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## "Hungary: An Inflection Point for a Young Democracy in Decline"

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*Hungary: An Inflection*

*Point for a Young*

*Democracy in Decline*

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International Studies Thesis

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## Abstract

This thesis provides an analysis of the global concern with “illiberal democracies,” which are states with at least some democratic institutions but diluted civil societies. From there, it establishes Hungary as a case study of how a young democracy has entered into institutional decline through an analysis of both the illiberal policies of the current Hungarian government as well as relevant historical context that may have disadvantaged Hungary in transitioning to democracy in the first place. As a post-communist country now heading down a path towards increasing authoritarianism, Hungary serves as a prime example of this issue. Specific areas in which illiberal policies have affected Hungary include the country’s press, judiciary, media, and electoral system. These concerns have been identified by relevant scholarship as fundamental in the movement towards an illiberal state. In this thesis, I am trying to prove that attempts to manipulate a nation’s “public culture,” which is the manner in which a nation views itself culturally, are closely correlated with illiberal governments and associated policies. Hungary affirms this correlation due to the constant focus on cultural issues by its governing party, Fidesz, through both rhetoric and associated messaging.

## I. Introduction

Illiberalism is an increasingly prevalent political philosophy in much of the world today. While illiberal leaders are generally accepting of the need for democratic institutions to exist, they attempt to degrade such institutions and also reduce the role of civil society in their home countries. In recent years, illiberalism has become closely correlated with many far-right populist movements around the world. Examples of far-right populist leaders in the world today include Donald Trump in the United States, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Marine Le Pen in France, Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. While many illiberal leaders are not successful in severely degrading institutions and civil society in their home countries, some have been. However, countries that are most prone to democratic decline are often ones with shaky foundations in democracy to begin with. Viktor Orbán’s government in contemporary Hungary serves as a striking and disturbing example of the corrosive effects of so-called “illiberal democracy” (Bánkuti 2012, 145). Even the use of the term “illiberal democracy” is problematic, because democratic institutions begin to degrade if they become illiberal. During

his tenure, Orbán has bought out media outlets, run incendiary and propagandistic campaigns against migrants and George Soros, and degraded the independence of his country's judiciary. It is evident that the most prominent effect of illiberalism in a country is the dilution of civil society. This is achieved under illiberal governments by rhetoric attempting to change the public culture of a nation. That may include, but is not limited to, fervently nationalistic or irredentist remarks.

One of the reasons that Hungary was vulnerable to illiberalism today was not only its past, but also because it is difficult for post-communist countries to successfully build up institutions and transition to democracy. Despite Orbán's authoritarian instincts, Hungary had been more successful in building up democratic institutions than many other post-communist countries. However, he has been able to exploit many of the institutions that were built up for the first time in the 1990s. Some political scientists believe that lower political participation and activism than in many Eastern European countries as well as the lack of labor unions have hindered Hungary's attempt to transition to democracy today (Seleny 1999, 489-492). They would argue that if the public places less emphasis on being politically informed, democracy as a whole will start to degrade since democracy can only truly manifest itself as a work of the people.

Orbán's authoritarian appeals are also rooted in supposed nostalgia for the past. This is a common tactic not only of authoritarian leaders, but right-wing populists in general as well. These sorts of leaders use rhetoric intended to make their supporters feel nostalgic for the days of "strong" leaders, rather than feeling optimistic about their future. They often further attempt to generate support by noting that the past was often an era before modern cultural issues

considered progressive in nature sprung to fruition. Economic decline or stagnation often increases the appeal of this type of rhetoric, because in those cases, at least a certain group of the public will view the so-called “good old days” as a period of greater economic strength and prosperity relative to the present. As in many post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, discussions on critical issues that would greatly affect the attempt to transition to democracy could be a key source of political friction between citizens. These issues would include how newly transitioning post-communist countries should deal with those who worked in state agencies that committed human rights abuses during the communist era, such as spies and secret police officers (Judt 2006, 698-699). Because actions taken on these issues by many post-communist countries, including Hungary, were not supported by all of the population, Hungary’s beginning of its transition to democracy was initially somewhat of a rocky one. Eventually, some improvements to the public discourse regarding how to remember the communist regime may have been made. For example, it gradually became less accepted over time to simply refer to anti-communists as “fascists” (Judt 2006, 826). Yet difficulties over how exactly to remember Hungary’s troubled history has bitterly divided the country’s electorate, a fact which has been exploited by Orbán and his party’s political rhetoric. These issues can be considered concerns of “transitional justice,” as they concern how to bring justice to those involved in abuses during the past of a country. Many successful examples of transitional justice have included trials, reparations, and/or a truth and reconciliation commission. The differences in how Hungary has remembered its Nazi past in comparison to its communist past are also very stark.

Orbán has had a stark and shocking ideological evolution over the course of his life. When he was young, he was an anti-communist rebel, yet by today he has morphed into an autocratic right-wing populist. How did this happen? One explanation may possibly be rooted in his aggressive personality. Orbán's college roommate and eventual rival noted that as early as the 1980s, Orbán had "domineering, intolerant ways of thinking and behaving that are all too evident in him today. There was also an expediency about him, one without any principles. He was, in addition to all of this, sincere and likeable" (Fodor quoted in Lendvai 19, 2017). After the fall of communism, Orbán founded Fidesz, a younger-skewing party attempting to bring democracy to Hungary by arguing that only young adults could clean up the mess that "adults" had made of Hungary and give birth to democratic institutions in the country. Fidesz held a prominent presence in Hungarian politics until 2002, when a center-left socialist bloc was elected. The socialists eventually ended up destroying themselves due to corruption, paving the way for Fidesz to be elected in 2010. During the time of the socialist government, it is possible that Orbán became increasingly demoralized and began to believe that the only way possible to maintain power is to subvert the democratic norms and institutions that have been put in place to hopefully put such political power in check. However, we do not know for sure just how Orbán ended up having such a massive ideological shift over the course of his public life.

Orbán came to power in 2010, as Fidesz received not only the highest number of votes for any political party in Hungary during the 2010 elections but a disproportionately elected supermajority in the Hungarian parliament. While the corruption of the Hungarian socialists back then was nowhere near the current scale and magnitude of Orbán's corruption, that is not relevant in the public eye since an increasingly pro-Orbán media climate in Hungary helps

Fidesz get away with corruption and cronyism. Orbán is able to stay in power is that his political opposition in Hungary is both weak and incredibly fractured. The socialists have been unable to even remotely gain mainstream traction among the Hungarian electorate during Orbán's nine years and counting in power. Today, Fidesz controls a supermajority in Hungary's parliament. This has been achieved not only through electoral success but also through extensive gerrymandering efforts. The main opposition party in Hungary, Jobbik, is a formerly fascist and ultra-nationalist party that has been accused of anti-Semitism in the past. However, as Fidesz moves further and further to the extreme right, Jobbik has actually moved towards the center. If Fidesz and Jobbik are considered to be out of the mainstream of European politics in general, then there is no clear mainstream political movement in opposition to Orbán that is either relatively successful today or currently gaining ground. While it would be difficult to generate powerful political opposition to Orbán in contemporary Hungary due to extensive gerrymandering and an array of other inherent advantages that Fidesz has in the electoral process, the weakness of Orbán's political opposition is still jarring even among other countries led by far-right populists. In the May 2019 European Parliament elections in Hungary, the most successful opposition coalition or party received only 16.26 percent of the vote, or less than one-sixth. Orbán's continued illiberalism and autocratic tendencies will only further hinder his opposition from potentially gaining ground, much less political strength.

