

Emilia Palonen

The Birth and Death of Liberal Democracy in Hungary

The Populist Logic
of Polarisation
as Hegemony



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Pro et Contra
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Pro et Contra 4

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Published by Helsinki University Press
www.hup.fi

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First published 2025

Cover design by Ville Karppanen
Cover photo by Emilia Palonen
Print and digital versions typeset by Jukka Lauhalahti

FINNISH POLITICAL SCIENCE
ASSOCIATION

Pro et Contra. Books from the Finnish Political Science Association

ISSN (Print): 2736-8513

ISSN (Online): 2736-9129

ISBN (Paperback): 978-952-369-136-0

ISBN (PDF): 978-952-369-137-7

ISBN (EPUB): 978-952-369-138-4

<https://doi.org/10.33134/pro-et-contra-4>

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Suggested citation:

Palonen, E. (2025). *The birth and death of liberal democracy in Hungary: The populist logic of polarisation as hegemony*. Pro et Contra 4. Helsinki University Press. <https://doi.org/10.33134/pro-et-contra-4>.

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Acknowledgements

Becoming an expert in the discursive dynamics of Hungarian politics for a non-Hungarian has been a long route. The process of writing this book that originates in my encounters with politics in Hungary in the late 1990s and early 2000s, has been one where many people are to be thanked. Moreover, my experiences, as well as academic and non-academic conversations have shaped my theorising which I showcase in this book.

My thinking mainly draws on my former teacher and mentor Ernesto Laclau's theory and develops from it a tradition that pays attention to rhetorical-performative political meaning-making where political actors engage in a relational field. My take differs from some other Laclaudian colleagues, but it has long roots in the methodological and rhetoric turns in what has been called the Essex School approach to discourse and populism. By the time of the publication of this manuscript, the post-Laclaudian 'Helsinki School' thriving in our research group HEPPSinki, with its cultural approach to populism, polarisation and emotions.

I am thankful for several colleagues around the world with whom I have learned about populist politics over the past 25 years or maybe 15 as the ECPR joined Sessions in Münster in 2010 that was an important point for many in my generation of populism research. Sadly, I cannot start naming all colleagues from then and later from these networks, but I hope to discuss the work with many of you in the future. Special thanks go to the PSA Populism specialist group who also invited me to give their annual workshop keynote in Budapest in 2024: it has been the only keynote I have had to do online due to having fallen ill, but one that I would have particularly loved to deliver in the city I once fell in love with.

One theme in this book is political scientists as a professional community. When I was learning Central and East European politics and societies in the late 1990s, the transition from communism to democracy in Hungary and the neighbouring region was expected to be a swift and easy process. It was supposed to be more or less achieved by 1999 when I spent my first autumn in Budapest as a student of Contemporary and East European Studies. My landlord was Dr. Heino Nyyssönen from the University of Jyväskylä, who became my mentor for many years. Heino also introduced me to Mari Vares from the Hungarian National Library, my role-model at the time. Inspired to start a PhD – if for nothing else then to at least learn the language (which I did) – I spent an Erasmus term somewhere near (but rarely inside) the Corvinus University. This was during the election campaign in 2002. The groundwork for my understanding of nationalism in Hungary was laid by my teacher and supervisor George Schöpflin, later an MEP for Fidesz. In Hungary, I have been inspired by Attila Ágh, whom I thank for supervisory conversation already in 2002.

The first version of this manuscript I started writing at the Institute for Human Sciences, Institute for Advanced Study, in Vienna in February 2005, combining my thoughts and blogs into a PhD thesis in Ideology and Discourse Analysis (IDA) programme at the Government Department at the University of Essex. The original PhD topic had been politics of the city-text, street names, memorials and architecture, which I later published articles and book chapters on. From Vienna, I particularly thank my wise mentor János Mátyás Kovács. Regularly meeting key scholars in the field made my first fellowship as Körber Junior Fellow History and Memory in Europe one of the best academic experiences of my life.

What supported me in the PhD work was the community of colleagues in and around the IDA programme at the Government Department at the University of Essex. I particularly thank fellow PhD candidates Tim Appleton, who also proofread my thesis at the time, Mercedes Barros and Mette Marie Roslyng-Jensen, Zoe Reyes, Jenny Gunnarsson Payne, David Payne, Efi Mascha, Marina Prentoulis, Oliver Marchart, Lasse Thomassen, Seoungwon Lee, Mark Wenman, Mehmet Arisan, Juan Pablo Lichtmajer, and the very much missed Alejandro Groppo and Jonathan Dean. Jason Glynos and David Howarth led the IDA seminars where Ernesto Laclau made us discuss his book manuscript *On populist reason*. My wonderful supervisors Aletta

Norval and Sarah Birch helped me through my PhD studies, building expertise for both discourse theory and comparative politics. Yearly conferences were like family gatherings with scholars such as Anna Schober, Alan Finlayson, Allan Dreyer Hansen, and Mark Devenney – who still hold the fort of Laclau’s theorising. The IDA PhD community engaged with the Centre for Theoretical Studies, led by Simon Critchley, and reflected with Steffen Boehm on what the university is about. Recently I discovered how much I was learning about thinking from my ethics teacher Albert Weale.

From January 2006, I spent eight-months at the Collegium Budapest, an Institute for Advanced Study on the Castle Hill in Buda. This eight-month Junior Fellowship provided accommodation, lunches, and friendships: particularly with Umut Korkut and Vassilis Petsinis. One day on the Castle Hill, I entered the Hungarian Academy’s Institute of Politics to meet with Márton Szabó, who kindly invited me to his seminar. I taught them Laclau (in Hungarian) and Mouffe (in English) and I learned about Hungarian politics from them. I am thankful to Márton for his friendship and support. I also wish to thank Zóltán Gábor Szücs and Attila Gyulai for many chats and reads over the years. Szilvia Horváth I thank for her friendship and co-theorising over the years, as well as reading and correcting my never-ending misspellings of Hungarian words and writing for her (too kind) [Epilogue](#).

While staying in Budapest, I also spent time in a village my friend told me about. After my first visit during the election spring 2002, I kept returning to the village to my Hungarian spare mother and brothers, and I thank them for their hospitality. Gabi is greatly missed. Special thanks to our friend Márta and the village youth: you opened up a much-needed perspective to my studies where mainly the circles of the Budapest intellectuals get their voices heard. My friend Marianna Nagy I also thank for her professional translation of the Vörösmarty poem in [Chapter 3](#), p. 100.

But let’s not forget about the Budapest intellectuals: it is impossible to name you all here but Gábor Egry and Balázs Trencsényi have been there for me for collaboration and to answer my historical questions. Special thanks to István Szent-Iványi who was visiting the University of Helsinki during the post-pandemic years and who gave some insightful comments on the manuscript. Zoltán Ádám, I thank you for your remarks, and Annastiina Kallius for your proven expertise on the liberal bubble. Árpád Welker and Zita Herman discussed with me

what happened back then and somewhat later in Hungarian politics, and they even came to Finland when I was unable to travel to Hungary. Áron Buzogányi, Robert Sata, and Mihai Varga, particular thanks for your friendship. All potential misinformation and misunderstandings about Hungary presented in this book are my own.

My theoretical work on the book continued in Chicago and Evanston in 2008 as I engaged with Ernesto Laclau as a postdoc at Northwestern University on Research Council Finland Scholarship. I returned to Finland to the University of Helsinki as a discourse theorist and set up a group for PhD researchers as discourse theory enables a study of several regions. This enabled learning from colleagues from many transitional or polarised communities. I have had a chance to supervise, engage, and co-author papers with many PhD researchers and post-docs, which are relevant to this book: Marina Vulovic and Liv Sunnercrantz, in particular, but also Virpi Salojärvi, Ruta Kazlauskaitė, Taavi Sundell, Halil Gurhanli, Juha Koljonen, Laura Sibinescu, Hanna Laako, Anna Kutkina, Kaisa Savolainen, Kanerva Kuokkanen, and Anniina Hyttinen with whom we have discussed Hungarian politics very much.

In 2020, Juha Herkman and I built a research group, Helsinki Hub on Emotions Populism and Polarisation (HEPP), at the University of Helsinki with two projects: Mainstreaming Populism and Whirl of Knowledge funded by the Research Council of Finland. I particularly thank the participants of the group – the HEPPsters – for their kind comments on the book manuscript and overall theorising: Alexander Alekseev, Gwenaëlle Bauvois, Kleber Carrilho, Ilana Hartikainen, Laura Horsmanheimo, Emmi Lounela, Dayei Oh, Olena Siden, Zea Szebeni and Feeza Vasudeva, as well as many others. Thanks all for your friendship and dedication in becoming an academic community, perhaps similar to the ones where I was raised. The funding from the Kone Foundation for the project ‘Ajan ja tilan politiikka itäisessä Keski-Euroopassa’ in 2019 also enabled hiring research assistants Vica Protovin and Henry Jokinen. It was also instrumental for writing up the last empirical chapters of this study.

In fact, I was working on the manuscript’s newly gathered data, the 1990s debates on Hungary’s NATO and EU memberships at my aunt’s house as we heard the news of Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine. We sat next to the kitchen table where my grandmother once told me about her experience in the Second World War: ‘they told us to put a cooking pot on our heads and run to the forest if military planes

approach'. She survived, was able to visit Budapest in the 1960s, and baked cakes, such as the chocolate filled Dobos torta for parties. In many ways, these experiences have never been that distinct in the wider region and in Europe. I experienced an uncanny similarity to the Hungarian debates, when in 2022, I was asked to comment on the views on Finland's NATO membership as the popular perceptions took a U-turn and the political elites also started to discuss benefits of military alignment. Recently, I have been most worried about emerging polarisation under a right-wing government in Finland taking similar turns to Hungary.

One of the reasons for the delay in the completion of this book was that academic publishing had not evolved in early 2000s, and it would not have been possible to make the book available to wider audiences both in Hungary and abroad. I have been working hard for diamond open access publishing for learned societies and, thanks to colleagues, this revolution is taking shape. The publications of *Pro et Contra. Books from the Finnish Political Science Association* series are available for everyone around the world. From this perspective, the world is a better place.

The book builds on some of my earlier works. The article Political polarisation and populism in contemporary Hungary (Palonen 2009) appeared in *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62(2) and is used with permission from Oxford Academic. The article Rupture and continuity: Fidesz and the Hungarian revolutionary tradition (Palonen 2011) appeared in *La Révolution française* and is used with permission from Open-Edition Journals. The article Transition to crisis in Hungary: Whistle-blowing on the naked emperor (Palonen 2012) appeared in *Politics & Policy*, 40(5) and is used with permission from Wiley. The article Millennial politics of architecture: myths and nationhood in Budapest (Palonen 2013) appeared in *Nationalities Papers*, 41(4) and is used with permission from Cambridge University Press. The open access article Performing the nation: the Janus-faced populist foundations of illiberalism in Hungary (Palonen 2018a) appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 26(3).

Thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript and the series' editorial board for their comments that were helpful in making the text more readable and pertinent. Ian Dobson from the University of Helsinki's language services and copy-editor Luke Finley are also to be thanked. Thanks to the series' editors Taru Haapala and Anna

Kronlund for your patience and friendship. From Helsinki University Press, Anna-Mari Vesterinen and Leena Rautjärvi are also to be thanked for supporting the book process.

Several projects have contributed to the book, with some people to thank in particular. Thanks to the Research Council of Finland for many projects where I have been able to develop the ideas: especially ‘Nations and their Others: Finns and Hungarians since 1900’ (led by Heino Nyysönen); ‘Asymmetries in European Intellectual Space’ (Marja Jalava, Stefan Nygård, Johan Strang and Johanna Rainio-Niemi) where I reconnected with Hungary in the early 2010s; ‘Populism as Rhetoric and Movement’ (Urpo Kovala, Tuija Saresma and Erkki Vainikkala particularly) which helped to develop the formula of populism; and could be continued in ‘Mainstreaming Populism’ (Juha Herkman, Urpo Kovala and Tuija Saresma, and Mari K. Niemi, and the greatly missed Niko Hatakka); and the ‘Whirl of Knowledge (WhiKnow)’ which I led, to understand the populist hype better. In the PLEDGE horizon project (Mikko Salmela), I have discussed the study with Gabriella Szabó, whom I thank for the encouragement in thinking that this kind of discursive political history could be interesting in today’s Hungary. Szilvia Horváth and I are funded by the European Commission to study the social contract in Hungary, and are finalising and discussing this book also in the consortium ‘Continuous Construction of the Social Contract, CO3’ funded in the Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement 101132631 (Anna Björk, Ruzha Smilova, Annika Teppo, Cristiano Gianolla and many others).

As you can see, sometimes one needs a village, or a few, to raise a book. Among my family, and my aunts and uncles, Kari Palonen has been part of this project: always patiently receiving and sometimes commenting on yet another version of my work. Even if we often cheerfully disagree about things, the rhetorical-conceptual-heuristic approach to politics I have learned from him intuitively.

My parents I thank for their sometimes quite literal support on this journey that actually started in 1990 already (the photograph on p. 85 is from a road trip my dad took to take me and my stuff to Hungary, I do miss him dearly). My brother Joose already learned his first words of Hungarian in 1999 (‘két korsó barna sört kérek’) and my sister-in-law Riikka compiled the first bibliography for my thesis when I was not allowed to type. We had a little contest back then: she was pregnant, but

my ‘baby’ was born earlier. The news of the human childbirth reached me just as my mother and I celebrated my doctorate. It’s time for a new celebration, Mum, and this one is on me! It’s time for both of them ‘babies’ to find their place in the world.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my son Urho, who is after all much more brilliant than this monograph and more entertaining. Thanks also to his dad, Lauri, for support and patience, and to my partner Aku, whom I promise that the next one will be ready much sooner.

Introduction

Democracy's future is being discussed intensively in 2025, when this book, whose basic argument I started writing 20 years ago, will finally be published after sitting on my desk in different versions for 15 years. The case country Hungary, its ruling party Fidesz and prime minister since 2010 Viktor Orbán have become hot topics. The model country of transition has become a model for populist, national-conservative-Christian, illiberal, post-liberal or radical-right leaders around the world, but also national, conservative, Christian leaders running neoliberal policies or those alter-elitist right-wing politicians moving into a clientelistic praxis of funding those ideologically close or with family connections over those who are politically or culturally of the other camp. Questions of the reversibility, death or end of democracy have been on the lips and keyboards of many academics and political commentators over the years as they have followed what are commonly called 'populist' leaders, authoritarian policies, neo-fascism and illiberalism (Applebaum, 2020; Klein, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Runciman, 2018), which arrive and corrupt flawless liberal democracy. Yet few seem to really engage with the dynamics between these emerging and power-holding actors and the contents of their discourses.

Taking a longer perspective, I argue that the takeover by Orbán was made possible by political polarisation that had emerged by the millennium while Fidesz was in government. Furthermore, left-wing parties also contributed to developments whereby, by 2010, people were disappointed with democracy – or what it meant to them by then. With the two-thirds majority that Fidesz received in that year, it was able to change legislation in ways that enabled it to stay in power. It had learned from the traumatic loss it suffered in 2002. In 2010 Fidesz was supported by more than half of the Hungarian electorate in those historic elections where it achieved a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian

parliament. Dissatisfaction was so deep that, while experts around the world protested, many ordinary people supported controversial decisions such as the changing of media laws: perhaps now polarisation could be contained. But over time Hungary has turned into an electoral autocracy. It has become a member of a European Union that sees itself as a guardian of democracy and that has now, due to violations of the rule of law, frozen the funds that have effectively kept Orbán's clientelistic system going.

