically shifted toward digital sources in the 2020s, a change that persisted beyond the pandemic (Mertek Media Monitor 2023). Digital platforms, especially online news sites and social media, became primary for news and public affairs, overshadowing television and maintaining the minimal role of print and radio. Research indicates that following the government's setbacks in the 2019 local elections, government-affiliated actors shifted their attention towards social media. Numerous targeted ads appeared on Facebook, many of them paid by *Megafon*, a media entity supported by government actors (Bátorfy et al. 2022, 24). While analyses of the 2019 European Parliament and local elections revealed that opposition parties spent more on advertisements than government-aligned platforms (Márton Bene, Petrekanics, and Bene 2021), the situation reversed for the 2022 elections, when government-affiliated parties spent approximately 1.5 billion forints on advertisements compared to opposition parties' 1.3 billion forints (Márton Bene and Farkas 2022). These figures represent a significant increase compared to previous periods, with pro-government actors amplifying their campaign spending to ten times their earlier outlays. In terms of direct reach (number of followers), pro-government pages hold a noticeable advantage on Facebook and Instagram, while the situation regarding indirect reach (level of user engagement) is mixed (Márton Bene and Farkas 2022). Overall, it is clear that pro-government actors have effectively surmounted their resources and influence disparities on social media during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, securing their position as the dominant force in this media segment as well.

In summary, navigating the post-2010 Hungarian media history presents challenges, yet a critical juncture and a subsequent distinct period can be identified. The critical juncture occurred in the mid-2010s, culminating in the anti-pluralist transformation of the Hungarian media system by the 2018 elections, symbolized by the establishment of CEMPF at the year's end. By this point, the Orbán regime had solidified as a populist electoral autocracy. A subsequent turning point came after the autumn 2019 municipal elections, as the Orbán government pivoted its attention towards online and social media platforms. This trend coincided with the onset of significant crises in the early 2020s, starting with the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, when media independence was further restricted. During the pandemic, the government acquired extraordinary powers by declaring a state of emergency and introduced a vague provision allowed for potential punishment of up to five years in jail for disseminating "false" information about the pandemic. Similarly, amendments to the Press Freedom Act with an unclear definition of "exceptionally justified cases" threatened the protection of journalistic sources, potentially leading to increased self-censorship (Bellucci 2021). As a result, Hungary

has even been described as a “coronavirus autocracy” (Kelemen 2020). Moreover, in the summer of 2020, the Orbán regime assumed control over the funding of *Index.hu*, Hungary’s leading online news portal. Just a few weeks later, the critical Budapest radio station *Klubrádió* announced that its license would not be renewed from February 2021. These events vividly demonstrate the ongoing trend of media takeover by the ruling party into the new decade. Thus, throughout this turbulent period, the government not only further curtailed media diversity and independence but also ensured that pro-government entities would dominate the online media landscape by the 2022 elections.

4. The implications of the transformed public sphere

After examining the systematic transformation of the media system by the Orbán regime, the study shifts focus to the consequences of these processes. It first explores the impact of the transformation on media market polarization and citizen perceptions, and then delves into the increased autocratic resilience of the regime.

4.1 Growing media market polarization and divergent perceptions of political reality

As demonstrated, the media policy of the Orbán regime has created an environment where independent journalism encounters substantial obstacles, allowing government-controlled narratives to dominate the public sphere. The Orbán regime has constructed a complex political communication machinery, leveraging state resources, experts, activists, and an extremely centralized media conglomerate to monopolize and polarize public discourse, shaping the foundations of political perceptions of the citizens. This undermines the capacity of an informed citizenry to make meaningful decisions and, ultimately, to hold the government accountable. More specifically, by the 2018 elections, the reduction in media diversity and the extent of public criticism of the Orbán regime had undermined civic autonomy, making democratic accountability impossible and completing the autocratic transition (Bozóki and Benedek 2024). Media can no longer act as watchdogs of democracy (Bellucci 2021). Instead, it serves as a “transmission belt” of the autocratic stabilization. Consequently, the democratic public sphere transformed into an arena of electoral autocracy, marked by top-down manipulation, utilizing regime-level resources to fundamentally shape public preferences and the will of the people.

This media system allows the creation of permanent discursive crises. Indeed, Orbán’s populist narratives revolve around the extraordinary crises of the political community, which not only justify the regime’s claim to power but also polarize public discourse and society, leading to starkly contrasting interpretations of political reality between government-friendly and critical media audiences. His populist vision relies on an extremely divisive friend-enemy logic, employs war metaphors, and creates a permanent state of exception in both legal and discursive terms (Antal 2019). Orbán’s populist discourse portrays the West as an apocalyptic place characterized by constant immigrant threats, the collapse of the rule of law, and a stifling political correctness that suppresses free speech (Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 46-47). In this narrative, Hungary’s sovereignty is threatened not only by the direct adoption of the norms of the “declining West” but also by its indirect consequences, especially migration, which directly endangers the ethnic and cultural homogeneity of Hungary, thus posing a threat to the very existence of the political community.