Despite the rampant corruption of Orbán's government today, Fidesz has stood to benefit politically from perceptions of corruption in Hungary among past postcommunist governments. Hungary's left-wing governments since the fall of communism engaged in considerable amounts of corruption, and did not necessarily do much to ease the transition to democracy (Mueller

2014, 16). As a result, Orbán can depict himself as a conservative opponent of corruption, even though his government is involved in rampant corruption on a level that far exceeds the misdeeds committed during Hungary's socialist governments. This is heightened by the fact that he sometimes calls his political opponents communists to attempt to silence political debate with them, a false and venomous smear that could be compared to so-called "McCarthyism" in the United States in the 1950s. This attempt to shut down discourse with political opponents by claiming that they may be communists is a common tactic among far-right populist leaders. It is also ironic given that Orbán has aggressively tried to rhetorically extinguish Hungary's communist past while still supporting policies such as state control of prominent industries (Dunai 2012). These sorts of attacks also gain greater relevance in a country that suffered greatly under the hands of a communist Soviet regime for decades, and as a result are very effective in helping cement support for Fidesz among at least a certain subset of the Hungarian population. These voters may then view contemporary Hungarian politics as a battle between "freedom" and "Marxism." While Hungary today is certainly not as anti-democratic as it was under Soviet rule, simply projecting allegations of authoritarianism onto opponents of Fidesz ends up deflecting from Orbán and Fidesz's authoritarian tendencies.

## II. The Ideology of Viktor Orbán and Fidesz

### A. Populism

The electoral victories of Orbán and his far-right party, Fidesz, can be attributed at least to some extent due to Fidesz's populist rhetoric. Populism is a political philosophy that claims to specifically focus on the needs of ordinary people. There are many varieties of populist political



movements, including on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. Populist leaders often use rhetoric that attacks “elites,” who are then accused of being inconsiderate towards the needs of ordinary working people. Many populists often refer to ordinary people that they claim to represent as “real” citizens, in an attempt to contrast them in an incendiary sense with the elites. It is important to understand that criticism of the role of elites in public life does not automatically make one a populist (Müller 2016, 101). In his book *What Is Populism?*, Jan-Werner Müller claims that populists are also “antipluralist” because “They claim that they and they alone represent the people. All other political competitors are essentially illegitimate, and anyone who does not support them is not properly part of the people” (Müller 2016, 101). Because of the divisive nature of rhetoric against pluralism, populists often attempt to divide society at large in an attempt to pit their supporters against others. Such a divisive outlook on politics can often exacerbate political polarization. This polarization often occurs through the establishment of “the people” as the “in-group,” and perceived opponents or enemies (including, but certainly not limited to, the elite) as the “out-group.” Fidesz tends to attempt to drum up popular support during elections by often attempting to use anti-immigrant rhetoric. As a result, they claim that they stand for native-born Hungarians rather than potential migrants to Hungary. This divisive strategy is often politically successful in a country with a very low percentage of foreign-born residents.

Populist rhetoric is used by Orbán not only to polarize Hungarian society, but also to degrade the country’s democracy through illiberalism. This is because much of the divisive message that Fidesz campaigns on is primarily targeted at liberals, whereas those who are illiberal are portrayed as the “in-group.” Orbán has claimed that liberalism is not a requirement

for a democracy. In 2014, he said that “A democracy is not necessarily liberal. Just because something is not liberal, it still can be a democracy” (Orbán quoted in Krastev 2018). It can be inferred from Fidesz’s rhetoric that the dividing line between liberalism and illiberalism is their views on the role of civil society. Liberals tend to view civil society as a requirement for a healthy democracy that must work in tandem with robust personal freedoms. Such organizations supported by liberals to achieve this goal include academic institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs,) and philanthropic foundations dedicated to promoting liberal causes. All of these organizations have been attacked by Orbán during his government’s tenure. Prominent liberal individuals in both Hungary and the region are also harassed by Fidesz’s messaging and rhetoric. This includes the Hungarian-American financier George Soros, European Commission leader Jean-Claude Juncker, and prominent opposition politicians. Prominent liberal ideas at odds with Fidesz’s far-right, nationalistic ideology are also excoriated by Orbán’s rhetoric. Examples of such ideas include tolerance for immigration, multiculturalism, and pluralism. When propagandistic rhetoric is used frequently by a government to make a case against civil society, this turns at least some opinions in the general public away from understanding the importance these institutions play in a healthy democracy.

Orbán’s illiberalism and populism are also manifested through his anti-EU rhetoric. Fidesz media has routinely portrayed the EU as being controlled by liberal elites, and their attacks on the EU have intensified since Fidesz was suspended from the EPP. He has intensified his attacks on both the EPP and the EU since being suspended from the former. This has been done through ad hominem attacks and billboard campaigns against Jean-Claude Juncker. The future of Fidesz in the European Parliament is uncertain to a certain extent, despite the party’s

electoral success in the 2019 European Parliament elections. Regarding the EPP, Orbán said that “We would not like to belong somewhere where we don’t have an influence on the main strategy issues” (Than 2019 and Dunai 2019). It is likely that Orbán would feel more welcomed among the increasing bloc of far-right parties in the European Parliament rather than the EPP. While the EPP is a conservative voting bloc that is center-right in ideology, it is supportive of liberal democracy, placing it at odds with Orbán in some cases. The EPP would firmly condemn Orbán’s attacks on civil society and the rule of law in his home country, some of which he would attempt to justify by claiming that he is obliged with protecting Hungarian culture against that of foreigners and their interests. Fidesz has figured out that they can use the EU as political bait by claiming to rural voters that they represent the common people, as opposed to out-of-touch bureaucrats in Brussels. This strategy is politically successful for them because the countryside is where support for Orbán is the strongest in Hungary. Appeal to rural areas is generally a key component of many far-right populist and even authoritarian movements. Since he is from a small town, Orbán is able to project the image of a populist “country boy” with enough of a degree of authenticity to allow voters to buy into such a depiction (Komuves 2018).

#### B. Fidesz’s Anti-Migrant Views and Policies

Orbán’s pervasive anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies are likely attempts to shore up his political base. He can use such rhetoric to sell himself as the strongman leader that Hungarians need to protect themselves from migrants or other cultures. This is a common tactic used by far-right populists around the world (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 7). Orbán built a fence on Hungary’s southern border with Serbia in an attempt to stop incoming migrants. *Freedom*

*House's* 2019 report on Hungary notes that "Only two asylum seekers are formally permitted to enter the country per day" (Freedom House 2019). Migrants and asylum seekers in Hungary are frequently denied basic rights and civil liberties. A policy of denying food to migrants in transit zones that were appealing denied asylum claims was in effect until a European Court of Human Rights decision in 2018 (Freedom House 2019). Today, lawyers or other works attempting to help potential migrants and asylum seekers in Hungary face the possibility of jail time (King). These sorts of policies are detrimental to Hungary's record on human rights, as well as the country's standing both on the world stage and as an EU member. Most reasons against immigration given by the government both officially and via propagandistic messaging are cultural in nature. Fidesz claims to want to control the Hungarian national identity. According to them, this means that those who do not fit their normative mold of a Hungarian identity are excluded. While migrants and asylum seekers are the two groups most commonly targeted by Fidesz messaging, another discriminated group whose oppression has been heightened during Orbán's tenure is the Roma population, commonly known as "gypsies." Roma people were targeted by the Nazis during World War II. Today, discrimination against them in Europe has made disturbing advances due to the growth of the radical right as well as conspiracy theories spread around several European countries, including one claiming that the Roma people are snatching children. Discrimination and inequality against the Roma people is tragically widespread in a variety of ways in Hungary, from income disparities to education (Freedom House 2019).

