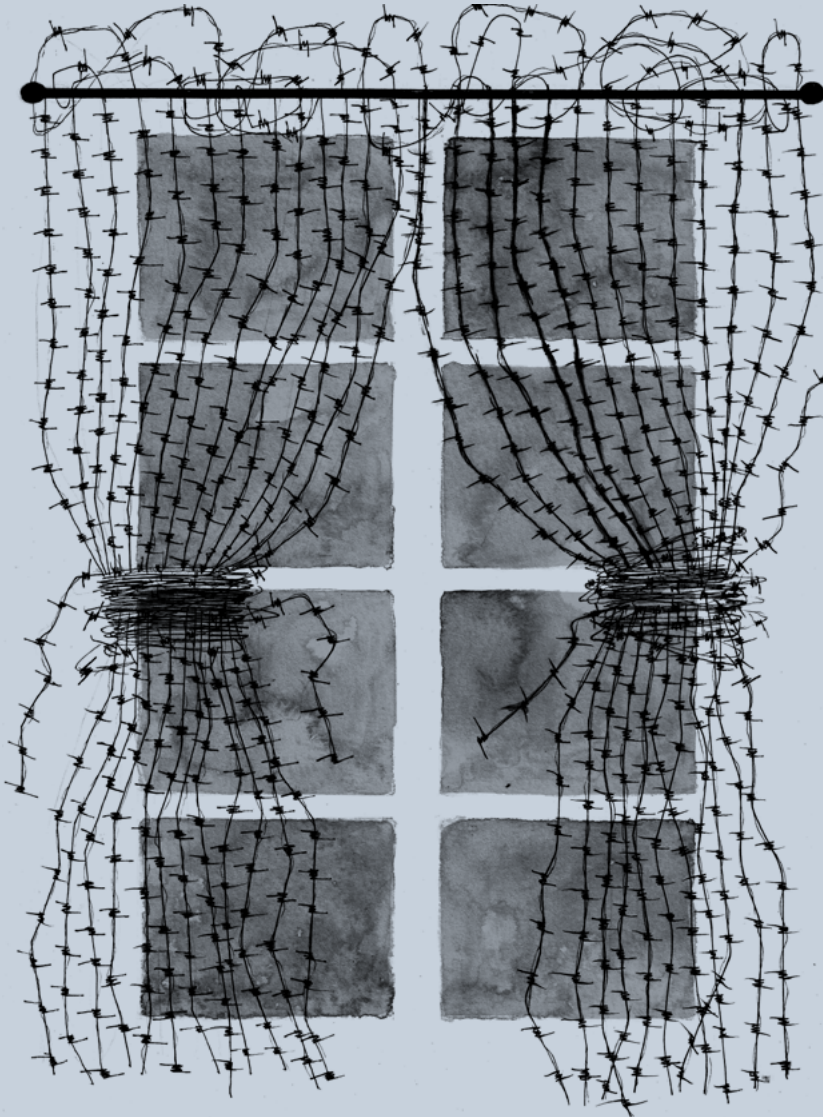


ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
BRUSSELS OFFICE



THE CRISIS AND FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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THE CRISIS AND FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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BOFFO	DONOGHUE	SHIBATA
BOLLDORF	ESKELINEN	STANDRING
BONFERT	HUKE	SWEETAPPLE
CANNON	LOSONCZ	SYROVATKA
CATERINA	OPRATKO	TIEDEMANN
CLUA-LOSADA	PASTORINO	TOSCANO
COTARELO	PETZEN	TSONEVA
	ROTH	YILMAZ-GÜNAY

ADA-CHARLOTTE REGELMANN (ED)
2022, ROSA-LUXEMBURG-STIFTUNG BRUSSELS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

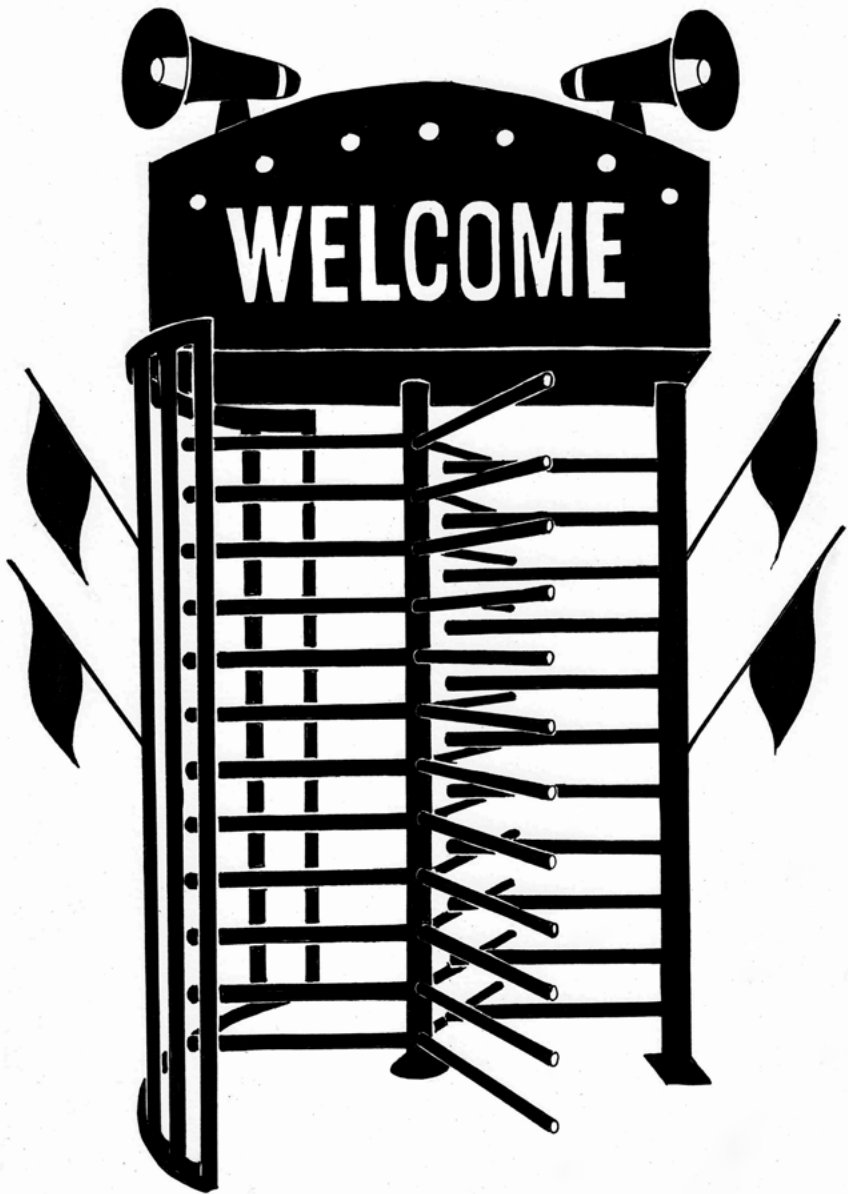
0	Introduction (Ada-Charlotte Regelmann)	4
I	THE AUTHORITARIAN THREAT	17
1	The Manifestation of Authoritarian Populism in Europe: Challenging the Fragile Compromises of Liberal Democracy (Norma Tiedemann et al.)	18
2	Authoritarian Neoliberalism, Covid-19 and the Future of Democracy (Alfredo Saad-Filho, Marco Boffo)	70
3	Authoritarian Regimes in Hungary and Serbia: a Comparative Approach (Márk Losonczi)	108
II	DEMOCRACY ON THE DEFENSIVE	183
4	Defending and Radicalising Democracy: Theoretical Perspectives and Starting Points for a Political Agenda (Teppo Eskelinen)	184
5	The Next Technocracy? (Jana Tsoneva)	214
6	Fortress City: Defensive Architecture and the Epistemologies of Public Space (Beatriz V. Toscano)	248
III	DEMOCRATISING PROCESS	279
7	Real Democracy in a Time of Coronavirus-Crisis Capitalism (Mònica Clua-Losada, David J. Bailey, Saori Shibata)	280
8	Democratisation and De-Democratisation in Times of a Pandemic (Barry Cannon)	324

IV	CITIZENS IN DEMOCRACY	363
9	Digital Democracy in Post-Indignados Spain: a Broken Promise (Pablo Cotarelo, Sergi Cutillas)	364
10	Allied Against Austerity: New Transnational Coalitions of the European Anti-Austerity Movement (Bernd Bonfert)	398
11	New Generations Gaining a Voice: Italian and German New Generations Against Right-Wing Populist Rhetoric (Veronica Pastorino)	438
V	DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION: ROAD AHEAD	471
12	Future? What Future? (Jennifer Petzen, Koray Yilmaz-Günay, Christopher Sweetapple)	472
13	For a Municipalist Democracy – Even After Covid-19? (Laura Roth)	506
14	Moral Critique in an Age of Multiple Crises: Towards Transformative Change (Adam Standing, Matthew Donoghue)	544
VI	ANNEXE	577
	List Of Contributors	578
	Illustrator's Notes	589

**AUTHORITARIAN
REGIMES IN HUNGARY
AND SERBIA:
A COMPARATIVE APPROACH**

MÁRK LOSONCZ





This chapter looks at the authoritarian regimes led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia. We examine not only the obvious similarities but also the significant differences between them. In terms of the interpretative framework adopted here, we will analyse political and economic changes as mutually related processes. In other words, the transformations in the general behaviour of political elites are addressed in conjunction with the underlying social structures. Particular attention is paid to these regimes' predecessors, i.e. the background to the Orbán and Vučić governments' rise to power. Specifically, in the 2000s, both the Hungarian and the Serbian governing parties pursued policies that were both pretty undemocratic and socially disastrous. Thus, the authoritarian so-called solutions offered by both Orbán and Vučić during the 2010s were very much a supposedly necessary response to the crisis of the 2000s. We place a great deal of emphasis on the special methods used by the Orbán and Vučić governments to cling to power. Following an analysis of economic issues, a section is devoted to their divergent relationships with the European Union, set against the backdrop of a broader international context. In spite of the fact that both Hungary and Serbia are receiving considerable development assistance and financial support for innovation (a substantial share of Hungary's GDP comes from the EU), both countries have tense relations with their Western partners, and they are also facing severe criticism for their authoritarian policies. The chapter concludes that the EU's contradictory, paternalistic carrot-and-stick approach is partly responsible for the deterioration of the situation. Finally, some cautious predictions are made about what the future might hold for Hungary and Serbia's authoritarian regimes, taking into account the potential drivers of emancipatory change.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, and especially over the past decade, we have witnessed a rise in authoritarian politics and right-wing movements – not only around the world (from the regime of Donald Trump in the United States to those of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India), but also in European countries like Hungary (a Member State of the European Union) and Serbia (a country with close links to the EU). Attacks on fundamental norms and a decline in participative institutions have resulted in a dramatic polarisation of the political landscape and a further crackdown on democratic rights. The crisis of liberal representative governments and the intensifying processes of neoliberalisation have resulted in misguided answers to the deteriorating situation. The insufficiency of democracy has been aggravated further by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although these are global tendencies, we cannot shy away from the challenging task of analysing their specific conjunctures, looking at both the similar processes and the different bifurcations of these authoritarian regimes. The rise of the authoritarian regimes in Hungary and Serbia was going on almost in parallel during the 2010s. Even at first glance, there are many similarities between the Hungarian regime, dominated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and its counterpart in Serbia, represented above all by Prime Minister and later President Aleksandar Vučić. For instance, in both systems the cult created around the leader (and the personalisation of the entire political sphere)¹ plays a key role, making a major contribution in both countries to the extreme polarisation of the political scene. Alternative and critical voices are marginalised in both Hungary and Serbia – a situation which is most evident in the lack of media freedom and pluralism.

However, despite the obvious analogies between these two regimes, there are also significant differences. To start with, their ideological prehistory in the 1990s is conspicuously dissimilar. The political path of Orbán and his party, *Fidesz*, began with a strong 'post-communist attitude', entwined with an explicit liberal ideology. Orbán and his party only gradually adopted a right-wing, conservative philosophy, owing to changes in the Hungarian political spectrum. On the other hand, Vučić kicked off his career in a far-right party,

1 See Tamás (2018).

with this ideology being particularly rampant in these early days when he was involved in Slobodan Milošević's authoritarian regime.