The argument regarding electoral autocracy refers to the situation in 2020s Hungary, in which political debates are no longer organised by TV channels to cater to citizens who go to the voting booths to vote in the elections. Generations are now growing up without experiencing political debates in their own country even as they can witness them via their mobile phones in other countries, between and within political parties. As I will describe in this book, back in the 1990s and 2000s the situation was quite different: there was a multi-party democracy, in which the opposition had the chance to turn the tables at elections. I discuss what confrontations took place and how political actors formed their own discourses against each other.

Most of the focus in both academic and non-academic research has been on one of 'Europe's strongmen', Viktor Orbán (Lendvai, 2019). While he has been branded a neoconservative and celebrated as one of the key figures of that global movement, 'those who know him and his career do not regard Viktor Orbán as a conservative politician' (Lendvai, 2012, p. 230). However, as Szélényi (2022) narrates in her memoir strengthened with academic argumentation, he has hung onto power for the sake of it since the early 1990s and has abandoned what many people excited about Fidesz were hoping would be its focus: centrism. Paul Lendvai had already in 2010 narrated to the German audience (then in English in Lendvai, 2012) the crossroads 'between democracy and authoritarianism'. My book is partially a prehistory of how the country reached that crossroads. Instead of addressing only the contemporary developments, which have been dealt with in many publications since 2010, I will investigate the transformation that took place on the road to that point.

Unearthing insights from the period of democratisation to liberal democracy will also enable us to understand that there is no sudden revolution that turns democracy into authoritarianism, but that the antagonising logic of populism that led to polarisation and further to

the Orbán regime's electoral autocracy in Hungary was already operating within democracy. And as I stress in this book, the idea of revolution itself is a myth or a rhetorical trope that is commonly referred to, and one of the heuristic tools for capturing the political transformation itself (see also Palonen, 2011). The stark polarisation has been coupled with a popular disengagement from politics.

This study makes three key contributions: first, it narrates the history of Hungarian democratisation until 2010, when Orbán came to power in a landslide, also accounting for the failure of the left and the liberals. Second, it discusses the paradoxes of liberal democracy. Third, it provides an alternative toolset for the study of polarisation and populist politics, and of performative meaning-making in politics, which it sees as a relational activity.

Contribution to the study of liberal democracy, populism and polarisation

Among the difficulties behind diagnosing the causes of these developments are terminological and contextual blindness. 'Populism' is used as a loose heading to refer to similar phenomena or logics around the world, to categorise parties or their types of performance. Yet what may really be at stake is that this phenomenon makes visible that while politics is premised on contestation and the building of temporary coalitions around points of identification for a community, it is not based on the representation of pre-existing interests among the electorate. It has been difficult for political scientists who base their tools on liberal democracy and analyse liberal democracy to capture this. But what is significant about this new mobilisation is the counter-hegemonic stance that generates political polarisation beyond partisanship as it has been traditionally understood.

This book is not a study of populism as such, even if I am known to many as a scholar in the sub-field of populism studies, but it can inform how we should study populism as affective-antagonistic political mobilisation. Populism and polarisation are interlinked, and my research provides an analytical vocabulary or heuristics with which to study them. The theory of populism as a logic of articulation (Laclau, 2005) provides keys to understanding how antagonistic confrontation may develop and spread. Polarisation appears to be a strategy, but due to the antagonistic frontier it generates, it also denotes a problem for

democracy. On the one hand we can talk about the sedimented political conflict as the war of position, as in Antonio Gramsci's work. On the other hand we can see that it turns on the idea of the other as being illegitimate to rule – and even a threat to the order that needs to be destroyed, as Carl Schmitt notoriously theorised. Therefore, to tackle the issue of polarisation we need also to rethink liberal democracy, which contains the tools for its self-destruction. This we will do with the help of Chantal Mouffe (2005) at the end of the book.

For me, democracy assumes that there is something to be debated upon, that there is some fluidity and openness. This is lost when politics becomes technocratic or some greater rationality is followed. Claude Lefort captures democracy's openness with the idea of the empty space in the core of democracy, *le vide*, which has been discussed by theorists of populism such as Nadia Urbinati and Jan-Werner Müller in different ways (Palonen, 2021). My perspective develops Laclau's and Mouffe's work (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2005), taking their thought forward rather than sticking with what they intended. I would maintain that *pro et contra* debates and political contestation seek to temporarily fill or make claims on this void in the core. Therefore, I also argue that populism is not a mode of governance but a style of mobilisation that provides a dichotomy and a filling for the void, that populism is not a substance or a state of affairs but a form and logic of mobilisation, which also may have polarising effects.

My work and the case study are also situated in the conjuncture where a new wave of theorising on populism started: studying at the University of Essex, I followed the seminars of Ernesto Laclau that led to the publication of *On populist reason* (Laclau, 2005), an important theoretical contribution still 20 years after its publication. But when I was writing myself, I was thinking about the theory of hegemony in the context where in Hungary people used the term 'polarisation'. In contemporary Europe, scholars have talked about heartlands of populism (Taggart), and many have explored Berlusconi, who reshaped Italy through mediatised populism (Mazzoleni, 2008). This did work as an inspiration for young Viktor Orbán already early on (Palonen, 2009; Szelényi, 2022). This emerging style was mainstreamed in the Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria in the 2000s, while the populist movements in the US (Postel, 2007) and Latin America provided an alternative view.

The global rise of populism (Moffitt, 2016) as the phenomenon was discussed in the mid-2010s by surprised audiences was actually not new. And this thing that emerged in the mid-2010s encompasses a range of references, from a far-right xenophobic movement, to charismatic leaders, and finally to the illiberalism that Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump seem to be promoting. This has contributed to conceptual confusion, and we have addressed this in prior work (Vulović & Palonen, 2023). However, the academic literature on populism has a longer time span of around a hundred years (Mény & Surel 2002; Postel, 2019). Irrespective of whether we are talking about the same phenomenon, some theorising of populism is useful when discussing the transformations in Hungary, but also the birth and death of democracy itself.

In political science, the term ‘polarisation’ has been used in different ways. The polarisation of American bipartisanship has been termed ‘affective polarisation’, and one approach has been to explore democratic backsliding as caused by affective polarisation (McCoy & Somer, 2019). For Orhan (2022), affective polarisation is all about partisan identification: strong belief in intra-party loyalty and negative feelings about the other, irrespective of demographic interests. Evidence is brought for the connection between the two. In this book, we will see how polarisation takes place in different fields of political activity.

I conceive of politics as affective and performative, as being about (dis)identification and demands that are articulated in dialogue between the representatives and the represented, mutually transforming them rather than simply projecting or mirroring the interests of the represented. The idea behind this is that both the representative and the represented are somehow transformed in the process of politics. This creates a great basis for agonistic democracy where we know what we are for and what we are against, just as Chantal Mouffe (2005) conceptualised it.

Unfortunately a very much sedimented polarised politics actually fixes positions. In political polarisation, two camps mutually reject each other and have no reason to talk about what they are for, as long as they argue that the other is fundamentally wrong, corrupt and illegitimate and whatever they propose is bad. This kind of politics comes not only from one side but it is maintained by both sides (see also Palonen, 2009). The responsibility therefore lies not only with the perceived demagogues in power. In this book I also discuss why it is difficult to avoid such a situation when it starts to unfold.

All of the above means that there is a need to reflect on how political science is done, which is why in [Chapter 9](#) I look at how Hungarian polarisation was studied in the 2000s. One of the key contributions in rethinking the foundations of comparative politics by Achen and Bartels (2016) discussed what would be the bases for political science inquiry. Discussions emerged of input and output, of the demand and supply sides of populism. Still, the tools in the political science literature, such as surveys and traditional studies of political cleavages, does not seem to offer answers in the same way as before.

Political parties that rely on demographic characters fail, because rather than interests and socioeconomic differences, new political actors rely on emotional appeal and identification. The populist logic generates a political subject where it does not really exist. This is why, for example, in the United States, the Democratic Party succeeded with Barack Obama in 2008 but failed in 2024, for two reasons: (1) it described differences, and subject positions to be represented, more than a united platform and uniting demands, and, related, (2) it focused more on the other to be opposed, i.e. on stopping Trump, rather than on something of its own. Even if Trump's campaign also was antagonistic, it managed to produce the illusion of a common platform, however opaque its contents may have been.

Political polarisation is a political strategy or logic of political meaning-making. It has been a solution in situations where there is not much to deliver substantively (Korkut, 2012). As opposed to the social polarisation of demographic distance, political polarisation is a discursive battle that aims to generate a 'culture war' type of difference, even where the cultural distinction may have not pre-existed. It is related to affective polarisation, which has been established as a particular research trajectory. I prefer the terms 'political polarisation' or 'hegemonic polarisation', as they are sedimented into a common reference point for all politics. I have also called it 'bipolar hegemony' (Palonen, 2009), and in [Chapter 1](#) I will explore its Gramscian and Althusserian roots in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of hegemony that inspired me.

The perspective from which I study politics demonstrates how political differences and moments of sameness become defined as they are articulated as part of political struggle. In agonistic *pro et contra* politics, it is about a rhetorical articulation of political frontiers rather than predefined interests that is driven by the making of demands and

political meanings. Democracy itself is a contested concept. There are different versions of it: proceduralist, which focuses on the procedures and legal framework; and processualist, which focuses on democracy as a process of representation, paying attention to the existence of the rules of the game or to the way in which politics is being practised.

Background

In this book, I will not explore precise ways in which democracy is being challenged or discuss definitions of democracy, normatively or in conceptual history. The aim is to explore the logic behind the challenge to democracy. In the context of Hungary, Fidesz presents a monopolistic claim on nationhood, and Orbán on being the legitimate ruler. I aim to shed light on related processes around Europe and in particular in the East-Central European countries, through a historical analysis with theoretical insights. East-Central European countries work as a laboratory for developments to be faced elsewhere. Ágh (2019) has discussed these countries as ‘velvet dictatorships’. In this study, rather than exploring a linear process of democratisation or backsliding, the aim is to analyse the process of political transformations as they are performed in Hungarian politics.

The manuscript has long roots, and I have sought to lead the reader to the authenticity of some of the texts born in the early to mid-2000s and to artefacts such as election videos. Because one of the dimensions of polarisation in Hungary is that of the confrontation of the metropolis versus the rest, the middle part of the book takes the reader to the cityscape and discourses about Budapest. My interest in polarisation arose when I was visiting Hungary for a longer period for the first time in 1999, and I managed to witness a key period when Fidesz was in power and how political polarisation started to transform society, social relations and party contestation. Here I try to convey the feel of this period through some immersive strategies.

Indeed, I ended up studying Hungary as part of my Bachelor’s in Contemporary East European Studies, writing an extended BA thesis on national memory politics in Hungary for my professor George Schöpflin, and I returned to this focus in the absence of fresh ideas for a PhD after my Master’s in Ideology and Discourse Analysis, which had dealt with the first mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, as a counter-hegemonic figure in the UK politics. My BA in London in the late



Turbulent Hungarian politics have often centred on the articulation of Budapest and the countryside divide that parties have tried to operationalise. It has also been difficult to study if one does not have a feel of both worlds. For many politicians, including Viktor Orbán, the world of the street cars with their networked elites was quite a different environment than the small towns. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

1990s had made me curious about democratisation and the potential for it to go wrong, so when I returned to Hungary for thesis work in the early 2000s, I started to understand Hungarian politics better. Besides having friends from different parts of the country, in 2002–06 I spent a lot of time in a village outside of Budapest. There I got to know how some of the young people were getting very excited about Fidesz while others were already dissatisfied with polarised politics. Unlike in the academic bubbles in Budapest, there was little understanding for liberal parties, who seemed quite distanced even just tens of kilometres away. However, I uncovered an interesting affective relationship with the Socialist Party: both disgust and fondness.

Perhaps my experience of Hungary did not differ much from what it could have been in other countries in the region, but the knowledge of polarisation that crept in can serve as a basis for comparisons with similar developments elsewhere. To solve the puzzle of the particular case of Hungary and to work up the first version of this manuscript

into a PhD thesis, my stay at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna was instrumental. My mentor János Mátyás Kovács gave me important insights and stressed the relevance of Central Europe for understanding the world. Central Europe has always been a laboratory for social and political change. It accelerates phenomena that can later be found elsewhere. Given that similar developments elsewhere have already caught up, it is finally time to narrate the story of emerging polarisation and disenchantment with democracy in Hungary.

In 2006, few thought that there was a problem of polarisation in Hungary; but since 2010, people have been very preoccupied with what is happening in contemporary Hungary. Since these developments no longer appear strange, it is time to explore the period leading up to them.

Over the years, I have developed heuristic tools or cognitive shortcuts based on my extant research on Hungary. These can be used in other cases, as they transcend this study's narration of the particular Hungarian case (e.g. Skytt, 2019). Much of this book is based on my PhD thesis, submitted in autumn 2005 and defended at the University of Essex in January 2006. The manuscript exists – or it should – as a paper copy at the library of the university, and an electronic copy of it exists on my webpage, polemics.wordpress.com. Furthermore, there are sections in an unpublished working paper 'Fringe and mainstream populism(s) in Hungary' that exists in the ECPR portal, presented in the Joined Sessions in March 2010 in Münster. I have further developed my argument about polarisation as bipolar hegemony (Palonen, 2009), disbelief in democracy (Palonen, 2012), revolution's eternal return and how it employs fantasy (Palonen, 2011), and illiberalism and populism's entanglement with nationalism (Palonen, 2018a) in a range of publications on Hungary. [Chapter 5](#) on Fidesz significantly draws on my research published in *GeoJournal* (2008). The article on Demszky (Palonen, 2005) was published in *Central European Political Science Review*, which has since been discontinued. It illustrates well the transformation and antagonism, while some of my other research, such as a chapter of the original thesis on Demszky, focused on the liberal dimensions of his discourse. The article has attracted a wide readership also outside of political science.

A short timeline of party politics in Hungary

In its contemporary form, Hungary is a country of ten million inhabitants in Central Europe, neighboured by Austria, Slovakia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia. It joined NATO in 1999 and finally the European Union in 2004, 15 years after the ‘revolution’ of 1989 in which it made its break from the Soviet Union and the Cold War Eastern Europe that it had belonged to. During the Second World War, the region had been left under the ‘protection’ of the Soviet Union, which over a couple of years turned the countries of Eastern Europe into its satellite states, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin controlling those in power in each of the countries. After Stalin’s death, a new era began with Nikita Khrushchev coming to power, and a de-Stalinisation process enabled all of these states to develop, to some extent, their own ways to legitimate state-socialist or communist rule.