By using immigration as his signature political issue when campaigning for elections in Hungary, Orbán makes it clear that his primary goal is to exert force on the collective values of

his country for political gain, especially to promote illiberalism. Orbán primarily campaigned on the immigration issue in the April 2018 election in Hungary, in which he was elected for a third term. In June 2018, Orbán was quoted saying to reporters in Brussels that “The invasion should be stopped” (King 2018). According to Fidesz messaging, migration serves not only as a threat to Hungary, but an invasion of national sovereignty and the culture of the Hungarian people and nation. Even after he was elected for the third time in 2018, Orbán has still continued to campaign by railing against migrants. On May 26, 2019, Fidesz won a majority of seats in Hungary’s elections for the European Parliament. Orbán claimed that the results of this election gave Fidesz a mandate of “stopping immigration all across Europe” and to “protect Christian culture in Europe” (Than 2019 and Dunai 2019). Given that there are so few migrants and refugees in Hungary, the only time that many Hungarians even come into any sort of encounter with the immigration issue is by absorbing government-influenced media or messaging campaigns on immigration. Orbán intentionally chooses not to campaign on issues that impact Hungarians in their daily lives, such as the economy or wages, but rather through demagoguery. This is because such rhetoric ends up serving as the glue to build cohesion within his political base, as well as heighten the appeal of a so-called political “strongman.”

It is also important to understand that Fidesz’s scapegoating of migrants is not only for cultural reasons, but likely to also capitalize on economic concerns among the Hungarian populace. Incomes in Hungary tend to be much lower than in Western Europe, and it has become increasingly difficult for the country to compete economically with many of Europe’s economic strongholds. As a result, Orbán can present his rhetoric to try to alleviate economic anxieties among the general population by attempting to claim that migrants threaten Hungary’s economy.

This is both untrue and ironic, as Hungary is actually losing out on much potential economic growth by exerting near-total prohibitions on migrants and refugees. However, when an electorate is both angry and potentially even frightened over their personal financial situation, they may be more vulnerable and susceptible to divisive and antipluralist rhetoric, especially since these people would tend to put themselves in the “in-group” and view whoever the demagogue declares as “them” as the “out-group.” Economic concerns in Hungary are also skewed by the fact that Western-style capitalism is not considered politically popular in Hungary. Krisztián Ungváry notes that “Capitalism, liberalism and free enterprise have traditionally, for most of the population, been unhappy experiences of perceived as such. In the 19th century only two groups, the Jews and the German-Hungarians, managed to profit from the social and political changes” (Ungváry 2014, 13). If views of liberalism are correlated at least somewhat to how citizens view at least some degree of economic and social liberty with skepticism, a key voting bloc of the electorate may be especially vulnerable to illiberal rhetoric and appeals.

### C. Irredentism

Along with fervent nationalism, irredentism is another key element of Fidesz’s recent ideology. Irredentism is the view that a nation actually controls territory that is a part of other nation(s) and must avenge such lost territory. While it is highly unlikely that Orbán would actually try to annex any territory from a country, such as the way that Vladimir Putin invaded Crimea, he still frequently uses appeals to an empirical-style state to attempt to mold Hungarian cultural values into his own illiberal image. In the summer of 2018, Orbán gave a controversial

speech at the Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp in Romania. This speech raised eyebrows due to its irredentist content. Orbán referred to an area of Romania by its Hungarian name, the Székely Land, and claimed that people in Budapest don't even believe it really exists (Orbán 2018). Some might wonder why Orbán even bothers with this rhetoric, given that there is really no chance he would actually try to take Romanian territory. It gives his supporters an idealistic image of Hungary as an empirical state that serves as a strong international power, and also gives his supporters a false sense of "hope" that Orbán will restore Hungary in exactly that manner. Orbán also claimed that "we should look upon Transylvania as a resource" and that the Székely Land "will still exist when the whole of Europe has already submitted to Islam" (Orbán 2018). These comments show a clear parallel between Orbán's "culture war" outlook on politics in general and his specifically irredentist resource. In order for Hungary to be a "dominant" nation in terms of territory, Orbán believes that it must also be culturally dominant. This must be done by imposing a nationalistic and Christian culture on the Hungarian public, and then seeking to aggressively maintain its status quos by systemically degrading civil society and its impact on public life in Hungary. Furthermore, Orbán believes that there is historical justification for the irredentist rhetoric he believes in that has been present for almost a century. The Treaty of Trianon "took away two-thirds of the country's territory and left millions of ethnic Hungarians living in what are now Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia" (Lowe and Peto 2013). This treaty was passed in 1920. Finally, Orbán believes that irredentist rhetoric is necessary to build social cohesion and strengthen the national identity of the Hungarian people.

Orbán has also offered both citizenship and passports to the Hungarian diaspora. Even though he knows that Hungary will not reclaim territory lost due to the Treaty of Trianon, he believes that offering citizenship to ethnic Hungarians around the world is the next-best alternative to creating a fully Hungarian ethno-nationalist state. These citizens from the Hungarian diaspora can vote in the country's elections. Some believe that Orbán has done so much outreach to Hungarians living outside of Hungary to solicit political support for Fidesz from them (Lowe and Peto 2013). Furthermore, Orbán's irredentism and extensive focus on the Hungarian diaspora has created tensions with nearby countries with considerable populations of ethnic Hungarians. The irony of Orbán's focus on the Hungarian diaspora is that even though he views pleasing Hungarians as necessary compared to the alternative of accepting migrants to grow Hungary's population, his outreach to the Hungarian diaspora does not have considerable effects reversing the declining population trends in Hungary. Some of Hungary's cities, including Budapest, are experiencing a shortage of workers. Most people in the Hungarian diaspora would not seriously consider moving to Hungary; in fact, many of them do not even know much Hungarian. Yet Orbán would never consider accepting migrants in Hungary, because such a policy would be completely antithetical to the far-right nationalism he has built up as his political brand name.

### III. Viktor Orbán's Attacks on Hungary's Constitution and Democratic Norms

#### A. Consolidation of Power

Fidesz has primarily attempted to further seize power through constitutional revisions that have long been considered dubious. Due to unusual provisions in electoral law, Fidesz ended



up with a supermajority in the Hungarian parliament in 2010 despite receiving 53 percent of the vote (Mueller 2014, 15). This led to Fidesz writing a new constitution in 2012 solely by themselves and without any input from opposition parties. Besides attempting to force out non-loyalists from a variety of positions subject to government oversight, the revised constitution further attacked basic freedoms and civil society. Several amendments to the constitution were passed in 2013. These amendments included only permitting campaigning for elections to state media, and restrictions on students receiving state grants (BBC 2013). These “reforms” have been criticized by a variety of international organizations for being antithetical to democracy, as well as by the Hungarian political opposition. The Socialist Party boycotted the vote on these constitutional revisions (BBC 2013). During this time, Orbán further inflamed culture wars by suggesting that political opposition to him was antithetical to the Hungarian nation. He claimed that the “nation cannot be in opposition” (Mueller 2014, 16). Orbán engages in such rhetoric to try to flame ultra-nationalism as patriotism, and opposition to nationalism as seemingly “un-Hungarian.” He can thus further depict his attacks on democracy as a part of attempting to shape his country’s public culture, through constant attacks on “elites” and pervasive rhetoric about how he represents the “real Hungary.” Shockingly, Orbán not only commits anti-democratic actions but also campaigns on them during Hungarian election campaigns. When Orbán ran for a third term in the spring of 2018, he touted legislation that has been referred to as the “Stop Soros” law. This name comes from the “Stop Soros” television ad that has played on Hungarian TV stations (Mackey 2018). This bill was written to target non-governmental organizations that are considered by Fidesz to “support illegal immigration,” and placed draconian restrictions on them. These NGOs would have been required to be screened on

grounds of national security, pay a 25 percent tax on foreign donations, and potentially be banned from coming close to the country's borders with Ukraine and Serbia (Mackey 2018).