This chapter traces the genesis of the respective regimes and the pathways that affected their later attitude, in the 2010s, when both Orbán and Vučić became symbols of an increasingly authoritarian politics. Their ideological divergence has a substantial impact on the dynamics of their present-day behaviour and rhetoric. This is particularly clear in the countries' respective relationships with the EU. Hungary joined the European Union in 2004, while Serbia is still a candidate for accession. As a result, Hungary and Serbia have rather different relations with the European Union. While Serbia has been severely criticised, it maintains an adaptable and cooperative stance, whereas, officially at least, Hungary often positions itself in counterpoint to the European Union, claiming that 'Brussels is the new Moscow', in other words that the country is supposedly being colonised by its Western European partners. Orbán's demonstrative anti-conformity is very different from Vučić's adaptation to Western expectations.

Of course, no country operates in a vacuum. Rather than approaches that explain the authoritarian tendencies in Hungary and Serbia solely by making reference to domestic political issues, we need an analysis that situates the authoritarian dynamics in a broader and more complex perspective. Moreover, although they are neighbours who cooperate closely with each other, Hungary and Serbia behave extremely differently in their regional environment and so face divergent challenges in terms of international relations. Although Hungary has significant tensions with some of its neighbours, these regional tensions are not as significant or as much of a politically mobilising factor in Hungary as they are in Serbia.

One of our goals is to reconstruct the geneses of both authoritarian regimes, first of all by means of a critique of their predecessors during the 2000s. Our aim is to offer an explanation with regard to certain key questions. Why did these authoritarian regimes emerge at all? Could this have been avoided? Unlike those who exclusively and (to draw on terminology used by Pierre Bourdieu) fetishistically focus on the superficial political reality, we believe that the political analysis has to be embedded in a broader framework that takes into consideration economic issues as well, both in the 2000s and with regard to subsequent developments. In other words, the authoritarian outcome of the 2000s cannot be understood without a detailed description of strongly neoliberal and socially devastating policies.

However, we are not going to reduce our analysis to a merely descriptive approach to the genesis of Orbán and Vučić's authoritarian regimes or to their current state. Instead, we would also like to point to potential solutions to the overall crisis and alternative emancipatory endeavours and possibilities. Therefore, we will also focus on three questions. Firstly, does the relative popularity of these regimes among voters hide an implicit emancipatory potential? Secondly, how could the Western European partners have acted differently to discourage these negative tendencies? And finally, what political attitudes might give rise to a major change in both countries? What institutional alternatives and international restructuring might help the citizens of Hungary and Serbia to create a much more democratic society, with an effective public sphere and a strong awareness of economic issues? These questions (and, with any luck, the answers to them) go beyond a merely descriptive approach as they focus on the possibility of a post-authoritarian society.

Keywords:

comparative authoritarianism
soft authoritarian regimes
Hungary
Serbia
EU conditionality

POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORKS

The rise of contemporary autocratic systems has been discussed from the perspective of a very wide range of interpretative frameworks. First of all, it is very hard to interpret the rise of the Hungarian and Serbian authoritarian regimes within a framework that simply emphasises the desirable linear development of liberal modernisation and treats certain (semi-)peripheral countries as abnormal exceptions. On the one hand, it was pointed out years ago that there are major flaws in the liberal modernisation paradigm (Carothers 2002;

Krastev 2016), but others have indicated that Western liberal democracies also find themselves in a serious internal political crisis (Crouch 2004; Rodrik 2018; Streeck 2014). On the other hand, in principle any (semi-)peripheral country in the capitalist world system can produce at least some kind of non-authoritarian representative government; in other words, fatalistic interpretations simply based on a country having marginal status and being subjected (economically and/or politically) to the core(s) of the world system should be avoided (Rustow 1970). Other interpretative frameworks bend determinism in a culturalist direction. In particular, culturalist analyses suggest that Hungarians have a “serf mentality” (*jobbágymentalitás*), specifically that, because of their basic cultural-existential attitude, they are inclined to embrace authoritarian regimes (Spiró 2017; Vajda / Buják 2018). Sometimes this interpretation is reduced to a criticism of an anti-democratic political culture (supposedly uncritically inherited from the Horthyst and Kádarian² past) in which, in the words of Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller, from an interview with Jan Smoleński (Smoleński 2018), “people have no idea how liberty can be used”.³ Similarly, throughout Serbia’s history, certain Serbian intellectuals have emphasised the harmfulness of Russian and “anti-democratic”/“populist” influence.⁴

114 /

Criticism from Bogdanović (2016) and Lošonc (2017) of such interpretations has demonstrated that, apart from being very rigidly and simplistically deterministic, this kind of interpretation cannot explain the significant differences between the various successive regimes in Hungary or Serbia. For instance, obviously the government formed by the Hungarian Socialist Party (*Magyar Szocialista Párt*, or MSZP) and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (*Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége*, or SZDSZ) from 1994 to 1998 cannot be described as an authoritarian regime with an aversion to liberty in the same way as the *Fidesz*–KDNP⁵ government led by Viktor Orbán after 2010. Moreover, *Fidesz* – Hungarian Civic

2 The allusions here are to Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya (1868–1957), Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1920 to 1944, and Hungarian communist leader János Kádár (1912–1989), who was General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party from 1956 to 1988.

3 See also Kis (2013), Skidelsky (2019) and Benczes (2016).

4 See, for instance, Perović (2015).

5 KDNP (*Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, i.e. Christian Democratic People’s Party) is *Fidesz*’s small Christian democratic coalition partner.

Union (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*)⁶ itself went through various stages of development, with its time in government between 1998 and 2002 differing significantly from its regime during the 2010s. Something similar holds true for Serbia as the authoritarian rule of Slobodan Milošević during the 1990s cannot be easily equated with the regimes of the various branches of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska Opozicija Srbije*, or DOS) in the 2000s. One-sided culturally deterministic approaches are not only insensitive to the nuances of political development in Hungary and Serbia but also incapable of explaining what was novel about the authoritarian regimes of the 2010s.

According to another interpretative framework, the changes within the political sphere can be attributed to the change in the behaviour of politicians (as they started to forge pernicious elite pacts, systematically destroy institutions, etc.) and their populist ideology.⁷ Sometimes it is even argued that the economic dynamics of these countries have no impact at all on the authoritarian shifts witnessed in the political arena (Inglehart / Norris 2016). This type of interpretative framework tends to be somewhat tautological as it often describes authoritarian political developments on the basis of the authoritarian shifts themselves, as if these new regimes emerged as a result of purely voluntaristic decisions, thus representing a kind of *deus ex machina*.

There are also explanatory frameworks with an entirely different theoretical background. For instance, analysts drawing on world-systems theory view the crisis of representative government within the broader canvas of the inner tensions and difficulties of the centre–(semi-)periphery relations of global capitalism. The risk of determinism haunts this framework too as it tends to underestimate the leeway of regional and local actors, as if they had absolutely no other choices (Farkas 1994; Artner / Szigeti 2014; Fabry 2011; Szalai 2012; Szalai 2018). A more subtle approach emphasises the fact that, for instance, the regimes of Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić are precisely what could be called an “inventive” response to the challenges posed by the inner contradictions of contemporary capitalism.⁸

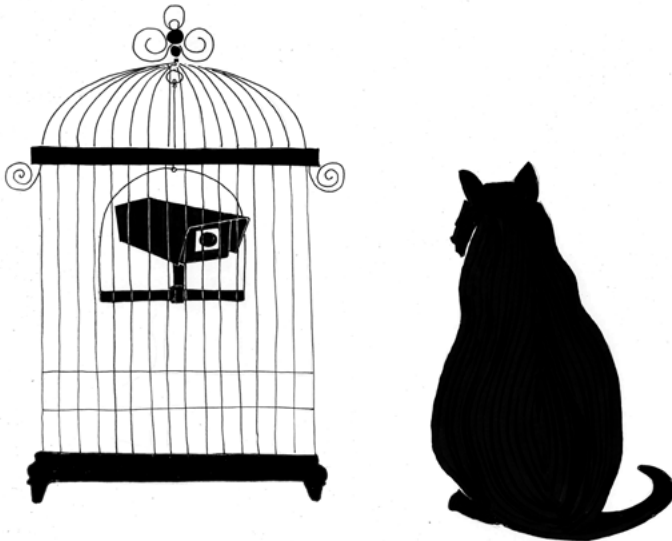
6 To give *Fidesz* its full name.

7 For a discussion of the critical approach to the discourse surrounding populism, see, for instance, Mudde (2017) and Stanley (2017).

8 See, for instance, Fabry (2014), Fabry (2018), Antal (2019), Éber (2015), Gagyi (2016), Wiener (2014a) and Wiener (2014b).

Certain authors claim that the Hungarian authoritarian regime represents a remarkable experiment, supposedly being an instance of a (semi-)peripheral developmental state trying, with a heterodox approach, to correct the mistakes of neoliberal capitalism, placing an emphasis on profitable branches of the international division of labour and encouraging the reinforcement of state bureaucracy (Bod 2018; György 2017; Wilkin 2016). However, it has also been suggested that the Hungarian case is rather unlike classical right-wing developmental states as it neglects social subsystems such as the education and health systems (Pogátsa 2016). For instance, Gábor Scheiring flatly rejects the concept of the developmental state on the basis that in his view, during the 2010s Hungary was an interventionist state that substantially contributing to an industrial malaise; thus, Scheiring proposes an alternative term, namely the “accumulative state” that intervenes to both handle conflicts and stimulate the increased accumulation of local-regional capital (Scheiring 2019; 2020).

Furthermore, it can be argued that the crisis of representative government is a result of both the processes and the pressure of global capital, yielding – at regional level, among others – “a parasitical rentier class of unproductive capital [which] now dominate[s] the global economy and effectively drain[s] industry and labour/consumers of resources” (Wilkin 2016: xv). This analysis is often extended to the examination of the forms of regional and local crony capitalism



or neopatrimonialism/neo-prebendalism, indicating that political interference even distorts regular market mechanisms, resulting in the “perverse redistribution” of goods and services (Makki / Mondovics 2016) or state capture. Political loyalty and informal relations became crucial in accumulating wealth (Innes 2014; Innes 2015; Schoenman 2014; Szanyi 2017). There is even the suggestion that these authoritarian regimes are being refeudalised (Szalai 2016; Szalai 2019; Tamás 2014). This kind of approach provides the scope for an analysis of the specific characteristics of the authoritarian regimes that took root in the 2010s. Sometimes these regimes are explained by well-worn analyses of illiberal democracies, or, to use various related terminology, electoral/competitive/soft authoritarianism or democratic despotism (Zakaria 1997; Levitsky / Way 2002). Needless to say, Hungary and Serbia are also examined from this perspective (Bozóki / Hegedűs 2017; Böcskei / Hajdu 2019; Filippov 2018; Gyulai / Stein-Zalai 2016; Szilágyi 2012; Szűcs 2018; Bieber 2020).

Unlike some of the dominant approaches, we are non-deterministic in our interpretation of the rise of the Hungarian and Serbian authoritarian regimes, i.e. regarding them as regimes that developed their own economic and political strategies. We reject both culturally reductionist analyses and interpretative frameworks that concentrate solely on the behaviour of the political elite. Instead, we believe that these authoritarian regimes should be conceived of as complex responses both to both the challenge of a domestic crisis and external pressure. Contrary to the culturally deterministic approach, which tends to explain political particularities from the vantage point of an exaggerated long-term perspective, we aim to focus on the subtle historical changes that have taken place over the past three decades. While a nuanced historicisation can provide a sinecure for the simplifications offered by various manifestations of determinism, we also need an approach that reconciles two basic rationales.

On the one hand, our aim in this chapter is to draw on explanations that take into account the crucial economic factors. One of our main conclusions will be that, although the rise of these authoritarian regimes was a reaction to the neoliberal policies of the 2000s, both Orbán and Vučić's regimes are also introducing very neoliberal measures. This economic analysis also needs to look at the complexity of various factors, i.e. both pressure from international developments and institutions, and local-regional responses that suggested a neopatrimonial accumulative state, resulting in state capture and a further decline in democratic rights.

On the other hand, we also need a phenomenological approach, i.e. not just an analysis of superficial phenomena but a detailed description of the way these regimes emerge, including an examination of political ideology (e.g. the rhetoric of enmity, the demagogic misuse of democratic discourse), the ambivalent behaviour of repressive apparatuses (as these regimes rarely use overt repression and instead tend to outsource violence to their direct partners), and so on. We believe that only the combination of a deep structural analysis and political phenomenology can explain both the rise of these authoritarian regimes and the way the relevant parties manage to secure repeated terms in office.