Hungary also changed its leader and sought to take off in a more independent direction in 1956 under the leadership of Imre Nagy. However, this attempted revolution was violently crushed by Soviet troops, and a new pro-Soviet leader, János Kádár, was to rule the country for decades. In this period, the state-bound economy became more relaxed and Hungary was considered one of the more liberal countries in the Bloc. After the country was democratised in 1989/90 into a parliamentary republic, it was recognised as one of the most advanced in the region in terms of reformed economy and democracy. Ethnically it has been one of the more homogeneous countries in the region, though it has a sizeable Roma minority. Many Hungarian speakers live outside the country as after the First World War it lost two-thirds of its administrative territory, which provides for nationalist discourses. This is what [Chapter 2](#), on ‘goulash communism’, studies.

The study covers the overall developments in Hungarian politics from the period of reform-socialist Kádárism to Orbán’s victory in 2010. This implies going relatively briefly through many political personalities, parties and events. Unfortunately, I have not been able to cover all relevant matters, and the focus on elections is very typical of political scientists as a way of mapping timelines in a comparative fashion. I could have also covered scandals or blunders over time (cf. King & Crewe, 2013). My focus is longitudinal transformation. But let us summarise these developments briefly.

In [Chapter 3](#) I cover the first three elections and the 1990s. The first post-communist parliament in Hungary in 1990 was composed of six parties while the 2002 parliament only had four, which remained there in 2006. Overall, the large parties have aimed at effecting a two-party system, since it gives them the best chance of fighting over the majorities needed for the single-constituency seats (Fowler, 2004a). The electorate is reluctant to ‘waste’ votes on small parties which might not succeed in passing the 5 per cent threshold. Furthermore – as I will demonstrate – attempts to totalise the political frontier between the large parties have led not only to bipolarism in the party system but to a situation of political polarisation, in which the single frontier is constantly reproduced in many sectors of life and governance and all differences are articulated around it. Equally, as I will demonstrate in later chapters, actors respond to and act under other structures and processes. The full scale and logic of polarisation, to which the electoral system contributes, can be discovered in this process. Arresting the chronological flow of the election-focused analysis in my study, [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) present two takes on antagonistic political discourse in practice based on two previous articles. In [Chapter 4](#), I analyse how Fidesz forms its discourse through the negation of Budapest and symbolic takeover in public space (Palonen, 2013). In [Chapter 5](#), I investigate, through the speeches of the Liberal mayor Demszky on a specific, revolutionary national day, the way in which the liberal discourse became increasingly polarised and anti-Fidesz (Palonen, 2005). In the 1990s and 2000s Demszky and Orbán had comparable political lives, and as key politicians their speeches offer nodal points for the political discourses of that era.

The first elections were won by a former dissident coalition that had taken a national-conservative party line – the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), with the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) a close second (see [Figures 1](#) and [2](#); on the first elections, see Kukorelli, 1991; Racz, 1991; Tóka 1995; Vasary, 1991). By 2002 these two parties had become the two smallest in the four-party parliament. Of the middle-sized parties in 1990, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz), have been the two largest parties since 1998, and the Independent Smallholders’ Party (FKgP), which followed the model of the interwar peasant parties and became the third-largest party in the 1990 parliament, has disappeared from the party map. The unreformed communist party, the

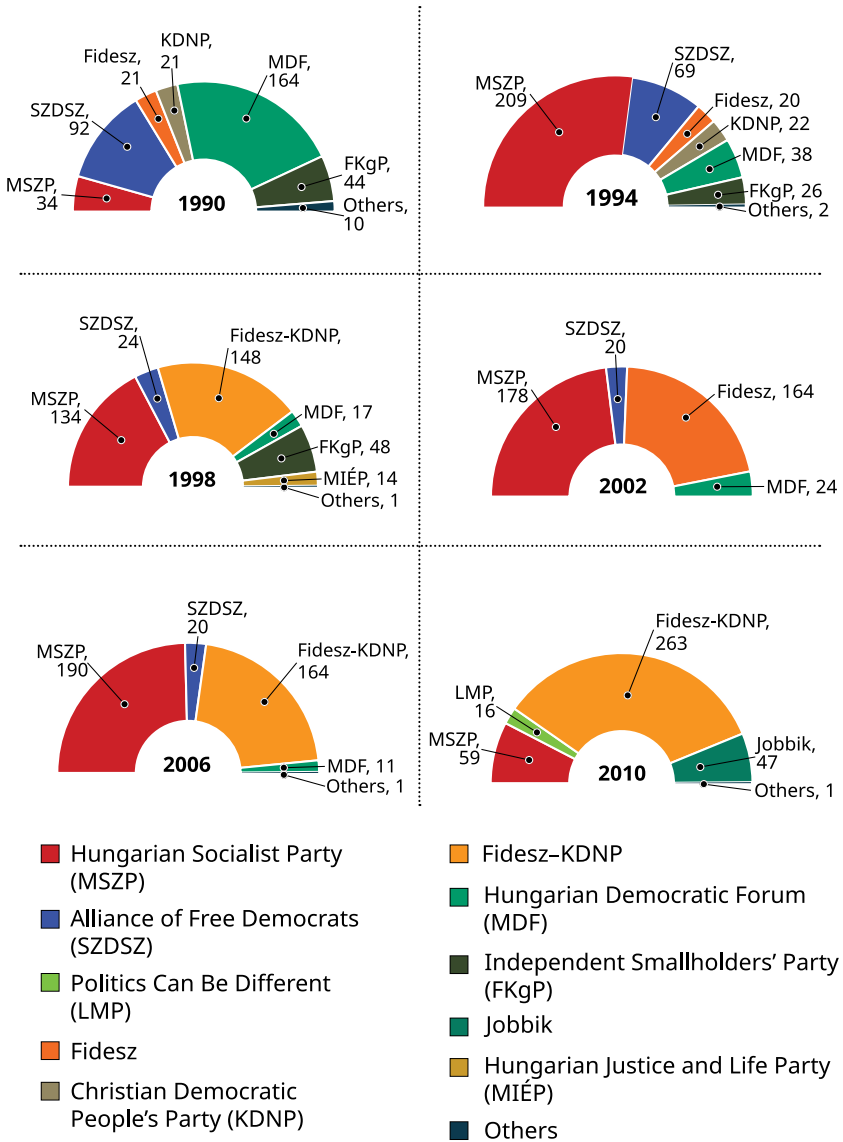


Figure 1: Distribution of seats in Hungarian parliamentary elections, 1990–2010.

Note: This is a simplification of the longitudinal developments in Hungarian electoral politics, where two rounds of elections in 1990–2010 with a complex electoral system is difficult to capture, therefore the balance of power and political change overtime is illustrated here with numbers of MPs, where some compromises have been made with double-listing of some candidates in some elections. In 2002, Fidesz was in electoral coalition with the MDF. KDNP was in coalition with Fidesz since 2006. In 2002 it was in coalition with the Centre party and gained no seats in the parliament.

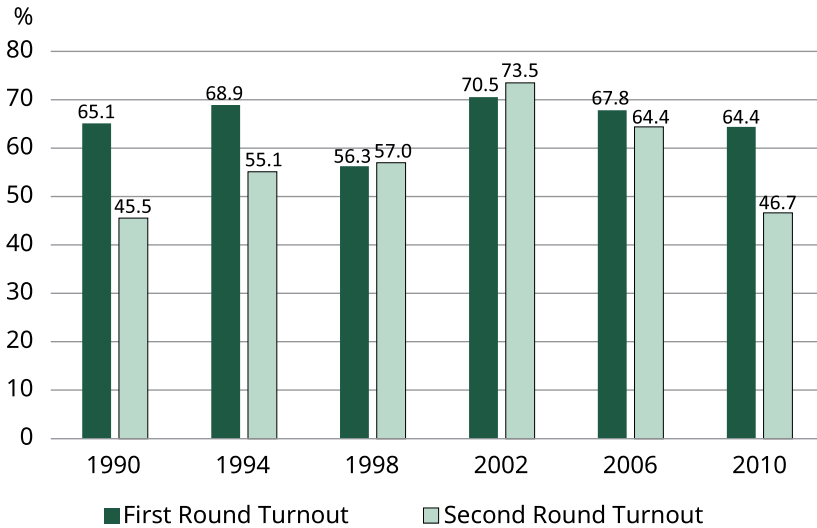


Figure 2: Voter turnout in Hungarian parliamentary elections, 1990–2010. Note: Turnouts in the Hungarian elections demonstrate the appeal of politics over time. The intensity of the campaign in 2002–2006 is indicated in the way both rounds were equally popular. Second round turnout was highest in the polarised 2002 elections.

Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP) and the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (MSZDP), as well as a plethora of mainly agrarian and nationalist parties, did not manage to pass the threshold. The 1990–94 government was formed by the MDF, the FKgP and the smallest party in the parliament, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP).

The first government's strategy was to focus on nationhood over its unpopular economic policies (Kostelecký, 2002, p. 42). The first post-communist prime minister József Antall's notorious claim was to be 'the prime minister "in spirit" of 15 million Hungarians', which then included Hungarian minorities outside the ten-million-strong Hungarian state. It also put its faith in the strength of populist nationalism: the MDF was a loose forum of national liberals and radical nationalists, and its right wing, represented by irredentist István Csurka, whose argumentation could in the context of the early 1990s be interpreted as making claims on the territories lost in the First World War. After the death in office of Antall in 1993, the MDF faced not only the battle over

who would succeed him as party leader but also over the relationship with this far-right wing in the party led by Csurka. Fidesz experienced strong competition between Viktor Orbán and Gábor Fodor, which the latter lost, and the party transformed itself radically.

Since the newly found 'freedom' of the post-communist period did not improve the lives of ordinary people, the 1994 elections witnessed a landslide victory for the MSZP. The party held more than half of the seats, but formed a government with the successful liberal party, the SZDSZ. This coalition became one of the poles of the bipolar hegemony. Their unity was questioned but was ultimately strengthened by the two parties' co-operation in government and later in opposition. The return to power of the left captured interest even abroad (Racz & Kukorelli, 1995; Tóka & Enyedi, 1999). One of the explanations for it was that the public wanted a change and the left gained from its position in opposition (Racz, 1993). Bernard Tamas (1999) argues that the Socialists won because their rivals' public performance was poor. Prior to the 1994 elections, both the MDF, the leading party of the government, and Fidesz, with the highest popularity ratings, experienced leadership battles.

Geoffrey Evans and Stephen Whitefield (1995) found that economic issues formed only a secondary political divide, while social liberalism and attitudes to the Roma and to the Hungarian minorities abroad dominated the scene; the Socialists had a more pragmatic approach than the first post-communist government and were expected to bring economic issues to the fore. This proved to be right. András Bozóki (2003) argued that in terms of policies, the government took paradoxical steps. First it slowed down privatisation, but as a response to international concern regarding developments in Hungary and also to a crisis between the two governing parties, the government introduced tough economic measures (the Bokros package). Here the values of the reformed communist MSZP and of the liberal coalition of anarchists and economic reformers – the SZDSZ – merged. The government also turned, for the first time, towards nostalgia for the Kádár era, yet at the same time it rehabilitated the era's most famous victim, Imre Nagy.

In 1998, the left lost the elections and the former 'small party' Fidesz emerged as the winner. Early on, Bozóki (2003, p. 435) has attributed this to the elitist politics, corrupt deals and problematic leadership of the left. Fowler (2004a) has emphasised the concentration of forces in the leadership of Fidesz towards the right. Selény (1999, p. 148) has

aptly pointed out that Fidesz was the only parliamentary party not yet to have made it into government. By virtue of this, it could offer a sense of novelty and the change wished for by an electorate that was disillusioned with the post-communist changes so far. The Hungarian political right claimed an electoral victory, even if the MSZP remained the biggest party in the parliament since it had a third of the seats and a third of the party list vote (see [Figure 1](#)).

The Hungarian electoral system, then, with its two voting days and combination of party lists and single constituencies, proved crucial. The once-small liberal party Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Party (Fidesz-MPP, hereafter Fidesz), which had reinvented itself in the national camp and run a hugely successful campaign, gained 30 per cent of the seats and 30 per cent of the party list vote. In the second round, it gained a landslide in the yet undecided seats. While the MDF failed to pass the threshold, the success of the 50 Fidesz-MDF candidates in joined-up single constituencies sealed the electoral victory for Fidesz, which formed the government with the FKgP. Support for the SZDSZ fell drastically, making it the second-smallest party in the parliament ahead of the extreme far-right-wing Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP). [Figure 2](#) shows that even if the turnout was low in 1998, the intensive and polarised elections starting in 1998 had a high rather than declining turnout on the second round of the elections.

From this contradictory position, Fidesz worked, during its four years in government, to sediment political polarisation. Now it was one of the large parties, and, in fact, the leading party of the right. It continued the already-established tradition in post-communism of doing away with the legacy of the previous government by way of a mini-revolution at every election. This served to form the clear-cut frontier necessary for to compensate for the ideological incoherence. Fidesz organised and monopolised national celebrations and set out to build a 'New Hungary' (cf. Fowler, 2004b). Funding from the government was allocated based on loyalty to the party, which was visible – for example – in local government funding, whereby Budapest's economy suffered greatly because the government spent on the countryside. Generally speaking, whereas the previous government had been accused of managerialism, the Fidesz government was blamed for establishing clientelist and neo-feudal practices.

This period is particularly covered in Chapters [4](#) and [5](#) through the discourses of Prime Minister (PM) Orbán and the Budapest

mayor Gábor Demszky, where I focus on the presence and absence of nationhood and Budapest in their mutual discourses. [Chapter 5](#) on Demszky explores how difficult it is to escape the logic of polarisation, and the development of antagonism in the speeches held on a revolutionary day.

As covered in [Chapter 6](#), by 2002 polarisation was the dominant ‘imaginary’ in Hungary, i.e. an overarching, sedimented and structuring vision or myth, through which things are organised and gain their meaning. This structured the political field as well as personal identifications. The elections were narrowly won by the MSZP, with 42 per cent of party list votes and 188 seats, against the Fidesz-MDF electoral coalition’s 41 and 178 respectively. What aided the Socialists was their position of opposition, which they could turn to their advantage (Racz, 2000). The SZDSZ stayed in parliament (with 19 seats and one joint seat with MSZP) and became the Socialists’ coalition partner again. The MIÉP narrowly fell below the 5 per cent threshold. Because of the left-wing government and the way in which Fidesz kept the MPs of the MDF under its control, the small parties had little real power, and polarisation took Hungary further towards a two-party system.

The 2002–06 period offered the Socialist-Liberal government a chance to introduce different policies, but they did not prove popular. Instead, the period saw strong mobilisation against the corrupt elites, as the Socialist PM was unveiled to have been working for the secret service in the 1970s and 1980s. The Liberals had internal issues and corruption scandals. So in fact, as I discuss in [Chapter 7](#), it was a period when Fidesz was visible everywhere other than in the parliament, and it sought to claim hegemonic attention through referenda and the presidential election, in which it backed a candidate from a non-governmental organisation – who also won. The 2006 elections were a tight contest won by the MSZP with 190 seats, four seats short of a majority, and it formed a government with the liberals, who got 20 seats. Fidesz-KDNP and the MDF were in opposition as, against the odds, MDF also remained in the parliament. The pre-election four-party debate and some anti-two-party mobilisation for the small parties was essential.