#### B. Popular and Rhetorical Support for Illiberal and Anti-Democratic Activities

Orbán wants to generate popular support for his anti-democratic actions, so all of his rhetoric designed to shape Hungary's public culture is intended to give cover to (and generate acceptance of) his attacks on democratic norms in Hungary. This is the clear reason why he continues to repeatedly use George Soros as a scapegoat. After all, Orbán sells himself as a strongman leader who is both in touch with rural and conservative Hungarians and a defender of traditional Christian values. To Orbán, Soros represents a threat to what he views as the traditional Hungarian way of life. As a result, the so-called "Stop Soros" law was sold to the Hungarian public via Fidesz-supported media as an attack against Soros, and by extension, traditionalist cultural conservatism in Hungary. From there, Fidesz voters became more and more accepting of any sort of legislation they view as hindering to the "agenda" of George Soros, even though they do not take much time to think about the law's severe consequences for the future of Hungarian democracy. After all, Orbán's degradation of civil society and associated democratic norms in Hungary have already harmed the country's place on the world stage as well as its future on a number of levels.

In addition to passing anti-democratic laws, Orbán also campaigns on aggressively amending his country's constitution. During the campaign leading up to the 2018 Hungarian election, Orbán campaigned on amending the constitution to try to block EU migrant quotas (Santora and Bienvenu 2018). Some of the most incendiary and anti-democratic rhetoric by

Fidesz degrades the fairness of the electoral process in Hungary. While elections in Hungary are free in that they are open to a wide array of political parties, many of the more anti-democratic changes to Hungarian society under Orbán makes them less fair. The head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe mission in Hungary was quoted in a *New York Times* article saying that “Voters had a wide range of political options, but intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, media bias, and opaque campaign financing constricted the space for genuine political debate” (Wake quoted in Santora and Bienvenu 2018). Wake’s argument is that while politics has always been rife with statements that are not completely true, Orbán’s propagandistic rhetoric that borders on conspiracy theories is so far removed from reality that it does a critical disservice to real, fact-based political discourse in Hungary. Given the miniscule number of migrants allowed to enter Hungary each year, rhetoric claiming an “invasion” of migrants is completely antithetical to basic fact. This past fall, Orbán started the process of revising Hungary’s constitution, which is expected to further trample on basic democratic norms in Hungary. He told a state radio station in the summer of 2018 that “In the autumn we would like to launch a 1-1.5 year long constitution revision where we will look at what has worked and what could have worked ... and find potential gaps which we need to fill in with new constitutional text” (Orbán quoted in Than 2018).

Gerrymandering is another anti-democratic tactic used by Fidesz to remain in power. This term refers to dubious redrawing of electoral districts to unfairly give advantage to a political party. Because of Fidesz’s extensive gerrymandering efforts, it is unlikely that they will be able to remain in power for a long time. Fidesz lowered the number of members of parliament from 386 to 199, and reduced the number of electoral districts from 176 to 106 (Novak 2018).

The goal of these efforts was to further cement Fidesz's stronghold on Hungarian politics in general. The remaining members of parliament not directly tied to an electoral district would be elected through "party lists" (Novak 2018). This tactic was also created to disproportionately benefit Fidesz. Besides these dubious actions, Orbán has also tried to actively limit the abilities of opposition parties to make gains in Hungarian elections. For example, he abolished a previous law that required a runoff vote if no candidate initially received an outright majority (Novak 2018). Orbán worked to get rid of this law to exploit and take advantage of the extremely fractured political opposition to Fidesz in Hungary. Since there is no clear opposition party with significant political support by itself, a runoff-free electoral system allows Fidesz to steamroll through many electoral districts in Hungary even if they do not receive an outright majority of votes. Orbán engages in gerrymandering and electoral disenfranchisement to keep a tight grip on Hungarian politics so he can continue shaping Hungary's public culture. Many of his political decisions made as prime minister are primarily executed based on the fact that they will help Fidesz remain in power. This includes other efforts beyond strictly electoral reforms, such as offering citizenship to members of the Hungarian diaspora, which Orbán views as likely beneficial to Fidesz politically.

### C. Corruption

Corruption in government under Fidesz is another major concern and threat for the country's democracy. These issues are unique because many average Hungarians are not aware of the extent of the corruption in the current government. They simply focus on Orbán's "culture-war" rhetoric, since that is what he primarily uses to make rhetorical appeals to the

public and is what pro-government media outlets incessantly report on. While corruption is prohibited under Hungarian law, many of these prohibitions are not always enforced in practice, especially under Fidesz. The Hungarian Criminal Code bans bribery as well as “most other forms of corruption offenses contained in international anti-corruption conventions” (GAN last updated 2017). In recent years, Fidesz’s takeover of much of the public sector in Hungary has made it harder for fair and impartial oversight of the public sector against corruption to be carried out properly and genuinely. When Orbán loyalists are in charge of a wide variety of government organizations, they will be more likely to turn a blind eye to corruption issues they see not only to protect their friends, but also out of fear of possible retribution by Fidesz for alleged “disloyalty.” Corruption issues in Hungary’s judiciary has increased as Fidesz has cemented more and more control over this institution over the years. There have been instances of bribes or improper payments to judges in return for an expected favorable verdict on a legal case (GAN last updated 2017). Corruption in Hungary’s judiciary is also closely related to increasing concerns about the lack of due process in the country’s legal system. Tünde Handó has been criticized for transferring court cases to the courts she selects during her tenure as leader of the OBH (Freedom House 2019). Furthermore, the increasing prevalence of corruption and decreasing judicial independence has also been bad for business, as many companies looking to invest in the region have become increasingly concerned about the country’s dying democracy.

Orbán has not only been accused of corruption surrounding the manner in which Fidesz has used EU development funds, but also mismanagement. Many of the projects built using EU development funds seem highly impractical at first glance, and not all of them adhere to EU rules and guidelines on development projects for member nations. For example, a bridge leading to a

“bicycle adventure park” was a recent project in Hungary built with EU development funds, but the bridge and the park are used by very few people due to poor construction that has led to safety concerns (Gorondi 2019). It is possible that support to suspend Hungary from the EPP increased recently among members of the bloc because they feel they do not have much to lose by excluding Hungary. Hungary is a small country with average incomes and a per-capita GDP lower than much of Europe, especially compared to western Europe. Orbán’s misuse of EU development money is a burden on the EU, since they are providing money that is essentially being wasted or used for outrageous vanity projects. The EPP was also concerned about the rising cronyism and lack of accountability in Hungary for Fidesz’s corruption.