During the second critical juncture of the post-1989 populist autocratization, in response to the mid-2010s refugee crisis, Orbán’s populism united previously distinct enemy images into a cohesive enemy-network. This “bizarre coalition” centered around the “left-liberal global elite” and their domestic “agents” labeled as a “fifth column” (Bozóki and Benedek 2024; Böcskei 2022; Jenne, Bozóki, and Visnovitz 2022). Orbán’s populist discourse targets the “umbrella enemy” György Soros as the “puppet master” behind domestic NGOs, critical media, opposition parties, and the EU (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Orbán portrays himself as the heroic protector

of the nation against external and internal threats, using national consultations and moralizing language to reinforce his claim of exclusive representation of the Hungarian people. Orbán also presents himself as a traditionally masculine leader and an internationally acknowledged right-wing statesman, highlighting his ties to Hungary's history and national identity to craft the image of a "leader above everyday politics, whose position is unquestionable" (Szebeni and Salojärvi 2022, 829). This complex and "internationalized" enemy image also addresses the populist paradox of needing to mobilize and communicate as the underdog even in power (Batory 2016; Böcskei 2022), necessitating the maintenance of "populist hype" (Palonen 2018) by positioning society against perceived threats to the people's will (Szebeni and Salojärvi 2022, 813).

The combined effect of portraying a permanent extraordinary crisis and controlling the political public sphere has led to an electorate that is deeply partisan and highly susceptible to elite manipulation. This environment of tribal divisions facilitates the shaping of citizens' views of political realities, driven by emotional attachments and identification with their in-group and its leader (Benedek 2021, 216–18), extending political competition even beyond the confines of democracy. The impact of this polarization on fundamentally different political perceptions was starkly evident in the autumn of 2023 during a severe economic crisis. Despite Hungary having the highest inflation rate in the EU for almost a year, 75% of pro-government respondents remained optimistic about the nation's economic and political direction, in stark contrast to the 97% of opposition supporters who viewed it pessimistically (Molnár 2023). This divide extends to perceptions of the European Union, with nearly 60% of pro-government respondents seeing its direction negatively, whereas over 60% of left-wing and liberal opposition supporters felt it was moving positively (Bíró-Nagy et al. 2023).

The partisan nature of public opinion in Hungary is significantly shaped by the polarized media system, with the government playing a hegemonic role. Bene and Szabó (2019) network analysis of the political polarization within Hungarian news media in 2014 revealed distinct ideological media blocs. They also highlighted the existence of cross-references despite differing political stances. However, the evolution of the media landscape since the mid-2010s has markedly deepened the division in political information sources. Polyák et al. (2022) demonstrate this polarization, showing that by the late 2010s, the Hungarian media audience was highly divided. Specifically, they found that around 12% of media consumers are in a pro-government news bubble, with an additional 22% predominantly consuming pro-government media, compared to a smaller fraction that primarily (5%) or exclusively (3%) consumes non-government media. This dynamic suggests that the vast majority of society receives a steady stream of regime-friendly messages, forming the primary or sole information source for a significant segment of voters. Even the 5% of voters not regularly engaging with media likely encounter overwhelmingly pro-government messages. Considering additional elements like outdoor advertising, activist networks, the local media market, and direct communications from the prime minister, which fall outside traditional media consumption metrics, the extent of pro-government influence appears even more dominant.

However, Polyák et al. (2019, 78) shed light on how Hungarian Facebook news consumers predominantly access a one-dimensional view of political reality, not due to a scarcity of diverse viewpoints, but because they find opposing perspectives unconvincing, given their personal beliefs and political affiliations. The extreme and ever-growing polarization in Hungary (Patkós 2023, 48) leads individuals to emotionally interpret facts to support their own views. In such an environment, news sources that challenge their convictions often lose credibility. This may also explain why 41 percent of media consumers reported consuming news sources they do not trust in 2023 (Mertek Media Monitor 2023, 19). Not surprisingly, trust in news media and journalism is among the lowest in Europe in Hungary, with polarized audiences gravitating towards news outlets that echo their political or ideological leanings (Bátorfy et al. 2022). Moreover, the social prestige of journalism is seen as significantly low by Hungarian journalists (Mertek Media Monitor 2021b, 59–60), a sentiment attributed to a deeply polarized society where many journalists are perceived as political instruments. Politicians actively

work to categorize independent journalists and media outlets within the pervasive divisive narrative, leading to “media bubbles” where impartial presentations of opposing viewpoints are rare.