DIFFERENCES IN THE GENESES OF THESE REGIMES AND THE CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

HUNGARY

Viktor Orbán became the leader of *Fidesz*, originally an acronym for *Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége* (Alliance of Young Democrats), in the late 1980s. Having been established as a radical reformist student and anti-establishment movement in the late state-socialist period, it was one of various liberal parties in Hungary as the country became a multi-party democracy. In the early 1990s, *Fidesz*'s explicit liberalism manifested itself in various ways. For instance, in 1990, Orbán – quoted in Urfi (2019) – claimed that “those who want to reduce the current rate of abortions from 90,000 per year to two or three thousand [...] aren't humans but monsters”. On the other hand, these days *Fidesz*, now a national-conservative party, calls abortion part of the “culture of death” (Botos 2019) and claims that “[t]o support abortion is to support murder” (HVG 2019). Furthermore, Hungary signed an international anti-abortion declaration with a number of other authoritarian governments, including Poland and Saudi Arabia (Borger 2020). At the moment, *Fidesz*'s anti-abortion stance is above all an ideological weapon (and a tool for forging international alliances), but the party has in practice continued to refrain from tightening up legislation. While the Fundamental Law of Hungary (i.e. the country's Constitution), adopted by the *Fidesz*–KDNP coalition, states that the life of the foetus should be protected from the moment of conception (Ministry of Justice 2021), the legal rights of pregnant women have not been restricted as this would be a highly unpopular move (given that their autonomous rights are supported by around four fifths of Hungarians) (Serdült 2020).

We should add here that Hungary refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention on violence against women, arguing that it promotes “destructive gender ideologies” and “illegal migration” (Didili 2020). Another possible example of this ideological transformation is *Fidesz*’s shift from openly anti-clerical positions to a close alliance with the so-called historical Churches (Hazafi 2001). A further ideological symptom is its relationship with George Soros. In 1989, Orbán was the recipient of a scholarship from the Soros Foundation to study at Oxford University. Many other leading politicians from *Fidesz* also received financial support from that foundation (Hargitai 2016). However, in 2013, *Fidesz* launched a huge anti-Soros campaign which claimed that many Hungarian NGOs were led and controlled by George Soros (Gondola. hu 2013). The campaign reached its height with government-financed anti-Soros posters bearing slogans like “Don’t let Soros have the last laugh” and “99% reject illegal immigration”. Thorpe (2017) points out that these posters led to accusations that the Hungarian government was whipping up anti-Semitism. Investigative journalists have chronicled how and why Orbán, under the influence of political consultant Arthur J. Finkelstein, turned Soros into a scapegoat (D. Kovács 2019). As compellingly demonstrated by Corneliu Pintilescu and Attila Kustán Magyari, the anti-Soros campaign grew into a fully-fledged conspiracy theory promoted by the whole Hungarian government (Pintilescu / Kustán Magyari 2020).

Fidesz was described in its early days as “radical-liberal” or a “moderate liberal centrist” political bloc (Körösényi et al. 2003). In 1992, *Fidesz* even joined Liberal International (Fidesz 2006). The party’s political-ideological position and strategy changed after the popularity of the national-conservative, Christian democratic Hungarian Democratic Forum (*Magyar Demokrata Fórum*, or MDF), the dominant party in the Hungarian National Assembly, the country’s parliament, from 1990 to 1994, fell away, creating a gap in the political spectrum. This political vacuum was filled by *Fidesz* as it became increasingly conservative (Körösényi et al. 2003). While in power from 1998 to 2002, *Fidesz* leant even further to the right, as can be seen in the integration of smaller right-wing parties into the government, big symbolic gestures such as moving the Holy Crown of Hungary from the Hungarian National Museum to the National Assembly, the considerable emphasis placed on the alliance with the historical Churches, and so on.

SERBIA

Aleksandar Vučić's political career could not be more different from Orbán's. In 1993, he joined the far-right Serbian Radical Party (*Srpska Radikalna Stranka*, or SRS), whose goal during the Yugoslav Wars was to create a Greater Serbia in the 1990s. The party's leader, Vojislav Šešelj, was found guilty by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia of involvement in instigating the deportation of Croats from Hrtkovci in Serbia. Many members of the SRS fought in the wars, either serving in paramilitary forces or as volunteers in the regular army. In an ominous statement in the Serbian National Assembly in 1995, Vučić said that "for every Serb killed, we will kill 100 Muslims" (Štetin 2015). In 1998, Vučić was appointed Minister of Information in the authoritarian regime led by Slobodan Milošević, pushing through the repression of alternative Serbian media and ensuring that the official media were broadcasting nationalist propaganda.

Vučić's role in the late 1990s has to be viewed in a broader perspective. It could be argued that the SRS was already contributing to the hegemony of the Milošević regime back in the early 1990s (Pavlović / Antonić 2007; Stojiljković 2012). However, the SRS's instrumental role became crystal clear when the party joined the so-called national unity or war government in 1998 with the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička Partija Srbije*, or SPS), in that almost from the very start, the SRS's main adversary was the so-called democratic opposition, not the ruling Socialist Party, and in the National Assembly the SRS repeatedly voted for changes to tighten the grip of the Milošević regime (Antonić 2015). Various arguments can be used to back up the characterisation of the Milošević regime as an authoritarian government (Pavlović / Antonić 2007; Losoncz 2020), revealing conspicuous parallels with the Vučić regime in recent years:

120 /

- 1/ Milošević generally tried to outsource violence to quasi-external actors (for instance, to the special forces of his country's intelligence services or to paramilitary forces), masking the regular army's responsibility for this. Similarly, Vučić heavily relies on intelligence services and, as we will see, also tends to use non-state forces to implement otherwise illegal and illegitimate measures in the form of violence.
- 2/ During the Milošević regime, there was a considerable disparity between Milošević's *de facto* and *de jure* power, i.e. his extra-institutional decision-making often overstepped the legal frameworks of the shallow state

(Tromp 2019). Likewise, Vučić is often criticised for going beyond the competences he has as President (for instance, he falsely claimed that his role was to “control the government”), i.e. his de facto power also exceeds the statutory limits on presidential power (Istinomer 2017).

- 3/ While during the 1990s the media were not directly outlawed at one stroke, their work was made harder by specific sanctions, financial pressure, and so on. Likewise, it is no coincidence that in the course of the Vučić regime, Serbia has slipped down the global media freedom rankings as nationwide media channels have been monopolised by the Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, or SNS) and independent journalists are often threatened.
- 4/ For Milošević, democracy was no obstacle but a vital tool in accumulating power. Even his rise to the top of Serbian politics in 1987 at the 8th Session of the League of Communists of Serbia was broadcasted by state media, and mass protests organised with his blessing at the end of the 1980s (the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution) were called a ‘happening of the people’. Moreover, Milošević introduced a multi-party system and called elections even when times were tough (e.g. when inflation was 178,882%). In a similar way, Vučić has been overemphasising the democratic legitimacy of his own regime (first of all, by calling as many parliamentary elections as possible, and also via a plebiscitarian communication strategy involving, for example, face-to-face consultations with ‘ordinary citizens’). Just as the Milošević regime was not only dictatorial but also softly authoritarian in a more subtle – even perverse, one might say – manner, the Vučić regime tends to avoid overt repression by seeking more nuanced strategies for control and the reproduction of power.

According to Slobodan Antonić, during the Milošević regime “there were no arrests, expulsions or prohibitions, there were no camps, acts of torture or trials for high treason – things that real dictators would do in similar circumstances” (Antonić 2015: 477). Even though we firmly believe, following Tromp (2019), that the Milošević regime did use violent methods and tools, Milošević’s shallow state did for the most part shy away from overt violence towards fellow Serbs, preferring a moderate or soft form of repression – and Aleksandar Vučić played a significant part in this. But even more importantly, there was a high level of continuity in terms of Vučić’s political role. As we

have suggested, his role in the authoritarian Milošević regime largely anticipated his behaviour in the 2010s.

THE PATH TO THE AUTHORITARIAN 2010s

The geneses of Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić's regimes are pretty divergent. They developed differently in their early days, explaining the distinctive forms of authoritarianism we see in Hungary and Serbia today. While Orbán's political career began with him severely criticising Hungary's Soviet-style socialist government in its final years and continued with him setting up the ultra-liberal *Fidesz* party, the rise of Vučić started with his membership of the far-right Serbian Radical Party and culminated in his involvement in Milošević's softly authoritarian (and, at least nominally, socialist) regime. Orbán has abandoned his original liberal perspective and has increasingly become a right-wing politician, while Vučić has made efforts to leave his nationalist past behind by moving towards an ideological stance close to the political centre. Hence, certain analysts tend to characterise the Serbian Progressive Party as a catch-all or big-tent party without a clear ideological agenda.⁹

To outside observers, Orbán often presented himself in the 2010s as a leader who was at odds with the political ideals of liberal democracy. On a visit to a Hungarian-majority town in Romania, Băile Tușnad, known as *Tusnádfürdő* in Hungarian, in 2014, Orbán proclaimed:

122 /

[W]e have to abandon liberal methods and principles of organizing a society, as well as the liberal way to look at the world. [...] Hungarian voters expect from their leaders [...] a form of state-organization [...] that will of course still respect values of Christianity, freedom and human rights. [...] It is vital [...] that if we would like to reorganize our nation state instead of the liberal state, that we should make it clear, that these [liberal citizens or politicians, depending on how this is interpreted (ed)] are not civilians coming against us, opposing us, but political activists attempting to promote foreign interests.¹⁰

In contrast, Vučić is trying to convince his Western backers that his regime meets the criteria to be classified as a so-called Western liberal democracy. Indeed, this dissimilarity between Orbán and Vučić can be partially explained

9 See, for instance, BBC News (2018).

10 This English translation of an excerpt from the speech comes from Tóth (2014).

by the countries' different statuses in terms of European Union membership – while Hungary is a Member State, Serbia is still a candidate for accession.

Finally, the differences in the regimes' geneses have profound consequences for the historical development of their authoritarian features. While Orbán and his party were often heavily criticised by the liberal and leftist opposition during the first Orbán government, from 1998 to 2002, the regime at that time was very rarely described as 'authoritarian' in general. On the other hand, Vučić's party, the SRS, often provided support to Milošević's authoritarian regime during the 1990s, whether from within or outside government. One might say that while Orbán's authoritarian regime in Hungary is mostly an invention of the 2010s, the authoritarian aspects of Vučić's regime have deeper roots, dating back all the way to the 1990s.

HUNGARY

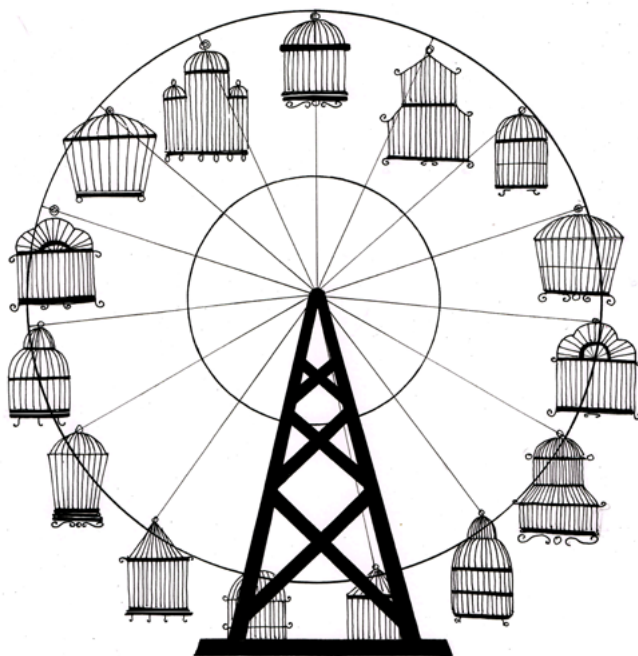
Neither of the regimes examined here, i.e. neither the Orbán administration nor the Vučić government, emerged in a non-authoritarian vacuum. In fact, we can only really understand their success if we take into consideration the non-democratic aspects and economically devastating politics of their predecessors. Orbán returned to power after eight years of governments led by the Hungarian Socialist Party, the MSZP (mostly in coalition with the Alliance of Free Democrats). The non-democratic character of the regime manifested itself most clearly in the so-called Őszöd speech, a 2006 speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, in which he criticised his own party's leadership for deliberately misleading voters to win the 2006 elections ("Evidently, we lied throughout the last year and a half, two years") and claimed that the government had failed to enact any progressive measures during its tenure ("You cannot [cite] any significant government measure we can be proud of").¹¹ The speech was leaked and caused a national political crisis in 2006 (The Guardian 2006a). The government responded to these protests with force and police violence (parlament.hu 2010).

