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Football as a Tool of Propaganda and Public Diplomacy: The Strategy of Viktor Orbán's Government

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Abstract

The article focuses on the use of sport, particularly football, as a propaganda and public diplomacy tool by the Fidesz political party and the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The first part outlines the relationship between politics and sport in post-Trianon Hungary, and the activities of the 'Golden Team' of footballers during the first post-WWII decade. This period ended with the suppression of the 1956 autumn revolution by the Red Army. The construction of the myth of an 'invincible team' is linked to conspiracies and more general negative perceptions of external actors, as well as nostalgia for a glorified, albeit fabricated, national and state history. This mythologisation is reflected in Orbán's illiberal democracy regime and its instruments of public diplomacy and soft power strategies. The analysis focused on selected phenomena of this process within Hungarian society and externally, primarily among the so-called cross-border Hungarians. The author contextualised football within the realms of emotions, identity and centralised authoritarian power, where it emerges as a pivotal phenomenon in the establishment of Orbán's national oligarchic regime.

Keywords: football, sports diplomacy, propaganda, soft power, Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government

1. Introduction

Throughout Hungarian history, sports have played a significant role in shaping national identity. As in the case of many other countries and nations, modern sport became a means of channelling rivalry with other nations and of building prestige and national cohesion in Hungary as early as the last few decades of the 19th century. Just like architecture, for example, sport was seen as a sign of progress. In architecture (for example the new parliament building, the Budapest Metro, or the zoo), Great Britain served as the primary model (Országh, 1979). It is certainly worth emphasising the military-educational dimension as well, comparable within the Habsburg Monarchy, for example, to the Czech Sokol movement or the German Turners. As showed by Nolte (2012), while the Czech and German physical education associations grew from the grassroots up, in the Hungarian context the elites played a key organizational role, injecting nationalism into the sports environment and shaping Hungarian mass identity.

Let us emphasize – once again, particularly in common with the Czechs – the interest in modern Olympism, which allowed not only states but also nations to be represented. Thus, even before World War I, Hungary had established itself as a powerhouse in certain sports, and after the war and the Treaty of Trianon, it focused even more intensely on sport as a means of substituting its political ambitions (Venuti, 2024).

As in many other countries, sports in Hungary have often been used as a tool for competition, or even as a 'proxy war', against external actors. The most well-known example of this was probably the water polo match between Hungarian and Soviet teams at the 1956 Olympic Games, known as the 'Melbourne Bloodbath'. One month after Soviet troops had brutally suppressed the Hungarian people's uprising against the communist dictatorship, the match between the Hungarian and Soviet water polo players in the final round took place. Due to the great distance between Australia and Europe, many members of the Hungarian delegation had travelled to a training camp abroad or directly to Melbourne before the Soviet occupation, and they competed at the Olympics under the symbols and slogans of the revolution (including a flag without Marxist symbols). The brutal match ended prematurely after a Soviet player attacked the Hungarian star Ervin Zádor, sparking a mass brawl in which spectators – many of whom were Hungarian exiles – also took part. Although Hungary later became the Olympic champion, most of the Olympic team decided to remain in exile, joining the approximately 200,000 Hungarians who had left the country shortly after the occupation (Novák, 2021). The way the 'Melbourne Bloodbath' is discussed in Hungarian political, societal, and media discourse is very similar to the way the ice hockey matches between Czechoslovak and Soviet players were politicised following the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (Numerato, 2010; Tůma et al., 2014).

Hungary has established itself as a sporting powerhouse in a number of disciplines, including water polo. The men's team has won the gold medal nine times, making Hungary the most successful country in this sport in the modern Olympic Games.

The women's team is also gradually gaining strength, achieving third place in 2020 and fourth place in 2024. Other notable disciplines include track and field, swimming, canoeing, boxing, combat sports, chess, and sports with a strong martial arts framework, such as modern pentathlon and fencing. Hungary has already won more than 500 medals at the Summer Olympics, including 181 gold medals. In the last decade, the country has also strengthened its presence in winter sports, particularly short-track speed skating (Printz, 2021). These achievements were publicly envisioned as part of a new Olympic Park situated right next to the national parliament as part of a bid to host the Summer Olympic Games in Budapest in 2024, put forward by Viktor Orbán's new government after 2010. The park is dominated by metal Olympic rings in the colours of the Hungarian flag and a list of the names of all Hungarian Olympic medallists carved into marble (PestBuda, n.d.).

Hungarian athletes' remarkable achievements in a variety of disciplines often lead to celebrity status, involvement in propaganda (e.g. boxer László Papp as the 'ideal communist athlete') or promotional activities, and participation in public life. For example, two-time Olympic fencing champion Pál Schmitt was elected president in 2010, but resigned from office two years later following a plagiarism scandal involving his dissertation (AP, 2012). Many women also feature among sports celebrities, including Judit Polgár, widely regarded as the greatest female chess player of all time, and the swimmers Krisztina Egerszegi and Katinka Hosszú.

As this brief overview shows, sports have played a significant role in Hungarian society and politics for more than 150 years, regardless of the specific regime in power. It would therefore be surprising if the hybrid regime led by Viktor Orbán did not use sports as a tool for self-promotion, the promotion of certain ideological patterns, the construction of myths, and, above all, the cultivation of national identity.

This relatively brief analysis cannot provide a comprehensive examination of the evolution of the relationship between sport, politics and propaganda in Hungary, due to the length of the period that would need to be examined, as well as the changes in political regimes. Therefore the author focused on football, which is widely regarded as the most prominent and truly global sporting phenomenon for many reasons. It is also a sport that has enjoyed significant support and favour from governments led by Viktor Orbán over the past 16 years, and was closely associated with the development of a hybrid regime in Hungary (Magyar, 2016).

The first part of this article examines key moments in the development of soccer's role in Hungarian society and politics during the interwar period, particularly in the first decade following World War II. It then focuses specifically on the period after 2010. Football is thus embedded in a complex model of establishing a national economic and political oligarchy linked to the Fidesz political party. Fidesz – the Youth Democrats' Association (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*) – was founded in 1988 during the transition to democracy by a group of students, including Viktor Orbán, Tamás Deutsch (currently a Member of the European Parliament, as well as president of the traditionally Jewish-rooted MTK Budapest FC club since 2010), and also the Speaker of the Hungarian

Parliament from 2010 to 2026, László Köver. The party's acronym was retained even after its transformation into the Hungarian Civic Union (cf. Enyedi & Zsolt, 2011).

This narrative also includes the concept of regional or international populism (see e.g. Söderbaum et al., 2021), which are placed within the context of memory politics and collective identity as oppression or even a conspiracy by external elites against the 'pure' Hungarian nation. The national and regional populism is thus based on the idea that Hungary has experienced negative external influences throughout its history. The defeat of the 'unbeatable' team in the 1954 World Cup final is considered to be a key external factor in the history of Hungarian football.

Thus the primary aim of this article was to analyse how the myth of the 'Golden Team' was manifested in the activities and communication strategies of Hungarian governments since Viktor Orbán returned to the office of prime minister in 2010. Football can particularly be seen as one of the key instruments of Orbán's broader 'conservative revolution' ideology and his efforts to revitalise the 'golden age'. Through the analysis of this case study, one can also reflect on the strong nationalist and revisionist tendencies characteristic of Orbán's regime and, more broadly, of Hungarian politics and society. Lastly, it can reveal broader trends in positive or critical reflections on Orbán's regime, using football as an example, including differences in media coverage and commentary.

For this analysis, the author relied primarily on analytical texts, and with the exception of the concept of regional populism, he did not ground the study in a robust theoretical framework, drawing on sources from both scholarly literature and numerous popular works, as well as media coverage, which is relatively abundant due to the interest in political topics related to sports – and vice versa. To reflect on historical events, the article primarily turns to historiographical works.

Regarding the methodology, the analysis was based on a combination of textual and discursive approaches, incorporating academic texts, journalistic works and the rhetoric of political figures into the issues under study. Specifically, the author focused on the discourse of the Orbán government and the Fidesz party, who use sports, primarily football, to build their own image. Given that these strategies extend beyond Hungary's borders, the study also monitored the Orbán government's sports and broader public diplomacy activities. In this regard, it is essentially a policy analysis concentrating on the entire political cycle, from agenda-setting to the use of sports as a propaganda tool, the construction of preferred narratives, and their prioritisation in the public sphere.

2. Football, the 'Golden Team' and Propaganda

Despite the significant achievements of Hungarian athletes in many of the above sports, football continues to hold a special place, even though the country has not seen any major international successes in the sport for fifty years. In addition to the sport's general global popularity and media appeal, key factors stemming from Hungarian history and historical politics must be mentioned. Of paramount importance here is the

mythologisation of the Hungarian national team, the 'Magical Hungarians', from the early 1950s. Building on the successes of Hungarian clubs in the Central European Cup in the interwar period (the Budapest teams Ferencváros and Újpest secured four victories and three additional final appearances), the team also drew on the achievements of a strong national team, which culminated in a World Cup final appearance in 1938 (the Hungarian team lost 2–4 to Italy).

After World War II, coach Gusztáv Sebes (born Scharenpeck) assembled an 'unbeatable' team, the biggest star of which was the forward and captain, Ferenc Puskás. The term 'Golden Team', originally *Aranycsapat*, is generally used by Hungarian sources, and it also appeared in the title of a film by András Surányi (1982), among others. The term 'Aranycsapat' was also used in the titles of several monographs written about this phenomenon (e.g. Bailey, 2019; Borsi-Kálmán, 2008; Fried, 2000; Gál, 2015; Horváth, 2011; Kalman, 2014; Kö, 1997; Szabó & Millisits, 2016). In light of the topic of this analysis, it is interesting that many of these works were published after 2010, clearly responding to a new wave of the politicisation of football as a tool for integrating Hungarian society while also distinguishing itself from the outside world.

The team enjoyed strong support from the Stalinist-style totalitarian regime and comprised players from two clubs: the military-run Honvéd and the originally Jewish MTK, which had been tied to the secret police since 1946. Communist propaganda presented the team as proof that communism was the best system, yet, like Hungarian society as a whole, it existed in an atmosphere of terror. For example, national team defender Sándor Szűcz was detained at the Austrian border in June 1951 while attempting to emigrate. As a soldier in the Honvéd team, he was subsequently hanged for treason (Cola, 2016).

Between 1950 and 1956 the Hungarian national football team lost only one of its 51 matches. They were the first team to defeat England at Wembley, winning 6–3 in 1953, and a year later they beat them 7–1 at home. They also became Olympic champions in Helsinki in 1952, a success they repeated twice more in 1964 and 1968 (Hořejší, 2012). A key turning point in the perception of the 'unbeatable' team was their defeat in the World Cup final, known as the "Miracle of Bern" from the perspective of the winning West German team and the "Bern Shock" from the Hungarian perspective. The 2–3 defeat on 4 July 1954 triggered an outburst of negative emotions within Hungarian society and was consistent with the atmosphere of Stalinist totalitarianism. The players were accused of 'selling' the match, and they and their families were subjected to attacks (Vráblik, 2021).

The Communist regime used the *Aranycsapat* for propaganda purposes and to boost its prestige, which made their subsequent defeat all the more painful in the eyes of the public. Spontaneous demonstrations and local unrest broke out in Budapest, lasting several days. Some reports mention smashed shop windows and attacks on state institutions (Jones, 1984). These reactions were directed not only at the players and coaches, but also at the authoritarian regime of Mátyás Rákosi, who had invested heavily in the team's success. Consequently, historians often view the shock of the

defeat in Bern as one of the catalysts for the growing disillusionment that culminated in the 1956 uprising (Vráblik, 2021; Woods, 2025;). The regime's response focused on identifying individual 'culprits'. Alongside coach Sebes, goalkeeper Gyula Grosics became the main target, criticised for the opponents' third goal. He was briefly placed under house arrest, accused of espionage and treason, and ultimately forced to transfer from Honvéd to the team in Tatabánya.

Following the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and its suppression by Soviet troops, the Golden Team was disbanded as many players went into exile. This was compounded by the fact that, in early November, the Honvéd team was on a foreign tour, and virtually the entire under-18 team, which had just won the European Championship in Switzerland, also remained abroad (Vráblik, 2021).

Various speculations and conspiracy theories have emerged surrounding the defeat in the Bern final, the most significant of which was the allegation that the West German players took performance-enhancing drugs. Scientific research into the discussion about the West German footballers' suspiciously good physical condition in the 1954 World Cup final indicates that, contrary to claims by those close to the team, the players were injected with methamphetamine (Randerg, 2013). This finding was part of an analysis commissioned by the German Olympic Sports Confederation from two universities. The resulting report, spanning more than 800 pages, documented two decades of systematic, state-organised doping among West German athletes following World War II (Krüger et al., 2013).

Naturally such conclusions reinforce suspicions of negative externalities, which are generally very prevalent in the Hungarian context. In the next part of this article examines how the regime associated with Orbán's return to the position of prime minister in 2010 links football with propaganda.

3. Football as a Tool for National Reintegration and Strengthening National Self-Confidence

As was already demonstrated, following the so-called Trianon tragedy, sport became a significant symbol of national identity and a cultural phenomenon in Hungary. Football emerged as the most visible element of this symbiosis, thanks to sporting successes and the mythology surrounding the Golden Team. For Orbán and some of his associates, it was precisely football that became a tool for strengthening national consciousness and reintegrating the nation, including ethnic Hungarians who found themselves in the territories of other states after 1920. Thus football became a kind of mirror of political ambitions, both within and outside Hungary, as well as a vehicle for transferring key characteristics of the autocratic regime into an environment with which Hungarian society associates a constructed history of national success and pride.

Orbán, who generally presents himself as a pragmatist, is open about his passion and enthusiasm for football. In his biography, he emphasised that he was an active

player in his youth. In addition to his hometown of Felcsút, other sources mention a youth team in Székesfehérvár (Wilson, 2024). At the same time, Orbán also used football very effectively as a symbolic space and a key tool for reinforcing the social narratives favoured by his government, including distrust of foreign actors, the idea of building a strong nation-state and the concept of the Hungarian nation's unique qualities. In Orbán's interpretation, sport, and football in particular, serves as a tool for national revival, state propaganda and personal self-realisation (Mortimer, 2022).

Even before his return to the helm of the government, Orbán had established the village of Felcsút – with a population of just 2,000 – as the primary focus and centrepiece of his football mission. This is the village where he grew up and which, according to available statistics, is the wealthiest municipality in Hungary on a per-capita basis. His key partner in this endeavour was Hungary's wealthiest businessman, the village mayor and his friend, Lőrinc Mészáros. The youth football academy they founded together in 2007 bears the name of Puskás – the Puskás Ferenc Football Academy (*Puskás Ferenc Labdarúgó Akadémia*). Following its establishment in 2010, more than ten additional youth academies were subsequently founded (Hrabě, 2022).

After Orbán's return to power, football became a key component of the so-called 'national oligarchy' model, in which economic success is closely linked to loyalty to Orbán. People close to Orbán were gradually incorporated into these structures. As previously mentioned, one such individual was Fidesz co-founder T. Deutsch, who manages the MTK club. Sándor Csányi, the second-richest businessman, became president of the football association, while Ferencváros, Hungary's strongest club, is led by Gábor Kubatov, another oligarch and long-time Fidesz vice-chairman (Vait, 2025). As Adámek (2021) noted, "In the first division, clubs with no ties to the Hungarian government are now in the minority."

Puskás Akadémia FC, the team from Felcsút, has become one of the symbols of this transformation, bearing a striking resemblance to the situation in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. With key state support, the small village was given a 3,500-capacity stadium, Pancho Arena, and financial backing propelled the team to the top ranks of the Hungarian league. Orbán's son, Gáspár, played several dozen minutes in European cups and three league matches for the team before becoming a chaplain in the Hungarian army (Palata, 2022).