[Chapter 8](#) covers the period after the 2006 elections, which was difficult for the left despite its having won the elections. The Socialist PM revealed, first internally, that the Socialists had been lying about the budget deficit prior to the elections and instead of tax cuts there

would be austerity measures. As this was revealed, popular opposition emerged and the ruling party lost support. This was a significant moment of doubt for the democratic system, and the post-2010 political discourse on the right is heavily built on the demonisation of the left as it was discredited in this period.

In 2009, the European elections, just as in 2004, went to the left by a landslide. By this point the liberals had split, with a new Green Party emerging from the alter-globalist and anti-polarisation movements. A new xenophobic party, Jobbik, also contested polarisation and made a significant leap in its first European Parliament elections in 2009. The elections in 2010 were called by Orbán the ‘revolution at the polls’, and Fidesz received around 53 per cent support and a two-thirds majority of seats, an increase of 99 seats. The Socialist Party collapsed, retaining only 59 seats while losing 133. Two new parties entered the parliament: Jobbik with 47 seats and Lehet Más a Politika (LMP) with 16 seats.

[Chapter 9](#) explores the 2010 elections, which marked the end of an era. Of the parties which formed the multi-party democracy in Hungary in the 1990s, only Fidesz and the MSZP remained. In the 2014 elections the electoral system was renewed and the number of seats reduced to 199. There was only one round of elections, not two. Ferenc Gyurcsány, the prime minister who had won the 2006 elections and admitted having lied, formed his own party, Democratic Coalition (DK), and the LMP also split, with the splinter Dialogue – The Greens’ Party getting eight seats while the LMP got seven. The number of opposition parties increased in 2018, and in the 2022 elections they formed a grand coalition of the opposition with left, liberal and green parties but also including Jobbik. This helped the new far-right party, Our Homeland (Mi hazánk), enter the parliament. In 2026 elections are expected to take place again in a different situation, where Péter Magyar, a splinter politician from Fidesz, will be a new contender with the Tisza Party. At the time of finishing this book in early 2025, the Tisza Party has overtaken Fidesz in popularity. I will discuss briefly the logic of Péter Magyar at the very end of the book, which otherwise focuses on the period until 2010.

Democratisation's U-turn, illiberalism and anti-politics

While in the 1990s there was a consensus on the direction of the democratising process, by the 2010s the discourse on democratisation had changed. I was among the very few who from the mid-2000s was pointing out problems of polarisation for democracy in Hungary (Palonen, 2009). Current literature focuses on the regime that Fidesz has generated in power, with little attention given to the preceding period. However, Korkut (2012, p. 19) reflects on the fact that the Hungarian public was not really persuaded into the liberalisation that started during the state-socialist period, and discusses polarisation in the late 2000s, when liberal-left-wing governments opposed the conservative right, calling for moral revolution. My colleagues' analysis of the challenges to liberalism are apt. The Hungarian case proves that mobilising on community-building or identification becomes even more important when there is little else that the government can deliver, although the 'revolution' against liberalisation and liberalism started earlier than the late 2000s, as I will show later in this book.

The Hungarian case challenges a unidirectional 'transition' (cf. Carothers, 2002), yet authors have continued to use linear metaphors (e.g. the "bumpy road" and 'backsliding' of democracy; Ágh, 2013, 2014). The assumption of linear democratisation made subsequent 'u-turns' or backsliding into anomalies (Ágh, 2014, 2016; Kornai, 2015), even though authoritarianism easily prevails in the age of democratisation (Krastev, 2011). Ágh (2015) writes about 'Potemkin democracy' moving towards elected autocracy: was it just a façade? The democratisation process in Hungary is viewed in terms of the consolidation of democracy (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2010; cf. Herman, 2015), or the constitution (Jenne & Mudde, 2012), studied through discourses or concepts such as good governance (Hajnal & Pál, 2013) and liberalism (Korkut, 2012).

Transition was supposed to bring with it a strong civil society, and it was assumed that there was one in Hungary, with dissident traditions. In the 1980s system was established that was technically multi-party, although only two parties were standing in these elections. Free elections were held in 1990, but despite the presence of varied groups of dissidents, their transformation into politicians in the 1990s led to the professionalisation of politics: politicians and apolitical masses became

and remained distinct (Ilonszki & Papp, 2012; Ilonszki & Schwarcz, 2013). Korkut has argued that the positive effect of democratisation on civil society has been taken for granted (Korkut, 2005, p. 149), and Rose-Ackerman (2005) has urged public participation. Hungary is often tied to the Western liberal democratic narrative of progress: in the 1990s, Hungary was a fast-learning top student among the transitional countries.

For many ordinary Hungarians, back in the 2000s, polarisation of this kind resulted mainly in estrangement from politics, continuing the anti-politics that was the dominant attitude in politics already before 1989. This was particularly theorised by György Konrád (1984). ‘Anti-politics’ ‘defined civil society in terms of resistance to an oppressive state’, Buzogány and Varga (2018, p. 76) argue, recognising a problem in the way in which Konrád’s “‘ideology of civil society” became an instrument for 1980s’ dissidents propagating an alternative to both communism and Western capitalism.’ Amid many paradoxes of ideologies and cleavages in Central Europe at large and Hungary in particular, which we discuss in [Chapter 9](#), is this inherent conservatism of the liberals. Maybe liberal democracy never intended to empower people but instead aimed to retain its own elites in power distinct from a civil society?

Liberalism, as the other pole in polarisation, paved the way to ethno-neoconservative-nationalism. My colleagues have addressed this as crisis of liberalism. In *The light that failed*, Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019, p. 6) discuss how liberalism abandoned pluralism for hegemony. Conversely, I argue that by claiming that liberalism is hegemonic, the *illiberals* generated a fringe populist confrontation and a dividing line that effectively mainstreamed them by turning all of the rest into the same dubious ‘liberals’. Something considered universal, liberal democracy, was turned into a particular version of democracy associated with the elites in Budapest.

The narrative included a particular take on the economy. Discussing the troubles of liberalisation in Hungary, Umut Korkut (2012, p. 1) argues: ‘Capitalism and liberal democracy may complement each other nicely, but the latter faces troubles if the former becomes too aggressive in its demands for economic transformation toward a competitive market economy, ignoring the welfare state’. Identity politics becomes even more important when there is little else that the governments can deliver. Arguably, it took the European Union time to react

to Hungarian developments because in the European Parliament, the position of the European People's Party Group depended on the Hungarian MEPs in its ranks (Kelemen, 2017). Fidesz were thought of as 'patrician' and later 'plebeian' conservatives (Egedy, 2013, p. 71) rather than far right.

Illiberalism is a language game, designed to generate an anti-liberal opposition that singles out the enemy and makes tangible the political frontier necessary for populist nationalism (Palonen, 2018a). Viktor Orbán's two-thirds majority victory in the Hungarian parliament elections in 2010 changed democracy in Hungary and has made it impossible for the opposition to challenge Fidesz-KDNP's power. Fidesz did not simply generate another 'interest' but formed a new dividing line that constituted its constituency as the people, against what they saw as the incompetent, old, unreformed ruling elite. Putting it in other terms: Viktor Orbán has always steered away from demography or socioeconomic differences, in a counter-hegemonic way of generating an abstract collective subject, 'us,' against an other that can always be singled out but takes different guises. This affective attachment has generated strong ties of belief in the party leadership, which even in the early 1990s was firmly in Orbán's control.

Orbán's idea of illiberal Hungary has spread widely as a polarising tactic that renders all parties not affiliating with this kind of platform the same – liberal – whether they are green, socialist, centrist, conservative or left-populist. Rather than taking as my starting point this divide that some consider foundational in Hungarian politics, calling it a *Kulturkampf* between ethno-populists and cosmopolitans (Trencsényi et al., 2018), I seek in this book to uncover the multitude and how it failed. My point is that the division in Hungary is discursive in the sense that it needs to be signified to exist: it has to be made meaningful through affective practices. An example could be keeping the map of Greater Hungary, retaining pre-First World War areas such as Croatia, Transylvania and Slovakia within Hungarian borders, on the wall. This becomes an imaginary which structures meaning-making practices in the country. Indeed, such maps exist *en masse* across Hungary: they have become more and more popular, in fact, as the official discourse has endorsed nostalgia and mourning of the loss of these lands.

Nationalism and imagined communities

In Hungary, nation always has its counterpart: when speaking in the name of the nation, there is always something that is non-national or threatening to the nation. This polarity and antagonism is always present and works as content for the logic of populism (Palonen, 2018a). In Billig's (1995) understanding of banal nationalism, this threat is not realised, or it is present only playfully. However, decades of distrust and confrontation have made the situation quite different in Hungary. The ethno-nationalist side is equally contested for promoting the wrong type of nationalism. In fact, in Hungary, 'peopleism' (around the signifier *nép*) and 'nationalism' (around the signifier *nemzet*) have co-existed (Vulović & Palonen, 2023). For both, there is a distinction, the metropolis, which is constituted through its opposition to the *vidék* (countryside or non-metropolis).

Throughout the book I will be returning to the divide which is often referred to, though poorly captured, as the *népi-urbánus vita*, also known as the populist-urbanist, rural-urban or national-cosmopolitan debate. This dominant imaginary in Hungary changes contents somewhat over the period and is maintained through discursive practices as a strategy for polarisation and a shortcut to power. It may also be a powerful tool for liberals in Budapest, still hoping to reverse the tide but slowly giving up (Kallius, 2023) – in so far as it retails for them the hope of their side's future.

Discursive elements have always been strong with Fidesz. They, as the example of the '13th month's pension' (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)) shows, may take symbolic forms. The party discourse first centred on the metaphors of orange and the slogan of civic-bourgeois Hungary (Fowler, 2004a). The late 1990s, culminating in Fidesz coming to power for the first time in 1998, was a moment of great enthusiasm in politics and democracy. The elections in 2002 were a tight and emotional political battle, where everyone had to choose sides. Fidesz lost so dramatically that Viktor Orbán shied away for years from the Hungarian parliament, mobilising crowds elsewhere. Because of the developments in 2006, with the lying prime minister (Palonen, 2012), the landslide that elected Fidesz in 2010 represented initially not an anti- but a pro-democratic movement born in the undertones of disappointment in liberal democracy.

Scholars studying the development of democracy, state and state-building in East-Central Europe and the Balkans have observed how myths of nationhood (Hosking & Schöpflin, 2002) offer fantasies of salvation (Tismaneanu, 2009). Later turning into nationalist intellectuals, Schöpflin and Tismaneanu understood the process well. As varieties of nationhood, state and nation-bound nationalisms emerged and became institutionalised in this region, alternative claims to community, togetherness and even myths sustaining these also began to emerge. In Hungary, nationalism was multiplied to nationalisms: scholars found fragmented communities with their own national expressions, myths and beliefs (Feischmidt, 2014, 2020; Feischmidt & Pulay, 2017; Feischmidt & Szombati, 2017). Yet on another level, a pan-European secularist Christian civilisationalist nationalism can also be detected (Brubaker, 2017).

The simple references to the nation that were much present in the 1990s in Hungary were replaced by alternative calls for togetherness and community. The demands for the people challenged those in power, or potentially in power, described as impeding the real possibility for people to govern, including current power-holders, the 'real' power-holders (such as multinational companies, the European Union, etc.) or most simply the elites. Like 'the nation', 'the people' do not pre-exist articulation (Canovan, 2005; Laclau, 2005). Multifaceted, it cannot be fully captured: 'the people' remains always a partial imagination. As nationalism often thrives on the limits of who constitute the nation, populist articulation thrives on a stark division between us and them, one which it leaves undefined (Laclau, 2005).

Arguably, Orbán's Fidesz has – at least until 2010 – operated on the basis of a post-foundational, fluid postmodern performance of the nation (Palonen 2018a) rather than building nationhood from the foundational, essential(ist) characteristics of nation. Following Benedict Anderson (1983), this is 'imagining the community' as the basis of nationhood or articulating the people. Myths sustain the imagined community. Each period in power contains its own heroes and tragedies, from Count Széchenyi in 2002 to Trianon in the post-2010 period. The illegitimacy of other parties to represent this community is discursively strengthened to impede votes for the political opponent. This makes it difficult for the opposition to mobilise.

Right-wing governments in post-1989 Hungary have focused on nation-building and symbolic politics: engaging with the politics of

the past through, for example, street names, memorials and architecture. This can be explored in the surroundings of the Hungarian parliament, where the interwar statues have been returned, others removed, and the car park moved to a symbolic space of the nation. In 2010, the law on the Trianon commemoration day sparked debate particularly among in the community of historians (Kovács, 2016). While these traumas and commemoration connect to the far right and revanchist irredentism in Hungary, they also are mythical objects of popular commemorative mourning. All of this can be useful when considering the current Hungarian government's attitudes to the Russian attack on Ukraine.

All of this interest in the politics of memory can be traced to the attempt to generate a new epistemic understanding and promote a particular narrative rather than another. For example, Katalin Miklóssy has recognised the need to discuss the rule of law as based on the nation rather than the state by lawyers as key political actors in Hungary (Miklóssy, 2018). In her PhD, Annastiina Kallius (2023, p. III) traces an “epistemic collapse” among the Budapest liberal intelligentsia.⁷ Currently the higher education system in Hungary is under pressure and subject to overarching transformations. Ultimately, what is at stake is a counter-hegemonic operation, which is uncovered in this book for the case of Hungary – and which my colleagues have been exposing for the 2000s, but which on the global scale has only recently begun. The years of Fidesz in power have made the ‘liberals’ disillusioned (Kallius 2023, pp. 231–232), and the emergence of a new force in politics from the right and the cadres of Fidesz in 2024 provides an interesting dynamic for the contemporary period, as it is set against the backdrop of polarisation outlined here.

The populist moment: unveiling liberal democracy's problems

The mid-2000s were already an interesting period for things considered to be populism. Ernesto Laclau engaged us as students and scholars with the preliminary chapters of his seminal work *On populist reason* (2005). Cas Mudde's (2004) article ‘The populist Zeitgeist’ came out in *Government and Opposition*. After their seminal book on the populist right in Europe (Mudde, 2007), with Cristóba Rovira Kaltwasser, they held a workshop in Berlin to write an edited volume on

populism and democracy. Considering the focus on the radical right, I was invited to talk about MIÉP, but I came and talked about Fidesz and Jobbik as populists instead (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). I also engaged with colleagues Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (2007, 2015), who worked on populists in power. For all of the above, populism never was just an anti-democratic phenomenon but the connection to democracy was kept quite palpable.

Academics began to discuss these political actors' ambiguous relationship with democracy (e.g. Laclau, 2005; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Carlos de la Torre (2010, p. 200) has highlighted in relation to populist movements in Latin America that populism appears to be for the people but resorts to unmediated forms of democracy and hierarchical, leader-centred power relations. By 2010, with the emergence of the Tea Party in the US, populism was emerging into discussions again – even though the traditions of US populism and neoconservatism were not the same (Postel, 2019). The literature pointed out the madness and how to manage these new ideas and challenges to the system (Rasmussen & Shoen, 2010; Sandbrook, 2011).

In the theory of populism that draws on hegemony, politics is understood as conflictual rather than consensus-seeking and constitutive rather than a direct representation of pre-existing interests. The spread of populism is a reference to a new conjuncture in politics (Brubaker, 2017). It implies that we should look at the practices, apparatuses and logics with which hegemony-challenging movements mobilise and seek to provide an alternative hegemony. In the [next chapter](#) we discuss hegemony, which will enable us to explore this as a counter-hegemonic set of movements, contesting the status quo and eventually also liberal democracy.