On the other hand, many analysts – e.g. Ágh (2013), Ágh (2016), Rauschenberger (2013), Böcskei (2016), Pogátsa (2013) and Pogátsa (2016) – suggest that one of the reasons behind the rise of Orbán's authoritarian regime was the unconvincing performance of the Hungarian governments between 2002 and 2010. They often argue that substantial economic inequality, i.e. the

11 The quotes are from The Guardian (2006b).

widening gap between the elites and the masses, has undermined democracy – see, for instance, Boix (2003) – or has had a direct impact in terms of strengthening anti-liberal identity politics – see e.g. Gingrich and Banks (2006). Certain authors stress that the crisis experienced by the relevant welfare states required authoritarian solutions in order to re-establish the domination of capital.¹²

Among other developments, at times an MSZP-led government introduced a flat-rate personal income tax favouring those with a higher income; in 2004, it reduced corporation tax to 16% (at a time when the global average was 32%); the budget deficit peaked at 9.2% in 2006 (when the level of indebtedness of individual citizens was particularly high); there were significant corruption and other scandals (Beck et al. 2011), and so



12 See, for instance, Bruff (2014), Streeck (2014) and Fabry and Sandbeck (2018).

on. Furthermore, from 2006 onwards, the leading economists advising the Hungarian government were calling for neoliberal reforms, i.e. further privatisation and austerity measures, while opposing any increase in the minimum wage, and for a reduction in the role of the state (for instance, by introducing competing private health insurance funds) (Tóth 2011). Austerity measures were put in place after the MSZP's victory in the 2006 elections, prompting a dramatic decline in the party's opinion-poll ratings from 37% to 26% even before the Ószöd speech was leaked (ibid.). The crisis was all-encompassing, ranging from the cessation of economic growth to the rise in the budget deficit, and from the foreign-currency debt crisis to substantial International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan packages (coming to 20% of Hungarian GDP) (Pogátsa 2019). Against this backdrop, Ferenc Gyurcsány tendered his resignation as Prime Minister in 2009, citing – as he put it at the time – “the recent turmoil that has made [Hungary] among the most troubled economies in Europe” (Kulich 2009).

An EU-wide survey of social mobility found that from 2007 to 2010 Hungary was the least economically just society in the European Union at that time, having the worst social mobility prospects of any country in the bloc (Eurofound 2017). While in 1993 the capitalist market economy enjoyed more support in Hungary than in Western Europe (Bruszt 1998: 174), by 2009 nowhere had backing from society for the capitalist market economy dropped off more sharply than in Hungary, with only around 46% of the population finding the market better than other social systems (EBRD 2007: 50f.). Leftist voters were especially disappointed (Policy Solutions 2013) and support for leftist parties in 2010 was lowest among skilled workers, manual labour and sole proprietors (Enyedi et al. 2014: 553). All this represents a significant shift from the situation in the 1990s.

The literature dealing with leftist criticism about the 2000s is plentiful.¹³ On the other hand, since at least 2009, *Fidesz* has derived most of its support from workers and the petty bourgeoisie, especially outside Budapest,¹⁴ while the MSZP only maintained its base among the managerial class (Enyedi et al. 2014: 539). According to Gábor Scheiring, “most of society took a negative view of the market transition, however, they did not reject

13 See e.g. Kiss (2009) and Éber et al. (2014).

14 For a possible analysis, see Policy Solutions (2020) and Bíró Nagy and Laki (2020).

democracy. [...] That is to say, workers did *not* force an authoritarian shift” (Scheiring 2019: 175) (italics in the original).

SERBIA

During the 2000s, Serbia, too, was far from a model of a democratic and economically prosperous, socially just country. In the decade following the overthrow of the authoritarian Milošević regime on 5 October 2000, the country was governed by various branches of the DOS. This chaotic period was marked by a series of very consequential political events (such as the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, Montenegro’s declaration of independence in 2006 and Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence in 2008). The various governments in this period brought together parties which, for the most part, combined a more or less engaged nationalism with pragmatic neoliberal policies. Notwithstanding some efforts to initiate fundamental structural reforms in Serbian society, many analysts, e.g. Pešić (2012: 24), suggest – in an allusion to the day after the demise of the Milošević regime – that it was as if there was no 6 October, i.e. vital reform measures were not put in place. Specifically, the Constitution was not suspended in the immediate aftermath of the so-called Bulldozer Revolution which toppled Milošević, and there was no systematic or critical examination of the moral/political values and practices of existing institutions (for instance, the leaders of intelligence services were not dismissed, meaning that they had time to destroy compromising documents, and there was no lustration). In fact, there was a high level of continuity between the Milošević regime and the ‘post-October’ system in terms of both institutional mechanisms and personnel (in the legal system, the Army, the intelligence services, etc.). Last but not least, the new Serbian Constitution, known as the *Mitrovdan Constitution*, codified in 2006, is characterised by explicitly nationalist articles, especially with regard to the status of Kosovo and the secondary status of ethnic minorities.

This whole period has been described as witnessing the “opportunistic pacification of the past, or a strategy of ensuring continuity with nationalism” (Dimitrijević 2003: 8). The DOS, which played a decisive role in the overthrow of Milošević, disintegrated after his extradition to be tried by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. More precisely, the DOS disintegrated into various moderately nationalist parties, including the Democratic Party (*Demokratska Stranka*, or DS) and the Democratic Party of Serbia (*Demokratska Stranka Srbije*, or DSS), which concurred with even more

nationalist parties, namely the Serbian Radical Party and the Socialist Party. In 2003, Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was killed by the Zemun Clan, a powerful branch of the Serbian mafia having strong ties with the intelligence services and politicians (Insajder 2019a). Civil society in Serbia was very much under the influence of oligarchic party structures. Aleksandar Molnar (2008: 72) refers to these regressive tendencies as “a total pluralistic party dictatorship”, as there was no one-party state, but the many governing parties appropriated public goods and services for themselves. There was systemic administrative corruption under the control of a strong partocracy (Barać 2007), as well as “an undisturbed interchangeability of power and money” (Pešić 2012: 175).

Furthermore, privatisation and economic monopolies were implemented under direct political influence (Barać / Zlatić 2005). In the words of Pešić (2012: 189f.), “[p]ublic goods were transformed into party property”, with “feudalistic landmarks”, and the activity of oligarchies (e.g. the relationship between parties and business) was not regulated by law. The local levels of the state (including policies and the employment of personnel) in particular were under strongly centralised party influence. Politicians were monitored by intelligence services in order to gather information on how they were going to vote in Parliament (ibid.: 190). Public broadcasting was also controlled by the ruling parties, and there was no pluralistic or democratic public sphere (ibid.: 198, 313).

In most cases, checks and balances were not applied, there was no separation of powers, and regulatory bodies were prevented from carrying out their activities. Today, Vučić's interference in the work of government is often characterised as an illegitimate and illegal encroachment by the President into the realms of executive power, but it is generally forgotten that he is not the first holder of this role to act in this way: Boris Tadić did the same when he was President.¹⁵ In sum, Serbia in the 2000s can be described as a place giving free rein to a privileged political-economic class and state capture, and as a country suffering from chronic anomie and neo-patrimonialism.¹⁶

While descriptions of the Milošević regime in the 1990s have used terms such as “blocked transformation” (Lazić 2011) and “delayed neoliberalism” (Musić 2011a; 2011b), since 2000 neoliberal economic policies have been in the

15 For more details, see Pavlović and Stanojević (2010).

16 For a detailed analysis, see Vladisavljević (2019).

ascendancy in Serbia. One of the new government's first acts following the overthrow of Milošević's authoritarian regime in 2000/2001 was to introduce a new labour law that abolished any formal requirement for there to be collective bargaining between employers and workers and that made the labour market more flexible (Musić 2013: 25f.). The new law on privatisation made it easier for majority owners to purchase companies; as a result, around 60% of economic resources were sold off as part of a process which has been called "one of the dirtiest privatisations in Southeast Europe" (Luković 2012). Former workers or small shareholders, who were for the most part excluded from these processes, protested in vain against these unlawful privatisations (Pešić 2012: 246).

From 2001 to 2009, between around 400,000 and 500,000 workers lost their jobs (Nikolić Đaković 2011). For instance, in Niš, one of Serbia's largest cities, only 15,000 of 200,000 industrial workers remained in their employment (Stevanović 2011). In Serbia, around 65% of firms were shut down soon after they were privatised, and 75% of workers were made redundant (Pešić 2012: 349). In addition, (largely high-ranking) party members became employers, thus combining control over means of production with their hold on means of political domination. From 1998 to 2010, membership of trade union organisations dropped from 50% to 33% of all workers; at the end of the 2000s, only around 12% of workers in the private sector were trade unionists. At the same time, around 600,000 workers were employed on the black market or unregulated parts of the economy (Musić 2013: 26, 39).

128 /

Systemic deindustrialisation (ibid.: 29–33) and large-scale subsidies coupled with high interest rates for foreign investments went hand in hand, Serbia's economy has become highly import-oriented. In 2002, the country's four biggest domestic banks were shut down, and financial control was mostly handed over (specifically, in the form of around 80% of the financial sector) to foreign banks (ibid.: 29, 34).

Overall, this period in Serbia can be best analysed drawing on the neoliberal shock doctrine and through the prism of disaster capitalism (Klein 2007). After the 2008/2009 economic crisis, the situation got even worse. Not only did foreign investments fall by around 50%, but in 2009, real-terms GDP was -4.1%. The unemployment rate was around 20%, and there were 370,000 fewer workers in employment in 2010 than in 2008. Moreover, 1 invoices of 57,000 firms were blocked as a result of unpaid debts (Musić 2013:

35f.). The catastrophic economic situation in Serbia prompted protests across the country. Workers from hundreds of firms went on strike in the course of 2009 (ibid.: 42–46). Ljubisav Orbović, the president of Serbia’s largest trade union confederation, the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions of Serbia (CATUS), called this series of protests by workers “the insurrection of the army of hungry, poor citizens, deprived of rights” (b92 2010).

THE RISE TO POWER AND THE SUCCESS OF THE SOFT AUTHORITARIAN VISION

HUNGARY

The 2010 elections culminated in a landslide victory for Viktor Orbán and *Fidesz*. The campaign was mostly focused on the issue of law and order: “A strong state – a strong government – a strong Hungary”. On the one hand, the *Fidesz* campaign promised that the corrupt politicians of the 2000s would be sanctioned and that the new government would break with what it called short-term private interest and moral nihilism. The other important political message was that there would also be a severe crackdown on ‘subsistence crime’ (which might be interpreted as referring to Roma petty crime). *Fidesz* did not plan to provide generous social benefits; instead, it announced that those depending on social security would be moved over to the public work(s) scheme or system.¹⁷ As for other social issues featured in the campaign, there was a significant emphasis on family values, creating 1 million new jobs and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (Magyar Narancs 2010). We must not forget that after 2002, *Fidesz* “opposed privatisation and “the market-friendly transformation of the health system” (Körösényi et al. 2003). In terms of ideology, *Fidesz*’s rise to power can be attributed to a complex conjunction of rhetoric targeted at an “elite” of “left-liberal” politicians and businesspeople and a doctrine focused on law and order and moving against marginalised communities. On the other hand, *Fidesz* offered a solution to the economic problems of the 2000s, more precisely to middle-class citizens’ fear of being declassed – and this provides the explanatory context for its quasi-leftist tendency to cling to some of the remains of the welfare state.

17 For more information about this framework (variously called the “public work(s) scheme”, “public work(s) system” or “public employment system”) in Hungary, see Koltai et al. (2012) and Belügyminisztérium – Közfoglalkoztatási portál (s.d.) from the Hungarian Ministry of Interior’s Public Employment portal. It was introduced by the government as a way to get long-term unemployed and jobseekers back into work.

SERBIA

The catalyst for Aleksandar Vučić's electoral victory in 2012 was SNS members' split from the far-right Serbian Radical Party, accompanied by the adoption of moderate and pro-European political views. The Serbian Progressive Party's campaign promised a break from the 2000s: in particular, putting an end to partocracy, and "fighting corruption and organised criminality" (Nikčević 2012). The "fraudulent privatisation" narrative also became a cornerstone of the SNS's ideology, and this was complemented by smear campaigns directed at the previous administration, and especially the Democratic Party. Totemically, at the end of 2012, Miroslav Mišković, a Serbian business magnate and owner of Delta Holding – and indeed regarded as the wealthiest Serb at that time – was arrested (however, he was released from custody soon afterwards, and most of the charges against him were dropped). Other political messaging also played a key role. Vučić announced that Serbia would probably be an EU Member State by 2022 (Cvejić 2016). Fiscal consolidation and infrastructural development were also vital aspects of the campaign. While an increase in the state pension was at the heart of the 2012 campaign, in 2016 a pay rise for workers in the education sector and the health system was the leading social issue.