In addition to direct support, Orbán's government has channelled funds into football through other means. One of the key sources is revenue from television rights purchased by state television. However, the most crucial mechanism is the government's provision of significant tax breaks to businesspeople affiliated with the football sector (Vait, 2025). Meanwhile, there are signs that supporting football has become a prerequisite for grant applicants or bidders for government contracts (Gulyás, 2025). For example, as Hrabě (2022) noted: "Sports, and football in particular, are financially supported by state-owned enterprises". While it is generally claimed that this support is voluntary, based on an awareness of social responsibility, those familiar with the situation speak of coercion. The way it works is that a company

receives a government contract and allocates a portion of its profits – sources indicate as much as half – to the public interest, in this case sports. If it refuses, it cannot count on any further contracts.

A key priority for the government is supporting the success of Hungarian football. One visible tool of nationalisation has been the measure whereby second-division teams only receive support from the football association if their rosters consist exclusively of Hungarian or transnational players (i.e. ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries) (Hrabě, 2022). It is also worth noting that Hungary is currently granting citizenship to a significant number of foreign players. Notable cases include Serbian footballer Nemanja Nikolić and French-born Loïc Négo.

However, the principle of nationalisation also applies in the opposite direction, as the Hungarian government and associated actors engage in 'stadium diplomacy' with cross-border Hungarians. Over the past decade the Hungarian government has financed the construction or renovation of stadiums in minority regions of Slovakia (Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely and Komárno/Komárom), Romania (Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy) and Serbia (Bačka Topola/Topolya). Funding has been channelled through grants, foundations and directly via the Puskás Academy, with official rhetoric stating that the aim is to support Hungarian culture and youth.

In reality, however, this is a deliberate policy aimed at consolidating influence in border regions. For example, Sokol (2023) directly linked these activities to Orbán's programme to support the 15 million Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin. Sokol also pointed out that, in addition to the three league teams that advanced to European club competitions in the summer of 2023 (DAC Dunajská Streda, TSC Bačka Topola and SEPSI OSK), the Hungarian government supports youth academies in the Slovenian region of Prekmurje, specifically the second-division ethnically Hungarian team NK Nafta 1903 Lendava, as well as the Munkács Football Academy in Mukachevo, Transcarpathian Ukraine. Orbán's friend, the Mayor of Felcsút, L. Mészáros, is a co-owner of the Croatian team NK Osijek. This city, known as Eszék in Hungarian, is the centre of Eastern Slavonia, where the Hungarian minority is present. A brand-new stadium was also opened here in 2023 with Hungarian support (Sokol, 2023).

Hence one can see that exporting Hungarian football infrastructure to regions with Hungarian minorities aligns with the Orbán government's geopolitical and cultural identity strategies. Funding for sports is complemented by a campaign to grant Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad. As a result the stadium becomes a cultural centre as well as a sports venue, where language, identity, and loyalty to Budapest are reinforced, yet this practice causes diplomatic tensions with neighbouring countries, who perceive Hungary's actions as interference in their internal affairs. The governments of Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine have repeatedly protested against the politicisation of the minority agenda. Visible political and diplomatic clashes include the tensions at matches in Dunajská Streda and Komárno in Slovakia, where large numbers of people sang the Hungarian national anthem. In 2019, Robert Fico's government amended the Law on State Symbols (known as the 'Lex DAC') to

prohibit the use of another country's national anthem, except when an official foreign delegation is present (VT, 2019).

Similar manifestations of ethnic tension can also be observed at SEPSI OSK matches. The club considers itself to be representative of the inland Romanian region of Székely Land, which has Hungarian ethnic roots. Orbán frequently attends the team's matches without coordinating with the Romanian government. Particular controversy was sparked by his attendance at a match between the unofficial Székely junior national team (Székelyföld U18) and the Hungarian junior team. This match was held at the stadium of the Romanian second-division, ethnically Hungarian team, FC Csíkszereda, in the city of Miercurea Ciuc, in July 2022 (Gáll, 2022; Sokol, 2023).

One of the most striking gestures by Orbán, linking football, ideology and his government's foreign policy goals towards Hungarians living abroad, was his attendance at a friendly match between Hungary and Greece on 20 November 2022. This match served as a farewell to Balázs Dzsudzsák's international career. The Prime Minister's Office released a video in which Orbán thanked the player for his contribution to Hungarian football while wearing a scarf depicting a map of so-called Greater Hungary, i.e. the region of the Tisza River basin prior to the end of the First World War.

This symbolic act sparked outrage in Romania, where the Foreign Ministry described the scarf as an "expression of revisionism", as well as in Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine, where the Hungarian ambassador was summoned for consultations at the respective foreign ministries. The Slovak Foreign Minister Rastislav Káčer described Orbán's gesture as "disgusting and repugnant", and the Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský also criticised it (Burger 2023; ČTK 2022).

In response to the criticism, Orbán made a light-hearted remark: "Football isn't politics. We shouldn't read into it what isn't there. The national team belongs to all Hungarians, no matter where they live". He also said, "Take it easy. A football match is a football match, and politics is politics." At the summit of the Visegrád Group prime ministers in Košice, held just four days after the incident, both the Czech prime minister, Fiala, and the Slovak host, Eduard Heger, distanced themselves from Orbán. Heger presented the Hungarian prime minister with a scarf bearing Slovak symbols and the message: "I noticed that Viktor Orbán has an old scarf, so I gave him a new one today" (Vilček, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Over the past 16 years, enormous amounts of money have been invested in football and sport in general in Hungary. Analysts estimate that top footballers earn twice as much as their Czech counterparts (Vait, 2025). Investment in football alone is estimated to total around 70 billion crowns, and the most visible result of this investment is the new 67,000-seat national stadium located practically in the middle of the city. The 600-million-euro Puskás Arena is located above the Puskás Ferenc Stadium metro station (formerly *Népstadion*, or National Stadium), and Adámek (2021) aptly dubbed it

'the symbolic temple of the Orbán regime'. Thanks to this new infrastructure, Hungary has naturally become the host of major international sporting events, including part of the European Championship, the Europa League final and the 2026 UEFA Champions League final (Daněk, 2024).

Budapest also hosted the World Athletics Championships at the end of August 2023. In connection with this sporting event, Orbán convened an 'illiberal mini-summit' in Budapest, attended by the presidents of Turkey (R. T. Erdoğan), Serbia (A. Vučić) and Azerbaijan (I. Aliyev), as well as representatives of several Central Asian states and the former prime ministers of Austria (S. Kurz) and the Czech Republic (A. Babiš). Once again, one sees how Orbán uses sports diplomacy to promote his preferred ideology of illiberal democracy and to express support for the official 'Eastern policy' and Pan-Turkism, to which the country adheres under Orbán (Greilinger, 2023).

Orbán's government uses international sporting events in a similar way to, for example, Azerbaijan – that is, as a means of boosting its own image and nation branding, but also as a tool for sport-washing. Recent sources (e.g. Boykoff, 2022; Grix et al., 2025) pointed out that illiberal democracies in the Global North are increasingly engaging in sportswashing, in addition to the most obvious undemocratic regimes (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, China and Russia).

Football and sports in general present effective tools of politicisation. In addition to being a significant form of entertainment that can temporarily mask, dampen or redirect feelings of frustration among individuals and social groups, football is also used to shape society ideologically based on a Manichaean dichotomy of good (the Hungarian team and the Hungarian state leadership, or rather Orbán's regime) and evil (external actors or internal opponents portrayed as traitors). Thanks to the government's control over the media, particularly through financial control, politically motivated actions by regulatory bodies, and economic pressure, the successes of Hungarian footballers and other sportspeople were presented as a success of state policy (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015; Polyák, 2019).

An excellent example of how public interest in sports can be leveraged to advance own priorities and set the political agenda, was the coverage by Hungarian state television during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. As Merkovity and Strumpf (2021) demonstrated, the government used short news segments (approximately a minute long) inserted during soccer match broadcasts to "direct viewer attention to a narrow range of migration-related news items and implemented reporting on refugees as a framing device for domestic and international political conflicts." It was thus a highly effective tool for the securitisation of migration and also for the populist division of the national and European political scene into *us* (opponents of migration) and *them* (enemies of the nation, opening the door to danger).

In general, Orbán's government effectively employed sports diplomacy, including its generous direct and indirect support, as a form of soft power. Public diplomacy also involves symbols and gestures that boost national self-confidence while simultaneously creating ad hoc or lasting tensions with neighbouring states. However, it must

be acknowledged that Hungary's sports policy system from 2010 up to 2026 was part of a broader context of an illiberal democratic regime, the development of a national oligarchy loyal to Orbán and clientelism. Contracts for the construction of sports infrastructure were awarded to politically connected businesspeople, while the system lacks effective spending controls.

However, the reality is that, for Orbán, investments in infrastructure are primarily investments in symbols. In this regard, football fits into a broader framework of nationalism and regional populism, including nostalgia – a mixture of contempt and admiration for those who are more successful – and resistance to globalisation and the liberal world order. This combination of emotions, identity and centralised authoritarian power was, above all, a narrative orchestrated by the state apparatus. Interest in the sport is rather low and stagnant, with the exception of international matches. While there are undoubtedly excellent Hungarian footballers with international potential at an individual level, the national team is yet to come close to the results achieved in the two post-war decades.

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From 'Return to Europe' to 'Return from Europe': Resonances of Normative Dissonances in Hungary-EU Relations¹

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Abstract

In contemporary democratisation discourse, it is widely agreed that 'pre-Magyar Hungary' was on a path of 'democratic backsliding' within the broader global autocratisation context. This article examines the underlying mechanisms of how and why Hungary has systematically contested EU normative values between 2010 and 2025, ie. during the Orbán government. To fulfil this objective, the paper systematically analyses Hungarian democratic backsliding across four sectoral policy areas: curbing judicial independence, restricting media freedom, limiting academic liberties, and the securitisation of migration. While these individual sectors have been widely studied separately, the contemporary literature lacks a holistic framework to explain these normative dissonances. This study fills a research gap in the literature by arguing that the gradual decline in the quality of Hungarian democracy is driven by an illiberal counter-normative framework structured around a highly personalised political authority. The author demonstrates how the Orbán government, by constructing a top-down

¹ This article is based on a Master's thesis completed at Dokuz Eylül University Institute of Social Sciences in 2024.

counter-normative narrative in terms of discourse, policy, and practice, sustains internal regime legitimation and secures the survival of its illiberal political order. Utilising the analytical tools of the social constructivist approach and qualitative document analysis, the study triangulated the EU legal framework, contemporary academic literature, and empirical data from international indices to shed light on these ongoing normative contestations. Ultimately, the selected case and theoretical framework demonstrate that social constructivist perspective possesses explanatory power to grasp the internal political logic and systemic construction of an illiberal regime.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, norm contestation, EU norms, Orbán government, illiberal regime

1. Introduction

In contemporary democratisation studies, more emphasis is placed on defending democracy rather than its democratizing in academic literature (Merkel, 2026). In this context, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland in Europe, Brazil and Venezuela in Latin America, Georgia and Armenia in the Caucasus, Burkina Faso and Mali in Africa, and Myanmar in Asia, have become basic scientific laboratories for studies of autocratisation and democratic backsliding. In addressing the situation of Hungary as an interpretivist case study in this article, one could begin by exploring the current state of the global trend towards autocratisation to understand the bigger picture.

Upon examining V-Dem episode datasets, the average level of liberal democracy continues to decline across the globe, and according to population-weighted averages derived from the V-Dem Institute it has returned to the 1985 level. Similarly, freedom of expression is worsening in nearly a quarter of all countries in the world, reaching an absolute record low in 25 years. Forty-five countries are in ongoing episodes of autocratisation, and 19 countries in ongoing episodes of democratisation. Nearly half of the countries becoming more autocratic are spreading increasing disinformation, and a quarter of all countries are affected by rising political polarisation. In general, whereas the majority of the world population remained in autocracies at 72% in 2024, nearly a quarter lives in democracies (Nord et al., 2026).

Freedom House 2025 and 2026 findings devoted to global freedoms complement the V-Dem Institute's quantitative and qualitative data. Global freedom declined for the twentieth consecutive year, with violence and authoritarian efforts being some of the main themes of the elections. Manipulative tendencies persisted during the elections, and post-election protests were disproportionately suppressed (Freedom House, 2025; 2026). Against this backdrop it is important to track down how Hungary positions itself in this current state of alarming democracy records. In particular, the Orbán government which came to power in 2010, by both exploiting and discursively inventing an enduring crisis situation, passed over 800 anti-democratic bills between 2010 and 2018 (Kochenov & Bárd, 2018). Thus Hungary became a paradigmatic case

study in which an illiberal political order was constitutionalised and fundamental civil liberties severely weakened (Bugaric, 2014). Rather than treating this U-turn as merely a diagnosis of legal incompatibility, it should be evaluated through the political logic of redefining democracy and regime consolidation, in which Orbán has constructed a highly personalised political authority to institutionalise his top-down plebiscitary leader democracy (Körösenyi et al., 2020).

In line with this view, there is an academic consensus that curbing constitutional checks and balances, restricting media autonomy, limiting academic freedoms, and securitising the migration phenomenon pose a significant threat to contemporary Hungarian democracy.

The following sections account for rising concerns about the gradual decline of democratic qualities, combined with the construction of an illiberal political order. The construction of an illiberal authoritarian regime as a counter-normative framework against the liberal EU normative order is based on four sectors: the weakening of checks and balances, the control of the media, the restriction of academic freedoms, and the marginalisation of migrants as threats to the state's security.

In contrast to these issues, demonstrating how illiberal counter-democratic norms resonate against liberal EU norms, this article suggests that other empirical evidence in the literature, including the politicisation of the Central Bank, the problem of corruption, and LGBTQ+ rights, should be also analysed. However, while the former explain the normative dissensus between Hungary and the EU, the latter ones were excluded as they require a separate study. For the broader aims of this article, a literature review was provided to grasp the current aspect of rising concerns about democratic backsliding in Hungary. The main aim was to explain why and how Hungary established an illiberal political order as a counter-strategy against the EU normative framework. Accordingly, by combining norm studies with the analytical concepts of plebiscitary leader democracy – interwoven with political meaning, legitimacy production, and identity politics – form analytical tools used to understand the related democratic backsliding shaped by the broader autocratisation.

2. State of the Art: Tracing Pathways of Hungarian Democratic Credentials from Pre-EU Accession to Present

While academia has significantly invested in documenting the main illiberal authoritarian tendencies of Hungary, there is still fertile ground for studying the ongoing democratic backsliding with different analytical tools. To offer this explanatory perspective applying analytical constructivist tools, the author examined how the normative evolution of democratic norms in broader Europeanisation proceeded in Hungary through legal texts, academic sources, and data imported from international indexes. The first part of this literature review briefly presents how Hungarian domestic policies and politics were Europeanised in the pre-accession period with descriptive methods. The second part departs from this legacy by problematising the quality

of democratic norms and their intersubjective meanings within the Hungarian-EU normative dissonance.

Following the end of the bipolar system that shaped international politics during the Cold War, Hungary transitioned from a communist regime to a democratic parliamentary regime with the construction of a “refolution”² (Ash, 1989). Given Hungary’s democratic trajectory after consolidating its relations with the liberal West following its independence, the internalisation of democratic norms within the framework of European integration as part of its ‘return-to-Europe’ strategy operated as two sides of the same coin (Batory, 2002b). In this ‘return’, the PHARE aid programme and the Copenhagen Criteria emerged as key institutional tools for normative transformation in promoting the political change of Hungarian democracy (Commission of the European Communities, 1998). While the former became a key institutional tool for single market adoption and cultivating democratisation, the latter was a set of standards that codified democracy, human rights, the rule of law, the protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy, and the stability of institutions guaranteeing competitiveness in Hungary’s democratisation process (European Council, 1993).

In this norm diffusion process, EU institutions served as ‘active norm entrepreneurs’ in Hungary’s democratisation and published progress reports to monitor Hungary’s normative record, from the start of membership negotiations through to full membership. These progress reports comprehensively monitored and encouraged the development of the norms of democratic rule of law state in Hungary within the framework of parliament, administration, judiciary, anti-corruption measures, human rights and the protection of minorities, civil and political rights, and economic, social, and cultural rights. Despite concerns in policy areas such as corruption and discrimination faced by the Roma minority, the Hungarian government made a considerable effort to translate and institutionalise the Copenhagen Criteria into domestic policy (European Commission, 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002).