In addition to misusing EU development funds, Orbán also uses Hungarian taxpayer funds to pay for personal vanity projects. Some of the most outrageous vanity projects he has supported were built for Felcsút, a very small town in which Orbán is from. These projects might also be referred to as examples of so-called “pork-barrel politics,” a term used to describe extensive and superfluous projects supported by politicians for the primary benefit of their home communities. The two main pork-barrel projects that Orbán has built in Felcsút are a 4,000 seat football stadium named after one of Hungary’s greatest football players, and a narrow-gauge railway that runs the three and a half miles from Felcsút to an estate bought by his father (Foster 2016). Both of these projects have been criticized by locals as well as Orbán’s political opponents as excessive, and simply reminiscent of Orbán’s personal desires rather than that of the general public in Hungary. After all, Felcsút is an extremely small town, so development projects designed to benefit the greatest number of people possible would probably focus on more populated regions of the country. The vanity of these projects is even more striking when

one considers that both are located remarkably close to the doorstep of Orbán's country home (Foster 2016). These projects also show that Orbán is not only misusing EU development funds, but also money from the Hungarian government. He does not do this alone. Fidesz MPs in Hungary approve the appropriation of large sums of money for these sorts of projects, as they know they must stay loyal to Orbán in order to still be viewed positively by him. Furthermore, high-level individuals in Orbán's inner circle, such as Fidesz leaders and oligarchs, are the target audience as to who (besides Orbán and his family) could not only afford to use these projects, but would use them in practice.

#### D. Hungary's Judiciary

Orbán has also attempted to shape Hungary's public culture due to his degradation of the independence of Hungary's judiciary during his tenure as prime minister. In 2010, Fidesz amended the Hungarian constitution with an amendment allowing the governing party to nominate judges to the Constitutional Court, rather than requiring the consent of a majority of parliamentary parties to a judge before a confirmation vote would be held in parliament (Bánkuti et al. 2012, 139) As a result, Fidesz was able to nominate constitutional judges that were far more ideological than judicial appointments in Hungary have traditionally been since the country's transition to democracy. Between 2010 and 2014, all of the eleven judges appointed in the Constitutional Court were selected by Fidesz (Freedom House 2019). Today, Fidesz has a supermajority in Hungary's parliament. As a result, they will continue to keep nominating staunchly partisan judges who will be loyal to Orbán. Furthermore, Hungary's National Judiciary Office (OBH) has been staunchly criticized by the international community for its partiality. It is

run by Tünde Handó, who is a close friend of Orbán and married to the leader of Fidesz's bloc in the European Parliament (Freedom House 2019). Her wide-ranging role at the OBH is also problematic as it may also serve as an example of nepotism, which is a sign of a democracy in decline in and of itself. One of the primary reasons why Fidesz was suspended from the EPP this year was the increasing lack of judicial independence in Hungary during the government's time in power. In December 2018, the Hungarian parliament passed a proposal setting up a parallel system of administrative courts that would be directly overseen by the justice minister (Freedom House 2019). This proposal led to intense backlash among not only segments of Hungary's political opposition, but from the European Union as well as an array of watchdog groups from around the world. It is practically a certainty that a parallel administrative court system would further be filled with Fidesz loyalists, and would further harm the independence of the judiciary.

On May 31, 2019, the Hungarian government decided to scrap plans for a parallel administrative court system (Gosling 2019). This was done in an attempt to try to prevent worsening relations with mainstream parties in the European Parliament. Even before the country's suspension from the EPP, Hungary has long been on incredibly shaky ground with the European Parliament. In the fall of 2018, the European Parliament opened an Article 7 procedure into Hungary after a narrow vote (Freedom House 2019). This procedure could potentially result in Hungary losing its voting rights and/or losing critical EU funding (Gosling 2019). Despite these considerable sanctions, it remains unlikely that Orbán will seriously want to change his behavior away from his most explicitly authoritarian leanings. This is because his attacks on democratic institutions are done under the cover of culture-based, incendiary rhetoric common among far-right populists. As a result, when Fidesz does something anti-democratic or corrupt, it



has an impact on Hungary's public culture because it is able to happen under the mask of "culture-war" rhetoric designed to appeal to conservative, rural voters that are most likely to vote for and support Fidesz. Furthermore, Orbán is concerned first and foremost with Fidesz remaining in power for as long as possible, and much of the overtly anti-democratic reforms that the Hungarian parliament has passed since 2010 are clearly designed to do exactly that at the expense of a fair electoral process, much less a robust civil society that can also help promote checks and balances on the government.

Another highly concerning corruption issue during Orbán's tenure is the allegation that the Hungarian prosecutor's office has acted selectively and partially for ideological reasons. This office has not investigated accusations that Orbán's government misused EU development funds (Freedom House 2019). By hindering the ability of a prosecutor's office to conduct legitimate oversight against potential corruption, trust in government as well as perceived levels of transparency among its citizens begin to degrade. Tragically, the failure to investigate potential misuse of EU development money may assist Orbán in attempting to change his country's public culture. This is because if Orbán's "EU development projects" are not perceived of as beneficial, much less efficaciously positive, in the eyes of at least a considerable number of Hungarians, they may become more doubtful of the need for EU development funding as a whole. This allows more and more people in Hungary to be susceptible to Orbán's anti-EU rhetoric, such as the controversial poster campaign during the spring of 2019 that crudely juxtaposed George Soros and Jean-Claude Juncker, vilifying and slandering both men in the process. The 2019 *Freedom House* report on Hungary also notes that "Influential business figures who fall out of favor with the government, such as Lajos Simicska, who once served as

Fidesz party treasurer, have experienced financial and legal pressure” (Freedom House 2019). As a result, not only has Orbán managed to take over much of Hungary’s judiciary on a number of levels, he has also engaged in rampant politicization of such an institution by encouraging defense and shielding of his friends and coordinated harassment of his perceived enemies. While Hungary’s levels of corruption are generally considered lower than many parts of the world, corruption levels are far higher than much of the rest of Europe. Out of the 28 countries in the European Union, Hungary ranks in 26th in the most recent Transparency International survey on corruption issues (Gorondi 2019).

#### IV. Viktor Orbán’s Use of Propaganda and Control of the Press

##### A. Posters and Billboards

Orbán often diffuses misinformation that conforms to his far-right ideology via poster and billboard campaigns. This is because such posters can be placed in strategic locations for the greatest number of people to see them, such as at bus stations or alongside major roads. The more people that see such propagandistic posters, the more likely at least some people may buy into the claims that Orbán is attempting to make. In the spring of 2019, Orbán ran a billboard campaign alleging some sort of sinister conspiracy involving the European Commission and George Soros. The posters used in the campaign were put up in public places all over Hungary. Their design can be described as two juxtaposed and likely-altered photos of George Soros and Jean-Claude Juncker laughing alongside a caption that translates in English to “You have a right to know what Brussels is planning” (Euronews 2019). Orbán has frequently accused Soros of conspiring to allow mass migration into Hungary against the Hungarian government’s wishes.

These advertisements have been accused of anti-Semitism, especially since Soros is Jewish and has been the subject of many conspiracy theories from far-right individuals and anti-Semites around the world. The surprising and ironic thing about this campaign is that since Orbán has almost completely shut down immigration into Hungary, there is virtually no net migration. Far more Hungarians are emigrating the country than people are immigrating to Hungary, which could have considerably negative effects. Many young Hungarians are moving abroad to countries in western Europe, which promise better wages, a higher standard of living, and stronger democratic institutions. Every sixth Hungarian baby is now born outside of Hungary (Euronews 2019). These emigration patterns could have a detrimental effect on the Hungarian workforce of the future, especially given the long-term effects of such an aging workforce on the Hungarian society that will manifest itself a generation, much less multiple generations, from today.