130 /

HUNGARY AND SERBIA IN THE 2010s – A COMPARISON OF TWO AUTHORITARIAN DYNAMICS

In this section we will focus on the similarities between the Hungarian and Serbian regimes in the 2010s. We will rely on a political phenomenology that refuses to describe these regimes as purely dictatorial, contrary to a conceptually unfounded, but still widely held, rationale – see, for instance, Bakó (2020), Gábor (2021), Márki-Zay (2021), Direktno.rs (2020) and Politika (2017) – and offer instead a more balanced approach that emphasises the ambiguities of electoral/competitive/soft authoritarianism.

The global trend towards the spread of soft authoritarianism followed a long process of democratisation. The so-called third wave of democratisation began in the 1970s in Portugal, Spain and Greece and was reinforced by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The dismantling of one-party structures, the differentiation of the civil society and the state, the rise of competitive multi-party systems, and so on radically changed the political scene in many countries. The 1990s were marked by a high level of optimism regarding the triumph

of so-called liberal democracy. For instance, according to Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2005* report (Freedom House 2005), the number of "Free" countries increased to 89 (with an additional 30 states being classified as electoral democracies with serious deficiencies in terms of the rule of law).

However, even back in 1997, Fareed Zakaria's well-known article *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy* (Zakaria 1997) pointed to a new authoritarian tendency in countries like Peru, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Slovakia. According to him, in many countries multi-party elections provide no guarantee of actual political liberty. In other words, maintaining the formalities of the liberal representative system can be combined with a political strategy that eliminates or limits civic and political rights, further distorts the neutrality of the state, and excludes or restricts institutions that could have served as a counterbalance to political arbitrariness, while there is unequal access to public resources, and so on. Within these new authoritarian systems, democracy is not abolished altogether – instead, it is 'hacked', i.e. authoritarian forces transform the political sphere by creating an unbalanced situation in terms of competition where elections are anything but fair (electoral rules are manipulated, public media are monopolised, the opposition is bribed, or even the ruling party creates its own opposition, etc.). The maintenance of formal mechanisms goes hand in hand with the misuse of loopholes and informal influence.

These authoritarian regimes are not purely dictatorial (unlike the overtly violent and repressive regimes of, for instance, Saudi Arabia, North Korea or Belarus). Instead, they have a transitional system between democracy and pure dictatorship, and so are often called 'hybrid' regimes. Today, there are more than 50 regimes that are regularly labelled as 'hybrid', including Armenia, Georgia, Botswana, Gabon, Senegal and Cambodia. The authoritarian tendency was further aggravated by certain global phenomena. One of them is the gradual evaporation of the hegemony of the United States, and the increasingly significant role of China, Russia, Iran and other countries. The intensification of geopolitical competition puts additional pressure on many states. Furthermore, the 2008/2009 economic and financial crisis posed new challenges for liberal representative governments, throwing its socially devastating effects into particularly stark relief. Some other forms of crisis (the ecological crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.) have also contributed to the rise and consolidation of authoritarian regimes. In our opinion, both Hungary and Serbia's

authoritarian regimes can be understood only by taking into consideration these wider global tendencies.

One might ask what the relationship is between the decline of liberal representative governments and the rise of authoritarian regimes. In theory, it could be that these two regime types are diametrically opposed to each other, i.e. the authoritarian tendencies are the result of a widespread mistrust for authentic political ideas and institutional practices.

However, many other alternative interpretations have been offered by political analysts. At the very least, one might suggest that liberal systems are inherently weak and fragile, i.e. they are necessarily exposed to illiberal tendencies. There have also been claims that the hybrid regimes emerged against the backdrop of political systems that were only nominally democratic, or, more specifically, in which the formalities of multi-party elections did not go hand in hand with substantive, participatory democracy. For instance, many analysts of the Hungarian hybrid regime, such as Antal (2013), Antal (2017), Ágh (2013), Rauschenberger (2013), Krastev (2016) and Böcskei (2016), suggest that its predecessors in the 1990s were overly technocratic and depoliticised society.

132 /

At a more general level, one might even come to the conclusion that, as has been demonstrated by many critical analyses, liberal representative governments themselves are in no way incompatible with authoritarian regimes.¹⁸ Thus, the rise of authoritarian regimes, not only in Hungary and Serbia but also more widely, raises important questions for the dominant political status quo in the West. However, the specific features of soft authoritarian regimes deserve particular attention.

First, hybrid authoritarian regimes rarely use overt repression. Specifically, they do not tend to simply ban opposition parties, NGOs or alternative media. The cost of these kinds of actions would outweigh the benefits, as behaving in this way might undermine the legitimacy of the system and, at the same time, could spark nationwide resistance. Filippov (2018) puts it as follows:

Restriction “to the extent necessary” is always more effective and sustainable than a complete ban. [...] Commanding a sufficient legislative majority, [those in power] can take over or hollow out the other key institutions of control: the

18 See, for instance, Neocleous (2008) and Losurdo (2014).

prosecutorial and judicial systems, the media regulator, electoral bodies, the central bank, the state audit office, and so on.

Accordingly, in theory, both the Hungarian and the Serbian regimes can be strongly and openly criticised; however, such criticism usually turns out to be ineffective. These tendencies are most obvious when it comes to media pluralism. In Hungary, outside Budapest the printed media are entirely under the influence of *Fidesz* (Magyar Narancs 2017), and many independent media outlets, such as *Népszabadság* and Index.hu, have been merged into other organisations or bought up or shut down by the ruling party – see, for instance, BBC News (2016) – and thus the situation is more like an information monopoly.

The situation is similar in Serbia, where state broadcasters “do not comply with the expected obligations regarding programme content” (Đurić / Dobrilović 2019: 43). The state media are openly one-sided and full of fake news, and journalists working for other media outlets are often humiliated or threatened. According to Media Associations (2018), research has shown that “public broadcasters are places from which public dialogue and critical thinking have been ousted and [...] their news programmes are dramatically dominated by the executive authorities”. Television channels with a national frequency have been placed under the complete control of those in power or openly pro-government owners and journalists (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia s.d.). Accordingly, in recent years, Serbia has slipped down the worldwide media freedom rankings compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) – in 2020, Serbia was 93rd, 34 places below where the country stood in 2016 (Maksimović 2020a).

Moreover, both the Hungarian and the Serbian regimes have done much to curb academic freedom. Central European University (CEU) announced that it was leaving Budapest after a confrontation with the Orbán government and the latter’s implementation of its Lex CEU (Deák 2017).¹⁹ The Orbán government also stripped the Hungarian Academy of Sciences of its autonomous research centres, placing them under the aegis of a government-controlled body (Inotai 2019).²⁰ The Serbian government launched a similarly authori-

19 The Hungarian government tabled an amendment to the Act on National Higher Education in the National Assembly that actually uses legal chicanery to force CEU to shut down its activities in Budapest and, for example, in a clearly unacceptable move, to open a new campus in New York State.

20 For a broader perspective, see Labanino and Dobbins (2020).

tarian attack on the University of Belgrade's Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory (IFDT) in 2019/2020 (European Western Balkans 2020c). To sum up, these authoritarian regimes rarely use outright prohibition and instead prefer to adopt alternative soft strategies of reorganising, monopolising, and so on.

Second, so-called democratic institutions are no obstacle to these authoritarian regimes; on the contrary, they are considered to be exploitable resources – elections lend them strong legitimacy (Džihic / Günay 2016). In Serbia, indeed, four parliamentary elections (2012, 2014, 2016 and 2020) confirmed a majority of the public's support for the SNS, and, furthermore, before the formation of the government in 2020, Vučić announced that Serbia would hold parliamentary elections again in 2022, which, according to Dragojlo (2020), experts saw as his attempt to repair his damaged legitimacy and his party's prospects in the 2022 Belgrade city elections. Thus, a stabilitocracy is somewhat paradoxically combined with a political-ideological "strategy of tension" and forced mobilisation. Both the Serbian and the Hungarian regimes prefer plebiscitarian communication. Thus, it is no coincidence that certain authors label the Orbán regime a "plebiscitarian leader democracy".²¹

134 /

The Orbán government regularly holds so-called national consultations for opinion-polling purposes, with questions being sent out to every household (Inotai 2020c), while Vučić has repeatedly stressed that he is ready to communicate face to face with anybody, including ordinary citizens; in 2016, he promised to meet citizens once a week in his office – a promise which was however only briefly kept (Insajder 2019b).

Besides trying to create a spirit of national consensus and cohesion (according to Orbán, quoted in Kovács (2019), the "homeland cannot be in opposition"), these regimes strongly influence the activities of the opposition parties, as they oscillate between marginalising or destroying those who are dangerous to their political monopoly and encouraging those who pose no real threat to them. For instance, in Hungary, the State Audit Office (ÁSZ) fined the conservative party Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) for illicit party financing. Vass (2019) reports that "ÁSZ's [...] activities [had] generated controversy, as according to critics, they increasingly serve[d] Fidesz's interests and undermine[d] democracy and [the] rule of law". At the same time, *Fidesz* made room in government-controlled media for *Mi Hazánk* (Our Homeland),

21 See, for instance, Kőrösenyi et al. (2020).

set up by ex-members of Jobbik as a more “authentic” right-wing rival for their former party (Political Capital 2019).

Having said all that, one might conclude that these regimes use democracy as an exploitable resource, while diminishing its truly pluralistic dimensions. However, we should add that a wide range of voter mobilisation strategies are deployed. According to philosopher and intellectual Gáspár Miklós Tamás, speaking in an interview with the weekly magazine *Magyar Narancs*’s Szilárd Teczár, “there are no parties in Hungary in the sense of movements. [...] *Fidesz*-KDNP is a novel mixture of quasi-state apparatuses and semi-autonomous business structures, not a party” (Teczár 2017).

In contrast to the erosion of mainstream parties and their membership in Hungary, the Serbian Progressive Party had 750,000 members in 2020 (nova.rs 2020), making it the largest party in Europe (mondo.rs 2019). This meant that one Serb in nine was a member of the ruling party (nova.rs 2020), reflecting the fact that party patronage is crucial in securing a job for oneself or for family members and also entails other privileges (in terms of taxation, rent, etc.).²²

Third, repressive state apparatuses have an ambivalent role in these authoritarian regimes. Filippov (2018) sets the scene in these terms:

In a hybrid regime operating in a democratic setting, members of the opposition are not terrorised by the police or party militias but by “civilian” security services, ultras or youth organisations, who are formally independent of the government. Thus, responsibility for political violence can be deflected from the state, which can look on as a bystander and characterise as grassroots social conflict the repression which it has stirred up and which serves its own interests.

In brief, violence is outsourced in order to maintain the government’s democratic legitimacy. For instance, in 2016, a large group of hooligan-like men prevented members of the Hungarian Socialist Party from submitting a referendum initiative to the National Election Office (Székely 2016). Later, it was revealed that the ultras were in fact operatives of Ferencvárosi Torna Club’s security firm, directly connected to the president of this sports club who was also a member of the Hungarian National Assembly and vice-president of *Fidesz* (ATV 2016).

22 For a broader perspective, see Pavlović (2019a).

Another example from Serbia might also be instructive here. As part of the so-called Belgrade Waterfront urban renewal project that is headed up by the Serbian government and is supposed to transform the Savamala district (the second largest mixed-use complex under construction in Europe at the time these lines were originally written in late 2020), “[a] whole street was demolished without prior notice by masked men using heavy machinery. By destroying the buildings, they opened the way for a contested, UAE-financed ‘Belgrade Waterfront’ luxury real estate project” (Euractiv 2016).

However, overt violence is meted out in certain extreme cases. For instance, in 2020 there were mass demonstrations against the government’s handling of lockdown, in which “people [were] hurt and arrested, and even attacked by the police for no obvious reason”, and opposition leaders were injured as well (European Western Balkans 2020b). Both Hungary and Serbia are spending huge sums on militarisation. For instance, the Orbán regime was the biggest buyer of German military hardware in 2019 (Deutsche Welle 2019a), and there were reports of further massive military transactions in 2020 (Kerner 2020). Vučić also announced a further expensive weapons purchase in 2020 (Zorić 2020). He has made it clear on multiple occasions that there is no military force in the region that is comparable with the Serbian Armed Forces (Politika 2017). In addition, Defence Minister Aleksandar Vulin has repeatedly said that Serbia might re-introduce compulsory military service (N1 2018). All of this is worrying in a region which was only recently ravaged by inter-ethnic conflicts and wars. Moreover, in recent years, the Serbian government has been linked to many international scandals, for instance covert exports of arms to Saudi Arabia (Deutsche Welle 2019b) and the weapons it supplied for use in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (Vuksanović 2020).