However, despite the positive atmosphere that rewarded full membership, the continuation of contemporary debates on autocratisation questions the linear nature of the Europeanisation process. Hungary has shifted from being a pioneer in implementing democratic standards to becoming central to discussions about the rule of law crisis, which necessitates an analytical investigation into whether the underlying phenomenon is a process of de-Europeanisation or rather a structural de-EUisation in which the government deliberately rejects the internalisation of EU democratic norms. Consequently, the central research problem moved from a simple evaluation of Hungarian democracy’s institutional deficits toward a comprehensive analysis of the shifting quality of democratic norms and their changing intersubjective meanings from within.

² The process of political change in Hungary points to what Timothy Garton Ash’s called conception-alisation of “refolution” (The New York Review, 1989). This concept is an expression of simultaneous occurrence of revolution and reform.

Against this backdrop, it was useful to examine the building blocks of the broader illiberal political structure to grasp which autocratic procedures led to the current crisis of democratic norms. Numerous academic studies demonstrated Hungary's democratic backsliding with different empirical evidence under the autocratisation umbrella. Despite a considerable amount of research that employs the frame of democratic decline, democratic regression, democratic decay, or de-democratization, the author complementarily adopted the concept of autocratisation as an umbrella term, and democratic backsliding as a gradual and directional sliding from a certain democratic position (cf. Bermeo, 2016; Croissant & Tomini, 2024). Within this framework, the central debate focused on how the Orbán government strategically constructed an illiberal democratic state, and how its constitutive elements were operationalised as a counter-strategy against the EU normative framework. These norm contestations, including the undermining of judicial independence, the restriction of media autonomy, the limitation of academic freedoms, and the securitisation of migration, have generally been evaluated under the heading of a 'rule of law crisis' in Hungary-EU relations.

Academic sources reveal that Hungarian democratic backsliding is approached from different perspectives and phenomena, including: the weakening of judicial independence (cf. Kovács & Scheppele, 2018) following the adoption of a new Constitution based on majoritarianism rather than pluralism; limiting media freedom as a form of illiberal governance (Polyák, 2019; Pap, 2017); the politicisation of the Central Bank and the subsequent undermining of its independence (Bugaric, 2014); the restriction of academic freedoms (Majtényi & Ryder, 2025); the erosion of LGBTQ+ rights, presented as the enemies and other(s) of ideological political construction (Gera, 2023); the stigmatisation of migrants within security frameworks constructed around nationalist and conservative identities (Szalai, 2023).

While all these studies reflect different variations of the illiberal authoritarian policies of the Orbán government (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018), from a broader perspective they demonstrate the constitutive elements of the government's invented political myths, represent a top-down personalistic leader democracy and serve as constitutive representations of strategic crisis inventions within a counter-normative framework produced by a nationalist and conservative identity against liberal EU norms. This supermajority, operating within the framework of ideological hegemony construction and regime survival objectives, creates various opportunity structures for the government to consolidate its regime, producing domestic political legitimacy through illiberal counter-normative narratives, and implementing anti-immigrant, anti-EU, and divisive discourses that reinforce the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'.

Within the process of norm contestation, the foundational point of departure point for the Orbán government's construction of an illiberal political regime was the "Fundamental Law of Hungary" that came into force in 2012 (Rupnik, 2012). Rupnik (2012) examined this illiberal turn, touching upon the manner in which the new Constitution was adopted. The Orbán government justified this change by arguing that Hungary had not adopted a new constitution, unlike other post-communist countries, and that

the former constitution symbolised the communist legacy. However, the literature determined that the way this constitution was adopted was incompatible with both participatory and democratic frameworks, as neither the opinions of opposition parties nor civil society organizations were taken into account. Despite these deficits, the constitutional change was legally implemented in Parliament thanks to the two-thirds supermajority held by Orbán's Fidesz party (Rupnik, 2012).

In parallel with this analysis, Scheppele (2015) described the newly adopted constitution and the subsequent political changes as the product of a strict majoritarian approach. Furthermore, the author noted that the Constitutional Court's jurisdiction in financial matters had been severely limited, preventing judicial review over budget and tax laws passed when the national debt exceeded 50% of GDP. Bugaric (2014) similarly stated that the new constitutional order granted immense power to the executive branch, eliminated checks and balances, and constitutionalised an illiberal political order that directly undermined the independence of the Constitutional Court, creating a highly favourable environment for an authoritarian regime.

Another issue incompatible with the EU's democratic norms is the rising concern about media independence, where government control over the media operates as a reflection of illiberal governmentality to achieve political domination over the public sphere. Polyák (2019) examined this transformation through three pillars: the weakening of the independence of regulatory bodies, the manipulation of access to resources, and the control of access to information. In this context, the Orbán government introduced a series of restrictive legislative frameworks as part of its media policies in 2010. Pap (2017) further noted that this media concept within the authoritarian regime-building process significantly contributed to the government's control over print and electronic media, utilising a centralized Media Council whose head was directly nominated by Orbán. In the context of a plebiscitary leader democracy, this process of media capture is understood as a public arena for the performative actions and political communication tools of those in power. In this way, the public sphere transforms into a poetic, political, and performative stage necessary for the circulation of emotionally charged and aestheticized narratives.

One of the explicit targets of this illiberal regime transformation is academic freedom, where visions of an open society, liberal ideas, and multiculturalism are depicted as 'enemies' or 'dangerous' counter-narratives to the nationalist identity that the government seeks to diffuse. In this context, Orbán signed a decree revoking the accreditations for gender studies, effectively banning the discipline (The Conversation, 2018). The government's political engineering aimed at restricting academic freedoms is also evidenced by indexed data showing that Hungary ranked 132nd out of 177 countries between 2011-2021 (Kinzelsbach et al., 2022). Zaccagnino (2021) examined the targeting of the Central European University (CEU) within this framework, demonstrating that discriminatory policies were applied to the CEU to dismantle it as a symbol of liberalism and cosmopolitanism, indicating 'open society, and 'gender' as the political 'others or 'enemies' of the regime.

The normative dissonance between illiberal government policies and liberal EU values has resonated deeply during the mass migration movements since 2015, which the European mainstream framed as a humanitarian crisis, but Hungary re-framed through metaphors of national sovereignty and Christian identity (Almustafa, 2022). Çepel & Abka (2022) demonstrated that Hungary's migration policy structurally diverges from the Union's human rights standards and the core value of human dignity. In this context, this difference does not simply represent a divergence between nationalist and conservative narratives versus liberal human rights norms. This so-called 'migration crisis' has been securitised and shaped people's perceptions, internalised as an ongoing pivotal issue and a populist myth in domestic politics, metaphorised as a struggle for freedom against the EU, Brussels elites, and Soros, thereby paving the way for a top-down plebiscitary leadership authorisation from the electorate as well as forming legitimate grounds for anti-immigrant policy (Körösényi et al., 2020).

To properly ground the resonances of the four selected cases of normative dissonances, there is a rigorous need for a clear theoretical framework. Understanding which EU democracy mechanisms and their normative interpretations Hungary diverged from, offers a suitable foundation for establishing the research problem theoretically. Social constructivist perspectives, when combined with the analytical tools of plebiscitary leader democracy (Körösényi et al., 2020), provide a theoretical basis for understanding how and why Hungarian illiberal norms based on sovereignty and national identity have systematically contested the democratic rule of law state norms, media pluralism, and civil liberties. While acknowledging the change in contemporary Hungarian politics – a change of government in 2026 – this article empirically focuses on the period 2010-2025, during which the mechanisms of the illiberal state were systematically institutionalised. Therefore, the analysis captures the structural and institutional dimensions of top-down regime building within the 'pre-Magyar era' of contemporary Hungarian politics.

3. Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism and Norm Contestation

To understand the resonances of normative dissonance between Hungary and the EU, this study employed a social constructivist framework as its primary theoretical approach. In constructivist thought, institutions are defined not by material meanings but by social constructs, intersubjective meaning structures, and shared understandings (Wendt, 1999). In this paradigm, norms serve as fundamental analytical units, defined as collective expectations and standards of appropriate behaviour for actors with a particular identity³ (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Katzenstein, 1996; Krasner, 1982).

³ In this context, EU normative values can be found in Article II of Consolidated Version of the Treaty of the European Union. This points out that *the* "Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in

Importantly, norms possess a dual constructivist function: they are regulatory, meaning they restrict and shape behaviour, and they are constitutive, meaning they actively create new actors, interests, and categories of action (Jepperson et al., 1996).

Within this intersubjective continuum, this article centers on the concept of normative dissonance to capture the tension between the EU legal order and (Treaty on European Union, Article 2) illiberal policies. Rather than a static institutional misfit, this structural dissonance is driven by an active process of norm contestation, through which domestic actors politically and discursively question the validity, meaning, or implementation of established supranational expectations (Wiener, 2007). When a ruling elite systematically maintains these contestations within the domestic sphere, this process results in the creation of a comprehensive counter-normative framework as a top-down architecture of illiberal meanings, discourses, and altered institutional rules designed to ensure regime legitimacy and political survival (Körösényi et al., 2020).

This operational mechanism directly functionalises Wendt's (1999) foundational proposition that social structures are defined by the intersubjective meanings that actors attribute to them. Applied to the contemporary trajectory of Hungary, the post-2010 U-turn demonstrates that "democracy is what Viktor Orbán makes of it." Instead of treating liberal values as an immutable template, the Orbán government has endogenously emptied the liberal meaning of democratic norms (in terms of protecting checks and balances, pluralism, and cosmopolitan human rights) and restructured them to fit an alternative, majoritarian, and ideological vision. In this regard, constructivist theory underlines that norms do not always have to be framed by morally positive narratives, and different identities can exhibit contrasting standards of behaviour for both liberal and illiberal systems of governance within the same overarching structure.

The stabilisation of such an alternative framework becomes apparent when the Government's predefined interests (particularly in the context of being compatible with a specific definition of 'the people' and an ideological understanding of 'us') override external normative obligations, prompting actors to actively seek socially acceptable pathways to violate established standards (Jose, 2017; Shannon, 2000, p. 294). This author argues that this constructivist process of norm reconstruction is fruitfully blended with the conceptual insights of a plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) (Körösényi et al., 2020), which explains the domestic structural conditions that make such transformation possible. Under PLD conditions, institutional environments and constitutional frameworks are treated as resources that are continuously shaped by the charismatic leader to protect and sustain the manoeuvre of executive action. Relying on a parliamentary supermajority as a structural source of power, the leader implements a top-down form of representation that uses majoritarian understandings as an opportunity structure. This transforms deliberate norm violations into acceptable internal standards, generating legitimacy to reinforce the illiberal order.

a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012).

Importantly, as Wiener (2007, p. 55) pointed out, norms cannot be generalised because their interactional validity is entirely dependent on the specific cultural and discursive context. Within the PLD theoretical insights, this interactional validity is sustained through a specific populist political style and staging skills (Körösényi et al., 2020). The charismatic leader actively shapes the conditions of internal interaction by controlling the media, transforming the public sphere into a performance stage, and employing emotionally charged and aestheticised political communication to permanently entrench elements of a counter-normative framework in public perception.

Furthermore, while global problems e.g. economic crises, create the necessary normative gaps for norm entrepreneurs to introduce alternative ideas (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998), the blended framework demonstrates that the Hungarian regime does not only react to external shocks but relies on internal crisis production and continuous crisis performance to maintain its charismatic hold. This cyclical crisis management is rooted in the constitutive relationship between identity and interests, where an actor's socially constructed identity directly determines the definition of their asserted interests (Wendt, 1999).

Within this framework, the 'refugee crisis' as an international social space has profoundly shaped the populist manoeuvres of the Orbán government. Through this interaction, incoming migrants have been discursively securitised as an existential threat to Hungary's national, economic, social, and cultural security. Through the dissemination of a populist myth as a powerful narrative scheme structured around a binary opposition between 'us' (the leader and the homogeneous people) and the ideological 'other' or external enemies (Brussels, Soros, and marginalised enemy representations), sectoral disputes (i.e. migration quota implementation) are systematically transformed into existential 'freedom fight'. Consequently, deliberate violations of institutional norms are successfully transformed into necessary and legitimate actions for the preservation of national identity.

By employing these blended constructivist and PLD analytical tools, the following sections systematically analyse the top-down implementation of these counter-normative frameworks across Hungary's judicial, media, academic, and migration spheres.

4. Methodology and Data Collection Tools

To assess the normative dissonance between EU values and counter-norms within the broader contemporary process of democratic backsliding in Hungary, this study employed a qualitative, interpretive single case study design ($n = 1$) (Lijphart, 1971). By using this approach, a systematic thematic document analysis methodology was applied to investigate four interconnected analytical sectors of democratic backsliding: the judiciary, the media, academic freedoms, and migration. The empirical dataset examined covers the fifteen years between 2010 and 2025 – this timeframe was specifically selected to capture the lifecycle and consequences of normative dissonance between EU normative standards and Hungarian domestic policy. To ensure data

diversity and analytical framework through data triangulation, a comprehensive pool of 79 primary and secondary documents was collected using a purposeful sampling strategy across the four defined analytical sectors (Tajik et al., 2025). These materials were systematically classified into five core categories.

The first category concerned supranational legal and institutional documents, comprising Treaty provisions, e.g. Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), European Commission infringement files, and formal judgments of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) establishing the supranational liberal baseline. The second category is devoted to discursive frameworks and speech acts, including official prime ministerial speeches (such as the 2014 Bálványos address), government legislative decrees, and state justifications that reveal the exclusionary 'us/other' dichotomies deployed by the Fidesz administration to perform crises and manufacture domestic social consent. The third category covered international datasets and index indicators, i.e. indicator data imported from the Variety of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset (v16, Released 2026), providing quantitative data on the process of democratic backsliding and norm contestations to support cross-methodological comparison. The fourth category was related to media outlets: newspaper articles, journalistic reports, and official media statements that track the 'field reflections' and empirical outputs of the illiberal regime's counter-normative frameworks. The final category concerned secondary academic literature: peer-reviewed studies indexed in the Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar used to ground the empirical insights within the established democratic backsliding studies and address existing gaps in the literature.

To systematically functionalise this qualitative analysis, the source materials were manually processed through a thematic coding matrix. Based on the conceptual framework of social constructivism, the texts were coded using key analytical concepts of contemporary norm research (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Wiener, 2007): the discursive construction and emergence of counter-norms, norm diffusion, norm internalisation, elite-driven agenda setting, internal regime legitimation, and political survival. This approach allowed the study to move beyond mere description, systematically tracing how democracy is redefined from within, how the Hungarian government internally empties liberal democratic expectations, and how they replace them with an alternative, majoritarian, nationalist, and conservative institutional vision. To complement these qualitative findings, quantitative data from the V-Dem dataset were used to enhance the methodological diversity of the research design. This methodological support helped with avoiding subjective reductionism by establishing a structural correlation between counter-normative frameworks and actual normative dissonance.

It should also be noted that this research design faced certain methodological limitations. As a single interpretive case study ($n = 1$), the findings demonstrate extensive internal validity and deep contextual insight into the trajectory of Hungary, yet they cannot be directly generalised to autocratic events occurring outside supranational legal structures such as the European Union. Nevertheless, this specificity does not diminish the analytical value of the study – on the contrary, by examining how an EU

member state internally challenges a supranational legal order from within, this article offers important theoretical insights and policy lessons for the study of democratic backsliding in comparative politics scholarship.

5. Analysis. Resonances of Normative Dissonances in Hungary-EU Relations: is Democracy what Viktor Orbán Makes of it?

Norms do not appear out of thin air (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This constructivist proposition offers an analytical starting point for assessing Hungary's contemporary illiberal transformation under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In tracing this trajectory, the Orbán government has systematically reshaped liberal EU norms in domestic politics by mobilising nationalist, conservative, and sovereignty-focused metaphors, thereby constructing a comprehensive counter-narrative against the EU's liberal normative system.