The Hungarian government does not only use billboard or other advertising campaigns to vilify and scapegoat its perceived enemies. It also uses such campaigns to promote policies of the government, such as Orbán's new policy in which women that have more than four children would no longer have to pay income tax (Harris 2019 and Palfi). Many of these advertisements are targeted specifically at certain audiences, such as young Hungarians. The government attempts to relate to the target audiences of its advertising campaigns related to policy when it creates ads on these sorts of issues. The couple depicted in the billboard advertisement for Orbán's family policy is the one from the so-called "distracted boyfriend meme," a popular internet meme showing a couple together while the boyfriend looks at a woman passing by from the opposite direction (Harris 2019). As a result of this, critics say Orbán's ad may implicitly

promote infidelity, even though the couple in the ad is not depicted in any provocative or potentially suggestive manner such as in the “distracted boyfriend meme.” This sort of advertising shows an attempt to clearly appeal to younger Hungarians, who would be more likely to be knowledgeable of contemporary internet trends, such as memes. It is also attempting to encourage them to stay in Hungary, as more and more young Hungarians leave the country. While Orbán would never be willing to compromise on his zero-tolerance immigration policy, many Hungarians are deeply concerned about a potential brain drain in the country in the future if the best and brightest young Hungarians continue to leave the country in considerable numbers. These advertisements also show us that Orbán uses billboards to attempt to shape how Hungarians perceive of political issues, rather than encouraging them to form their own opinions from various independent and objective news sources.

## B. Misinformation

The concept of truth is a critical part of civil society because it enables citizens to have at least a common acceptance of basic facts. While there will always be political disagreements that may be incredibly stark and strong in a democratic society, there needs to be at least some common understanding of basic facts that are mutually accepted by all citizens as generally fact rather than opinion, much less fiction. Unfortunately, even though Orbán has many perceived “enemies,” there is no one he assails as intensely as George Soros. Much of the advertising that Orbán ran during the 2018 Hungarian election campaign was focused on simply attacking Soros, and he often resorts to outrageous conspiracy theories and outright misinformation to try to smear him as viciously as possible. One crude billboard depicted Soros and several prominent

opposition politicians holding wire clippers accompanied by a caption that translates to “they would tear down the border fence together,” and another advertisement showed a heavily Photoshopped picture of Soros’ face alongside a caption saying what translates to “don’t let Soros have the last laugh” (Mackey 2018). These anti-Soros posters were found throughout public transportation stations and on billboards all over Hungary. As a result, many Hungarians encountered them on a daily basis. Orbán also spreads far more detailed and erroneous misinformation about George Soros in campaigns that may as wide-reaching as his vile billboard advertisements. In 2017, he sent two questionnaires to every Hungarian voter. The first questionnaire asked voters for their opinions on how Fidesz has responded to EU migration policies (Mackey 2018). The second questionnaire discussed a made-up “Soros plan” on immigration policy that was made up of several components. None of these components were even remotely based on fact. Respondents to this questionnaire would check their support or opposition to the seven different points of this imaginary “Soros plan,” which included points including allegation that Soros wants migrants to receive more lenient sentences than non-migrants for criminal offenses, and that Soros would support the EU requiring Hungary to pay each migrant 9 million forints (about \$35,000 USD) in welfare (Mackey 2018). The likely goal of this questionnaire was to further misinform the public in order to generate support for the Hungarian government’s conspiratorial views on George Soros. A minority of Hungarian voters responded to this survey, so it is unclear just how successful it was in terms of spreading propaganda and shaping public opinion to justify illiberal attacks on Hungarian democratic institutions. 8 million “Soros plan” questionnaires were sent out by the Hungarian government, but only 2.3 million were returned—most of whom were Fidesz voters appalled by the imaginary

“Soros plan” laid out in the survey (Mackey 2018). Questionnaires like this are used by Fidesz to further polarize the Hungarian electorate and solidify support for the party among its political base, who have become increasingly appalled by George Soros due to their receptivity to anti-Soros messaging campaigns by the government. It is unclear how voters who do not support Fidesz respond to the anti-Soros advertisement campaigns.

When one is exposed to such distorted media on a pervasive basis, one’s line of thinking is at risk of being changed due to the sheer frequency of exposure to misinformation. This misinformation does not only extend to Soros himself, but also to many Hungarian liberals that are accused of being even remotely associated with him. Liberals in Hungary are frequently attacked in the media with terms such as “Soros mercenaries.” This implies that according to Fidesz, Soros is some sort of sinister puppeteer who controls and manipulates others to his will. That notion, as well as many of the other depictions of Soros by Fidesz in Hungary today, are based on anti-Semitic rhetoric. European history professor Dr. Edward Bristow, who was in Hungary during the fall of 2016, said that “The posters of George Soros employed classical anti-semitic tropes” (Bristow). Local newspapers in Hungary have also published visual graphics that appear to show Soros as a “puppeteer” as well (Csaky quoted via tweet in Mackey 2018). Given the sentiments against Jewish people among certain segments of the Hungarian population, Orbán tragically feels that he can be especially successful in attempting to change his country’s public culture by whipping up fear, hatred, and misinformation against a successful Hungarian Jewish man.

### C. Media Consolidation

Orbán has also taken over much of the media in Hungary. Besides running billboard and poster campaigns, Fidesz has bought out much of the country's journalistic outlets. Recently, owners of most pro-Fidesz media outlets agreed to form a conglomerate of nearly 500 outlets and titles. This transaction was exempted by the government from antitrust review (Freedom House 2019). It has become clear that Fidesz is more concerned about tightening their grip on Hungarian society through media echo chambers rather than encouraging an open and objective news market. Media outlets in Hungary today are far more likely to conform to Fidesz talking points on policy, such as vilifying immigrants and scapegoating George Soros. As a result of this media climate, it has been more and more likely for misinformation to go viral in Hungary. In 2017, a short video went viral that appears to show surveillance camera footage of two men brutally attacking a woman praying in a church, who are implied by the video's caption to be immigrants. The video has been seen roughly 300,000 times on the Facebook page of a pro-Fidesz media outlet, and the video's caption translates to "Europe 2017: Is This What You Want?" (Mackey 2018) However, a Hungarian news outlet found that the perpetrators of the attack were two gang members in the United States. They also found that this incident occurred in Omaha, Nebraska, and the audio found in the video of voices shouting "allahu akbar" was added in (Mackey 2018). However, most of the Hungarian public watching such a video likely would not know that it does not depict a real assault committed by migrants in Hungary. As a result, those who view videos such as this are more vulnerable to Fidesz's extensive fear-mongering about immigrants. Even the most savvy individuals can still be vulnerable to such misinformation on social media, especially since many would not go out of their way to

question something the view on social media from a source that represents their “tribal” ideology.

Fidesz’s control over the media is also designed to make it as difficult as possible for opposition parties in Hungary to receive popular support. Double standards that are prevalent in pro-government media outlets amplify this difficulty. For example, the center-left socialist bloc in Hungary ended up destroying themselves electorally in the early 2000s due to an array of corruption issues. However, their corruption was nowhere near the scale of the corrupt activities committed by Fidesz. Yet there is not much socialists in Hungary could do to improve their standing among media outlets, with so much of the media staunchly and ideologically pro-Fidesz. Many Hungarians who primarily consume pro-government news outlets likely believe that Fidesz is less corrupt today than the socialists were during their time in power. Fidesz was able to achieve such intense control over the country’s media outlets by appointing loyalists to key media-related positions. It is very common throughout the world for ruling governments to nominate members of their party or coalition to lead key positions subject to government oversight. However, Fidesz’s partaking in such actions is uniquely dangerous for democracy since they nominated individuals for media council positions on the primary condition that they would be loyal to the government above all else. From there, Fidesz voted in July 2010 to amend Article 61 of Hungary’s constitution, which was designed to protect against “monopolies in the media” (Hinsey 2012, 127). Hungary’s constitution has been revised multiple times under Fidesz, normally to modify originally instituted protections for democratic institutions and associated issues. Many watchdogs, non-governmental organizations and oversight groups have noted that today, Fidesz has near-total control of a much of the Hungarian



mainstream media. Furthermore, Hungary's Media Council also has been given the right to block Internet service providers (Hinsley 2012, 128).