Moffitt (2016, p. 151) has argued that ‘While it might be nice to state clearly that populism “is” or “is not” democratic, it is only by acknowledging the complexity of the relationship between the two phenomena, and noting populism’s both democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, that we do it justice’. Therefore, discussion of populism enables us to discuss what democracy is. Populism has the potential to include previously excluded groups or identities in the ‘performance of the “people”’; to enable people to understand complex political phenomena; to ‘reveal the dysfunctions of the contemporary democratic systems’; or finally to offer alternative influencing tools than mere voting (Moffitt, 2016, pp. 144, 142–149).

Negative approaches to populism emerged when it was associated with demagoguery and fascism. For Nadia Urbinati (2014), populism is one of the trends affecting our conceptions of democracy, when representative liberal democracy is in danger. The double-bind is present in political theorists Ernesto Laclau's (2005) and Chantal Mouffe's (2005, 2014) work on populism and politics. Yet while Urbinati seeks to restore and de-contest liberal democracy, Laclau and Mouffe's theorising reveals that the foundations of liberal democracy are contestable and contingent. Both rely on Claude Lefort's argument regarding the empty space of democracy (Accetti, 2015), but they interpret it in different ways (Palonen, 2021). Laclau's perspective stresses the emptiness of the space of power as always refillable and temporary, while for Urbinati it is seemingly never filled. Similarly, Jan-Werner Müller (2016), in his attempt to define populism, insists on a notion of the people as never filled. In fact, for Müller (2016) populism is undemocratic, excluding the elites from the people and articulating the people as a 'whole'. The distinctions between Laclau, Müller and Urbinati lie in their ontology. For Laclau, identity, representation or nationhood is never fully constituted, whereby the space of power is always empty and contingent (Palonen, 2021).

The temporality rather than the content is central. With my focus on the 2000s, I hope to capture this populist moment, and how Fidesz managed to seize it. This might sound like an antithesis of populism from the perspective of disentangling these ideologies. However, as we will see below, for me, populism is not even a thin ideology (Stanley, 2008), and it is not premised on 'the people' substantially understood (Vulović & Palonen, 2023). Rather, it is a form which was operationalised quite successfully in constituting a political community through antagonism. This takes the whole discussion to liberal democracy's internal paradox: the opening of the door for illiberals. The combination of taking analytical force from the theory of populism and drawing on criticism from Chantal Mouffe on the consensus-driven forms of liberal democracy enables us to address polarisation and the emergence of illiberalism.

Heuristic tools: form of populism and mainstream, fringe and competing dynamics

Comparative politics usually predefines its object of study to see whether or not this object appears in given formats in the cases analysed. Defining populism through particular categories as the anti-elitist politics of the self-righteous people has been a tool for recognising whether or not such a phenomenon exists. My approach is different. I am not interested in defining as populist or non-populist the Hungarian actors I investigate. Rather, my 'look and see' approach enabled the development of lenses. Populism as a heuristic device is an analytical tool for investigating what kinds of discourses or differentiations there are in Hungarian politics. Against mainstream approaches which consider populism as an object of study, I treat it as an analytical tool, reversing the independent and dependent variables.

Heuristic devices are procedures that enable us to better explore social phenomena, which as models may also have explanatory value (Glynos & Howarth, 2006). Discourse theory is rich in these kinds of logic that operate in meaning-making. Laclau (2005) particularly discusses empty and floating signifiers in trying to conceptualise populism as a political logic. He argues that populist leaders emerge like empty signifiers uniting different grievances, articulating them into demands and representing all of them and at the same time giving voice to different groups, which become a collective subject. In this way the 'people' challenge power-holders in a counter-hegemonic popular front even if it is internally heterogeneous and never really a true representation of the people. It is important that there is something that is being opposed. The idea of conflict is central to this kind of thinking; when politics is not polarised there are adversaries rather than enemies, agonism rather than antagonism, as Chantal Mouffe stresses.

In his earlier work Laclau (1990) discussed points of reference with which meanings are produced: particular myths as reference points between many discourses may turn into structuring horizons, imaginaries. Polarisation as an imaginary is present in all meaning-making. It also fixes the limits of society and becomes the structuring principle for a community. This perspective was influential for me, as I saw that in Hungary, the function of the deep divide has been precisely this: to provide an imaginary where all political differences can be assumed.

This heuristic device may make tangible the overarching logic of polarisation. But we need more tools. Over time I have developed a set that I apply in this study:

(1) A *form(ula) of populism* enables the study of chameleonic populist movements and leaders on the one hand, but also the longitudinal and lateral investigation of political mobilisation. It has two components, which are both heightened by something affective or affectively loaded:

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us}^{\text{Affects1}} + \text{Frontier}^{\text{Affects2}}$$

This draws on politics being about constructing a collective subject ‘us’ in a situation where there always is something else to oppose. I use the term ‘frontier’ here as I find it important to highlight that it is not yet another ‘them’ or a group of people. Mostly, people, parties and movements oppose something that may then be symbolised by ‘them’ or as the other. The other may impede the ‘us’ from existing in one way or another, and it can be an object of research to find out what really lurks behind what we appear to oppose. I have applied this with Liv Sunnercrantz (2021) longitudinally and laterally to Nordic populist parties and expanded it with Marina Vulović providing an understanding of the chains of equivalence that go into the us and frontier side of the formula. It makes it look more complex, but it is more accurate to the actual realities we study. Just as Vulović and I (2023) used it for the case of Serbia, also in this book we can explore the chains of equivalences, instances where several elements are contained in the side of the us, or the frontier – or for that matter affects. The relation of equivalence is here captured with the symbol of equivalence even if we potentially abuse formal logic here:

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us} (\text{Demand} \equiv \text{Demand} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects1}} + \text{Antagonistic Frontier} (\text{Other} \equiv \text{Other} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects2}}$$

(2) Furthermore, in this book I operationalise a typology of *three populist dynamics*, which pinpoint the type of antagonistic challenge to the field that political movements are providing. These I have already used with Juha Herkman and our many co-authors for the study of European elections of 2019 (Herkman & Palonen, 2024b). *Competing populism* as bipolar hegemony was something I uncovered and theorised when I was writing the first versions of this book, then my PhD thesis, and I developed it in interaction with my colleagues at

the seminars organised at the University of Essex. Mostly we discussed how the counter-hegemonic front challenges those in power, but in this case power itself would be bipolar, as the antagonism would have sedimented. *The fringe populist dynamic* I developed when studying how the Finns Party provided a challenge to all the other parties from the edges of the party spectrum (Palonen, 2020). This is quite helpful as it is often the way in which ‘populist parties’ emerge. However, to understand how populist parties stay in power, I developed for a workshop paper for the ECPR Joint Sessions (Palonen, 2010) on the idea of mainstream populism which translates it into the ‘mainstream populist dynamic’. This enabled me to observe a longitudinal comparison, where the focus is on the object of confrontation and the position of the parties that are studied, rather than issues of substance. After the type dynamic is unveiled, the content of the discursive confrontation can better be outlined. Changes can be demonstrated in both dynamics and their discursive contents such as anti-elitism or nationalism.

Rhetoric-performative discourse analysis with mixed data

My study, set in interpretive political analysis, combines a post-structuralist perspective in which meanings are not already there but emerge through relations or (dis)connections in a non-predetermined way, and a post-foundational focus on the foundations on which discourses are articulated and where the bases of their relational uses lie (see also Bevir, 2010; Marchart, 2007). I have developed a rhetoric-performative discourse analysis based on these insights and the tradition of Essex School discourse theory that I learned in the early 2000s. Discourse here refers not to speech and writing but to contingent relational, always fluidly articulated structures of meaning. The anti-essentialist approach explores how contents are given and meanings constituted in a performative process. A discourse theorist’s key tasks are to observe how prior meanings and connotations are evoked and transformed (Alekseev & Palonen, 2025). The book investigates the transformation of the discursive field and contextualises the emergence of populist logic as a specific form of politics particularly tied to mobilisation.

Discourse-theoretical approaches that seek to explore contestation and overdetermination are not dependent on data realism, as what we are trying to uncover are relations of meanings, logics and patterns

which, if they exist in society, would also exist in different samples of social life. This is to say not that data does not matter or would not be interesting, but that we can be more instrumental about it and look beyond correlation to richer narratives of interpretation (Bevir, 2010).

The data for this book is mixed. Some chapters use original data more than others. I aim to open different layers that can be studied politically, ranging from the audio-visual and architectural to speeches and mobilisations. An interpretive approach to discourse allows for such a mixed use of materials. There will never be a complete set, and what is unveiled is a reading of the relational dynamics of meaning-making, contextualised as well as possible in relation to the evolving confrontation-alliance that is taking place.

There has been quite a transformation in the sourcing of the data for this book that has been circa 25 years in the making. Forming an overall picture of what is going on and what are the arguments has been key. I have based my arguments on on-site observation in 2002. Informal discussion has always been a source of understanding for the logic of polarisation and the conceptions that people have about it. I have spent time in both Budapest and the countryside. I did keep a blog, but I have not written a diary, so I cannot really claim to have been doing systematic ethnographic field research. Gaps in memory have been addressed by colleagues commenting on drafts of my work.

One set of analyses are the political speeches – sourced directly from the Budapest mayor's office on a CD as per personal request in 2004, or online (viktorban.hu). More recent data gathering in the 2020s to enhance my previous work, partly synchronous with the development of polarisation, has been through retrospectively provided online sources (YouTube, Open Society Archives). The transformation in terms of what is available now and what was available then, and how, is of course significant. But what is available now is equally contingent on what is made available by whom, when and for which period – and of course for what reason. The events from 2002 to 2006 were captured through on-site observation. The 2006–10 period relies on a more general discourse-theoretical reading of unfolding political events.

All in all, this book is intended to narrate the past and interpret it, in Hungary up to 2010, doing memory work. I do not claim that I will be able to reconstruct the period. It will always remain my reading, and selective: memory work par excellence, in the ethos of Jacques Derrida (1986), or a *Passagen Werke*, fragmented archive, following Walter

Benjamin (1999a, 1999b; see Lindroos, 1998). It is up to the reader to be persuaded by the mixed-data approach, but I also hope that it can provide inspiration for more structured approaches, through which data realism and systematicity may overshadow interpretation and creativity. More and more, we end up with situations in which archives are destroyed or controlled with a particular vision, and data that is available one day is no longer available or ‘complete’ the next. A mixed-data approach can be useful in overcoming some of the anxieties related to this.

The aim here is to explore political transformation also by operationalising the form of populism as a heuristic device that can capture the diverse contents offered to us, the frontier and affects, and explore how as logics in the everyday sense these can provide explanations (Glynos & Howarth, 2006) for the emerging polarisation.

The structure of the book

The empirical chapters in this book are quite dense and it may feel that they require prior knowledge. It includes many personalities, and at the same time I have left out central personalities from this book. There is no gender balance: I think Hungarian politics and intellectual life have always been in a significant imbalance, but even in this context I have probably mentioned fewer women than I should have. Each empirical chapter includes both a brief outline in the introduction and a discussion of the populist dynamics in the conclusions, so if one wants to avoid the analysis part itself, it is possible to hop through the book. However, I build the study so that it can also be useful for discussing discourse-theoretical analysis.

In [Chapter 1](#) I introduce a new theoretical and methodological framework for studying polarisation. I discuss the theory of hegemony and theorise bipolar hegemony and connect affects with discourse theory. The chapter introduces and develops heuristic devices. Particularly, it puts forward the form of populism for the study of antagonistic political articulation, and it outlines a typology of populist dynamics.

In [Chapter 2](#) my focus is on the transition that in a certain sense started in 1956 with the Kádár era, the emergence of several oppositional political groupings and their confrontations. [Chapter 3](#) I dedicate to the three elections in the 1990s, for which I apply the formula of populism to debates, using background audio-visual material that

has been made available through YouTube, such as old election videos and election debates recorded the time which I did not witness myself.

Chapters [4](#) and [5](#) I reserve for focusing on the discourse of two maverick politicians: Viktor Orbán and Gábor Demszky. These chapters also clarify the polarisation that these two contribute to in their discourse. They also offer tools for analysing the absence of something in a discourse and increasing confrontation. The co-constitutive presence-absence of Budapest and the nation are discussed here, with particular reference to urban public spaces – one of my pet topics over the years.

In [Chapter 6](#) I investigate the high point of polarisation, the election of 2002, and in [Chapter 7](#) I focus on the way in which Fidesz regenerated itself and presented confrontation in the opposition 2002–05 through extra-parliamentary means. [Chapter 8](#) engages with the failure of the left after the 2006 election. Fantasy in democracy was both alive and collapsing as alternatives that emerged. In [Chapter 9](#) I go through the ‘revolution at the polls’ that Fidesz claimed in 2010 and discuss its connection to polarisation, also consider how political scientists have been ill equipped to deal with polarisation. The [concluding chapter](#) explores the post-political zeitgeist in which it was difficult to address the polarising challenge of the populist discourse. It opens the space for a rebirth of democracy.

The [epilogue](#) is written by my Hungarian colleague Szilvia Horváth, who has lived through the illiberal reforms of the Orbán government as an academic and has regularly discussed with me both the current situation and the versions of this book.

Conclusions

The title of the book, *The birth and death of democracy in Hungary*, may sound like an exaggeration in all directions: was there ever really functioning democracy in Hungary that could be discussed or form the basis of what this book is presenting? The aim of this study is to indicate how political mobilisation took place in Hungary – mapping out particular movements and moments in politics from 1956, which some on the Hungarian right rather would rather forget as a left-wing phenomenon, to the 2006 lying prime minister, whom many on the Hungarian left would equally wish to ignore. Probably the study ends

up challenging both ends of the spectrum with its analysis, and as the author I only welcome this as a positive effect of my contribution.

The book is about politics, polarisation and populism ‘as the ideological’ condition in Hungary. It narrates Hungarian politics but also gives food for thought for political practice and liberal democracy. The study offers heuristic tools to explore politics elsewhere and pinpoint the ways in which polarised politics may lead to the emergence of illiberalism or electoral autocracy. The heuristic devices I use, from the formula of populism to populist dynamics, transform populism from an object of study into the mode of political articulation. It is both an immanent reading of Laclau, I argue, and a revisionist use of the widely (ab)used term ‘populism’, which is too often used as a euphemism for things people would rather not talk about. My motivation for this revisionism is precisely to enlarge the toolkit of political scientists to study contexts beyond liberal democratic ones. Grafting new analytical devices is important in a situation where we have been powerless in the face of the crumbling of liberal democracy through its inner paradoxes. Here, the theory of hegemony and radical democracy come in useful for analysts just as they are for practitioners. While radical democracy seeks to combine equality and freedom, counter-hegemonic politics does not have an essential predefined substantive basis. It can be operationalised by any political actor.