Through this constructivist path, Orbán's sovereignist, nation-state-centric, nationalist, and conservative approach has actively reshaped Hungary's identity within the EU and called into question its pluralistic democracy governed by the rule of law state norms. Viewed from this perspective, the domestic counter-rhetoric confirms the assumption that "democracy is what Viktor Orbán makes of it", providing the necessary intersubjective legitimacy for the implementation of illiberal policies. When Viktor Orbán's foundational speech at the Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp in 2014 is analysed, the intentional strategy of normative deconstruction and regime consolidation becomes explicitly visible:

"(...) the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach (...)" (Website of the Hungarian Government, 2014).

In his speech, he also stated that:

"(...) Hungary's citizens are expecting Hungary's leaders to find, formulate and forge a new method of Hungarian state organisation that, following the liberal state and the era of liberal democracy and while of course respecting the values of Christianity, freedom and human rights, can again make the Hungarian community competitive and which adheres to and completes the unfinished tasks and unperformed duties that I have just listed (...)" (Website of the Hungarian Government, 2014).

To justify this systemic break from the "Western dogma", Orbán based his counter-narrative on the performance of successful non-Western models and put forward the following argument:

“(...) the most popular topic in thinking today is trying to understand how systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies and perhaps not even democracies, can nevertheless make their nations successful. The stars of the international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey. And I think that our political community recognised and touched on this challenge correctly several years ago and perhaps also succeeded in processing it intellectually, and if I think back on what we have done over the past four years and what we will be doing during the upcoming four years, then things can indeed be interpreted from this perspective. Meaning that, while breaking with the dogmas and ideologies that have been adopted by the West and keeping ourselves independent from them, we are trying to find the form of community organisation, the new Hungarian state, which is capable of making our community competitive in the great global race for decades to come (...)” (Website of the Hungarian Government, 2014).

This discursive rhetoric demonstrates the constitutive function of a restructured nationalist and conservative identity on the identified further interests of the state. Under the operating conditions of the PLD, this populist political style is instrumentalised not only as rhetoric, but for elite transformation and the construction of authority. These constitutive representations of identity have found far-reaching empirical reflections in a top-down process of state capture, ranging from the loss of judicial independence and the seizure of the media to academic censorship and the strategic securitisation of immigrants.

Judicial Independence

One of the key steps in this institutional restructuring was the adoption of the Hungarian Fundamental Law. In this context, the manner in which the new Constitution was adopted following its rise to power, the way constitutional norms are applied, the government’s offering of significant economic incentives to judges to prevent them from returning despite rulings from the European Court of Justice, and the adoption of new laws to date that undermine the EU’s normative standards, all reflect the illiberal counter-normative construction and demonstrate that the liberal EU norms have not yet been fully internalised in Hungary (Bugaric, 2014; Kochenov & Bárd, 2018; Rupnik, 2012; Scheppele, 2015;). To legitimise this new political order based on majoritarianism, the regime instrumentalised the plebiscitary democratic technique. The 2011 National Consultation on Fundamental Law involved approximately 900,000 participants (Körösenyi et al., 2020). This top-down form of representation provided a normative legitimacy from the public for what the literature conceptualises as “autocratic legalism” (Scheppele, 2015), paving the way for a widespread system of cronyism filling the Constitutional Court with loyalists and centralising patronage appointments across the ordinary judiciary (Körösenyi et al., 2020). This institutional erosion and subsequent

emergence of normative dissonance with EU standards is captured in the empirical records of international indices. The data parameters are specified in Figure 1 below.

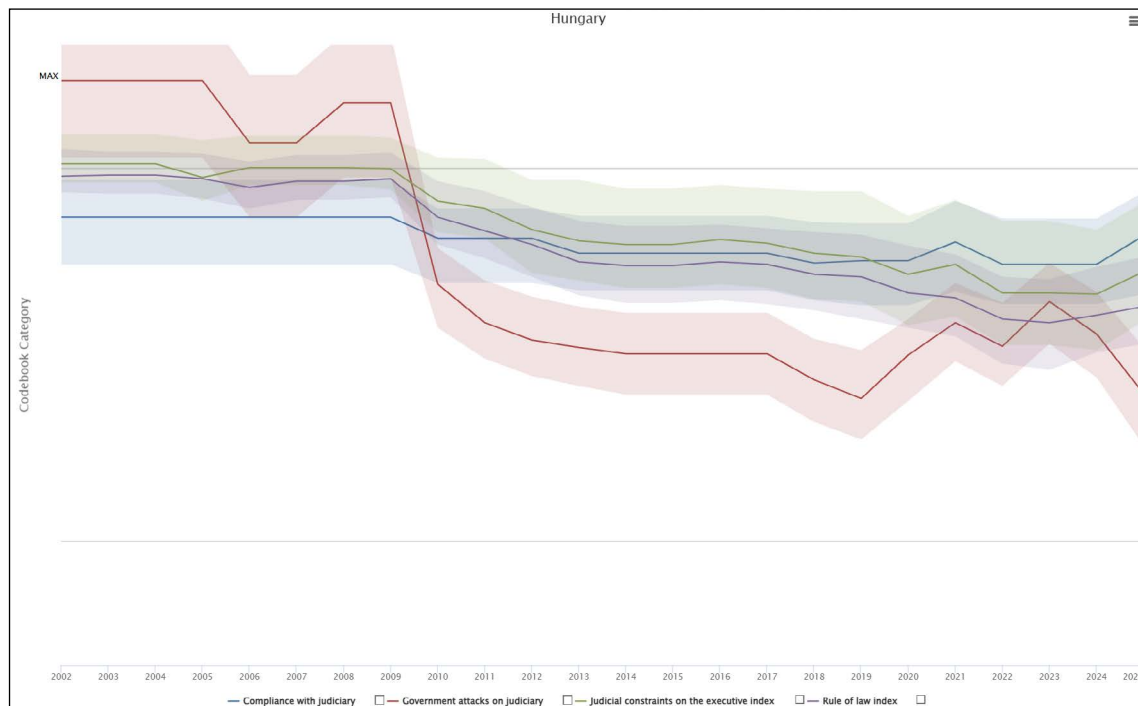


Figure 1. Variety of Democracy Country Graph by Selected Indicators⁴

Source: compiled by the author based on the Variety of Democracy Institute's specific indicator data (Variety of Democracy Institute, 2026a)⁵

⁴ The author's reason for showing the trend in Hungary before 2010 in the chart was deliberate, as it provides a comparative perspective on the situation before and after 2010.

⁵ Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index (v2x_juon), an index of the extent to which the executive branch respects the constitution and complies with court decisions, and the extent to which the judiciary can act independently. This index's scale is interval, ranging from low to high (0-1). Its sources are "v2exrescon", "v2jucomp", "v2juhccomp", "v2juhccind", "v2juncind". Its data release is 1-16.

Rule of Law Index (v2x_rule), an index of how transparently, independently, predictably, impartially, and equally laws are applied, and how lawful the actions of government officials are. The scale is an interval, varying from low to high (0-1). Its sources are "v2exrescon", "v2exbribe", "v2exembez", "v2excrtps", "v2exthtps", "v2juaccnt", "v2juccorrdc", "v2juhccind", "v2juncind", "v2juhccomp", "v2jucomp", "v2cltrnslw", "v2clrspct", "v2xcl_acjst". Its data release is 9-16.

Compliance with Judiciary (C) (v2jucomp), i.e. how often the government complies with important court decisions that it does not agree with. Based on responses equivalent to 0: Never; 1: Seldom; 2: About half of the time; 3: Usually; 4: Always. Its scale is ordinal, converted to interval by the measurement model. Its data release is 1-16.

Government attacks on the judiciary (C) (v2juoatck), i.e. how often the government attacks the integrity of the judiciary. Based on the responses equivalent to 0: Attacks were carried out on a daily or weekly basis; 1: Attacks were common and carried out in nearly every month of the year; 2: Attacks

The empirical data in Table 1 show that the rule of law in Hungary has been deliberately and significantly undermined. Tracing the transformation from the baseline pre-2010 situation to the contemporary consolidated era, the Judicial Constraints on the Executive Index shows a serious decline from 0.90 to 0.68, coinciding with a drop in the overall Rule of Law Index from 0.88 to 0.60. These changes, consistent with the logic of autocratic legalism, do not only reflect an institutional transformation but also map how judicial mechanisms have been politicised through the systematic application of executive aggrandisement for regime consolidation and political survival (Bermeo, 2016). This systematic subversion of legal norms is further reinforced by the changing behavioural patterns of those in power. Compliance with the Judiciary indicator shows a steady erosion, falling from 1.66 to 1.44. Within the constructivist logic, this institutional challenge manifests the consolidation of the primacy of politics over law, where legal frameworks are systematically weaponised by the ruling elite to maintain their capacity to act, confirming that democracy is indeed what Viktor Orbán makes of it (Körösényi et al., 2020; Scheppele, 2015; Wendt, 1999). This institutional defiance is also empirically corroborated by the dramatic drop in the Government Attacks on the Judiciary index, which falls from a positive 1.44 post-accession score to a highly declining score of -1.21 (Variety of Democracy, 2026a). Within this broader autocratic legalistic counter-normative framework against the rule of law, the instrumentalisation of crises as permanent tools for persuading the masses and producing legitimacy reached its empirical peak during the globally spreading COVID-19 pandemic. Benefiting from the “state of danger” legal regime, the Fidesz supermajority enacted the Authorisation Act of 30 March 2020, granting the executive branch the right to rule the country by decree with virtually no temporal limitations (Hegedus, 2020). This law represents the ultimate manifestation of an alternative counter-normative framework where the leader does not adhere to existing institutional frameworks, but instead exploits the state of exception to endogenously invent alternative ones.

Media Freedom

Within the broader context of democratic backsliding, a second empirical manifestation of illiberal state-building, directly opposed to liberal EU norms, concerns the restriction of media autonomy (European Parliament, 2011; Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2012; Polyák, 2019; Sedelmeier, 2014). In stark contrast to pluralistic liberal EU norms, the Hungarian government’s media policies have been systematically instrumentalised to generate social consent for its nationalist and conservative ideology, transforming political communication and meaning-making into an institutional apparatus of state propaganda. This transformation represents a manifestation

occurred more than once; 3: There were attacks, but they were rare; 4: There were no attacks on the judiciary’s integrity. Its data release: 1-16.

Data interpretation: A lower value indicates a more autocratic situation.

of the constitutive influence of a reconstructed nationalist identity on pluralistic media standards. Beyond mere descriptive censorship, this trajectory demonstrates the deployment of specific authoritarian apparatuses designed to localise the ideology desired by the ruling government and to strategically legitimise its constructed enemies/others. Within this anti-normative political communication order, 'immigrants', 'Brussels', 'EU', and 'Soros' function as key intersubjective representations of the "ideological other". Thus, the charismatic leader Viktor Orbán centralised public and private media structures, homogenising the public media space and transforming it into a performative stage for constructing ideological others (Körösenyi et al., 2020). The homogenisation of media policy and its transformation into an elite-focused propaganda tool was empirically confirmed by the continuous downward trends in international indexes such as Variety of Democracy, see the data from Variety of Democracy in Figure 2 below.

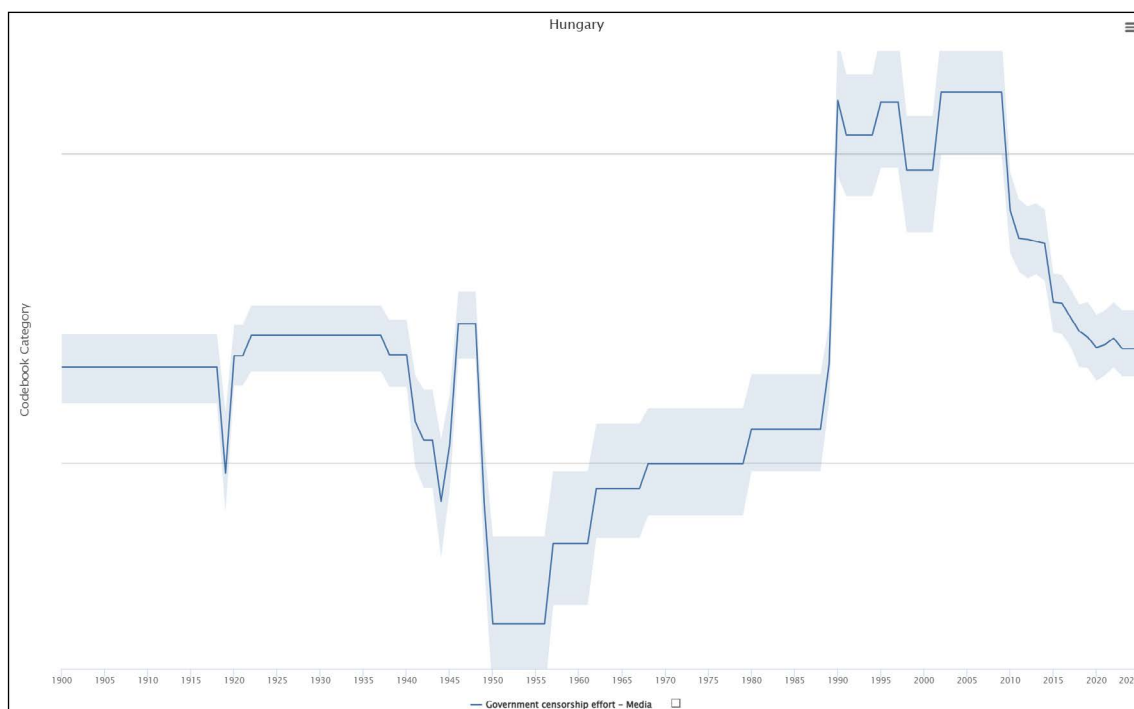


Figure 2. Variety of Democracy Country by Government Censorship Policy – Media Indicator by Years

Source: compiled by the author based on the Variety of Democracy Institute's specific indicator data (Variety of Democracy Institute, 2026b)⁶

⁶ Government censorship policy – Media (C) (v2mecenefm): According to the Variety of Democracy Institute (2026b) formal methodological guidelines, the Government Censorship Effort Indicator (v2mecenefm) assesses both direct and indirect attempts to censor print or visual media. The data release of this indicator is 1–16, with scores ranging from 0 to 4. Specifically, a score of 0 indicates routine and direct censorship, while a score of 1 indicates routine but indirect repression. Scores of 2 and 3 represent direct or indirect censorship limited to highly sensitive topics, respectively. Conversely, a score of 4 indicates that public authorities rarely interfere with major media outlets.

In terms of data interpretation, lower values reflect a more autocratic environment with systematically higher levels of censorship.

Empirical data included in the Variety of Democracy indicators show that the concentration of power in the Hungarian media landscape accelerated after the Fidesz government came to power. Accordingly, a sharp decline was recorded from an initial value of 2.46 in 2009 to a marginal score of 0.04 in 2025. This sharp decline demonstrates that the restricted media freedom in Hungary is progressing through a structurally implemented top-down centralising strategy, in which a key step were the new media laws adopted after the Orban government came to power, not aligned with the normative frameworks of the Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Directive 2010/13/EU) (Polyák, 2019). This institutional restructuring significantly increased executive control over both print and electronic media sectors, and the media space was instrumentalised for regime legitimacy and mass approval through the establishment of a centralised Media Council filled with government loyalists (Pap, 2017).

Furthermore, the sharp decline in this indicator was also an expression of the institutional erosion of the media. The Council actively manipulated access to market resources by controlling frequency auctions, and previously successful independent radio stations were excluded from the market due to regulatory decisions (Polyák, 2019). The centralised consolidation of media autonomy and its erosion for political survival has led to external normative objections; the European Parliament warned that media pluralism in Hungary was seriously endangered, while the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, stated that the new media laws created unprecedented risks of direct political control (OSCE, 2012).