4.2 The increased autocratic resilience of the Orbán regime

Scholars largely agree that the Orbán regime’s electoral victories and its robust social support stem significantly from its ability to dominate the political public sphere. Scheppelle (2022) notes that beyond the electoral system and pre-election social benefits, Orbán’s stronghold on media was a key factor in his 2022 electoral success. He effectively used the media to amplify his messages, particularly leveraging the war in Ukraine to position himself as the champion of “peace and security”. This tight grip on public discourse also enabled him to sow divisions within the opposition and court former radical right *Jobbik* voters by exploiting divisive issues like LGBTQ rights. The “child protection referendum”, conducted alongside the elections and serving as a means to sidestep campaign finance limits, further supported this strategy. While government-aligned media outlets extensively broadcasted pro-government slogans, opposition leader Péter Márki-Zay was scarcely given a platform on public television to present his program.

The prime minister’s advantage in the political public sphere was strikingly demonstrated through his exploitation of the “rally ‘round the flag” effect, with the unforeseen central campaign issue being Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Orbán committed to preserving Hungary’s neutrality in NATO’s dealings with Ukraine, halted weapon transits through Hungary to Ukraine, and highlighted the necessity of ongoing dialogue with Moscow for peace and energy benefits. He misleadingly portrayed the opposition as pro-war and accused them of secret negotiations with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. With the media firmly under Orbán’s control, the opposition struggled to counter these accusations or shift the prevailing narrative from the government’s binary “peace vs. war” (“life vs. death”) stance to a more favorable “West vs. East” cleavage. Consequently, just as the migration issue had bolstered Fidesz’s electoral support in the 2018 elections by tapping into identity-based fears amidst widening economic inequalities and the accumulation of wealth among political elites, the Ukraine war had a similar effect in the 2022 elections (Krekó and Enyedi 2018, 48).

However, while the opposition has struggled to overcome its competitive disadvantages, the Orbán regime could face significant challenges due to economic difficulties in the long term. Ádám (2019) applies transaction cost economics to illustrate how authoritarian populist regimes shift power from horizontal political exchanges to vertical hierarchies reliant on government-controlled clientele. This shift may lower market-type political transaction costs, including bargaining, enforcement, and information costs, but it also intensifies financial demands and corruption, thereby raising management-type political transaction costs associated with organizational inefficiencies and corruption. If the regime encounters funding challenges for its controlled clientele, as has been the case in Hungary in the early 2020s, the costs associated with corruption and political management are likely to increase, presenting potential risks to the regime’s stability.

On the other hand, populist autocrats can navigate through significant economic challenges and still achieve political successes, as evidenced by Turkey’s Erdoğan, who, akin to Orbán in 2022, overcame a united opposition in the 2023 elections. In both Turkey and Hungary, several factors contributed to the striking level of autocratic resilience. Despite facing severe economic downturns, Erdoğan retained his popularity thanks to his extensive tenure and a history of economic prosperity. Thus, he adeptly shifted the campaign focus to national security, casting the vote as a battle against the nation’s enemies, both within and beyond its borders (Esen and Gumuscu 2023). Similarly, Erdoğan, like Orbán, implemented economic relief measures ahead of the elections, shielding his voter base from economic difficulties. Additionally, the opposition in both nations not only contended with media biases but also internal rifts and policy incoherence due to their diverse makeup, vulnerabilities that autocratic leaders can effectively exploit, even amidst adversities.

All in all, much like its entire political system, Hungary's media landscape has evolved into a *hybrid media system*. In this mixed media environment, autocratic elements such as media capture and asymmetric parallelism overshadow the formal democratic frameworks. As a result, despite showcasing pluralistic features such as free speech, the Hungarian media system is marred by strong anti-pluralist tendencies and heightened populist political polarization, undermining citizens' capacity for meaningful decision-making and holding the government accountable. Such dynamics fortify autocratic power under a democratic guise, reinforcing the resilience of autocracy – a hallmark of all hybrid regimes.

5. Conclusion

This study delved into the Orbán regime's media system, placing it within Hungary's wider historical and cultural framework. It highlighted Hungary as a paradigmatic example of how contemporary autocratization influences and is shaped by media systems, uncovering the dynamic between autocratic structures and populist narratives that bolster regime stability and enhance autocratic resilience. Thus, it offered new insights even to well-informed readers. Through a detailed exploration across three dimensions, the study comprehensively unpacked i) the anti-pluralist transformation of the political public sphere in the 2010s, ii) the rise of a new media system, and iii) the impact of these dynamics on media market polarization and the regime's autocratic resilience. First, it scrutinized the logic behind the transformation of Hungary's media system and the Orbán regime's strategic manipulation, moving beyond institutional changes – such as new media regulation, control over media supervisory authorities, and public media – to explore how media ownership evolved in the 2010s, merging economic interest with political aims. This amalgamation turned numerous platforms into pro-government mouthpieces. However, certain “grey-zone” media maintained a semblance of balance, offering limited criticism of the government while helping to shape the regime's opposition. The strategic allocation of state advertising, the diminishing transparency of public information, and the reliance on third-party campaigns further solidified this alignment.