Through this book I hope to convey a perspective on the deep polarisation sedimented in Hungarian politics in the 2000s and the failure of the left, which resulted in a situation that enabled Orbán’s two-thirds majority and the implementation of ‘illiberal’ reforms in a way that seemed to many in Hungary legitimate even as they faced criticism across the world – and that has inspired right-wing forces across the globe to take a counter-hegemonic perspective on liberal democracy. The study may appear slightly mundane, as I go through some key events in the history of Hungary’s democracy, with reference to political forces that are no longer relevant. But the power of this account, just like that of Szelényi (2022), is in explaining how a relatively normal political process polarised and led to an illiberal regime. This could happen also elsewhere.

CHAPTER 1

Hegemonic transformations of polarisation and populism

In this book I argue that political science has failed to really understand political polarisation because it draws on a different concept of politics than liberal democracy, which is reliant on bases of interests, identities or socioeconomic factors (see also [Chapter 9](#)). Therefore, in this chapter, I will build a theoretical base for studying political polarisation in Hungary, and also for understanding the phenomenon more widely. Even if there appears to be a consensus among certain researchers in political science on what populism means, there is a lot of variety in its usage in academia and outside of it. For many years, I gave up on the usage of the term ‘populism’ altogether, preferring to describe challenges around democracy in other terms (Palonen, 2012) or simply focusing on topics where it did not appear.

The revisionist perspective on populism as a heuristic that I adopt in this book seeks to restore the use of the term and connect it to the Laclaudian theory of populism, in turn closely connected to the theory of hegemony (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This allows us to think about politics in a new way that is not confined to the liberal democratic paradigm which so-called populists such as Orbán, and Trump after him, are seeking to challenge. My radical move is to turn populism into a tool of analysis, in contrast to the role it is traditionally assigned: an object of analysis. This is important, as it enables us to ‘look and see’, to borrow a Wittgensteinian phrase (Wittgenstein, 2001), what besides the contents – abstract and vague or robust and predefined – are the discursive elements and logics that constitute the antagonising political discourse in populist politics or political mobilisation at a given time. Engagement with the logics of hegemony, polarisation and populism enables us to build cognitive shortcuts to

deal with political difference and sameness: populism is about (dis/mis)identification.

The articulation of political meanings is a process through which fixed perspectives and dominant frames of interpretation are contested, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) argued when they conceptualised ‘discourse’ as an articulated set of elements with limits that gives temporal structure or fixture to a discursive field that is always in flux. The shaping of the field of political meaning-making takes place in a discursive field. A counter-hegemonic contestation seeks to replace this with a new perspective and organisation. In the analysis of hegemony, the extension of the chain of equivalence – the process of relating different groups to each other – is crucial. Nevertheless, politics is not only about the extension of this chain but also about its limits. From the agonistic perspective to democracy, in politics, what we do not want is equally as important as what we do want.

The central argument in the analysis of Hungarian politics is that what was commonly called political polarisation in Hungary in the mid-2000s had a specific logic as ‘bipolar hegemony’. This study develops the notion of bipolarised hegemonic contestation as something informative to political struggles and deadlock situations beyond 2000s Hungary. Going through Hungarian politics, I explore the logic of why polarisation is such a pernicious problem (see also McCoy & Somer, 2019). I investigate how polarisation is related to affects, explaining this in a particular way through the use of discourse theory and the rhetorical-performative dynamics of populism. Particularly, I make an anti-essentialist reading of the post-structuralist and post-Marxist theory of Ernesto Laclau (1990, 2005). Outside and within this tradition, in my radically anti-essentialist reading, the concept of ‘populism’ already has much baggage. It is used in everyday language in so many ways that it risks becoming obsolete. Rather than disregarding the term, I make a revisionist suggestion: to give it value not as content but precisely, as Laclau insisted, as a political logic.

Therefore, my study offers heuristic tools for addressing the emergence of antagonistic forces in politics and the sedimentation of a bipolar political strife that derives not from a particular clustering of political interest but from a deep (dis)identification. Discussing *polarisation as bipolar hegemony*, the heuristic tools or logics I introduce in this chapter and the book are *the form of populism* and the *three populist dynamics of fringe, mainstream and competing*. I have developed

these based on discourse theory and a post-foundational understanding of hegemony and populism, which are conceptualised as theoretical phenomena on the ontological level, where they can take different contents at the ontic level – as in Hungary, as analysed in this book.

As a discourse theorist I maintain that political theory ought not to lose its relation to empirical developments. Neither should the investigation of any context forget its own reproduction of theory. Rather, it should seek to enhance theoretical understanding. Throughout the book I have tried to communicate my situatedness in the context of reading. The heuristic tools will be helpful in interpreting (Bevir, 2010) and providing explanans, some explanations deriving from the discourse-theoretical logics we can see operating (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Social sciences usually work with solid and fixed categories, but my post-foundational tradition challenges this. What is (relatively) fixed is the heuristic tools and logics themselves. I add ‘relatively’, as even they are to be (re)articulated by researchers when they engage with analysis (Howarth et al., 2000). Disagreement may therefore take place at the level of the heuristics tools themselves. This is why I also need to outline the tools that are commonly used in discourse theory, so that I can be criticised for my interpretation, but I intend to make the bases on which I found my work transparent.

Liberal democracy’s failure to address the logic of political articulation or meaning-making is at the core of the critical theories of Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2005). While Mouffe discusses agonism and antagonism, Laclau conceptualises the attempt to signify a political subject particularly through a relational logic of political meaning-making. In Laclau’s work, slogans or political leaders obtain meaning as uniting empty signifiers which transcend their prior particular content to represent a whole chain of demands that are in a relation of equivalence with each other under this common heading. While Laclau’s work can be difficult to grasp because of its theoretical underpinnings and language that borrows heavily from continental philosophy, different interpretations have sought to make it tangible. Left populism as a political project is one of them (Laclau, 2005).

The aim of my formalist approach is to trace the core of the argument’s logic. Earlier I captured this process of a(nta)gonistic discourse in the form of an equation: $Populism = Us^{Affects1} + Frontier^{Affects2}$ (Palonen, 2020; Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021). My immanent reading is an attempt to capture the key points of Laclau as a theorist rather

than as an activist. We have highlighted the way in which a distinction should be made between ontic and ontological understandings of populism (Vulović & Palonen, 2023). Ontic contents get grouped as chains of equivalence, where they may be represented by one term that becomes the symbol and reference point for the whole chain of contents, as its empty signifier, a unifying force. This is often the symbol of the impossible fullness or temporary unity of the ‘us’, as collective subject. Othering can also be used to strengthen us. To address polarisation, the same form can be applied in any co-constitutively antagonistic situation, which may end up as bipolar hegemony, where both sides constitute themselves through the rejection of the other.

Empirically, it is this observation, as an outsider, of a mutual rejection that motivated me to carry out this research and develop my thinking over decades after the initial puzzle that I faced. It started from the need to match theory of hegemony with critical reflection on political polarisation in the case of Hungary, where I was spending a lot of time in diverse social contexts. Later, I developed my thought through witnessing polarisation and hegemonic struggles elsewhere.

This theoretical chapter first engages with the category of hegemony and the discursive field from the Gramscian-Althusserian perspective. Then it explores polarisation in this context with reference to Laclau, Gramsci and Lacan, also challenging traditional political science understandings of polarisation. It explains why polarisation is very attractive to parties to maintain. As populist rhetoric is something that generates polarisation through the articulation of antagonism, which may polarise, I also address populism and clarify why it is not an ideology but, from the perspective of the theory of hegemony, ideological in the Althusserian sense. This leads me to discuss affects as an important theoretical dimension in connection with populist and polarised politics. In the last part of the chapter, I introduce the heuristic devices of the form(ula) of populism and three populist dynamics, and the better-known logics of discourse theory.

Hegemony and the discursive field

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) drew on Gramscian-Althusserian tradition when building a strategy for new social movements in the *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. This provided a genealogy of hegemony in socialist theorising.

The concept of hegemony has long roots, from Greek political philosophy to left-wing political thought, where it was importantly theorised by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (Cospito et al., 2024). It has been associated with leadership in a wide sense that includes the mechanisms of epistemic production, media and education institutions. The attention is moved from the focus on who is in power to who controls instruments of power, which Louis Althusser (2008) called ‘state apparatuses,’ even if the reference was more to the institutions structuring society. In the hands of Laclau and Mouffe these acquired even more discursive flair. They observed how certain ideas were dominant and contested in what they called the discursive field where political meanings originate.

In traditional class struggle it was clear that one side is in power and another side oppressed. From the start, being able to recognise one’s identity as working class was a central point in *The communist manifesto* of Marx and Engels (1998). The workers should generate class-consciousness as a means of contesting the state of affairs. The next generations of Marxists had several takes on what the options for mobilising the working class were: their work, leading to syndicalism, and their ideas, leading to ‘hegemony.’ In this study we explore the theorists who have sought to build on ideas deriving from the theory of hegemony.

Gramsci’s thinking has been interpreted as the mere contestation of an existing order, only for it to be filled with another type of order. This can take place through the party but also through the media, which Gramsci wrote about at length, or other institutions. Althusser (2008, p. 39) argued that ‘ideology has a material existence’ and theorised how it exists in practices and apparatuses. These generate consciousness, a subject. Therefore, controlling such apparatuses is of utmost importance. This enables us to see what hegemonic battles take place in politics and societies, where social imaginaries, with their orders, are tried out and substituted through articulatory practices. Instead of ideology Althusser stressed the ideological.

Gramsci thought of politics as a continuous cycle: there is always space for crisis; it is normal for political parties to dismantle or reproduce themselves and gain or lose members. Gramsci (1996, pp. II, 241) highlights this cycle and the ‘normal’ process of changing representation with the term ‘organic crisis.’ As a post-Gramscian theorist, Ernesto Laclau (1990, 1996, 2005) discusses transformation in

the discursive field in terms of unity and fragmentation. For him the results of the process are by no means evident and mere moments in an already-determined cycle – which makes him a post-Marxian in this canon of thinking. Focusing on the creation of and battle between political camps, it is important to conceptualise the emergence and articulation of unity and the fragmentation of it. In this, the notion of hegemony is extremely useful.

In the new conjuncture of populism, the same process is also taking place on the far right. In the case of Hungary, as I will demonstrate in this book, the process began earlier. Why? Because in the post-materialist conditions of the neoliberal welfare state there was little else to deliver other than ideas. The idea of moving political control from one group in power to another is the thriving force in Marxism, but in post-Marxism we are focused not just on the control of power but on alternative claims that are made for power, and transformations on the discursive field criss-crossed with antagonism.

Due to the way in which articulation takes place, hegemony is not a static state of affairs but is always in flux, with competing attempts to sediment and contest. Rather than one-off replacement of one order with another, I maintain that hegemony is a process: a constant movement through rearticulation, which takes place between the extremities of fragmentation and unity. Articulation is necessary because of the inherent distance between the represented and the representative: to make political claims and demands these must be articulated. They must be brought up, rather than merely emerging naturally, which means that things and their representation, the form they take, are distinctive. The process of articulation, therefore, implies changes. The articulation of a temporal relational unity also implies the creation of a difference or distinction. At the same time, it implies the distinction between elements in the chain and what is not articulated, what is called in this theorising the ‘constitutive outside’.

Attention to hegemony also enables us to understand that polarisation is the product not of a single political party, but of a larger structure of political articulation and identification, which to succeed must be maintained by all of the main political parties. It is maintained because political and social groups articulate their identifications through the situation of polarisation, rather than through radically different identifications and new frontiers. This theorising may sound complex, but it is relatively straightforward. Since the far right, in general as in

Hungary, has taken a liking to Gramscian thinking, it is useful for the analysts of contemporary politics to try to grasp how dynamics and logics can be conceptualised and operationalised.

Polarisation in the Laclaudian-Gramscian(-Lacanian) perspective

Political identity mobilisation includes a combination of ‘us’, the community that needs to be articulated to exist, and the frontier that is the limit of such a community. Antagonism, the emphasis on the limit, is crucial for this sort of populism. Populism does not equate to polarisation – it is a form that may become sedimented as polarisation, when the two sides of the debate co-constitute themselves through the negation of the other.

Political identities deserve a whole sub-chapter but this is outside our scope, as this book explores how mobilisation takes place in Hungary through points of political identification. But more briefly, it suffices to argue that from the Laclaudian perspective, which draws equally on Derrida, Lacan and le Bon, political identities in general are constructed through negativity and performed in a rhetorical process. In this tradition, identity is conditioned by a constitutive lack. Lacan talks about the ‘subject of lack’, what we are not, and what is confirmed for us by authority, by the ratifying gaze of the ‘big Other’. Lack drives us to seek to become something more than one: ‘us’. The process relies on something that is beyond the limit of ‘us’. Political leaders have a role in ratifying the identity of the self. This alterity in general, or more specifically, ratifying the ‘big Other’, is part of our identity. As Jacques Lacan (2004; see also Evans, 1996) has argued, there is no other of the other. The constitutive difference and lack of fullness is internal to oneself, to us. Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 193) write: ‘A hegemonic formation also embraces what opposes it, insofar as the opposing force accepts the system of basic articulations of that formation as something it negates, but the place of negation is defined by the internal parameters of the formation itself’. It is not yet another entity.

A similar phenomenon has been captured in terms of social imaginaries, which for Taylor (2004) are contingent and tend to structure the ways in which horizons of possibility are perceived in political contexts. The terms ‘imaginary’ and ‘myth’ emerge in Laclau and Mouffe’s work as discursive reference points for several political actors, offering

the partial fixation and limiting of discourses. Laclau (1990) theorises them in *New reflections on the revolutions of our time*. These not only transform over time and through social change, but they are volatile to political attempts to generate new meanings and contest the status quo – or simply other political beliefs and imaginings. This leads us to also consider polarisation.

Marking and emphasising a specific political frontier is the crux of polarisation. A critique of polarisation, however, does not go against political frontiers. On the contrary, conflict is a vital part of politics, and politics is a vital part of democratic life. As Laclau (1990, p. 160) has stressed, ‘there is only politics where there are frontiers.’ But as Aletta Norval (1997) has pointed out, there are also limits, and not all that is political involves frontiers. Any system needs limits, and, crucially, political discourses and groups need something which is posited outside the system, not as a mere limit but as something that is in an antagonistic relation, as an enemy or adversary. Politics is about making visible the limits of the totality ‘us’, an imagined community, by turning the limits into frontiers.

Polarisation generates a ‘war of opposition’ in the Gramscian sense, which appears as sedimented. In the party system, polarisation has produced a ‘static equilibrium.’ This term, used by Gramsci (1996, pp. II, 241–242), implies that none of the camps, classes or parties ‘has the strength to win’:

The passage from one party to another is an organic [and normal] phenomenon even when it takes place very rapidly by comparison to normal periods; it represents the fusion of a class under a single leadership in order to resolve an overwhelming problem affecting its existence. When the crisis is not resolved in this organic manner but instead produces the man sent by providence it means that a static equilibrium exists; it means that no class, neither the conservative nor the progressive class, has the strength to win, but it also means that even the conservative class needs a master.

The ‘organic’ process of change has been halted in the polarised situation. This I take to mean that fluidity rather than fixity is the normal state.

Polarisation is a situation in which the signifying frontier is constantly articulated at the same location. The identities are constructed on each side against each other, and any incompatible differences are

blocked out. The bipolar system sustains both communities, which articulate their identities through the same frontier. In the construction and maintenance of polarisation, negation is essential. Polarisation is a situation in which self contains and is maintained through a strong internalised otherness.