This systematic media control transformed the public sphere into a performative stage necessary for the circulation of simplified and aestheticised discourses that reinforce rigid "friend/enemy" polarisations (Körösényi et al., 2020). The regime used top-down disinformation campaigns to construct and discredit external and internal enemies it has invented, all in pursuit of further political survival and regime consolidation. The most significant empirical manifestation of this strategy was the state-sponsored anti-Soros campaign. George Soros is discursively presented as the central "ideological other" and the malevolent actor behind a populist myth that organizes illegal immigration to undermine European sovereignty. In 2017 alone, the Hungarian government spent €7.5 billion on state-directed anti-Soros media campaigns (Polyák, 2019). Following this ideological identity politics, Fidesz, which holds a supermajority, enacted the "Stop Soros" legislative package in 2018, legally making a highly polarising, media-marginalised political myth an official instrument of state and security policy.

However, as corroborated by data from Variety of Democracy, the use of crises as enduring tools for the production of counter-normative frameworks and legitimacy peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the umbrella of the emergency legal regime, the government integrated a highly restrictive anti-disinformation clause into the Authorisation Act of 30 March 2020, imposing prison sentences of up to three years on individuals who spread "distorted facts" or "false claims" related to the emergency. While framed by the executive branch as a necessary measure to protect public order, independent journalists, civil society organizations, and academics have pointed out

that the law is deliberately being instrumentalised to silence critical reporting and punish public dissent (Hegedüs, 2020).

Academic Freedoms

Within the broader context of democratic backsliding, the third empirical manifestation of illiberal state-building is the systematic restriction of academic freedoms (Bárd, 2020; Enyedi, 2018; Helms & Krizsán, 2017; Ryder, 2020). Rather than occurring as a series of separate academic interventions, the erosion of higher education autonomy has been deliberately functionalised to facilitate a comprehensive, top-down reconstruction of knowledge designed to serve the hegemonic ideological strategies of the ruling elite.

One of the most prominent cases of this strategy explicitly targets the boundaries of higher education, systematically replacing cosmopolitan and autonomous academic norms with traditionalist and conservative ideological structures. The most significant empirical manifestation of this ideological limitation occurred in 2018, when Orbán signed an executive decree unilaterally revoking university accreditations for Gender Studies programmes, effectively banning the discipline across the domestic landscape (The Conversation, 2018). This ideological counter-move directly targeted the public curriculum, including that of elite institutions such as Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). It is worth noting that the banning of this discipline represents a classic demonstration of the exclusionary identity politics necessary for regime consolidation. As the critical framework of gender studies directly opposes the traditional family structures and majoritarian gender roles that Fidesz sought to institutionalise, higher education has been systematically securitised to protect the domestic sphere from the perceived so-called "Western cultural imperialism."

In addition to this curriculum limitation, the second case lies at the intersection of the PLD's theoretical insight into the primacy of politics and Scheppele's conceptualisation of autocratic legalism, since legal frameworks are used as weapons to carry out institutional exclusions (Körösényi et al., 2020; Scheppele, 2015). This mechanism was institutionalised with the adoption of the amendment, widely known as "Lex CEU," by the Fidesz parliamentary supermajority in April 2017 (European Commission, 2017). Although framed in neutral language, the law introduced highly discriminatory structural conditions designed specifically to restrict the activities of foreign accredited institutions in Hungary. The amendment stipulated that foreign universities could only operate domestically if they maintained active higher education campuses in their home countries and a formal bilateral international agreement was signed between the Hungarian government and the country of origin; this condition targeted the Central European University (CEU), the only foreign institution in Budapest without a US-based campus (Zaccagnino, 2021). Despite CEU officials taking immediate and transparent steps to comply with the new regulations and New York State successfully negotiating the necessary bilateral framework, Prime Minister Orbán used his personal veto to prevent the agreement from being signed. This veto activism reveals the true

nature of the initiative: a highly calculated political engineering manoeuvre designed to wage a targeted ideological war against dissenting intellectual spaces. As a result, CEU, one of Central Europe's most prestigious higher education institutions, was forced to relocate all its core academic activities to Vienna in 2019 (Zaccagnino, 2021).

From a traditional liberal perspective, this forced displacement presents a stark paradox. CEU maintained a high degree of scientific quality, operated independently of public funding, paid significant internal taxes, and created significant intellectual employment (Bárd, 2020). However, within top-down ideological transformation and enemy-creation logics, these objective institutional benefits are systematically invalidated by the regime's overriding political survival logic (Körösenyi et al., 2020). As CEU was founded by George Soros, who is discursively indicated as the ultimate external other/enemy organizing mass migration to dilute European culture, the university was targeted as an existential other-enemy. By attacking the institution, the charismatic Hungarian leader successfully mobilised a powerful populist myth and transformed a blatant violation of academic freedom into a necessary "freedom struggle" for the preservation of national sovereignty. This progressive erosion of academic autonomy is strongly corroborated by empirical data provided by international indexes, see The Variety of Democracy data presented in Figure 3.

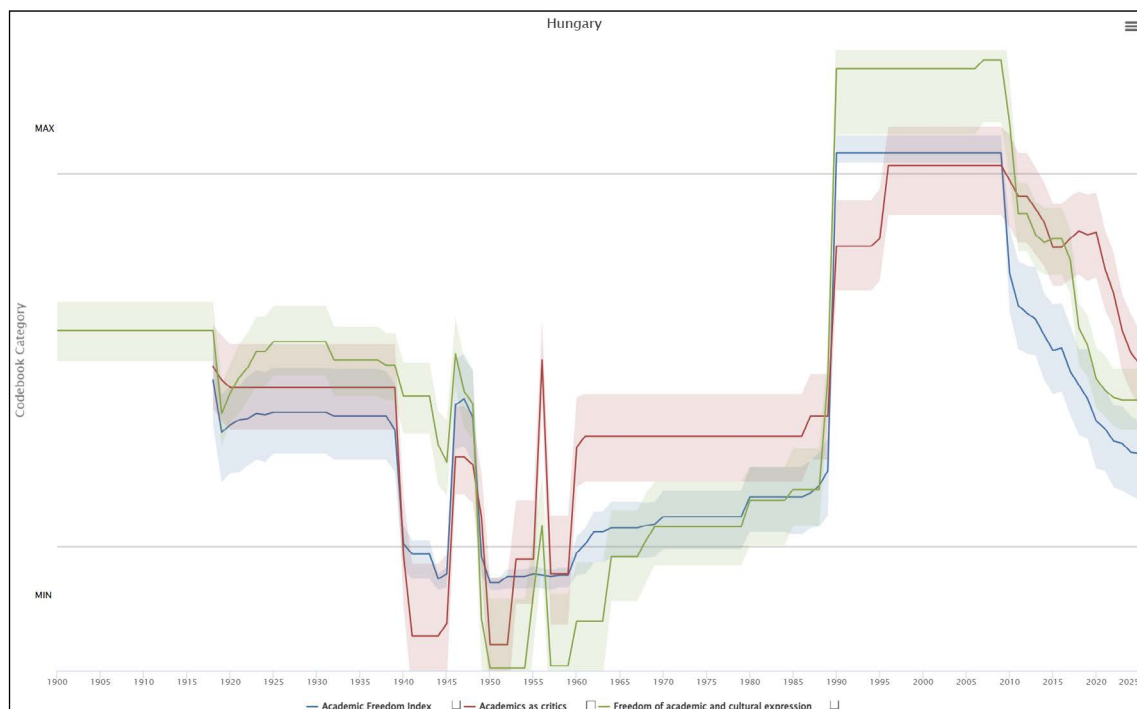


Figure 3. Variety of Democracy Country Graph by Academic Freedoms – Selected Indicators by Years

Source: compiled by the author based on the Variety of Democracy Institute's specific indicator data (Variety of Democracy Institute, 2026c)⁷

⁷ Academic Freedom Index (D) (v2xca_academ): according to the Variety of Democracy Institute (2026c) formal methodological guidelines, this indicator is related to the extent to which academic

The trends presented in Figure 3 provide robust empirical confirmation of the progressive and directional erosion of higher education autonomy under Fidesz rule. The overall Academic Freedom Index, tracing the trajectory from the pre-transformation baseline to the present, shows a dramatic decline, falling from a near-perfect score of 0.95 in 2009 to a worrying 0.30 in 2025. Examining the severity of this structural decline through an international triangulation lens, the global Academic Freedom Index report shows that in the decade following Orbán's constitutional restructuring, Hungary ranked 132nd globally, alongside states such as Somalia, Palestine, and Brazil, placing it in the bottom 20-30% of higher education autonomy worldwide (Kinzelbach et al., 2022, p. 7).

This institutional deterioration is further highlighted by the changing behavioural and communicative indicators of Hungarian academic life. The Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression Index declined from a score of 3.04 in 2009 to a negative score of -0.16 in 2025. This shift to negative indicates that academic expression in Hungary was transformed from a legally protected routine to a highly restricted space marked by frequent pressure from public authorities and structural censorship, particularly on political issues.

Within the Hungarian political structure, this restrictive environment directly targets academics, who are the primary source of internal, horizontal criticism. This is clearly confirmed by the sharp drop in the Academics as Critics Index from 2.06 to 0.10, indicating that the discernible environment of academic criticism in the public sphere has

freedom is respected. This indicator's scale is interval and scores range from low to high (0-1). Its sources include "v2cafres", "v2cafexch", "v2cainsaut", "v2casurv", "v2clacfree". Its data release is 10-16.

Academics as critics (C) (v2cacritic): according to the Variety of Democracy Institute (2026c) formal methodological guidelines, this indicator is related to the extent to which academics and university students openly criticise government policies. Based on five scores, a score of 0 signifies a total absence of academic criticism, while a score of 1 represents only minor, limited academic criticism. Moderate forms of public scholarly disagreement are coded as 2, whereas a score of 3 indicates that academics routinely voice substantive critiques against government policies. Finally, the maximum score of 4 is reserved for environments where higher education actors can openly engage in fundamental criticism of government policies. Its data release: 10-16.

Freedom of academic and cultural expression (C) (v2clacfree): according to the Variety of Democracy Institute (2026c) formal methodological guidelines, this indicator relates to the interconnectedness of academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression with political issues. Based on five scores, a score of 0 indicates that public authorities disregard these freedoms, routinely apply censorship, and impose significant restrictions on academic and cultural freedoms. A score of 1 indicates that academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are weakly respected by public authorities, with occasional enforcement, but direct criticism of the government is often met with repression. A score of 2 indicates that academic freedom and freedom of cultural expression are partially respected by public authorities, with routine enforcement, but strong criticism of the government is sometimes met with repression, whereas 3 points represent a predominantly libertarian structure characterised by minimal and infrequent academic interference. Finally, a maximum score of 4 indicates environments with full institutional respect and no restrictions on academic freedom or cultural expression. Its data release: 10-16.

In terms of data interpretation, lower values reflect a more autocratic environment.

been damaged. In an illiberal and personalistic Hungarian context where academic freedoms are increasingly undermined, the silencing of academics and students is a fundamental requirement for the regime's authority and political survival (Körösenyi et al., 2020).

Analytically, this multifaceted academic restriction reveals a profound normative inconsistency that violates both supranational legal standards and Hungary's own constitutional obligations. Articles 11 and 13 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) explicitly prohibit public authorities from imposing arbitrary restrictions on scientific research and academic expression, and this provision directly contradicts them. Furthermore, this anti-normative framework undermines Hungary's international obligations under the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), overseen by the World Trade Organization (WTO). By applying discriminatory criteria that violate the fundamental principle of national treatment, the Fidesz government's higher education policies deal a serious blow to the normative vision of international law. In response to this challenge, the European Commission initiated a formal infringement procedure and ultimately referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice (ECJ), which ruled that Lex CEU weakened freedom of association, academic freedom, and the right to do business (European Commission, 2017). By strategically instrumentalising the academic field for its own political survival, the Hungarian regime succeeded in transforming higher education from a critical and cosmopolitan field of inquiry into one tightly regulated by ideological alignment, thereby providing a legitimate basis for the institutionalisation of alternative meaning-making processes.

Migration

The fourth empirical manifestation of the normative debates surrounding the EU's liberal framework rests in the transfer of migrants to the state's security agenda (Euronews, 2017; Guardian, 2016). Due to the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war and widespread regional displacement in the Middle East, the mass movement of over one million refugees arriving in Europe by mid-2015 triggered an "existential crisis" in EU member states (Almustafa, 2022; Demir & Soyupek, 2015). To manage this "humanitarian influx", the European Commission (2015a; 2015b) introduced a mandatory quota system based on solidarity and fair burden-sharing, aiming to relocate 120,000 refugees among member states according to indicators such as GDP, population size, and unemployment rates. However, this supranational initiative revealed profound normative dissonances within the EU, accelerated trends of Euroscepticism and anti-EU sentiment, and led to the construction of exclusionary physical and symbolic policies against newcomers.

The fundamental source of the normative dissonance between the EU and Hungary regarding the phenomenon of migration was the securitising policies of the Orbán government, which systematically weaponised nationalist, sovereignist, and nation-state metaphors to reject EU solidarity frameworks. In this process, the government was not

only a passive participant in an external crisis, but rather, as its strategy operationalises Wendt's (1999) proposition regarding the constitutive link between identity and interests, demonstrating how the phenomenon of migration is endogenously utilised to generate and sustain permanent domestic crises to maintain the internal authority of the charismatic elite (Körösenyi et al., 2020). In this trajectory, which serves the goals of political survival and further regime consolidation, the so-called "existential crises" in international social spheres are strategically filtered through the nationalist-conservative identity of the leader, which directly determines the definition of his advanced state interests. The regime, having transformed migration into a tool for domestic political survival, employed specific speech figures to turn incoming migrants into security reference objects, systematically circulating metaphors of "fear," "violence," "terrorism," "invasion," and "influx" in public discourse. This expanding, multi-layered securitisation process successfully achieved centralist policies, generating broad domestic consent for anti-immigrant policies shaped on a traditionalist basis.

This discursive polarisation has been increasingly reinforced through concrete physical and symbolic policies. In 2015 the Fidesz government constructed a 175-kilometer barbed and razor-wire fence along Hungary's borders with Serbia and Croatia (Euronews, 2017; Guardian, 2016). Beyond its role as a physical deterrent, this border barrier represented a counter-normative struggle designed to deliberately blur established supranational border management traditions and deter asylum seekers (Antal, 2019). To stabilise these anti-immigrant normative frameworks within domestic public opinion, Orbán instrumentalised plebiscitary techniques and populist political methods designed to generate social approval (Körösenyi et al., 2020). The first major manifestation of this strategy was the initiation of the 2015 National Consultation on Migration and Terrorism. The twelve-question survey functioned as a top-down tool for public opinion manipulation; by explicitly repeating the term 'terrorism' seven times, it linked economic migration to existential violence and framed newcomers as welfare-chauvinist threats who directly jeopardised local employment and cultural integration (Hungarian Government, 2015).

To reinforce these top-down centralist and populist policies, the regime also implemented a highly strategic counter-response to the radical right-wing pressure within party politics. Initially the radical right-wing party Jobbik had proposed a constitutional amendment to nullify international refugee obligations, which was rejected by Fidesz parliamentary group leaders led by Lajos Kósa due to international legal restrictions (Hargitai, 2020). However, considering the potential agenda-setting risks in domestic party politics, the Orbán government promptly embraced this agenda and formally announced the Immigration Quota Referendum on October 2, 2016 (Hargitai, 2021). The referendum campaign was conducted entirely on an anti-EU and anti-immigrant platform, asking voters whether they should allow the EU to force the displacement of non-Hungarian citizens without parliamentary approval (BBC, 2016).

Although voter turnout fell short of the official legal validity threshold, the government strategically exploited the 98% "No" vote among participants to assert political

and legal authority. Seeking to legitimise societal consent from this plebiscitary source, the Prime Minister utilised this retrospective, ex-post legitimacy to push through the policy changes which explicitly declared that no foreign population could be settled in Hungary, and legally mandated all state organs to protect the nation's constitutional identity and Christian culture (The Government of Hungary, 2018). This structural move directly subverted the foundational principle of the primacy of EU law, asserting that accession to the EU could not restrict Hungary's inalienable right to determine its territorial and demographic structure.