136 /

Further questions might be raised regarding the intelligence services. In Hungary, the national security law was amended repeatedly, leading critics to draw attention to the risk that Orbán’s legislation was paving the way for a kind of information police state (Hungarian Spectrum 2013). Furthermore, it seems that state intelligence services are partially being outsourced to the newly established private security company belonging to Lőrinc Mészáros, often referred to as the most corrupt man in Hungary (Botos 2020). This is also hugely problematic because private intelligence agencies are less easy to control and less accountable, and the profit-seeking motive can irrationally distort their activities (Losonczi 2020). In 2017, László Földi, the Orbán regime’s

favourite national security expert and a former adviser to the Mayor of Budapest from 2010 to 2019, István Tarlós, stated:

Right now, there is a war going on. These people [i.e. members of humanitarian civil organisations dealing with migrants] are collaborators, war criminals, traitors, and so on. [...] [T]hey can be liquidated immediately. This is martial law: we don't bring spies or saboteurs before the courts – we liquidate them straight away. (Erdelyi 2017)

On the other hand, in Serbia, the security-intelligence sector has been increasingly taken over by the SNS's authoritarian regime. Key positions in both the intelligence services and the institutional watchdogs (such as the Security Services Control Committee of the Serbian National Assembly, the Serbian 'Protector of Citizens' (i.e. the national ombudsperson), the State Audit Institution or the judiciary) are made up of party officials or their close associates. For instance, the head of the Security Information Agency (BIA) is Bratislav Gašić from the SNS, and the head of the Bureau for the Coordination of Security Services is also a party member – until October 2020 this position was held by Nebojša Stefanović and thereafter by Aleksandar Vulin. In short, both the intelligence services and the institutional watchdogs are under the monopolistic control of this party. Clientelism is omnipresent. Petrović (2020: 4) explains:

[T]he security services are now (increasingly) exceeding their powers and authority and are (increasingly) acting as a political police force. Protection of the constitutional order and counter-espionage have been transformed into protection of the party in power and the fight against internal enemies. Such security services either turn a blind eye to crime and corruption linked with party officials or become its protectors.

/ 137

Security services seem to help to consolidate political and economic power in various ways. For instance, they leak information to pro-government tabloid newspapers as part of a campaign against journalists who are critical of the government (Radivojević 2018). To give another example, the Serbian Protector of Citizens received a document from the Military Security Agency describing how the agency gathered intelligence on the Serbian Radical Party in 2015 (Protector of Citizens 2015). Apart from the abuse of power, what is most troubling are the interconnected clusters of illegal or even mafia-style activities, SNS officials and security-intelligence services (Krik 2019; Dojčinović / Pavlović 2019; Marković 2020).

Fourth, we have already mentioned that both regimes run smear campaigns against members of the opposition. Both political systems are highly polarised – in the case of Hungary, see, for instance, Bátor (2016) – and both Fidesz and the Serbian Progressive Party regularly target and stigmatise the most ambiguous opposition leaders, e.g. Ferenc Gyurcsány in Hungary²³ and Dragan Đilas in Serbia (Nenadović 2020). In keeping with Orbán’s words “the homeland cannot be in opposition”, opposition parties are often represented as enemies and traitors from within.²⁴ Moreover, the Orbán regime uses the psychology of enmity more broadly, i.e. campaigns are organised against various individuals or groups or key ideological messages are directed at them.

We have already mentioned the case of George Soros. According to opinion polls, in Hungary, 49% of people believe that Jews secretly run the world (Sirotnikova 2020).

In 2015, Hungary’s authoritarian regime erected border fences to stop the flow of migrants, and these anti-migrant policies were followed by a hard-hitting anti-immigration campaign (Nolan 2015). Ahead of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary was the least asylum seeker-friendly country in the European Union, with around 64% of Hungarian citizens having negative attitudes towards migrants from non-EU Member States (as opposed to an EU average of 44%) (Juhász et al. 2017).

138 /

Orbán has also been accused of anti-Gypsyism, i.e. of “seeking to mobilize his voters by targeting independent courts, the Roma minority, and the NGOs who help them” (Than 2020). A further campaign has been launched against the “‘jail business’, a term coined by government propagandists to refer to criminals who sue the state for huge sums in compensation, citing poor prison conditions” (Inotai 2020b), and the Orbán regime has also criminalised homelessness (Deutsche Welle 2018b). Finally, the Hungarian authoritarian regime has used new legislation and constitutional changes to limit LGBTQ+ people’s rights (Deutsche Welle 2020).

As mentioned previously, ideologically the Serbian authoritarian regime is on a completely different trajectory. Specifically, Vučić and other key party officials have mostly been gravitating from far-right positions to the political centre, as

23 See, for instance, Magyar Narancs (2014).

24 See, for instance, Magyar Nemzet (2020).

the Serbian Progressive Party has adapted to the European Union's expectations. Given that Serbia is still a candidate for accession to the EU, campaigns against internal or external marginalised groups are far less extensive than in Hungary. Furthermore, the Serbian regime has particularly focused on certain measures that could be regarded as progressive. For instance, in 2020, out of 21 cabinet members, 10 were women (N1 Belgrade 2020). Western media often concentrate on the fact that Serbia has an openly lesbian Prime Minister, although certain critiques have pointed out that this has had no significant impact on the status of the LGBTQ+ community in Serbia (Jenkin 2020).

Serbia started to put up a barbed-wire border fence to stem migrant flows in 2020, and the Serbian police is sometimes very aggressive towards migrants (Stojaković 2020). The Serbian state also seems to treat anti-migrant far-right protesters in the same way as humanist leftist demonstrators (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2020). Still, the situation is very different from the one in Hungary.

Serbia's position is much more delicate when it comes to regional matters, in particular the status of Serbian minorities in neighbouring countries: the relationship with Kosovo has not yet been normalised and Serbian influence can also have a very divisive and destabilising influence on Bosnia–Herzegovina (Battaglia 2019). Tensions have also been growing between Serbia and Montenegro, as a result of ecclesiastical disputes, the opening of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic and Montenegro's expulsion of the Serbian Ambassador to that country (Maksimović 2020b). In the case of Croatia, important steps have been made towards reconciliation, but Croatia continues to be severely criticised for not doing enough to protect its Serbian community. Therefore, significant tensions remain between the two countries (Vladisavljević 2019). To sum up, although Hungary also has rather tense relationships with some of its neighbours such as Romania or Ukraine (TRT World 2019), regional tensions are not as significant or as much of a politically mobilising factor in Hungary as they are in Serbia.

At the start of this section, we suggested that the Hungarian and Serbian governments are by no means isolated cases – in fact, these authoritarian regimes form part of wider global tendencies. All the key characteristics of hybrid regimes (the lack of overt repression, the limitation of institutional watchdogs, the use of democratic elections as exploitable resources, the outsourcing of violence, the sharp polarisation of the voting population, etc.) can be clearly found in the Orbán and Vučić regimes. The fact that these

political systems differ substantially from purely dictatorial regimes, indicates that many of the old opposition strategies (for instance, those used before the collapse of Soviet-type regimes) are outdated. It is certainly not enough to think only in terms of the replacement of the exponents of such hybrid regimes – the underlying structural foundations of the political systems should also be rethought and re-invented.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

HUNGARY

As suggested above, the Orbán regime was a response to a political and economic crisis. Before 2010, Hungary was a (semi-)peripheral country with neoliberal economic policies (low taxes, low wages, weak trade unions, etc.). The economic elites were above all competing for investments from transnational capital. According to Gábor Scheiring, two basic mechanisms were lacking in this framework: the developmental state (with a system of state industrial politics, investments in scientific research, systematic imports of technology, etc.) and the welfare state (ensuring equal opportunities in education, a socially just health system, etc.) (Scheiring 2019: 36–39). *Fidesz* offered a nationalist alternative of the state that would defend citizens from malignant domestic or foreign influences, i.e. “there was a promise of cultural stability instead of the uncertainties of globalisation” (Pogátsa 2020).

140 /

In a certain sense, *Fidesz* has been economically successful. First and foremost, it has reduced unemployment rates. According to official data, there were overall 800,000 more employed workers after 2010 than in the previous two terms of government, meaning that Hungary had the third highest employment growth rate in the European Union. By 2019, the unemployment rate was around 3.7% – even in the poorer eastern parts of Hungary (Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) 2019). At the same time, the number of workers employed by the state has fallen significantly. However, according to critics of the system, unemployment benefits are minimal and are only paid out for a very short period (three months, the shortest such period in the European Union). It is also telling that, nominally, unemployment benefits have been turned into ‘jobseeker benefits’. For these benefits to be extended, claimants must register for public work,²⁵ for which wages are no more than €150 per month, while those who have only registered receive just €63 per month.

25 See footnote 17 above.

In Orbán's so-called work-based society, "provision [for] the unemployed has become virtually non-existent and thus large sections of Hungarian society have been [...] ejected and rejected" (Veres 2019). Előd (2020) indicates that the aim of the whole system is to encourage people to find a job for themselves, without relying on the helping hand of the state. Proportionally, only 0.3% of GDP is spent on unemployment benefits. By April 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of unemployed people in Hungary had gone beyond 400,000 (Trademagazin 2020), i.e. more than 10% of the population. Despite the severe effects of the pandemic, there have been only slight increases in the unemployment budget. Based on National Employment Service data, around half of unemployed people receive no financial support (and around 200,000 people have no income) (Béresné / Maklári 2021). The official data are often manipulated; for instance, those who lose their jobs are often categorised not as "unemployed" but as "inactive" (on the basis that they are supposedly not actively seeking a job). The actual number of unemployed people might be double the official figures (Kovács 2021).

Fidesz has also tried to reduce Hungary's external financial vulnerability. Specifically, in 2012, the Orbán government flatly rejected the conditions attached by the IMF to a new €15-billion loan (BBC News 2012) – a step which has been frequently praised even by leftist critics of the Orbán regime. Moreover, *Fidesz* has consistently increased the minimum wage (in February 2021, it stood at 167,400 Hungarian forints, or – at the exchange rate applying at the time – €461 (gross) per month), as well as supporting citizens through the foreign-currency loan crisis (as loans were converted at below-market prices, partly at the expense of the banking sector). Some of these measures could be interpreted as slightly progressive.²⁶

/ 141

However, one might argue that the economic policies of the Orbán regime are still extremely neoliberal: for instance, it introduced a flat rate of taxation (thus favouring those on higher incomes), inflicted significant damage on what remained of welfare policies, established a harmful workfare programme and protected offshore activities (Tóth / Virovác 2013). Social issues have been aggravated by the introduction of the so-called slave law that enables employers to demand up to 400 hours of overtime per year (Deutsche Welle 2018a).

26 Take, for instance, the issue of cuts in fees for public utilities described in The Orange Files (2013a).

Furthermore, financial incentives for foreign investment have doubled during *Fidesz's* time in power (and the annual average productivity for domestically owned companies was only one third of that for multinational companies in Hungary). The Orbán regime has not managed to transform the Hungarian economy into a system that has more domestically owned firms with high value-added exportable products. However, the party has systematically helped to increasingly line the pockets of the country's elites, this capital being bound up above all with "casinos, wholesale trade and major land holdings" (Új Egyenlőség 2017).

While the upper class (the top 10–20% of the population) have profited from the new economic policies, the lower classes have been neglected. This is especially obvious in the case of the health system (3% less of GDP than the EU average has been spent on the health system) or education (with 3.9% of GDP being spent on education while the EU average was 6.5%).²⁷ Sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge calls these phenomena a "perverse redistribution" system (Makki / Mondovics 2016), while others emphasise the fact that the Hungarian regime can be characterised as presenting an authoritarian version of neoliberal capitalism (Fabry 2014; Szalai 2018; Szalai 2019; Pogátsa 2019; Scheiring 2020).

142 /

The negative effects of this kind of neoliberal politics were especially evident during the coronavirus pandemic. The catastrophic state of the health system meant that at one point Hungary was the world's worst-hit country, having the highest number of deaths per capita from COVID-19 (Simon 2021).