The situation of polarisation is so attractive for both communities that both rely on the frontier and articulate each other through it. This frontier is made visible while it is being contested. Anything 'bad' is projected on the other, and anything that the other maintains as important cannot be redescribed and tied to one's own framework. It is considered undesirable, suspicious and 'bad'. Anything desirable, on the other hand, is attributed to oneself (Palonen, 2009).

Quentin Skinner (2002) has stressed that in classical rhetoric, these changes in the normative contents of concepts are 'paradiastolic' moves. There are also competing claims over discursive elements, contestation over floating signifiers. Both rhetorical processes or processes of signification designate different political camps. However, the problem with the situation of polarisation is that the elements are described mainly through the normative framework of good/bad, legitimate/illegitimate, which means that they cannot be 'legitimately' contested in the public realm or rendered openly political and contestable.

I would like to stress that in my reading, a plurality of frontiers is part and parcel of democracy: it enables the negotiations, conflicts of interest and debates that keep politics as an open process, which nevertheless tries to establish positions. The problem of polarisation is that it contains a dominant frontier, while others are downplayed. This situation is not ideal, as it creates 'consensual' camps, a system through which political differences are downplayed on both sides and in which 'politics' as a process of frontier-making is lacking. In short, for a functioning democracy, politics should occur over more than one frontier, and with changing coalitions. Democracy needs temporary moments of division, but when this sediments into an essentially incontestable social imaginary, it becomes problematic for understandings of democracy that endorse multiplicity and debate.

This kind of polarisation is in fact close to affective polarisation (McCoy & Somer, 2019). Yet here we see polarisation as a strategy and hegemony, which goes against the larger framework of affective polarisation studies. Also in contrast, the political scientist Giovanni Sartori (1976) used polarisation to refer to a situation caused by

high-level fragmentation, the emergence of poles, which is in Sartori's words 'centre-fleeing' (Sartori, 1976, esp. pp. 98–130, 273–293). In fact, polarisation as theorised here is the opposite of the situation in Italy that Sartori was trying to capture. In Hungary, politics is centrifugal but in deep conflict.

As I will show in this book, in Hungary the two poles do push each other away, but while doing so, they remain by the frontier, leaving little 'ideological distance' between them and competing over the same signifiers. This resembles a bi-partite political system that sets the basis for 'affective polarisation', but – crucially – there are, or at least have been, more than two parties involved. In this work, polarisation indicates a concentration of political groupings on two sides, whose coherence is maintained by their common opposition to the other side. Competing camps construct themselves through each other. Here polarisation is seen as a bipolar hegemony, which refers to the structure of a particular formation rather than notions of supremacy.

Polarisation solves the initial problem of fragmentation – a lack of unity – in post-communism, by instituting a frontier which sustains two communities as a bipolar hegemony. Furthermore, polarisation requires constant rearticulation and, therefore, constant antagonising around that frontier, since new cleavages or demands could otherwise emerge that would distort the situation of polarisation. Consequently, to maintain polarisation, any new cleavages or demands must be articulated into the existing system.

In this way, polarisation offers a chance for two camps to exist by making sure that the frontier between them establishes a strong imaginary – a system of differences in which all of the demands that arise are articulated. This allows them to create their identities without paying too much attention to the contents of their discourses, beyond the emphasis on the frontiers. This is an asset in the context of post-communism, in which the generation of new discourses is difficult, which would resonate among the people in Hungary and fit the demands coming from outside of Hungary.

The maintenance of the frontier of polarisation in Hungary is the primary task of the political forces that gain their identities from it and that tackle any contestation and emerging demands through it. It can be seen as the 'big Other' of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the one that ratifies the discourses – or more simply a political or social imaginary that is difficult to escape from.

As a form of politics, polarisation is similar to consensus. In fact, it is two consensuses divided by a frontier. While the problem of consensus is that political frontiers are minimised, in polarisation, disagreements are minimised on each of the two sides, and political divisions are all projected onto the frontier of polarisation between the two camps. This is apart from the political frontier between the people who are able to participate in the polity and those who are not. The stress is on minimising, since there will always be some confrontation within the consensual unit, but, to maintain the situation, internal conflict is kept to a minimum and its role in the political process is downplayed.

Similarly, anything which is not easily accommodated into the system is ignored or its significance diminished. The emergence of new cleavages, which cannot be easily articulated into the existing system, threatens to distort polarisation. This would put in question the identities and logic of the communities or political forces that are created through the situation of polarisation, since they are reliant on the imagined frontier, and on otherness. The other can rarely be seen except as an adversary – even if the two ‘enemies’ are each other’s perfect partners, in terms of maintaining the polarisation. Since polarisation exists through the rearticulation of any new cleavages or demands into the existing system, it will obviously block any ‘real’ political antagonisms and crucial demands. There may even appear to be a consensus on the part of the two parties to the polarisation over the exclusion of certain demands, ones which would threaten the system, and which can then be branded as ‘irrational’, ‘illegitimate’ or ‘irrelevant’.

Polarisation as bipolar hegemony contains two constellations. Neither of the communities have any prior or necessary existence, but rather they have been ‘invented’, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s (1983) term. The signification of something that was not there before can happen through an empty signifier, which gives a ‘name’ to the community. This is visible in the Fidesz discourse (e.g., New Hungary; *polgári*, civic, Hungary; or, latterly, the people of Hungary, *Magyar emberek*) which will be studied in the last few chapters. The community can also be signified through its frontier. In practice, these methods of signification exist as a combination.

Populism is not an ideology but is ideological

In this chapter, we theorise dimensions of populism as a typology and heuristic. It has been argued that populism as a movement or strategy emerges through a crisis of representation. The articulation of a crisis is a regular tool for the power-holders (Moffitt, 2015). There is always something that impedes the full constitution of the national identity (Stavrakakis, 2014). Yet at the same time national articulation provides a fantasy of salvation (Tismaneanu, 2009). These are discursively produced through threats and claims. In this study I argue, in a revisionist way, that populism is not useful as a list of contents or an articulation of ‘the people’ as a nodal point, but its abstract logic can be captured to better understand political meaning-making.

Leaping into the discussion of populism as a (thin) ideology, which my colleagues Ben Stanley (2008) and Michael Freeden (2016) have been writing about and which Cas Mudde (2007) has popularised globally: all students of politics have read Andrew Heywood’s (1992) *Political ideologies: An introduction* in some form and are equipped to embark on investigation of the contents of ideology. In the (post-) Marxist tradition, introduced in this chapter, ideology is not substance. Althusser (2008, p. 45) uses a tautology to try to capture the processual idea of the ideological function: ‘ideology [is] nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning’. For him ideology is about (mis)recognition (Althusser, 2008, p. 46). I treat populism in a similar way: rather than content, populism is the moment and process(ing) of (mis/dis)identification. The recognition of ‘us’ takes place through something that impedes us.

This enables me to present a revisionist argument for the use of populism in a new way, and questions whether populism is related to something substantive as content, instead exploring ‘populism’ as an opportunity to explore the unfixing and fixing of contested foundations. From the post-foundational perspective populism is performative and constitutive: it is merely a logic of articulation (Laclau, 2005). It is composed of constitutive antagonism, representation and fixity through affects. This logic captures the temporary moment of unity between disparate, otherwise incompatible groups, when there is a moment of the political, expressing and momentarily constituting ‘us’, or ‘we the people’. With a common positive claim or demand, or instead of it, it could be constructed through a negation. The positive

ways in which this unity is signified include the adoption of one slogan or personality or demand over others.

Populism is a form of hegemonic contestation, meaning that it has no necessary essence. It is not substance but the logic of articulation as such. In his work, Laclau also distinguishes between the logics of equivalence and difference. They operate in each signifying system: the logic of difference 'organises the positivity of the social' or enables the co-existence of distinct mutually different nodes, elements or subject positions, while the logic of equivalence refers to negativity and introduces social division (Howarth, 2014). Laclau's point is that non-populism involves no equivalence.

Sometimes the nexus of democracy, populism and politics may be even too close to call, as we can see from the shortcomings of Ernesto Laclau's theory, as contended by Benjamin Arditì (2010). In fact, what can be seen from Laclau's (2014) later writings is that populism is indeed only an extreme form of political articulation. Populism is not universal but a particular logic, which often prevails in political mobilisation. It is also ideological in its grip. These modalities are contained in the form that also explains the grip that representation engages with.

The affective dimensions

Affective ties, identification and articulation of political demands that are central in politics (Mouffe 2000, 2005) often get ignored in theories of liberal democracy that see the population as separated into demographic groups, with pre-existing interests or issues that parties simply pick and represent. Hence, liberal democracy is established where interests are represented in politics and political parties are the representatives and carriers of those interests.

The affect theory has become an important way to describe social and political phenomena of our time. Many draw on Sara Ahmed (2004), who has powerfully described the stickiness of our articulations. Political scientists and social psychologists alike have become interested in emotions, and emotional communication has become both practice and an object of analysis for the study of populism. Affective polarisation is a whole research framework which explores how partisan distinction intensifies as voters move further from each other in mutual rejection. Rather than dwelling on the affects, particular

emotions or feelings of experience, my focus as a discourse theorist is on the way in which particular signifiers become affectively loaded.

Through the lens of the theory of hegemony, affectivity is a modality. The stickiness is already part of the rhetorical way of meaning-making, the use of metaphors and other rhetorical devices that relate things to another in affective ways to generate distance and proximity. Furthermore, the process of representation is affectively loaded: representation is always partial but necessary. One needs to identify with or against something – while at the same time knowing that this brings an illusion of fullness of representation.

The bases for affect theory are found in the basic conception in structural linguistics that there is a split between the signifier and signified, so language is already a process of assigning, maintaining and contesting meanings – which could be otherwise, but we choose to rearticulate certain connections and relate things with each other. In the language of representation, the representative cannot fully capture the represented in the process of representation. Representatives are recognised as proper or rightful to represent the represented, but in democratic politics, where we are not assigned but choose a representative – our signifier – we presume identification. Full representation would be impossible, and precisely this mediation, inaccuracy and impossibility makes politics interesting. In post-structuralism the focus is on the instability and impossibility of full connectedness or full representation.

Theorists of post-Marxism, which is a form of post-structuralism, have focused on ideology's role for recognition and becoming the subject. In the psychoanalytical post-structuralist tradition Jacques Lacan has emphasised the split subject as the reason why identification is possible in the first place. The subject of lack is premised upon the idea that one may feel fullness but never reach it.

Discourse theory draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to discuss the phenomenon whereby political subjectivity is always split between the represented and the representative, and the reconciliation between these two is impossible, even if at the same time the subject strives for fullness. Identification that is premised on either the 'us' or disidentification with the other is to bring fullness to the political subject. This is why the process of representation as well as the subject-object relations are rather complex, from the Lacanian perspective (Stavrakakis, 1999).

Affective identification with an ever-failing but much-needed identity is the basis of politics. In *The ethics of psychoanalysis (Book VII)* Lacan (1992, pp. 125–126) is hesitant to discuss affects, as for him they seem to escape analytical speech. He merely points to some affects such as anger and love. In operationalising the formula, I have not sought out emotions or affects but have pointed to what appears as the affective, the ideological ‘grip’ (Glynos 2001, 2008) that appears to me to be the analyst to bring the fullness in the fantasy structure of identification with ‘us’ – or *jouissance* (negative guilty pleasure of enjoyment) for ‘the frontier’.

Fantasy drives us towards fullness. This is also what is at stake with identification with leaders. Laclau discusses Freud’s group psychology as a source for political mobilisation (Freud, 1959). The ratifying gaze of the ‘big Other’ has been theorised by psychoanalytical thinkers, and it is apt here: on the other hand, there is no need for a leader – it can equally be down to the movement or the other to oppose that offer, that affective connection (mis)recognition.

Besides the fantasy of fullness, the negative fantasy of *jouissance* (enjoyment) can maintain the structure of identification. In polarisation, *jouissance* is in an important role because the rejection of the other keeps it at hand in political articulation, offering pleasure through negation. In the form of populism I will introduce below, we can also capture how the emphasis is sometimes on the positive fantasy (us) and other times on negative fantasy (frontier).

The theory makes clear that us-building and disidentification are also always affective processes. In the formula of populism, I choose to highlight this connection. I realise that affects or emotions are not just another component in the chain that constitutes populism. It is the grip of ideology, or the affective loading itself, which I propose should also be named as part of analysis, even if it often lurks behind the processes of political discourse. Sometimes, of course, affects are very palpable. All of the components of the formula of populism can be highlighted at times while the other components are not visible. For instance, disidentification enables the rhetors of the political discourse to avoid making the ‘us’ tangible.

In logical terms hegemony always entails a binary: one hegemonic force in power and the counter-hegemonic force contesting it. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the empirical terms, the situation may be more complex. The bipolar hegemony that I discuss here is an

anomaly – or this is what I thought, in any case. In democratic terms, as I see it, hegemonic contestation is necessarily a temporary political moment – but of course, many of the political struggles around the world are not taking place in a democratic context. Quite often, they are autocratic and/or colonial, just as in South Africa, which the Essex School were investigating (Norval, 1996; Howarth & Norval, 1998). At the time when I was learning about this, of course, it was unthinkable that Hungary could be called an electoral autocracy. This is why I have tried to maintain in this book that there was no need for the situation to be transformed into polarisation in the first place, or that the other force had the strength to win, as I discuss below, and there has been no turning back.

The form of populism

The analysis of Hungarian politics demonstrates how political mobilisation and differentiation takes place in particular conditions of an uneven space of meanings. The discursive field offers only a possibility of trying to establish meanings in a space criss-crossed by antagonisms. The logic of equivalence organises antagonism in a position of distinction, where the differences between the elements in the signifying chain, groups or demands fade away. This can be facilitated by the articulation of an empty signifier that momentarily takes the representing role of the whole signifying chain. What emerges as the common platform, movement, community or (put in the most abstract terms) ‘us’ is constituted, on the one hand, by representation – the element as the ‘empty signifier’ becoming the symbol or name of a temporary unity – and, on the other hand, the constitutive otherness – what is opposed.

In order to investigate the making of political identities in an undecidable terrain, it is important to somehow capture this logic of constitutive antagonism and the chain of equivalences that operates within it. As a solution to this, I have proposed a formula that captures the affective-antagonistic articulation of political identities as follows:

$$\textit{Populism} = \textit{Us}^{\textit{Affects1}} + \textit{Frontier}^{\textit{Affects2}}$$

This is the form of populism at its purest and most naked manifestation. What is visible is, on the one hand, the element of temporary togetherness, ‘us’ or the imagined community, the collective subject –

the recognition. On the other hand, there is the constitutive otherness – not merely another ‘other’, group, signifier or oppressor but, at its most abstract, the difference itself. This antagonism generates the logic of equivalence that constitutes ‘us’ through misrecognition. The affective element can be an emotion but it can equally be an emotionally loaded signifier, such as democracy or communism, tax cuts or migrants.