The operational effectiveness of this newly created counter-normative framework was further enhanced by the systematic criminalisation of civic activities. Following its victory in the 2018 general elections, Fidesz's overwhelming parliamentary super-majority enacted the "Stop Soros" legislative package, formally punishing civil society organizations and individuals providing legal or humanitarian assistance to refugees with up to one year of imprisonment (Guardian, 2018). The regime, leaning on an exclusionary populist myth constructed around a dichotomy of heroes versus villains, spent €7.5 billion in state advertising to stabilise this narrative by portraying billionaire philanthropist George Soros as an external enemy organizing mass migration to dilute European civilisation (Polyák, 2019). The law granted the Ministry of the Interior unlimited powers to ban NGOs deemed a national security risk and imposed a 25% punitive tax on foreign funds received by civil society bodies (Boros, 2018; Deutsche Welle, 2018). This aggressive encapsulation led to the forced relocation of the Open Society Foundations from Budapest to Berlin, with the foundation explicitly justifying the move by citing the systematic suppression of civil society for executive political interests (Open Society, 2018; Ryder, 2022).

The Orbán government's securitisation policies, designed with xenophobia in mind, directly violated fundamental international asylum directives, generating a severe normative dissonance. The "Stop Soros" framework stood in direct contradiction to Articles 8(2) and 12(1) of the EU Asylum Procedures Directive (Directive 2013/32/EU), which legally bind member states to guarantee international protection applicants effective access to legal counsel, advice, and NGOs at border crossing points and transit zones (European Commission, 2019). In response to this blatant breach of the Union's legal framework, the European Commission initiated formal infringement proceedings under Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) and referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice (ECJ). The court explicitly ruled that Hungary had systematically failed to fulfill its obligations under Union law and declared the criminalisation of aid to asylum seekers an unlawful restriction of rights guaranteed under EU directives (The European Court of Justice, 2024).

However, instead of changing course in the face of international cases, the Orbán government used subsequent international problems (particularly the global pandemic) to reinforce biopolitical representations of the other. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the discovery of the first local coronavirus cases among Iranian university students was immediately integrated into the leader's anti-immigrant nationalist

narrative. The executive branch 'scapegoated' foreign students as undisciplined, transforming a public health emergency into a new battlefield in its broader strategy of endogenously inventing continuous crises (Batory, 2022; Bohle & Eihmanis, 2022). Using the pandemic emergency "state of danger" legal regime, the government issued an executive decree permanently integrating asylum procedures into the emergency framework. The regulation stipulated that asylum applications could no longer be made on Hungarian territory or at border crossing points – instead, applicants were forced to undergo a highly restrictive pre-asylum procedure at designated Hungarian embassies abroad, such as in Kyiv or Belgrade (Szente & Gárdos-Orosz, 2022).

By implementing this comprehensive strategy of 'othering', the Fidesz government systematically emptied the content of fundamental components of human dignity, such as identity-based acceptance, inclusion, and recognition, failing to meet any criteria of normative refugee protection (Abka & Ünalp Çepel, 2022). Consequently, by constantly manufacturing threat narratives through sectoral security policies, the Hungarian regime successfully completed the transition of the domestic public sphere into a government-directed securitising performative stage. By polarising a strict "us and them" dichotomy, the executive transformed the external crisis into a permanent internal crisis narrative, successfully turning its political survival goals into mandatory, legitimate actions for national survival.

At the intersection of democratic backsliding and EU norm dissonance, the four analytical sectors assessed above serve as profound empirical manifestations of how systemic normative contestations are directly linked to top-down counter-normative frameworks constructed by the ruling elite. Illiberal and populist practices pursued for regime consolidation and political survival imply the spread of an exclusionary ideological line at micro level, while simultaneously producing a highly securitised counter-narrative against the macro-identity of the EU, an identity structurally based on liberal, cosmopolitan, pluralistic, and rule-of-law standards.

Importantly, Péter Magyar's recent electoral success and the changing dynamics in the Hungarian political landscape raise intriguing questions about the future trajectory of norm contestation projections. While this study acknowledges that internal political restructuring presents a historic window of opportunity to potentially re-establish democratic rule-of-law standards in Hungary, it adopts a cautious approach regarding the institutional and practical pace of a rapid re-democratisation transformation. Comparative perspectives based on the fluid interaction between identity and normative visions demonstrate that mapping these shifting internal structures provides a significant research gap for future studies investigating the dismantling of counter-normative architectures or broader re-democratisation efforts in Hungary-EU relations.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In the broader context of contemporary autocratisation research, the social constructivist perspective provides a fertile analytical ground for assessing the systemic norm

contestations between Hungary and the European Union. This article systematically supports and validates the hypothesis that the gradual, directional decline in the quality of Hungarian democracy is driven by a structurally designed, illiberal, counter-normative framework engineered by the ruling elite. Blending constructivist norm dynamics with theoretical insights from the plebiscitary leader democracy (PLD) concept (Körösényi et al., 2020), this article presents a four-sector analysis explaining how and why a consolidated illiberal political order internally empties supranational expectations to guarantee the political survival of the executive branch and the longevity of the regime.

The empirical analysis conducted across the four selected policy sectors demonstrated that the post-2010 trajectory reveals a profound normative dissonance where “democracy is precisely what Viktor Orbán makes of it” (Wendt, 1999). Instead of creating straightforward institutional gridlocks, the charismatic leader strategically functionalised his parliamentary supermajority to implement a top-down restructuring of legal and communicative meaning structures. In the judicial sphere, this was manifested through autocratic legal mechanisms (Scheppele, 2015), successfully establishing the primacy of politics over law. Regarding media freedom, the domestic public sphere was systematically restructured through aggressive, top-down executive control, transforming it into an elite-directed performative stage designed to manufacture social consent and circulate simplified, emotionally charged discourses (Körösényi et al., 2020). In academic freedoms, the forced relocation of the Central European University via “Lex CEU” and the unilateral banning of Gender Studies programmes imply a calculated top-down reconstruction of knowledge, where autonomous cosmopolitan institutions are systematically securitised as ideological threats to the traditional identity constructed by the state. Finally, the securitisation of migration reveals another critical dimension of this counter-normative framework, as the executive branch, through the “Stop Soros” legislative package and pandemic-era restrictive decrees, criminalised civil solidarity and tightened asylum procedures, directly defying supranational court rulings (The Court of Justice of the European Union, 2024). Taken together, this article fills a critical gap in the literature by offering a comprehensive framework that triangulates the EU legal and institutional bases, contemporary academic literature, discourse and speech acts, and empirical data from the Variety of Democracy (V-Dem) indices. The article demonstrates how intersubjective interpretive politics, the fluid nature of norm contestation (Wiener, 2007), and the mutually constitutive effects of identity politics can be functionalised by an elite in power to create an alternative, resilient structure.

However, while recent internal political shifts and electoral success of the opposition in Hungary present a historic window of opportunity for potential democratic renewal, this study adopted a rigorous and cautious approach to the practical and institutional pace of any rapid re-democratisation. It is worth noting that the deeply entrenched bureaucracy alongside the formal and informal counter-normative structures built during sixteen years of Fidesz rule cannot be easily dismantled simply by electoral results. Consequently, the theoretical and empirical insights suggested in

this article confirm that social constructivist frameworks, when intertwined with the political realities of plebiscitary leader democracy, possess significant explanatory power in revealing the internal logic of autocratisation. Mapping the future trajectory of these shifting structures and the ongoing normative dissonances between the domestic polity and the EU prepares the groundwork for a critical research agenda in future comparative political studies on international law, identity politics, and democratic resilience.

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Framing Energy Sovereignty: A Snapshot of Populist Narratives and Climate Politics in the Morawiecki Government (2021–2023)

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of populism and energy and climate policy in Poland, focusing on how government narratives shape public discourse and influence policymaking. Using a qualitative case study design supported by keyword frequency analysis, the study analyses political speeches and official communications by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki between 2021 and 2023, including parliamentary speeches and 300 posts from his official Facebook page. Drawing on Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, the analysis explores how the Polish government constructs the identities of 'the people' and 'the elite' within energy and climate policy discourse. The findings indicate that government communication frames 'the people' as a unified national community associated with energy security, economic stability, and sovereignty, while portraying the European Union and other external actors as antagonistic elites advancing policies presented as unsuitable for Poland. Key concepts such as the European Union, climate, and sustainable development, function as empty signifiers whose meanings are articulated within government discourse

in ways consistent with broader political narratives. The author suggests that these narratives align with a policy approach prioritising energy independence, particularly through continued reliance on coal, while climate-related discourse receives comparatively less emphasis within the analysed communications. By linking populism theory with climate and energy policy, this article contributes to the growing literature on the political dynamics of the energy transition in Central and Eastern Europe. It highlights how populist framing can shape policy trajectories and complicate the implementation of European climate objectives, including the European Green Deal, in contexts where national sovereignty and identity are politically salient.

Keywords: populism, energy policy, Poland, climate politics, the European Union

1. Introduction

Poland's energy sector has become a focal point in European discussions, reflecting broader shifts in global energy dynamics and domestic politics. Historically reliant on coal – dating back to the establishment of its first coal mine in Szczakowa, Małopolska region, in 1767 (Cieślak et al., 2013, p. 433) – Poland now faces mounting pressure, particularly from the EU, to transition to sustainable energy sources and phase out coal by 2049 (European Commission, 2023, n.p.).

The decision to commit to a late coal phase-out just before the 2050 deadline, was largely driven by EU conditionality, which compelled compliance. Without this pressure, Poland would most likely have refused to agree to a coal phase-out altogether (Fabianowicz, 2023, p. 100). In the event of non-compliance, the EU threatened to cut 50% of the promised Just Transition funds. Additionally, the coal phase-out is viewed negatively by traditional industries and certain segments of the population, making the delayed timeline a strategic move by the government to preserve its public image (Fabianowicz, 2023, p. 100).

Most European countries aim to phase out coal much earlier. This transition has not only reshaped national energy policies but has also influenced public perception. This article draws on research on populism to examine how this transformation was perceived during the final legislative term of the right-wing populist party PiS. The author focused on the final phase of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's government, particularly the period 2021–2023, in which the Law and Justice (PiS) party held a dominant position. The analysis deliberately excluded the newly elected government under Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who took office on December 13, 2023. By concentrating solely on the previous administration, the article provides a more precise understanding of the interplay between populism and energy policy transitions in Poland before the political shift.

The discourse surrounding climate and energy policy in Poland, shaped by its populist political landscape, presents a compelling subject for analysis. This article examines how energy transitions are framed within national narratives, engaging with broader questions of Polish identity and political strategy. By analysing government

communications, it also seeks to examine the role of populism in shaping energy policy discourse. Accordingly, the following research question was posed: In the context of Poland's climate and energy policy narratives, how does the government construct identities and oppositions between 'the people' and 'the elite'?

Building on the established research, particularly that of Ernesto Laclau, this article examines how government energy policy narratives describe the people as a unified group associated with common energy interests and challenges, while depicting the elite as an external force linked to climate and energy policies presented as unsuitable for Poland. The analysis explored how these oppositions are articulated within government communications and how they relate to broader debates surrounding energy transition and sovereignty.

From a scholarly perspective, this article contributes to broader theoretical discussions on populism and its influence on policy discourse, particularly in Central and Eastern European states. It highlights emerging themes of populism that have evolved alongside growing illiberalism in the region, and politically it is crucial for understanding the challenges and opportunities in implementing the European Green Deal, both within Poland and in other contexts where populist politics play a significant role in shaping policy outcomes.

2. Literature Review

Researchers have been particularly interested in studying how populism and democracy are connected. According to certain scholars, populist movements pose a threat to democratic institutions. Müller (2016, p. 101) described populism as a reflection of representative politics, highlighting its anti-elitist and anti-pluralist nature. According to his analysis (Müller, 2016, p. 102), populists make false claims about representing the people's will. His assessment is that they represent a risk to democracy (Müller, 2016, p. 103), and that populism does not address the issues of liberal democracy. The study pays special attention to Western democracies, which are undergoing a shift towards populism despite already having strong democratic foundations.

By redirecting attention to Europe, one can observe issues similar to those in the United States with their distinct causes and manifestations. Berman (2019, p. 404) noted that the influence of populist parties is a cause for concern, as they have taken control in Western and Eastern Europe, and emphasized that the rise of populism in Western Europe has been ongoing for decades, but it was not until 2008 that these parties became central to political debate.

Mudde (2019, n.p.) stated that the primary objective of populist radical right groups in Central and Eastern Europe is to advance illiberalism. This often involves undermining judicial and media independence, weakening minority rights protections, and diluting the separation of powers. The extent of their influence and control largely depends on the strength of the populist radical right party and the structural complexities of the political system.

Riedel (2019, p. 24) further explored populism research based on the case study of Poland. The signs of growth and stability in Poland suggested a promising future of progress and prosperity, reflecting a reliance on stable democratisation, while as in Hungary, the country has changed course from being pro-democratic and oriented towards Western liberalism to adopting an authoritarian direction.

As European mainstream politics has evolved significantly with the rise of populism, this shift has coincided with the growing prominence of climate politics and the energy transition. This intersection reflects a deeper, more complex relationship in which populist movements and parties – often critical of political elites and international agreements – engage with pressing issues such as climate change and energy policy. For example, Radtke and Drewing (2020, p. 164) found that the energy transition was initially perceived as an elite-driven initiative, led by political parties and interest groups that overlooked the concerns of ordinary citizens. According to this line of research, populists argue that so-called experts exert excessive influence over policymaking, while politicians fail to genuinely represent the people. They also claim that policymakers are out of touch with local communities and that energy transition plans are both condescending and impractical.

The way in which populist actors engage with climate change and environmentalism has evolved, with many increasingly incorporating these issues into their political narratives. Hoerber, Kurze, and Kuenzer (2021, p. 2) showed that right-wing populist parties do not necessarily reject environmental protection outright. Instead, they reframe and prioritise environmental issues in ways that may challenge the EU's sustainability transition – a strategy they term *Ego-Ecology*.

Other studies highlighted an even more nuanced approach, where far-right parties promote concepts such as *green patriotism* and environmental conservation, particularly in relation to protecting their so-called homelands (Buzogány & Mohammad-Klotzbach, 2021, p. 156). Rather than dismissing climate change as politically irrelevant, populist actors increasingly use it as a tool to advance their own ideological and political objectives.

In general, research provides valuable insights into populism's influence on democracy and its role in shaping European politics, including climate and energy policy. However, as stressed by Kurze, Hoerber, and Kuenzer (2021, p. 3), a significant research gap remains in understanding the intersection between populism and sustainability.

This research puzzle suggests that Laclau's theory can enhance in particular the analysis of the previously mentioned nexus, emphasising the role of rhetoric in constructing political identities and the populist divide between the people and the elite. This perspective also resonates with emerging work on populist regionalism, which highlights how populist actors frame supranational institutions as external elites (e.g. Söderbaum, Spandler, Pacciardi, Greskovits). Using this theoretical framework is highly relevant for studying the evolution of populism's stance on climate politics and environmental policy in Poland. Laclau's focus on the changing nature of populist demands offers a nuanced perspective on the shifting narrative regarding climate change and energy transition.

The existing research provides a foundation for understanding how populism influences democracy and policymaking. However, Laclau's theory offers a more specific framework for analysing the techniques used to construct and deploy populist narratives, particularly in environmental debates, and helps explain how populist strategies adapt and evolve in response to shifting climate politics.

In the case of Poland, Laclau's theory is particularly useful for examining how climate and energy policy narratives are framed. It sheds light on how the government, especially through the communications of Mateusz Morawiecki, constructs the identities of *the people* and *the elite*, positioning them in opposition to each other. This perspective helps clarify how populist rhetoric influences Poland's approach to climate policy and the broader energy transition.

Laclau offered a profound insight into populism in political discourse, focusing specifically on the construction of political identities, a central concept in his framework. His study (2005, p. 86) explored the process by which populism forms a collective identity of the people in opposition to an elite or establishment through the use of political rhetoric. He stressed the role of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2001, p. 412), t.e. broad and flexible terms that bring together diverse groups despite their differing viewpoints, and emphasized the importance of antagonistic connections in populist movements, a crucial aspect of uniting these collectives against a common adversary. This point was also highlighted by Mouffe (2022, n.p.).