Secondly, the study analyzed the Orbán regime's growing influence over the media landscape, noting parallels with the media frameworks observed in the Balkans and Russia. Rather than relying on overt censorship, the Orbán regime exerts control through the distribution of media resources, encouraging self-censorship and adherence to government narratives. Autocratic innovations such as “collaborative journalism” and “subsidized speech” subtly shifted public discourse, eroding media independence under the guise of media freedom. These tendencies effectively diminished the trust in independent media and ethical journalism, while the viability of these outlets was further constrained by operational and fiscal challenges. The Orbán-Simicska conflict in the mid-2010s intensified the government's intent to tighten its media control, an effort that culminated in the 2018 electoral victory for the ruling parties and Simicska's downfall. The COVID-19 pandemic saw further encroachments on media diversity and independence through new acquisitions and ambiguous laws penalizing the spread of “false information” about the pandemic, posing risks to journalistic sources. Public data indicates that pro-government media had achieved dominance in the media market by the late 2010s, especially in rural areas, while critical media remained competitive online and in the small market of printed weeklies. Moreover, the early 2020s witnessed pro-government forces significantly amplifying their social media presence, surpassing the opposition in both campaign spending and audience, suggesting another critical juncture. However, further investigations are needed in this area, extending beyond the scope of the present study.

Thirdly, this study sheds light on the implications of these developments. An extremely polarized system has emerged in which the Orbán regime's complex communication machinery leverages state resources, experts, activists, and a deeply centralized media empire to dominate public discourse. As a result, the Orbán

regime can portray itself as the nation's guardian against both external and internal menaces, notably framing migration as a threat to Hungary's ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Such a dominated public discourse, coupled with a highly partisan audience susceptible to elite manipulation, undermines citizens' ability to make informed decisions and hold the government accountable. These dynamics further reinforce the Orbán regime's autocratic resilience, underscoring the crucial role its control over the public sphere plays in securing electoral victories and maintaining substantial social support. The regime has adeptly utilized crises, including COVID-19 and the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as divisive issues such as LGBTQ rights, to bolster its popularity and sway public opinion. Despite this, a strong and moralized political identity might present limitations when confronting short-term challenges, particularly those affecting elements of identity meticulously built over time. This was precisely the case in February 2024, when a scandal erupted over a presidential pardon linked to a pedophilia case. This incident led to significant repercussions, including the resignation of the head of state and a substantial loss of popularity. Moreover, the current economic strain poses potential long-term challenges, with the costs of sustaining pro-government clientele escalating, possibly threatening regime stability. Yet, as demonstrated by populist autocrats like Orbán and Erdoğan in Turkey, such regimes can remarkably sustain their resilience, particularly through turbulent periods.

Finally, it may be worth situating Hungary's current political and economic developments within the wider context of enduring domestic and global trends. Wilkin (2018) highlights that Hungary's move toward illiberalism is part of a global pattern, where the political culture of classical liberalism erodes under pressures from the rise of modern nation-states, neoliberal capitalism, and enduring traditional social hierarchies. This backdrop frames the ascent of populist autocrats, shifting from Western liberal values to nationalist and anti-globalization ideologies, as a reaction to globalization's impact on local communities (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Moreover, since the early modern period, especially after the 1848–49 War of Independence, a profound existential fear for the national community's survival has been a hallmark of Hungarian political culture (Kürti 2020). This historical lens helps decipher the resonance of Orbán's narratives on national sovereignty (the "freedom fight"). Hungary's enduring illiberalism is also tied to its history of authoritarianism, reactionary social forces, and resistance to liberal freedoms. As Wilkin argues, Hungary's journey since the 1848 revolutions is marked by a "narrative of quasi-feudalism, reactionary aristocracy, fascist movements, authoritarian state socialism, and finally a neoliberalism that has systemically dismantled Hungary's welfare system and re-feudalized its economy and society" (Wilkin 2018, 7). Decades of neoliberal reforms, coupled with the absence of a strong socialist alternative, have contributed to polarizing Hungary's political discourse, framing debates within a binary of neoliberalism versus ethno-nationalism. With such a historical and cultural heritage, the failure to establish a stable democratic political culture between 1990 and 2010 seems less surprising. Nevertheless, the collective experience of the (gradual) loss of existing democracy could, in the end, fortify democracy by being woven into its immune system.

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Acknowledgements

This article has received funding from the European Unions’s Horizon Europe programme under the grant agreement No. 101132601 (Moral Emotions in Politics: How They Unite, How They Divide). The usual disclaimer applies.

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