SERBIA

Apart from North Macedonia (from 2008 to 2017), no country has experienced a more radical shift to authoritarianism in the Western Balkans than Serbia (from 2012/2014 to now). The authoritarian regime of the Serbian Progressive Party is pursuing neoliberal policies even more brazenly (Pavlović 2019b; Balunović 2019) than *Fidesz* in Hungary. There is no doubt that certain significant changes have also been in evidence in Serbian economic policy. For instance, Serbia has managed to bring down public debt, and its public finances have also become much more sustainable. Indeed, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has praised Serbia's fiscal adjustment measures and the fact that the country has outperformed

27 As for the consequences, see Hungarian Free Press (2016).

expectations. However, levels of inequality in Serbia are greater than in any EU Member State and indeed among the highest in Europe overall, alongside North Macedonia and Turkey (Aradarenko et al. 2017), and the gap between the *nouveaux riches* and ordinary citizens is growing all the time.

There is hardly any social mobility. The reasons for this are manifold. While we have argued that economic policies during the 2000s caused great harm socially, the situation under the Serbian Progressive Party after 2012, and especially after 2014, has got even worse – from 2012 to 2013, Vučić was only Minister of Defence and First Deputy Prime Minister, but many analysts, e.g. De Launey (2014), have suggested that he had the most de facto influence in government as the leader of the largest party, the SNS. The role of neoliberalism is most obvious in the case of the Labour Law adopted in 2014. The leftist critique is that this legislation made the Serbian labour force extremely vulnerable by enabling arbitrary changes to employment contracts, deregulating overtime and payment reduction, and reducing the influence of trade unions to the absolute minimum (Jovanović 2014). There were nationwide protests against the Labour Law and a general strike with 1 million participants. However, the protests against these measures proved ineffective.

Furthermore, the Vučić regime cut public sector wages (by 22–25%) and pensions (by 10%). Serbia introduced neoliberal austerity measures at the behest of the IMF. As Pavlović (2019b: 679) explains, “Serbia devalued the dinar (so-called external devaluation) [in 2009–2010], which enabled [a] less painful adjustment to the supply shock, which is probably why it had to go for the most radical austerity reform in the region in 2014–2018”. Looked at from a broader perspective, what we see here in the Serbian case is what Živković (2013) calls “the typical neoliberal medicine of opening up to foreign capital, privatisation of state industries and public services, liberalisation of labour markets, and tight control over monetary policy”. Since 2013, the employment of new workers in the public sector has been banned (b92 2013). On the other hand, employment very much depends on political patronage and clientelism. Those who got their jobs through political channels are under the strict control of the Serbian Progressive Party. Official propaganda made out that unemployment reached a historic low in 2021 (namely 9.9%). However, these data are often accused of being one-sided and manipulated.²⁸

28 See, for instance, Obradović (2020).

Other neoliberal policies that characterise the Serbian Progressive Party's rule include increasing privatisation, the commodification of education, unlimited subsidies for foreign investors and the transformation of urban space into an entrepreneurial and competitive zone, as in the case of the Belgrade Waterfront project (Jovanović / Škobić 2014; Radenković 2016; Simović 2016; Kostić 2016; Matković 2017; Dato 2018). Most of these so-called reforms were flagged by Vučić as "painful and necessary" corrections of the status quo.

Given all this, one might argue that the neoliberalism of the Vučić regime is merely the culmination of neoliberal policies in Serbia dating back many years. However, the disastrous economic effects of this are greater than in the past. Around 60,000 people have been leaving the country each year, with most of them migrating to Western European countries. Although Serbia's health system proved somewhat resistant to the challenge of the coronavirus crisis (the number of deaths seems relatively low compared with neighbouring countries, and Serbia's vaccine supply outstripped demand), the country was expected to face something of an economic dip in 2021 (1.8%). While this was less than the anticipated average hit to EU Member States' economies (around 7.5%), which might appear to offer Serbia a competitive advantage, there were very specific reasons for this.²⁹ On the one hand, Serbia's integration into global supply chains is minimal, thereby preventing the coronavirus crisis from overly affecting the country's economy. On the other hand, agriculture accounts for a substantial share of GDP (around 15%), and this economic sector, too, was only minimally impacted by the pandemic (Stevanović 2020).

144 /

THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

It would be wrong to suggest that the EU's (semi-)peripheral countries necessarily end up with authoritarian regimes. Although Orbán and his *Fidesz* party frequently make out 'Brussels' to be a purely colonial force, it is clear that the authoritarian shift in Hungary cannot be legitimised as a logical or necessary counterpoint to Western European policies, given that there are obviously also (semi-)peripheral countries where authoritarianism is not part of the political equation and so is not a cause for concern. In order to understand the rise of the new regimes in Hungary and Serbia, we have to bear in mind above all the

29 At the time this paper was finalised, in summer 2022, according to Danas (2022), Serbia's economic growth rate was 3.8%, which is attributed to the war in Ukraine, among other factors.

internal political and economic dynamics of these countries. However, this does not detract from the fact that the complexity of *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party's strategy and of how they acted was at least partially a response to the expectations and pressure of the objective challenges posed by international actors, especially the EU. We believe that this influence was often counterproductive, contradictory or sometimes distinctly negative. Criticism of authoritarian governments, as provided by the EU, should never be used as institutional blackmail that could harm whole societies.

HUNGARY

Hungary submitted its EU membership application in 1994 and accession negotiations started in 1998 (in fact, diplomatic relations with the European Community – i.e. the forerunner of the European Union – were established even earlier, back in 1988). The country joined the EU in 2004 together with seven other Central and Eastern European countries and two Mediterranean states. Although Hungary's accession was part of a wider enlargement process, the country was often deemed a special candidate because there was no real questioning of the West-facing orientation in its public sphere during the 1990s (unlike in Poland and Czechia³⁰). Furthermore, Hungary was often perceived as a model country in that it rolled out one of the most radical economic reform programmes in post-communist Eastern Europe and is considered to have had an exemplary transition to democracy.

/ 145

Hungary was also among those candidate countries who led the way in terms of completing chapters of the EU *acquis*, i.e. the body of existing European Union law (the most difficult chapters had to do with reforms in agriculture and financial and budgetary provisions). A referendum on joining the EU was held in Hungary in 2003, in which 83.8% of the electorate voting 'yes' (well above Poland's 75% and Czechia's 62%). Although the MSZP was the governing party at that time, previously *Fidesz* – especially during its time in government from 1998 to 2002 – had played a significant role in moving forward the accession process. Indeed, in 1994, *Fidesz* unequivocally stated that Hungary's integration into the European Union as soon as possible was the party's primary foreign-policy objective.

However, during the 1990s the rhetoric of *Fidesz* – Hungarian Civic Party (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Párt*), as it was known at the time, on Europe and

30 Here we use the Czech Republic's official short name.

the EU changed. This shifted to a conservative position, grounded in cultural attitudes and increasingly opposed to the 'technocratic' approach represented by other parties.

Thus, for instance, Orbán warned that EU membership might put thousands of Hungarian farmers out of business. *Fidesz's* soft Euroscepticism during the 2000s was replaced by strong tensions between the party ideology and what was portrayed as the establishment in Brussels. Certain analysts, such as Johnson and Barnes (2015), emphasise the role of austerity measures required by the EU in the rise of the Orbán regime. *Fidesz* wanted to see a reduction in Brussels bureaucracy, a simplification of EU regulations, and so on. This kind of rhetoric reached its height in 2012 when Orbán "accused the EU of colonialism and meddling in his country's domestic affairs" (Pop 2012) after restrictions were imposed on EU funds as a result of Hungary's budget deficit and constitutional amendments. This announcement of restrictions was followed by large-scale demonstrations with the slogan "We will not be a colony!" (FEOL 2012).

146 /

Then in 2019, *Fidesz* used anti-Brussels billboards funded by the Hungarian state to accuse Jean-Claude Juncker – the then European Commission President – and George Soros of an immigration-fuelled conspiracy against European civilisation. The message on these billboards read "You also have the right to know what Brussels is up to" (Szakács 2019). Opinion polls show that in 2020, *Fidesz* voters believed that the European Union was Hungary's most dangerous political partner (Joób 2020).

The tensions between the European Union and *Fidesz* go back a long way. In 2013, the European Parliament adopted the Tavares report criticising the new Hungarian Constitution and its amendments for violating certain basic principles and rights. Special attention was paid to judicial reforms, reform of the electoral system, the lack of independence of the publicly owned media and the criminalisation of homelessness (The Orange Files 2013b; European Parliament 2013; Norwegian Helsinki Committee 2013).

Subsequently, in 2018, the so-called Sargentini report (European Parliament 2017) was adopted by the European Parliament. The report drew attention to the erosion of democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights in Hungary. It even invoked Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, i.e. the strongest action the EU can take against a Member State when then latter

breaches certain basic principles. Apart from concerns already raised by the Tavares report, the Sargentini report highlighted the abuse of migrants, corruption – see Fazekas and Tóth (2016) – and the inadequacy of privacy and data protection (Köves 2018).

In 2019, the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP) group in the European Parliament suspended *Fidesz* following accusations that the latter had breached the rule of law (News Wires 2019). Then in 2020, the EPP called for a vote on the expulsion of *Fidesz*’s Tamás Deutsch, the leader of its Hungarian contingent, when he compared EPP leader Manfred Weber with the Gestapo and the ÁVH, the Hungarian State Protection Authority from 1945 to 1956 (Euronews 2020). Further tensions arose that year when the Hungarian government blocked “the EU’s €1.8 trillion budget-and-recovery package – [...] held hostage due to their opposition to a planned new mechanism linking EU money to respect for rule of law criteria” (Bayer 2020a). Ultimately, a compromise delayed the implementation of the protection of the rule of law and anti-corruption mechanisms (ibid.).

In order to understand the full complexity of Hungarian–EU relations, we have to take into consideration other factors, such as the financial assistance provided to Hungary by the European Union, Hungarian public opinion about the EU, and, finally, the negative effects of the reports mentioned above. Hungary has often received vital balance-of-payment assistance from the EU. Moreover, in spite of *Fidesz*’s anti-EU rhetoric, Hungary is one of the main beneficiaries of EU funding (only Czechia and Slovakia have received proportionally more funds than Hungary): in the words of Spike (2016), “Hungary was the third-highest recipient of European Union money in the 28-member bloc between 2008–2015 [...]. [...] the European Investment Bank gave almost EUR 1 billion more to Hungary than Hungary had paid into the bank in the given period”. During the 2010s, between 2.5% and 3% of Hungary’s GDP came from the EU budget (Kovacevic 2019). In 2015, the EU budget accounted for as much as 4.38% of Hungarian GDP (that year Hungary received €470 per capita).

It is estimated that between 2007 and 2020, the EU provided Hungary with €22.5 billion in funding for the country’s economic development and innovation programme (including the renovation of infrastructure and of cultural heritage). Furthermore, in spite of official *Fidesz* propaganda, according to which the EU was simply inefficient and had been unwilling to help Hungary during the

COVID-19 pandemic, the country was given €320 million to support small and medium-sized enterprises.

Certain EU financial packages were made more flexible to cope with the crisis. Hungary received an additional €26.5 million from the EU Solidarity Fund in 2020, and it is expected that even more financial support will follow in the years ahead (Magyari 2021). Given the high level of anti-EU propaganda, it is somewhat surprising that Hungarian public support for EU membership peaked in recent years, reaching around 85% in 2020 (even 77% of *Fidesz* voters were supportive) (HVG 2020). In addition, around 60% of the Hungarian public back extending the competence of the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), i.e. they would support an institution that would investigate the misuse of EU funds and corruption.

SERBIA

Negotiations between Serbia and the European Union about the accession process were stepped up after the removal of Milošević's authoritarian regime from power in 2000/2001, bringing an end to the country's political and economic isolation. Serbia officially applied for EU membership in 2009, and it became a candidate country in 2012 as part of the EU's plans for future enlargement (together with other countries from the region: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Turkey). On 19 December 2009, visa requirements were lifted for Serbs travelling to Schengen countries (which incidentally also sped up migration to Western Europe). At the time of writing, the accession negotiations are still ongoing, and the country is receiving significant development assistance (by 2020, Serbia had benefited from support worth €2.9 billion from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance). The EU is by far the biggest donor to Serbia, and the Serbian government's cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague during the 2000s was a key factor in the accession process.

However, the country has faced many major challenges in its relations with the EU (Ministry of European Integration 2020; European Parliament 2019). Right from the start of negotiations, one of the main obstacles to Serbia's accession to the EU was its strained relationship with Kosovo, given the Serbs' refusal to recognise its sovereignty (Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia in 2008), despite the fact that as recently as 2021 that the normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo was highlighted as a priority

and a prerequisite for EU accession. While Serbia's "claims regarding Kosovo will continue to take precedence over any potential prospects for accession" (Pérez 2020), the EU is trying to get to the heart of the problem. Demostat (2018) reports that a 2017 opinion poll showed that 69% of Serbs claimed that they would not support joining the EU if recognising the independence of Kosovo were made a precondition for accession.