According to Laclau (2005, p. 73), populist movements typically start with particular social grievances and evolve into a wider set of demands. Another crucial element of his theory is the role of populist leadership, in which leaders embody the hopes of the masses and oppose the privileged class. Laclau (2005, p. 130) underlined the adaptability of populist movements across different ideologies, highlighting their fluidity and heterogeneity. The ability of populism to adapt makes it a powerful political force. His analysis, from a post-structuralist perspective, pointed out how populist narratives influence the formation of political realities and perceptions.

3. Methodological Approach

This study employed a qualitative discourse-analytical approach based on Laclau's theory of populism in order to examine how the Morawiecki government framed energy and climate policy between 2021 and 2023. The research focused on two interconnected case studies: (1) Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's 2021 speech in the European Parliament and (2) 300 posts published on his official Facebook page during the 2022–2023 pre-election period. The parliamentary speech enabled a close examination of rhetorical identity construction and antagonistic framing, while the Facebook material provided insights into recurring communicative patterns in the government discourse. Posts were retrieved from Morawiecki's official public profile and screened for references to climate, sustainable development, and the European Union. Keyword frequency counts relating to these themes guided the selection of posts for deeper

qualitative interpretation. The author then examined how these materials reflected Laclau's concepts of antagonism, empty signifiers, and the construction of political identities.

The article is positioned within Laclau's discourse-theoretical understanding of populism, particularly his concepts of antagonism, empty signifiers, and the construction of *the people* through opposition to *the elite*. These concepts guided both case studies: the parliamentary speech was analysed to identify rhetorical constructions of political identity and antagonism, while the Facebook posts were examined to trace how selected terms acquire recurring meanings in government communication. Keyword frequency counts were therefore not treated as a standalone quantitative measurement, but as a supporting tool for identifying patterns subsequently interpreted qualitatively.

4. Context of Analysis. Key Characteristics of Poland's Climate and Energy Policy

Poland's reliance on coal is significant. The year of 2021 saw a notable rise in the demand for coal as coal-based electricity generation made a strong comeback, accounting for 80% of the total electricity generation in Poland (International Energy Agency, 2022a, n.p.), yet coal usage is not merely an economic issue but deeply embedded within national, social, and political narratives (Broughel, 2024, n.p.). Scientific consensus strongly advocates for the urgent phase-out of coal to mitigate climate change by reducing CO₂ emissions (IPCC, 2019, n.p.). This transition is crucial for replacing coal with cleaner energy sources, such as solar, wind, hydroelectric, and nuclear power. However, the latter remains contested due to its environmental impact, as it is not entirely carbon-free.

In Poland, the city of Katowice – one of the country's most prominent coal mining regions – serves as a powerful symbol of both energy independence and historical industrial strength. The coal industry is not only a key provider of domestic energy but also a major employer, deeply intertwined with local economies and social structures. Consequently, coal policies extend beyond energy considerations; they are closely linked to national identity, cultural heritage, and socio-economic stability (Broughel, 2024, n.p.).

The above explains why Poland hosted the 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP24) in Katowice. At the time, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki referred to coal as Poland's 'black gold' (Tutton, 2018, n.p.). The government framed COP24 in a way that suggested Poland's heavy reliance on coal could even be an advantage in its path toward climate neutrality, as stated by President Andrzej Duda (2018, n.p.). In this context, Poland positioned itself as a supposedly honest broker, capable of representing the EU's modern ecological ambitions while appealing to emerging economies like Brazil, which remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Poland was presented as a potential role model for transitioning towards climate neutrality (Worland, 2018, n.p.).

Prior to 2022, Poland also pursued diversification strategies to reduce dependency on external suppliers, including the expansion of LNG import capacity through the Świnoujście terminal and regional cooperation within the Three Seas Initiative. These efforts complemented the broader emphasis on energy security and sovereignty within government narratives (International Energy Agency, 2022b, n.p.).

The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has given coal an additional strategic dimension. The Polish government has emphasised a narrative of greater energy independence from Russian supplies compared to countries like Germany, which began phasing out coal and nuclear energy early, investing heavily in renewables, yet it also had to secure short and mid-term energy solutions, leading to increased reliance on Russian gas (Eberly et al., 2023, n.p.).

In contrast, Poland has maintained relatively low dependence on energy imports and has fully eliminated coal imports from Russia (Maj, 2023, p. 3). Other EU member states, including Germany, have also taken steps to reduce reliance on Russian energy, whereas Poland, along with other Eastern European states, had already warned Germany in 2016 about the geopolitical risks of Nord Stream 2, urging its cancellation to prevent strategic vulnerabilities for Europe (Sziklai et al., 2020, p. 2).

While Poland is more independent in terms of domestic energy supply and security, its energy policies have often been framed within a narrative of independence and resistance to external (particularly Russian) influence. The country still lacks sufficient domestic energy supply, which is now compensated for by imports, for example, from Colombia, Indonesia, and South Africa (Maj, 2023, p. 3). Despite environmental concerns, the government has also invested in developing the Baltic Pipe Project (intended to transport natural gas from Norway to Poland), primarily to reduce dependency on Russian gas (Sandford, 2022, n.p.). In conclusion, Poland is not energy self-sufficient, which challenges the populist claims.

Poland positions itself as a protective barrier against what it perceives as economically harmful climate policies. For instance, in EU negotiations Poland has sought exemptions and extensions for several climate targets, citing the economic, social, and political ramifications of swift transitions away from coal. This was most evident in the lawsuit of the most recent PiS government against the Fit for 55 legislations initiated by the EU (Elissaoui et al., 2023, n.p.).

5. Analysis. Laclau's Theory on the Populist Approach in the Context of Poland's Energy Narrative

The Polish government frequently shapes its energy narrative in a manner consistent with Laclau's theory, presenting the people as a unified entity in pursuit (Laclau, 2005, p. 86) of energy security, economic stability, and national sovereignty (Polish Government, 2023a, n.p.). This narrative underslines the importance of energy independence and the protection of domestic energy sources, particularly coal (Morawiecki, 2024, n.p.), and putting it in this way, the government cultivates a shared national

identity centred on a strong, self-reliant Poland, resistant to external pressures – especially those related to EU energy and environmental regulations (Morawiecki, 2024, n.p.).

According to Laclau's theory (2001, p. 412), Morawiecki employed terms such as European Union and European Green Deal as empty signifiers, portraying them as external forces that threaten Poland's sovereignty and economic stability. In contrast, the government stated that Poland can achieve energy independence through traditional energy sources. Supporting this claim, the Ministry of State Assets collaborated on a report emphasising Poland's energy self-sufficiency, citing an estimated 32 billion tons of untapped hard coal reserves – an amount the government deemed sufficient to secure the country's domestic coal supply for the foreseeable future (Śniegocki et al., 2022, p. 12).

Conversely, *the elite* in Poland's energy narrative consists of external actors, including the European Union, environmental non-governmental organizations, and, at times, foreign energy market players, often perceived by the average Polish citizen as disconnected from their everyday needs and realities and frequently described as promoting energy policies that endanger Poland's economic stability and energy security (Riedel, 2021, pp. 207–216, 221). By constructing this sense of external threat, the government reinforces the division between *the people* and these external forces, further legitimising its stance on energy independence. The President of Poland openly opposed EU regulation, implying that only immature and irresponsible countries would take risks with their citizens' interests: "Which country wants to give up resources which it owns and which are a guarantee of its economic sovereignty and energy independence?" (Oroschakoff & Gurzu, 2015, n.p.).

As already mentioned, this study analysed two interconnected case studies to examine Poland's energy policy. While the overall research covered the period 2021–2023, the analysis of Facebook communication focused specifically on the pre-election period of 2022–2023.

The first case study addressed Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's 2021 speech in the European Parliament, specifically the construction of antagonistic identities within energy and climate policy discourse. The speech reflected Morawiecki's broader rhetorical approach during this period, particularly in its emphasis on sovereignty, energy security, and criticism of EU policy. It was selected because it brings together debates on European integration, national sovereignty, and energy policy, making it particularly relevant for examining the construction of antagonistic identities within Laclau's framework. The qualitative analysis focused on how rhetorical distinctions between the people and external actors were articulated, as well as on the way themes such as sovereignty, European integration, and energy security contributed to processes of political identity construction. The second case study examined official communications from the former Polish Prime Minister's office in the buildup of the government elections, with 300 posts from 2022 to 2023 from the official Facebook page of Mateusz Morawiecki systematically reviewed. The study analysed the posts in greater depth when keywords such as energy, climate change, and sustainable development were present.

This approach drew on Laclau's concept of empty signifiers, examining how recurring political terms acquire specific meanings within government communications and how these meanings contribute to the construction of political identities and oppositions.

By combining qualitative analysis of speeches with keyword frequency analysis of Facebook posts, these case studies provided insights into recurring populist patterns within the Polish government's energy and climate policy narratives.

a) Case Study: Parliamentary Speech

There was a noticeable change in focus and discourse in Prime Minister Morawiecki's speeches. His address to the Polish Parliament in 2019 mainly focused on domestic matters, highlighting the rivalry between PiS and PO (Jaskółka, 2019, n.p.), during the time when the government was concentrating on securing power in domestic issues.

In 2020 there was a clear change in the PM's major speeches, addressing more international matters. This change was clear in his speech at the European Parliament, where he ardently defended Poland's stance on the rule of law debate (OKO.press, 2020, n.p.)

The year 2021 marked a further intensification in Morawiecki's approach, broadening his critique to include the EU's stance on energy and climate policy (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.). Throughout 2022, during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Morawiecki maintained a critical stance against Russia and supported the EU's handling of the war, such as the energy sanctions of the EU against Russia (Platform of European Memory and Conscience, 2022, n.p.).

Ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections, Morawiecki delivered an impassioned speech at Heidelberg University, a historically significant venue. The Polish Government's assessment of the European continent's failures in 2023 stressed the rising importance of national sovereignty, with their anti-EU rhetoric reaching a climax (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.). These speeches collectively illustrated a visible shift in emphasis, moving from domestic political concerns toward broader debates surrounding European policy, sovereignty, and energy issues.

The 2021 speech was particularly relevant for this case study because it reflects an intensification of Morawiecki's criticism toward the EU, while simultaneously addressing themes related to energy and climate policy. Its content is a valuable resource for examining the use of populist framing in Laclau's theory, particularly in its portrayal of the people versus the elite and the persuasive techniques used to tackle urgent global problems.

Morawiecki presented a vision of Poland as a united and resilient nation, with a focus on energy independence and security, depicting it as a country that brings together millions of Poles through its strong opposition to the EU. The EU's Recovery Fund, presented as a Polish endeavour, was described as a shield for Poles against globalisation and foreign influences, implying that the EU bears responsibility for economic and social challenges (Kość, 2021, n.p.).

"It was Poland that promoted an ambitious Recovery Fund ensuring that today's response to the challenges of energy, climate change and post-pandemic transformation was adequate to the needs, and that economic growth would be strong, giving hope and guarantee that millions of children, women and men would not be left alone and vulnerable to globalisation" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

To ensure that there was no ambiguity, another part of the speech clearly established the EU as a perceived threat to the Polish people.

"I reject the language of threats, hazing and coercion. I do not agree to politicians blackmailing and threatening Poland. I do not agree to blackmail becoming a method of conducting policy towards a Member State. That's not how democracies do things" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

Morawiecki not only positioned Poland in opposition to EU institutions but also broadened the scope of representation beyond national level. By referring to wider European challenges and presenting Poland's proposals as solutions relevant for the continent as a whole, he constructed a broader political community extending beyond domestic audiences. In Laclau's terms, this rhetorical move reinforced the construct of the people through their shared concerns, whilst simultaneously defining the elite as actors unable or unwilling to address these challenges effectively.

Morawiecki stated that the EU experienced a major gas and energy crisis because of strategic manoeuvres resulting in unprecedented price increases. From his perspective, countless European companies faced a dilemma: either decrease production or transfer the increased costs to consumers (Government of Poland, 2023c, n.p.). He warned that this crisis could destabilise Europe, putting it at risk of widespread bankruptcies. Morawiecki voiced worries about the possibility of millions of households and tens of millions of individuals being pushed into poverty and hardship because of uncontrollable cost increases throughout the continent. He warned of the risk of a domino effect, where one crisis could set off a sequence of subsequent collapses (Government of Poland, 2023c, n.p.).

By referring to Europe at a crossroads, he attempted to ensure that Poland had a more promising future with two paths to choose from, i.e. Europe and what an alternative path might be. His rhetoric provoked strong reactions among participants of the debate: "I can see the agitation on your faces. I understand that you disagree with it, at least in part, in this chamber. But I do not understand why" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.). This exchange illustrates another rhetorical strategy within Morawiecki's discourse. By emphasising disagreement within the Chamber while questioning opposing reactions, he reinforced a distinction between those who recognise the seriousness of the challenges facing Europe and those portrayed as failing to respond adequately. In Laclau's terms, this contributed to the construction of antagonistic identities between the people and the political elites.

Morawiecki underlined how Poland's government chose the right path, while the EU just looked away: "This is what Poland proposes (...) How to fairly and effectively finance the energy and climate transformation? How to make our decision-making

process more effective? What can we do to prevent our citizens from feeling increasingly alienated in the EU?" (Government of Poland, 2021, n.p.).

The analysis indicated that Morawiecki's speech defined energy policy through themes associated with sovereignty, energy independence, and relations with the European Union. Within this discourse the EU was frequently presented as an external actor linked to policies portrayed as constraining Poland's energy autonomy. The response in Poland to Morawiecki's speech in the European Parliament was a mix of opinions, showing a significant political divide. Members of the ruling party supported his stance, highlighting Poland's sovereignty and equality within the EU. Radosław Fogiel, from the PiS party, underlined Poland's equal standing in the community, while Beata Kempa, former State Secretary for Justice, emphasised the limited participation and the importance of discussing more pertinent matters. Krystyna Pawłowicz, a judge on the Constitutional Tribunal, summed up the PM's speech, demanding that Poland be respected and firmly rejecting any attempts to use threats or financial blackmail to obtain concessions (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

Opposition politicians, including Magdalena Adamowicz, criticised Morawiecki for sidestepping the main issue and delivering the most anti-EU speech ever heard in the European Parliament. In addition, Marek Belka voiced disapproval towards Morawiecki for neglecting the core subject of the discussion that Poland uses populist tactics by attacking the EU (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

An interesting development was the handing of a wooden Pinocchio figurine to Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki by MEP Łukasz Kohut, intended to highlight what critics described as his misleading statements. The figurine was quickly taken away by Konrad Szymański, Minister for European Union Affairs in the PiS government. Kohut's gesture provoked strong reactions, as he accused those in power of damaging Poland's international reputation (Polsat News, 2021, n.p.).

b) Case Study: Climate Narratives (2022–2023)

In the second case study, the sub-concept of empty signifiers in Laclau's theory is exemplified by the correlation between the frequency of posts with specific keywords on climate policy and their perceived importance. This highlights how selective emphasis in government communication shapes public perception. An empty signifier refers to a term or symbol that is deliberately made vague and inclusive so that it can represent a wide range of meanings and identities. In practical terms, 'climate', or 'sustainable development' and 'European Union' can function as empty signifiers. While each of these concepts has a broad, universal appeal, their specific content and implications can vary significantly across different contexts and ideologies (Laclau, 2001, p. 412).

To identify the specific meaning of the empty signifiers, the analysis was based on keyword frequency counts to identify posts engaging with topics related to European energy and climate policy – when a keyword appeared in a post, a more detailed

qualitative analysis was conducted. The selected posts were interpreted in the context of Laclau's theory of populism, examining how the concepts were reflected in government communication.