The takeover of much of Hungarian media by the government has had drastic effects on Hungarian journalism. It is estimated that by April 2011, less than a year after Fidesz's media laws passed, 1,000 journalists in Hungary had lost their jobs (Hinsley 2012, 131). The need for independent and objective journalists is mandatory for a healthy and functioning democracy. While much of Hungary's political opposition is opposed to Fidesz's media laws, they are fractured and divided within themselves that it is difficult to orchestrate meaningful opposition. The Hungarian opposition also consists of a wide spectrum of political opinion, which further makes it difficult for opposition parties to find common ground. For example, there were clashes between liberal parties and Jobbik during a January 2012 assembly against Hungary's newly revised constitution (Hinsley 2012, 126). The presence of Jobbik may not be easy for the rest of Hungary's opposition given their previously authoritarian nature and history of anti-Semitism and anti-capitalist efforts. Today, Jobbik has moved away from the extreme right in an attempt to court support away from Fidesz. Furthermore, Hungary's opposition does not have a clear and unified vision for what they would do to promote media independence in Hungary. It is important to note that freedom of the press is still protected in Hungary. As a result, citizens are technically still free to publish independent journalistic content that is critical of the government. However, the worsening political climate of the country under Fidesz increases pressure on the remaining independent journalists in Hungary to turn a blind eye to holding the government accountable. In order to promote media independence in Hungary, the country's opposition should focus on uniting its bloc together with a detailed proposal to preserve and strengthen civil

society in the country. Even then, however, Orbán undoubtedly has the upper hand in the country's media climate. Sadly, he will likely have such an advantage for a long time to come given the sheer extent of Fidesz's domination of the media. At this point in time, Fidesz is also likely to remain in power for a long time as well, given their current supermajority in the Hungarian parliament as well as extensive gerrymandering efforts that degrade the freedom and fairness of Hungary's elections.

## V. Viktor Orbán's Control of Culture

### A. How Fidesz Views A "Public Culture"

Orbán's political appeal in Hungary is also built on how he attempts to inflame so-called "culture wars." To him and Fidesz, opposition to liberalism spans not only in his attacks on civil society, but also his perceived need to promote so-called "traditional values." For example, a pro-Orbán newspaper wrote an opinion piece criticizing a performance of the show *Billy Elliot* at the national opera house in Budapest. The piece claimed that the show was problematic because it could make children gay (Komuves 2018). The irony of Orbán's pervasive stoking of culture wars is that most effects of that happen in Budapest rather than in the more rural areas of Hungary, which are more likely to be pro-Fidesz. Many Fidesz voters in rural Hungary rarely have experiences that might be attributed to that of the country's cultural elite, which also means that they end up further buying into Fidesz's demonization of liberalism. Just like in many other bitterly polarized countries, there almost seem to be two different Hungarys: a cosmopolitan and liberal one primarily centered around Budapest, and a traditional and illiberal one centered around the countryside. It is impossible to understand the extent to which culture-war rhetoric

degrades civil society in Hungary without looking at its effects on education. During Orbán's time in office, Fidesz has essentially rewritten much of the curriculum for elementary and secondary schools (Freedom House 2019). This revised curricula increases historical revisionism in order to attempt to depict Hungary in a far more nationalistic and jingoistic manner. Orbán has also moved to terminate programs of study generally considered liberal in Hungarian higher education. The Hungarian government stopped accreditation for gender studies programs in universities in 2018 (Freedom House 2019 and Komuves 2018).

Fidesz's incendiary rhetoric designed to enable democratic decline extends not only to cultural issues, but also to religion as well. Orbán views himself as the savior and leader of a Christian nation who is called to avenge those supposedly against traditional Christian values and practices. He sometimes invokes Christianity in defense of his controversial immigration policies (Walker 2019). Fidesz claims that multiculturalism, which includes religious pluralism, is a threat to Hungary. Orbán has frequently resorted to demagogic rhetoric to deride Islam, claiming that his government must pursue anti-immigrant policies to attempt to keep out Muslim migrants. As more and more Hungarian media is bought out by the government, fear-mongering about Muslims is increasingly prevalent in the country's news landscape. The 2019 *Freedom House* report on Hungary states that "Government-led xenophobic campaigns in recent years have fueled anti-Muslim sentiment, which in turn has discouraged the open practice of Islam" (Freedom House 2019). The Hungarian government's inflammatory attacks on George Soros have also been criticized for some for possible anti-Semitic undertones, including attempts to tie Soros into global conspiracies and scapegoating of him based on his financial status. While freedom of religion is permitted in Hungary, vicious attacks on religious minorities only further

serve to damage practice of a wide variety of religions, not to mention the social fabric of the country as a whole. These attacks also end up having effects on a variety of cultural institutions in Hungary. For example, after the show *Billy Elliot* was pulled at the national opera house in Budapest, the theatre announced that the topic for its next season would focus on Christianity (Komuves 2018).

## B. The Arts

Orbán's government also has degraded the role that the arts play in public life in Hungary. This has been achieved by stacking key artistic and cultural jobs in Hungary with Fidesz loyalists, who can then selectively focus solely or primarily on creating or funding arts that are in affirmation with the nationalistic views of the government. An example of this is how film production has changed in Hungary during Orbán's time in power. Hungary is not generally well-known for its film industry, but some recent films such as Laszlo Nemes' *Son of Saul* have generated international acclaim. Orbán accused filmmakers involved with Hungary's motion picture foundation of embezzlement, and the foundation was dismantled (Gyóri 2018). This was likely because he wanted to have greater control over potential political messages coming from films being made in Hungary with state funds in order to further attempt to indoctrinate the moviegoing populace. Orbán then put a wealthy Hungarian movie tycoon named Andy Vajna in charge of film in Hungary. Vajna had made a fortune in Hollywood in the 1980s helping work on popular U.S. action films such as *Rambo* and *Total Recall*. Vajna started working closely with Orbán, although disastrous decisions were made from the beginning of his tenure; for example, no films in Hungary were made for over two years after Vajna started his role as the

“government commissioner for renewing Hungarian cinema” (Győri 2018). The clear attempt by Fidesz to politicize the country’s film industry was made blatantly clear in 2010, when Hungary’s declared secretary of state at the time told filmmakers that “now we are building a new world” (Szócs quoted in Győri 2018). Film has always been used as a tool by directors to shape and create unique views of the world for audiences to experience, but a country that allows its government to manipulate film in such a manner for censorious reasons is a nation headed down a disturbing path of democratic decline.

Other art forms and artistic groups in Hungary have also been influenced by Fidesz. This includes the National Theatre in Budapest. Many artists in Hungary who are not supportive of Fidesz have spoken out against this government influence, although those in Hungary’s creative community that support the government have generally accepted this overhaul, especially since some of them potentially stand to gain appointments to high-level positions if they are perceived of as both prominent and loyal to the government. Orbán appointees are primarily selected on their loyalty to Fidesz, but an array of other factors can come into play. This may include how the appointee may physically appear in comparison with what Orbán views as a “Hungarian” identity. For example, a special commissioner to Orbán wrote a letter in 2011 about the new director of the Szolnok theatre. He opened this letter by talking about the new director’s “flashing blue eyes” (Győri 2018). This is a reference to Aryan heritage, as was instilled into the popular consciousness during World War II by the atrocities of the Nazi regime. The Nazis claimed that the preferred “Aryan” race would be built on those who had blond hair and blue eyes. This continues Orbán’s attempts to establish an “in-group” and an “out-group,” with the

in-group consisting primarily of culturally conservative ethnic Hungarians and the out-group consisting of religious and ethnic minorities.