According to the *Serbia 2020 Report*, there are major deficiencies in terms of Serbia meeting the EU's accession criteria, saying that while "[s]topping short of calling it a captured state, the Report describes a serious lack of progress in judicial reform, the de-politi[c]isation of public administration, and the freedom of expression, while the oversight of [...] Parliament over the executive is described as barely formalistic. Corruption remains a cause [for] concern" (Majstorović 2020).

Apart from political concerns, serious issues have been raised about Serbia's economic policies (ibid.).³¹ Criticism focuses for example on the lack of fully fair and pluralistic elections and institutional mechanisms. For instance, after the 2020 elections, the Serbian National Assembly was left without a clear and viable opposition (the Serbian Progressive Party's dominance was uncontested – it had 188 of the 250 seats and no real opposition), and the government was formed by the ruling coalition commanding an overwhelming majority in the National Assembly (the main opposition parties boycotted the elections).

/ 149

Furthermore, "Serbia's foreign policy is least adjusted to the EU common foreign policy positions. [...] It [is 60% aligned with] the EU positions on the various foreign policy themes, which range from Venezuela to Belarus" (Bandović 2021), in contrast to Montenegro and North Macedonia's 90–93%. Serbia even expressed an interest in joint Russian–Belarusian military exercises. Taken together, despite supposedly being a frontrunner in the accession process, from the EU's perspective Serbia is seen in many respects as lacking any real drive for reform and falling short in terms of tangible results, especially with regard to basic democratic principles and the rule of law (BIEPAG 2017). By 2021, while enthusiasm for the EU in Serbia had waned, a narrow majority of Serbs (around 54%) continued to support EU membership (European Western Balkans 2021).

31 See also Stevanović (2018), European Commission (2020) and EU Delegation to the Republic of Serbia (2020).

However, both the EU and Serbia have become less committed to the accession process. On the one hand, Pérez (2020) reports that “[t]he EU’s ongoing identity crisis has motivated countries like France and the Netherlands to seek a slower approach to accession for candidates from the Western Balkans”. On the other hand, he indicates that there is a “political realisation that the status quo is well worth preserving”, points to “[i]ncreasing assistance from Beijing and [...] strong political backing from Moscow – two allies that will not demand domestic compliance with human rights standards in return for support” and says that “Serbia can additionally flirt with Russia and China and use this as a bargaining chip with the EU” (ibid.).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, President Vučić encouraged a narrative of victimisation by Brussels by (falsely) suggesting that Serbia was receiving significantly more aid from China (and that European solidarity was some kind of ‘fairy tale’). Symptomatic of this was that 40% of Serbian citizens believed that China was Serbia’s biggest aid donor (ibid.). Furthermore, according to a 2020 public opinion poll, 75% of the population thought that China had been by far Serbia’s biggest provider of assistance in fighting the pandemic (Ivković 2021).

150 /

The country’s “[o]ppportunistic swings between Russia, China and the EU”, as Bandović (2021) describes them, will surely become even more pronounced in the years ahead. To sum up, then, Serbia’s commitment to the EU is more uncertain than it has been at any time since 2000.

Unsurprisingly, there is very close cooperation between the Orbán and Vučić regimes. The Hungarian government strongly supports the Serbian EU accession process, and Serbia is taking important steps to help the Hungarian minority living in Serbia, for instance, by allowing the privately owned Prosperitati Foundation to channel Hungarian government-backed funds to Hungarians from Serbia (Keller-Alant 2020). There is also significant infrastructure cooperation, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway project (Inotai 2020a). Moreover, the Hungarian governing and economic elite is expanding its economic influence in Southeast Europe, including Serbia. According to András Juhász, “the expansion of Orbán’s influence will hurt all those who want to bring about a progressive politics in the region. This is because [...] it is only the right who benefits from the Orbán government’s money” (Juhász 2019).

THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF EU POLITICS

As is well known, the European Union itself is also frequently criticised for not being democratic enough, i.e. as an institution that has to be reformed – see, for instance, Fernández (2013) and Door (2013). Instead of simply using a paternalistic carrot-and-stick approach with regard to authoritarian countries such as Hungary and Serbia, which is lacking in coherence, expediency and effectiveness, EU Member States could serve as models only insofar as they are themselves at the forefront of promoting more civic engagement and a wider democratisation process that also embraces the economic sphere.

The EU has certainly made many significant blunders in the past two decades: (a) its failure to criticise Hungary or Serbia's undemocratic and socially damaging regimes during the 2000s; (b) its ineffectiveness and/or hesitancy for the most part in commenting on the authoritarian *Fidesz* and Serbian Progressive Party regimes; (c) its frequent encouragement of neoliberal policies that were socially damaging to the Hungarian and Serbian populations (a strategy which has very substantially contributed to alienation from the EU). As mentioned above, in the case of Hungary, the implementation of the rule-of-law mechanism was postponed as recently as 2020, prompting Orbán to declare a “victory of common sense” (Spike 2020).

As for the Serbian government, in spite of its underperformance in terms of basic democratic principles and the lack of cross-party and public dialogue encouraged by the EU, the Vučić regime continues to attract strong support and praise from EU ambassadors and representatives (European Western Balkans 2020a; Djilas 2020). Certain key critical voices and investigative journalists suggest that the symbolically generous and forgiving attitude shown to Hungary has been due to the close relations between the German federal government and its Hungarian counterpart (Panyi 2020; Techet 2020). The situation seems to be similar for Serbia, given that, according to Development Agency of Serbia (RAS) (2020) data, Germany is the country's leading investor. Thus, the suspicion is that economic interests trump objections about democratic principles.

However, overall, the commitment of both Hungary and Serbia to the European Union is fragile and of a “tactical” nature. Both countries have very strong ties with the authoritarian Russian and Chinese governments (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty 2019). The Serbian case in particular seems to be a particularly sensitive one, given that “the EU has lost its momentum

in the Balkans and has let other powers fill the void. Now the Union has to compete with others over this part of Europe and makes concessions with the autocrats. The EU's conditionality policy lost both its stick and the carrot.[.] New players, China, Russia and other non-EU actors are benevolent towards undemocratic governance as long [as] it secures them economic expansion" (Bandović 2021). One might ask whether the EU will develop more tolerance for sallies into authoritarianism, in order to keep Serbia (and to some extent even Hungary) on board as a partner. Indeed, it is not inconceivable that the Serbian government will soon adopt an even more hostile and confrontational policy towards the EU, like the Orbán regime.

CONCLUSIONS

At the start of this chapter, we proposed an analytical framework that draws on both the political phenomenology of the relevant authoritarian regimes and the underlying social structures, focusing in particular on economic issues. We offered an approach that takes account of both the circumstances and the subjective responses to the objective challenges, and also the special political methods and economic strategies deployed by the elites.

152 /

We claimed that the Orbán and Vučić regimes have very different geneses. While Orbán and *Fidesz* moved away from a liberal ideology to a right-wing, conservative one, Vučić and his followers abandoned their far-right stance in favour of a position somewhere towards the political centre, in line with the expectations of their Western European partners.

We also suggested that the geneses of these authoritarian regimes can be very clearly explained by a critical analysis of the 2000s – in those years, both the Hungarian and the Serbian governing parties pursued policies that were both pretty undemocratic and socially disastrous. Thus, both Orbán and Vučić's authoritarian 'solutions' during the 2010s were very much a response to the crisis of the 2000s. We might argue that disillusioned voters turned to *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) to facilitate a different economic politics. Both *Fidesz* and the SNS insisted on creating a political vibe that diverged from that of the 2000s, and they both combined the promise of establishing law and order with socially sensitive political messaging.

However, in both countries, neoliberal economic policies are still in the ascendancy. Both Hungary and Serbia are in real crisis in terms of rising social inequalities and the degradation of education and the health system.

There are also significant similarities with regard to the overall political vibe. Instead of outright prohibitions, both authoritarian regimes mostly call on more subtle strategies (monopolising the state-sponsored media, using elections and so-called national consultations as exploitable resources, etc.). However, these regimes have also been known to resort to violence.

At the time when the author was completing the writing of the first draft of this paper, polls showed that *Fidesz* was slightly declining in popularity. They also suggested that the united opposition (made up of six parties) could in principle defeat *Fidesz* in the 2022 elections (Bayer 2020b). Meanwhile, in Serbia, there is nothing to suggest any significant weakening of the dominance of the Serbian Progressive Party.

Any attempt to properly address these issues demands a rigorous analysis of what is going on. From a strongly conceptual perspective, what is today called “democracy” has very little to do with its original meaning in the classical European political tradition (Wood 2008). In fact, it would be better to characterise today’s “liberal democracies” more specifically, namely as “liberal representative governments” which face serious challenges with regard to political and economic liberties. As has been demonstrated by many critical analyses, liberal representative governments are not at all incompatible with authoritarian regimes. Accordingly, one might argue, at least from a leftist point of view, that true democratisation means more than just a change in the members of the government. In particular the mere pluralisation of the political system and the reintroduction of checks and balances will be insufficient.

In order to fully accomplish real democratisation, the public sphere should be enriched with more participative and deliberative processes. Furthermore, democratisation does not have to be reduced to what is usually – and reductively – equated with ‘politics’, but should be extended to other social spheres as well (such as workplaces and neighbourhoods). This approach might seem to be somewhat unrealistic and idealistic; however, in both Hungary and Serbia in recent years, the most promising and creative ideas and practices were initiated precisely by grassroots, bottom-up movements or political organisations with significant civic engagement (in the case of Serbia, movements such as *Ne da(vi)mo Beograd* (Don’t Let Belgrade D(r)own), *Krov nad glavom* (The Roof Over Our Heads) and *Solidarna kuhinja* (Solidarity Kitchen); and in Hungary, for example *A Város Mindenkié* (The City is for All), *Közélet Iskolája* (School

of Public Life), *Deviszont*³² and *Utcáról Lakásba! Egyesület* (From Streets to Homes Association)).

We are very much of the opinion that the authoritarian regimes can be roundly defeated (that is, at systemic and not only surface level) only if political and social change involves large-scale, decisive participation from ordinary citizens. In this respect, the significance of international actors should not be exaggerated – in fact, too much intervention from them might even be counterproductive. Specifically, it is better for existing problems to be resolved from within through greater citizen participation which people have actively fought for. Organic and gradual change from within would afford a new government in each of the relevant countries greater legitimacy, given that then the opposition to the authoritarian regimes could not be accused of serving foreign interests, and Western states could not be characterised as dictatorial colonial powers.

In order to bring about such change, broad-based popular participation in political processes would be needed both within the state apparatus (e.g. transformational change at municipal level, pressure being exerted on the public authorities to make changes in the judicial sphere, etc.) and in civil society (from trade unions to humanitarian grassroots movements) that would involve more inclusive and participative processes. However, international actors such as the European Union could still play a vital role.

154 /

In our view, the EU should certainly not put pressure on hybrid regimes to enforce neoliberal policies, nor should it blackmail authoritarian governments by inflicting harm on whole populations. As for the overall political messaging of the EU at symbolic level, it has to be as clear and reasoned as possible. However, all actual sanctions should be directed at the governments responsible for the further decline of civic and political rights, and not at the people of their countries.

As we have suggested, in both Hungary and Serbia, voters were disillusioned at the handling of social issues in the 2000s. For instance, it is telling that nowadays *Fidesz* draws most of its support from employed workers and the

32 This organisation providing a community space for disadvantaged young people in Budapest derives its name from a widespread Hungarian expression unconventionally bringing together the words for “but” (*de*) and “although” (*viszont*) (Cooperative City Magazine 2019).

petty bourgeoisie, i.e. from classes with lower incomes. It is also interesting that both *Fidesz* and the Serbian Progressive Party used a somewhat leftist discourse as they rose to power (by adopting an anti-elite rhetoric, declaring war on corruption and organised criminality, using a 'fraudulent privatisation' narrative, etc.), including promises to keep alive what remained of the welfare state. If our analysis is correct, there are strong and authentic leftist sentiments in both Hungary and Serbia which are distorted by the authoritarian regimes and which other political movements might draw on one day in a very positive, emancipatory way. It is clear that these tendencies could flourish more easily if they could resonate with various initiatives relating to a more 'social Europe'. To sum up, all actors will need to deal with key economic and social issues if society is to be transformed at its roots.

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/ 167

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