Keyword: Climate

The keyword climate appeared 60 times and was the least frequent among the observed terms. During the pre-election period of 2022–2023, references to climate were comparatively limited and most commonly associated with formal titles or institutional contexts, such as climate ministers, conferences, and summits. Within the analysed posts, climate policy was less frequently articulated through broader strategic narratives or detailed policy initiatives than themes related to energy security and sovereignty. In Laclau's terms, the concept therefore remains only weakly articulated within the examined communication (Laclau, 2001, p. 412).

According to the extant literature, e.g. Riedel (2021, n.p.), it is argued that populist rhetoric is employed to align with green conservatism. However, at least in this analysis, there was no evidence that the government sought to convince the wider public of green conservatism. A similar theory of green patriotism (cf. Buzogány & Mohammad-Klotzbach, 2021, p. 156) or ego-ecology (cf. Hoerber & Kurze Kuenzer, 2021, n.p.) showed that some governments try to gain political weight on the topic of climate change, yet within the analysed material, references associated with green conservatism, green patriotism, and ego-ecology remained limited. Therefore the findings suggest that climate-related communication was less central to the government's public messaging than themes linked to energy security, sovereignty, and EU relations.

From the perspective of Laclau's theory, the analysed communication placed Brussels as an external actor associated with policies portrayed as disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens. This antagonistic framing was illustrated through statements such as: "We will do anything to protect Polish families against another pseudo-green idea by rich countries and bureaucrats from Brussels" (Morawiecki, n.d., n.p.). Within this discourse, Brussels was positioned as an elite actor, while the government presented itself as defending national interests and Polish families against policies presented as externally imposed.

Keyword: European Union

The term *European Union* appeared 296 times, signalling a strong message to the public, in line with the concept of the *empty signifier* in Laclau's theory. One of the central issues within this discourse was coal mining, particularly the controversy surrounding the Turow coal plant. Several court rulings, including decisions by the European Court of Justice and a Warsaw court, mandated a halt to Turow's expansion. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki strongly criticised these rulings, arguing that they were detrimental and unjust to Polish citizens, workers, and families. He interpreted such verdicts as

destabilising for Poland's energy sector and even declared them *illegal* (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.).

This portrayal of judicial institutions as a threat to Poland's energy security and sovereignty aligns with a broader populist narrative. Following Laclau's framework, Morawiecki built an antagonism between *the people* – represented by the national government – and *the elite*, which in this case included European judicial authorities and policymakers. The EU was thus presented as an external force undermining Poland's right to self-determination in energy policy.

From Laclau's perspective, Morawiecki further burdens the term *European Union* with negative connotations such as pursuing dangerous policies on migration, security, and sovereignty, portraying it as an elite institution that disregards the will of the people. In his rhetoric, the EU's actions are depicted as a violation of Poland's constitution and national interests, underlining what he describes as the *fundamental right* of Europeans – particularly Polish citizens – to sovereignty over their own territory (Government of Poland, 2023, n.p.).

A dominant theme in Morawiecki's discourse is the EU's perceived failure in managing migration. He argues that the uncontrolled influx of thousands of unauthorised migrants has led to instability, particularly in Southern Europe. According to him, Poland has long advocated for stronger action against illegal migration, positioning itself as a defender of European security. The Polish government, under his leadership, passed a resolution rejecting the EU's migration redistribution policies and calling for immediate reforms to the bloc's migration strategy. Morawiecki presented these measures as necessary steps to protect both Poland and Europe as a whole.

Keyword: Sustainable Development

The term sustainable development appeared 72 times, predominantly between March and September 2023, indicating greater visibility during the latter part of the electoral period. Within the analysed communication, sustainable development was frequently associated with infrastructure and national development projects. The qualitative analysis indicated that government communication linked sustainable development to investments such as monuments, highways, and schools. While these themes correspond to Sustainable Development Goal 9, they represent only one dimension of the broader framework of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Hoerber, 2013, p. 161; United Nations, n.d.). Thus sustainable development was primarily articulated through infrastructure and development-oriented narratives rather than through climate-centred framing associated with SDG 13. The selective emphasis on SDG 9 can be interpreted through Laclau's concept of the empty signifier, in which the term was articulated primarily through infrastructure and development-oriented narratives within the analysed communication.

The analysed communication aligns with Laclau's framework, particularly in the construct of *the people* (Polish citizens and their interests) and *the elite* (the EU and

other external actors). Within this discourse, climate-related themes were articulated through oppositions between national interests and external institutions, reflecting broader patterns of populist identity construction.

c) Comparison of the Case Studies

The comparison of both case studies indicated how themes associated with populist rhetoric appear across different forms of government communication on energy and climate policy. Both cases highlight concepts of *the people* and *the elite*, central to Laclau's framework, while differing in their communicative format and emphasis.

Case Study I examined Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's public speeches and identified a shift from predominantly domestic political concerns towards broader debate surrounding European policy, sovereignty, and energy issues. Within those, Poland was frequently positioned in contrast to external actors, particularly the European Union, through references to sovereignty and energy autonomy. Case Study II focused on digital communication through the Prime Minister's official Facebook page. The analysis indicated that government communications placed differing levels of emphasis on selected themes, with climate-related issues receiving comparatively less attention than energy security and national sovereignty. The selective use of the keywords and portrayal of the EU and other actors as *elites* illustrates how populist narratives are communicated through digital platforms during periods of electoral competition.

Comparing these case studies revealed recurring patterns in how the government addressed energy and climate policy across different communicative settings. While Case Study I focused on speeches directed at political audiences, Case Study II examined digital communication directed to a broader public. In both cases, themes of sovereignty, energy security, and relations with external actors remained central.

The analysis highlighted how energy and climate-related communications were articulated through oppositions associated with Laclau's framework, particularly the distinction between *the people* and the external *elites*. Across both traditional and digital forms of communication, selective emphasis and recurring political themes contributed to broader debate surrounding climate policy, sustainable development, and national sovereignty.

6. Conclusion

These case studies addressed the research question of how the people and the elite were portrayed within the Polish government's energy and climate narratives. The analysis indicated that the government communications, particularly through Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's speeches and digital messages, described the people as a collective associated with common energy interests and challenges. This collective was contrasted with external actors, particularly the European Union, frequently linked to policies presented as unsuitable for Poland.

Applying Laclau's framework to the analysed material suggests that government communications articulated a distinction between *the people* and the external *elites* through themes of sovereignty, energy independence, and national interest. These patterns appear both in Morawiecki's public speeches and in the government's digital communications, reflecting recurring forms of antagonistic identity construction within the examined material. Particularly in relation to sustainable development and climate change, the analysed material illustrates how empty signifiers operated within Laclau's framework. Certain themes received greater emphasis than others, contributing to representations of national interests in contrast to external actors and institutions. Within this discourse, selective articulation of political demands and priorities reflected broader processes of antagonistic identity construction.

The transition to Prime Minister Donald Tusk's coalition government after autumn 2023 introduced a new political context for Poland's climate and energy policy. Following eight years of PiS government, questions remain regarding how the new administration will balance EU climate commitments, energy security concerns, and domestic political expectations. Future research may assess whether the patterns identified in this study persist, evolve, or diminish under changing political leadership and institutional conditions.

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Review of the Book “A Bright Future: How Some Countries Have Solved Climate Change and the Rest Can Follow” by Joshua S. Goldstein and Staffan A. Qvist, New York Public Affairs 2019, ISBN: 978-1-5417-2410-5

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Energy transition and climate change are inextricably linked processes that are stirring global politics. This has led to discussions, new ideas, and doubts about the best solutions to curb unfavorable climate trends while simultaneously maintaining economic growth and prosperity. Given current challenges, sustainable development is not just an empty slogan, but a direction for change. This book by Joshua S. Goldstein, an American political scientist, and Staffan A. Qvist, a Swedish energy engineer, attempts to identify some solutions, at the same time debunking several myths about energy. Although published in 2019, the book remains relevant today. In the words of George P. Shultz, former Secretary of State, as stated on the book's cover: “A Bright Future comes along at a critical time for our planet. Its key message: the climate is changing, the consequences are serious, and we can and must take action”.

As the authors emphasise, humanity's most important task is decarbonisation and the transition to clean energy. To achieve this, carbon dioxide pollution would need to be reduced by about 30% per decade (50% would be better, but this is unlikely). Relying on renewable energy sources (RES) cannot be an effective solution as they are dispersed by nature, and what is more, variable and unreliable, unlike concentrated nuclear and coal energy sources. This is especially true since the approach to these energy sources is different. On the one hand, between 2001 and 2006, China doubled its coal consumption. In turn, US President Donald Trump announced already in his first term that the 'war on coal' should be ended (p. 16). Such trends will not contribute to the introduction of rapid changes and decarbonisation. On the other hand, contemporary environmentalists promote unrealistic slogans such as "We don't need nuclear energy, we can have 100% from RES" (p. 73). The authors prove that such a concept cannot succeed for several reasons, but above all, show in the figures presented in an accessible way, their claim that what the world can achieve in 10-20 years using nuclear energy would take 100 years using renewable energy. Hence decarbonisation cannot accelerate without relying on nuclear energy.

This does not mean that green energy should be abandoned, but, as the authors point out, its shortcomings must be remembered. Hydropower accounts for two-thirds of the world's renewable energy, whilst it does reduce carbon dioxide emissions, yet it also threatens the ecosystem. For example, the construction of numerous hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River in Southeast Asia threatens one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on Earth, whereas wind energy generates electricity at a relatively low cost but does not power most cities (with the exception of seaside resorts). Offshore winds are generally more stable than onshore winds, but the number of prime locations is limited (the seabed in California is quite steep compared to the seabed in the UK). Generation costs vary because the wind is variable, its strength depending on the season. Days/years, but also summers, can be more or less windy. Solar energy, however, is unavailable for most of the day, and in northern countries it can even be unavailable for several months. Globally, it accounts for only about 1% of global electricity demand.

The authors argue that the model solution is to use an energy mix, i.e. nuclear energy and renewable energy sources wherever possible. They describe two energy transformations, one of which can be a model for other countries, while the other one may not. The first of these countries is Sweden, which halved its total CO₂ (carbon dioxide) emissions between 1970 and 1990. The Swedes built numerous nuclear-powered power plants and also developed renewable energy sources. The second country, Germany, chose a different path, relying on pro-environmental policies. In 2016, Germany achieved the goal of supplying over 25% of its electricity and almost 15% of its total energy from renewable energy sources, while reducing nuclear energy production. but without abandoning coal. According to the authors, when "the whole world should start decarbonizing the atmosphere as soon as possible, it will be a lost time for Germany" (p. 46). After Fukushima, in 2011, the German state began to withdraw from nuclear energy [or rather, it did not withdraw from the idea of closing all nuclear power plants,

because this process of anti-nuclear policy of Germany began earlier – with M.S.]. At the same time, lignite is still the source of 25% of German electricity. Interestingly, the power plant in Janschwalde using this fuel is among the ten most polluting power plants in Europe.

The book consists of four chapters and is written in a very accessible manner. It is based on extensive data and calculations from various parts of the world. Due to the topic under study, the authors employ various technical terms related to electricity measurements, but they explain these concepts in the introduction. Thanks to this and the interdisciplinary approach, it is accessible to every reader, not just those involved in energy and climate issues. It can also serve as a guide for politicians to ensure that the energy transition is not too tortuous and 'bumpy', and above all, very costly to society.



Review of the Book “Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism” by Yanis Varoufakis, The Bodley Head 2023, HB ISBN: 9781847927279, TPB ISBN: 9781847927286

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In his book “Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism”, Yanis Varoufakis – a Greek economist, former finance minister, and active participant in European public debate – argues that contemporary capitalism is not merely undergoing another phase of transformation but has effectively been supplanted by a qualitatively new socio-economic order. This new order, described by him as “technofeudalism”, is a system in which traditional mechanisms of market competition and profit-maximising capitalist optimisation give way to the dominance of digital platforms and cloud infrastructure, as well as the rents extracted by their owners. Varoufakis defines this rent in terms of the now ubiquitous subscription model that grants, naturally for a fee, temporary access to network infrastructure.

Varoufakis’s starting point is the observation of the growing power of major tech corporations, which are not merely ordinary market enterprises but rather creators

of their own closed ecosystems, where they set access rules, mediate relationships between producers and consumers, control information flows, and exact fees from entities dependent on the infrastructure they have built. According to the author, this resembles feudal relations: the platform becomes the digital equivalent of land and its owner a modern-day lord, while users and entrepreneurs become vassals dependent on them.

The book's greatest strength lies in its description of the concentration of economic, technological, and communicative power in the hands of a few private entities. These platforms do not merely facilitate exchange; they also set the rules governing it, determine information visibility, control access to audiences, and gather data that enables them to predict—and sometimes even shape—user behaviour. Varoufakis rightly observes, therefore, that their power extends far beyond the traditional concept of a company's market position.

The book is written in accessible language, which makes for an easier read and lowers the barrier to enter a complex subject matter straddling political science and economics, yet this approach also leads to simplifications. While the concept of technofeudalism is rhetorically compelling, it is not always analytically precise. After all, feudalism was not merely a system of rent extraction but a specific legal, social, and political order rooted in personal dependency, land ownership, and the fragmentation of public authority. Consequently, the parallels between that system and the digital economy are partial and, above all, metaphorical.

However, the most significant reservation concerns the way Varoufakis substantiates his thesis regarding the end of capitalism. The author presents its history as a series of successive transformations from industrial capitalism, through the dominance of financial capital (finance), to the expansion of digital platforms. In doing so, he demonstrates the system's remarkable capacity to adapt to crises and alter its own mechanisms of accumulation. Without establishing a sufficiently convincing dividing line, he describes the last of these transformations not as another metamorphosis of capitalism, but as its end. Varoufakis thus depicts the history of capitalism as one of constant flux, only to ultimately treat the latest shift as proof of the entire system's demise.

This conclusion is particularly open to debate from the perspective of Marxist thought. Capitalism is not merely a mechanism of market exchange, but a broader socio-economic order rooted in private property, waged labour, capital accumulation, and the reproduction of specific power relations. While the owners of digital infrastructure may indeed constitute a new faction of the propertied class, they do not necessarily form a new feudal class. A shift in the dominant actor – from factory owner to platform owner – does not in itself prove a change in the system itself, provided the fundamental logic of accumulation and subordination remains intact.

The growing importance of rents and subscriptions does necessarily signal the birth of a new economic order. Capitalism has long generated monopoly, financial, and land rents. The subscription model stabilises revenue, binds the customer to the enterprise, and allows for the recurring monetisation of the same relationship. It may also serve

as a response to limited purchasing power – specifically the inability of a segment of society to shoulder high one-off expenses. Thus, instead of selling ownership, capitalism offers temporary access to goods, which is an example of its adaptability rather than a return to feudal relations.

From the perspective of political science, Varoufakis’s reflections on the blurring line between private and public power are particularly valuable. Platforms establish rules, control the flow of information, and perform quasi-regulatory functions, yet they remain exempt from the mechanisms of democratic accountability characteristic of state institutions. Nevertheless, the author does not always sufficiently account for the interdependence between the state and capital. Tech corporations still rely on guarantees of property rights, infrastructure, and legal order, while public institutions benefit from their technologies and data. Hence, what is occurring is not a simple displacement of the state by digital ‘overlords’, but rather a reconfiguration of the relationship between political and economic actors.

Despite its essay style and oversimplified argumentation, “Technofeudalism” is a valuable read for political scientists. Varoufakis is not only an economist but also a former Greek finance minister (serving in the radical-left Syriza government) who was directly involved in conflicts regarding the autonomy of politics vis-à-vis the markets. Thus, the book can also be read as a testament to how a member of the political class interprets contemporary sources of power and defines the central social conflict. While the very concept of technofeudalism may be analytically questionable, it serves as an incredibly effective narrative framework for describing the societal sense of dependence on platforms, the loss of control over data, and the concentration of capital.

Varoufakis accurately diagnoses new forms of power, yet he is too quick to declare the end of capitalism. His book is more convincing as a description of the next stage in the system’s transformation than as proof of the emergence of a new order, while its greatest value lies not in definitively resolving this issue, but in reopening questions about the relationships between property, technology, and political power.