### C. Academic Freedom

Attacks on academic freedom is also a deeply distressing way in which Fidesz attempts to control how the Hungarian public perceives of as culture. The Hungarian government's refusal to sign an agreement on the status of Central Europe University was not the only example of this. Fidesz has attempted to further consolidate government control over non-governmental organizations, research bodies, and public education. Right now, Fidesz is planning to further exert control over the Hungarian Academy of Sciences by giving control of them to a government-run council (Dunai 2019). This decision prompted protests in Hungary in June 2019, who marched between several academic institutions that have been placed under heightened or total state control in Budapest. These attempts to degrade the value of independent academic inquiry are part of a broader strategy by Fidesz to decrease promotion of intellectualism in order to encourage the public not to question Fidesz rhetoric and propaganda. Anti-intellectualism has long gone hand-in-hand with authoritarianism, since authoritarian leaders do not want the public to think for themselves, much less differently than the leader. Fidesz has already been suspended from the EPP within the European Parliament, and it is unlikely that they will return to the bloc any time soon. The feeling is mutual, as Fidesz feels much closer ideologically to the emboldened group of far-right parties that overperformed in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, while the center-right EPP does not wish to compromise on the need for strong

democratic institutions and a strong, united European Union. This stands in stark contrast to Orbán's worldview.

#### D. Historical Revisionism

Revisionist history is another way that Orbán has attempted to manipulate the public culture of Hungary. Orbán has gone to startling lengths to try to modify what the Hungarian public views as a consensus surrounding basic facts and interpretations of historical events from twentieth-century Hungary. Fidesz paid for a new museum in Budapest known as the House of Terror, or "Terrorhaza." This museum is supposedly designed to remember and warn about the dangerous effects of authoritarianism in Hungary. This includes both the fascist regime during World War II as well as the communist regime during the mid-to-late twentieth century.

However, the House of Terror has been highly controversial since its inception due to allegations of revisionist history. Orbán's critics argue that the museum was primarily built to vilify the Communist Party as well as left-wing politicians while not condemning fascism and extreme-right politicians in an equivalent manner. These critics note that there are over twelve rooms in the House of Terror, but only two are devoted to discussion of fascism (Sodaro 2018). As a result, some believe that this museum is yet another attempt by Orbán to try to change the public culture of his country by further attacking the left on a level not comparable to the right. If Hungarian citizens buy into the notion that authoritarianism is primarily "leftist" in ideology, that benefits and emboldens Orbán's authoritarianism because it is able to provide him cover to recede democratic institutions. Orbán has praised fascist leaders from the country's past by discussing their "strength," including Miklós Horthy, who ruled Hungary during most of World

War II and worked with the Nazis to send Jews in Hungary to concentration camps. This sort of rhetoric further provides Orbán cover with ensuring at least his supporters view him as a strongman. A new museum on the Holocaust, the House of Fates, is newly opening. It has long been controversial since its announcement, and has been accused of Holocaust revisionism when an official said that the museum would tell the “story of love between Hungarian Jews and non-Jews” (McAuley 2019). Orbán has since hired a Hasidic rabbi to “reimagine” the museum and serve as its director, likely out of a desire to avoid possible further accusations of anti-Semitism by his critics (McAuley 2019). The museum has been deeply controversial among Jewish leaders, some of whom view it as an example of Holocaust revisionism (Aderet 2018).

Orbán’s revisionist history and appeals to “the past” even expand to how he and Fidesz view the horrors of the Nazi regime. He believes that Hungarians had no moral responsibility for the genocide of millions of Jews and others during the Holocaust, yet this is simply not true in reality. This revisionist view of history is particularly dangerous because Fidesz rhetoric on this topic is meant to sound “legitimate,” rather than fictional. As a result, it can skew people’s understanding of history. Furthermore, it scapegoats and dehumanizes those killed during the Holocaust by trivializing the atrocities committed by the Nazis. An example of the increasingly revisionist narrative constructed around the Holocaust today in modern Hungary is the 2014 Holocaust memorial, which is located in Freedom Square in Budapest. This monument depicts a German eagle attacking the Archangel Gabriel, which is considered a symbol of Hungary (Győri 2018). As a result, the implied message of the memorial is that the atrocities of the Holocaust were only the fault of the Germans, rather than anyone in Hungary having moral responsibility for such depravity. This monument has created intense controversy since it opened in Hungary



due to its allegation that Hungarians had minimal, if any, role in the Holocaust. When Freedom Square was redesigned, statues to several more progressive figures not supported by Fidesz and its leaders were also removed (Gyóri 2018). By not only attempting to spread a message of revisionist history but also to extinguish more progressive elements of Hungary's past, Fidesz is attempting to modify how Hungarians view history at the expense of their ability to view history with at least some objectivity and find at least some agreement on common facts.

Revisionist history has become a key part of some other right-wing populist governments in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, Poland passed a law in 2018 that made it illegal to claim that Poles had moral responsibility for the Holocaust. This law received intense backlash from much of the world outside of Poland, with many accusing the country's ruling, right-wing party (Law and Justice) of trivializing the Holocaust. Lithuania's Museum of Genocide has been criticized for trivializing the atrocities of the Holocaust in Lithuania, where 90 percent of the country's Jews were killed (McAuley 2019). In Lithuania, memory surrounding both Nazi and Soviet rule is especially divisive because many anti-communist leaders and martyrs were supporters and/or enablers of the Nazi regime during World War II (Cassedy 2007, 82). A variety of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe also have popular support for right-wing populist and anti-migrant policies. For example, the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev notes that "The Bulgarians have identified themselves completely with Orbán's reading of the refugee crisis; they feel they are represented by him" (Krastev quoted in Lendvai 2017, 199).

## VI. Conclusion

Viktor Orbán's government in contemporary Hungary serves as a striking and disturbing example of the corrosive effects of so-called "illiberal democracy." During his tenure, Orbán has bought out media outlets, run incendiary and propagandistic campaigns against migrants and George Soros, and degraded the independence of his country's judiciary. The most prominent effect of illiberalism in a country is the dilution of civil society. This is achieved under illiberal governments by rhetoric attempting to change the public culture of a nation. That may include, but is not limited to, fervently nationalistic or irredentist remarks. It remains to be seen whether Orbán could be defeated electorally in the spring of 2022. However, as more and more sustained attacks on democracy occur by Fidesz, the prospects for a possible return of liberalism to Hungary look dimmer and dimmer. These dim prospects are also exacerbated by the extent to which Orbán has attempted to manipulate his country's public culture through a variety of means, such as media consolidation, propaganda campaigns, and appeals to a seemingly jingoistic and irredentist past. Since these examples of actions and rhetoric are closely correlated to the manipulation of Hungary's "public culture" and associated consciousness, they have impacted the country's movement towards illiberalism over recent time. Prospects for a healthy democracy with a flourishing civil society in Hungary were never especially strong due to the damning impact of communism on the country, as well as the fact that it is a very young democracy. It remains to be seen how Fidesz will work in the European Parliament going forward. The EU could use more of its leverage to prevent Hungary from engaging in anti-democratic activities, especially given that a small but significant percentage of Hungary's GDP comes entirely from EU funds. As a result, one can say that Fidesz is attacking Hungarian democracy on the dime of those paying taxes to the EU (Garton Ash 2019). It has become far

more difficult to promote liberal values in Hungary today than it was when Orbán was elected in 2010, but there will need to be clear efforts by Hungarian citizens to move away from authoritarianism in government as well as to resist the worst impulses that can be brought out by intense manipulation of the “public culture.”

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