The formula of populism enables comparative research in longitudinal or lateral studies, as we can see how the emphasis or the contents of the components of the formula are changed. The comparative research we have engaged in on this hitherto explored the transformation of Nordic populisms over time (Palonen & Sunnercrantz, 2021), and we also studied the rhetoric-performative audio-visual discourse of far-right parties or movements in Finland (Salojärvi et al., 2023). At the core of this formula is the possibility to engage with cases beyond the label ‘populism’ while being still able to explore the core of populism in people-making, antagonism and affective rhetoric-performative flair.

In the expanded form, Marina Vulović and I (Palonen & Vulović, 2023) have added an emphasis on the chain of equivalence within the ‘us’ – and to some extent also the frontier.

$$\text{Populism} = \text{Us} (\text{Demand} \equiv \text{Demand} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects1}} + \text{Antagonistic Frontier} (\text{Other} \equiv \text{Other} \equiv \dots)^{\text{Affects2}}$$

The ‘us’ can be a combination of different groups that may be represented by one of them, a leader or a slogan as the empty signifier. But it becomes clear in my analysis of Hungary, too, that the frontier may also be a combination of elements to oppose (such as, for Fidesz, internationalism, the EU, neoliberalism, communists etc.). This process of representation is constitutive of the subject. The idea of the chain also enables us to see the heterogeneity that de facto inhabits political discourses. Irrespective of whether we analyse left populism that is premised on diversity or the success of alt-right political rhetoric that manages to unite diverse groups into the same counter-hegemonic platform, this is a crucial point to uncover.

As the frame is logical, the formula can also be combined in still another logical way. ‘Us’ can also be found through the reversal of the equation:

$$Us^{\text{Affects1}} = \text{Populism} (\text{Antagonistic discourse}) - \text{Frontier}^{\text{Affects2}}$$

The formula is a logical one, not mathematical, and it is a heuristic device rather than a definite end result of research. In different phases of the book, the formula will illustrate a particular confrontation that emerges and enables the constitution of the us in an antagonistic way.

With varying intensity, the form of populism operates in all political mobilisation in which togetherness and distinction are created. Sometimes one side of the combination is emphasised more than the other. This enables me to demonstrate longitudinal and lateral transformations in Hungarian politics. However, populism does not explain theoretically what has taken place in Hungary in terms of political contestation. For that we need to understand the logic of populism. The equation has two sides that co-constitute each other.

Operationalising the formula in this book, I have deliberately chosen something other than emotions as such that for me seemed to capture what was so affectively loaded or provided the glue or affective stickiness in each analysed case. In the next section we discuss further the way in which affects play out in politics, and what are the micro-level tools for discussing political phenomena.

The typology of populist dynamics: competing, mainstream and fringe

The final point I would like to raise is a typology of populist dynamics. We have learned so far that antagonism is a significant part of political articulation, and it is necessary as a logic of equivalence for populism. Antagonism operates in a range of ways.

The concrete question for research is: *how is populist challenge organised?* For this, I developed a typology of mainstream, fringe and competing populism when trying to analyse different moments in time or cases of populism, and with Juha Herkman I operationalised it in the study of politics around the European Parliament elections in 2019 (Herkman & Palonen, 2024b). There the idea was that we do not pre-classify parties as populist but indicate the way in which the populist dynamic operates. In the conclusion to that study, Juha Herkman categorised parties as Eurosceptic, critical European or Europhilic. To steer away from substance of populism in classification was important for us, as it enabled us to see what the discourses of the parties were really about (Herkman & Palonen, 2024a).

We were also able to see how antagonism was organised in the arguments of the political parties. The key was to see how parties positioned themselves in the field in rejecting the mainstream, generating a polarisation or taking the position of the centre, rejecting what was outside. This is a truly affective way of establishing a political position, but the question is how and in which direction the rejection is targeted. Again, we do not go into the question of substance in the building of the heuristic, but it enables us to better identify such groups.

In this heuristic triad, *fringe populism dynamic* entails a rejection of the whole field of meaning-making – a contestation of the social imaginary with an attempt to provide a new one. This is typically the challenger populist mobilisation. However, at the point when this new imaginary is adopted and the group is in power, it still needs to maintain antagonism – not to lose the elements vital to populism. This kind of grip can involve exploiting a trauma that those in power are associated with: the others are seen as a solid undifferentiated group, or an enumeration of signifiers in a chain of equivalences. This dynamic was one that Fidesz operationalised in rejecting all of the other forces in the spectrum. Hence, in the early 1990s already the political others became an undifferentiated mass for Fidesz.

From the *mainstream populist dynamic*, anything that is considered to be at the margins or outside of the imagined community or unfitting to the social imaginary is rejected. This kind of dynamic may take place when the populists are in power and are able to keep finding suitable groups for othering. In power, it can be useful to pinpoint the marginality of these actors. However, we can also see that Fidesz in power has been able to at the same time operationalise the mainstream populist logic at home and refer to the liberal world order as its fringe dynamic. The mainstreaming populist dynamic enables us to observe the regular need to maintain a position and rhetoric through the rejection. It may well be that the so-called anti-populists or liberal democrats, in their rejection of the challengers to the status quo, resort to this kind of populist dynamic, even if they would not be considered populists in a substantive sense or their discourse or ideology does not contain what some term populist ideas.

A particular dynamic that can emerge is *competing populism*, where neither of the forces operationalises the mainstream, rejecting the other as marginal, or provides a fresh challenge against the status quo. I developed the heuristic of competing populism to refer to the

political logics where all political differences are invested in a bipolar confrontation. Competing populism refers to a situation in which there are two sides that constitute themselves through mutual opposition, as in bipolar hegemony.

Populist dynamics are based on the idea of political parties and leaders engaged in a rhetoric-performative meaning-making process. The role of political rhetoric is to constitute what is argued for. In these processes the *us* emerges temporarily as the collective subject, as not merely an identity but a point of identification – and the dynamic refers to the direction of *disidentification*, in particular.

Here, we can see that the antagonism is mutual in polarisation in the competing populism dynamic, whereas it is the rejection of the status quo or power-holders in the fringe populist dynamic and in the mainstreaming populist dynamic it is the rejection of those considered as marginal by those looking down from an already-established position of power. What maintains ‘*us*’ in these diverse cases is the way in which they are positioned in the field. This is in stark contrast to studies that focus on the contents of populist discourses, including their style.

However, capturing the inter-party dynamics is relevant when we see rhetoric and performance as part of the ways in which political meanings and points of identification are made. As this is expandable to the study of social movements, we can also observe inter-movement dynamics and the ways in which the challenge is being presented. This heuristic distinction enables us to see what are the logics that maintain and challenge politics.

In sum, taking the example of Hungary briefly, in the competing populism dynamic the frontier remains at the core of the political debate as in polarisation (e.g., Fidesz in 2002). Fringe populism refers to the situation in which a movement rejects the rest of the political field and generates a new dichotomy, as did Fidesz in the early 1990s. Mainstream populism occurs when the position of the populist actor is already so central that it can simply reject all others challenging its power as internal or external enemies, as did Fidesz from 2010 onwards in particular. The challenge to liberal democracy in Hungary takes place through populist dynamics, first as presenting an alternative then as rejecting criticism of the new illiberal politics as marginal.

The logics of discourse theory: signifiers, myths and imaginaries

In this book I operationalise certain logics and heuristic tools of discourse theory. In their influential study Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) isolate three logics in Laclaudian discourse theory, drawing on their own theoretical backgrounds, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian theory of knowledge. Their work follows the late Laclaudian idea that we can capture, through certain rhetorical tropes or logics such as populism, meaning-making practices and sedimentations and contestations of meaning. Glynos and Howarth's decision to distinguish between social, political and fantasmatic logics has been useful for a generation of scholars coming from the Essex School. The idea of social logics, being non-contested or sedimented, political contesting, and the fantasmatic providing the ideological grip or glue serves an analytical purpose also in this book.

The three logics indicated by Glynos and Howarth as a heuristic trio indicate a metalevel analysis. This is typical of some discourse-theoretical tradition in post-structuralism that emphasises structures. However, for a more meso- and micro-level analysis it makes sense to develop further concepts that can be operationalised in a similar way but that can offer more analytical rigour in contextual or intertextual analysis.

In the tradition of Laclaudian discourse analysis or post-structuralist discourse theory, classical examples of these are 'empty' and 'floating' signifiers. Rather than things to uncover in particular contexts, they are themselves logics of critical explanation. The telos of research is not to find and name empty or floating signifiers but to explain what is going on in that situation that emerged to the researcher as interesting. In the tradition of structural linguistics, each signifier has one or more signifieds that it represents, but in the post-structural process we pay attention to the multiplicity and transformation of the signifieds – or the signifiers, equally interestingly.

Another set of logics is myth and imaginary. These have been outlined in discourse theory and give structure to the discursive field, and they are referred to and thereby rearticulated in several discourses. Nodal points and empty signifiers are micro-level tools within a discourse. Myth is a reoccurring reference point in the field of discursivity that may be used by many groups. It often has a narrative structure, but

it operates as a floating or empty signifier – a nodal point that gives structure. Myths, when they are referred to regularly, can become social imaginaries that capture the horizon of the field of meaning-making.

The two most commonly used heuristic logics in discourse theory exemplify the political processes of representation with particular moves in the discursive field. The category of empty signifier refers to the process of representation in which one element starts to signify a whole chain of equivalence or differential signifiers in a metonymic way – becoming the name or common heading for a range of other concepts or demands and at the same time losing some of its own previous content due to the weight of this representation. Empty signifiers are therefore not empty but potentially overloaded.

The category of floating signifier refers to contestation in which the meanings of a signifier are linked relationally to different frames of reference or chains of equivalence. Therefore, the identity of a floating signifier is further split between the two sets of signifieds that give meaning to it. Classical rhetoric enables us to pay attention to the way in which modes of argumentation (and thereby also articulation, meaning-making) are different – those which retain different points of reference as present and those which simply replace them – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Using the term ‘floating signifiers’, we can refer to the way in which the contents are co-present in different chains of reference, even if the connections are disrupted (one is denied its prior or other identity as part of a chain of reference). This resembles the above-mentioned trope of ‘paradiastole’, and characteristically changes the normative framework of a deed by choosing different terms for it. Something considered anti-democratic or of the communist system can now be seen as democratic, or the same can occur with references in nationalism: previously toxically nationalist terms may be well adapted.

Drawing on rhetoric, Laclau (2005) wrote at length about a new term in the field or a term that significantly challenges the discursive field: ‘catachresis’. This term generates a new signifying chain and can radically transform the field of discursivity. Illiberalism is such a term, grafted from anti-liberalism (Palonen 2018) – and it has spread globally as a reference point for a particular type of culture war, or as we would call it, a counter-hegemonic claim that seeks a bipolar hegemony. This catachrestic term can also be an empty signifier for a chain of

reference, when is used when the other terms in the chain do not need to be present. In this sense it can work as a metonymy for many different contents, just as populism in everyday language is often used for a diverse set of contents.

The imagining of political community and difference takes place under this heading and cannot avoid making reference to it. Regular reference or rearticulation maintains the imaginary that constitutes the imagined 'society'. If it is contested or not maintained, another myth can take its place. Revolution in the Hungarian political context has been often a myth, but has at times emerged as an imaginary, to temporarily legitimate widescale political shifts. This was the ethos in the 'system change' around 1989, and it was revisited by Orbán in 2010. The final set of heuristics, populist dynamics, explores positioning in the discursive field. It can also be seen as challenging the imaginary of the status quo and building new myths for alternative imaginaries. One fitting example is Laclau's (2005) discussion of the Polish Solidarity movement.

Conclusions

These conceptual tools and discussion on hegemony will be helpful in analysing and explaining the Hungarian context in this book but also useful for investigating other contexts. Hegemony is a tool for understanding particular logics of political meaning-making. In the ethos of this framework, my idea here has been that populism appears a rather redundant category, and it would be better to refer directly to nativism, misogyny or xenophobia for the far right, or anti-elitism for the study of more traditional forms of populism, left or right. However, in a revisionist move, I decided to rearticulate the term for particular dynamics. Ultimately, the study argues that polarisation is a bipolar hegemony through which the antagonistic logic of political meaning-making operates on both sides of the equation, and unites the two co-constitutive camps (*competing populism* as bipolar hegemony).

All of these heuristics refer to fixing meaning in the discursive field. One of the issues behind the reasoning for this continuous process of fixing meanings is drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The key issue here is the idea that the subject is constitutively split and lacking and therefore needs to identify or end fullness, even if only temporarily and incompletely. Laclau and Zac (1994, p. 37) argue that 'the death of the

subject [split subject] and the unstable character of all identity [need for identification] are conditions of that management of the incompleteness of society that we call politics.' This is a fully affective process.

My radically anti-essentialist perspective differs from some Laclauian takes on populism and stresses the ontological character of the form – rather than content (cf. Vulović & Palonen, 2023). If, as I claim, populism is not a list of contents, and if it is not merely premised on the articulation of 'the people', as a nodal point, I conclude that it would be useful to capture, as an abstract logic that operates within political meaning-making: not as something always already filled but as something that is pure form – as something not empirical but logical. The heuristics also draw from the same ethos.

Even confrontation does not make polarisation hegemonic. Rather, the institutionalisation of this frontier generates a situation that we call bipolar hegemony. And this is somewhat a paradox, as populism and institutionalism are antitheses in Laclau's theorising. But this is precisely the point that I try to retrieve as the democratic ethos in (post-) Laclau: just as populism is a logic operating within politics and democracy, it is not the only logic of politics, otherwise the space of contestation would not be kept open. In Laclau and Mouffe's work there is temporary fixity, not permanent. Going back to the previous point about Gramsci: hegemony cannot be the end or final state; it will be kept open. Of course, this also applies to autocrats who keep inventing new enemies to retain emotional attachment.

In sum, hegemony offers a way to explore logics in the wider field of discourse. Understanding populism as a heuristic device rather than a research object in itself is useful, as in an empirical case we can see how it takes different contents over time while still retaining an emphasis on us-building, antagonism and affects. Therefore, the theoretical conceptualisation of populism must be flexible enough to accommodate this transformation. After theory is time for praxis, for those who engage in political rhetoric and for those who analyse it. In the following chapters, I explore Hungarian politics from the late socialist period to 2010, going over key moments of elections and taking deep dives to different parts of the political spectrum where the one-time youthful liberals ended up.

The heuristic tools in this chapter enable me to treat through the lens of populism things that would not generally or previously be understood as populism. Indeed they are not 'populist', but they may

adopt, at least at times, the antagonising discourse in which we can recognise the form of populism, or they may work on logics of differentiation that can be captured through populist dynamics.

CHAPTER 2

Bipolarities of ‘goulash communism’, ‘revolution’ and ‘the transition’

Now we move on to the first empirical chapter. For those interested in the developments of Hungarian politics, this is a dive into what was there before the system change in 1998, or 1990 when the first elections took place. I will explore the transitional discourses and the demand for change. For those interested in the operationalisation of the formula of populism, this chapter works on this systematically, because mobilisation and generating a particular political us – as well as the common fronts necessary for widescale change – was important and the formula enables us to compare the situation across cases. It indicates what were the most important points of reference and building blocks for political identities. The confrontation of the popular front with the power-holders was not a mere polarisation. Both sides were quite heterogeneous, and in mutual conversation. In particular, the reform economist critics of state socialism were still getting their advice through the power-holding regime. In other words, the opposition criticised the lack of political liberties but the Hungarian economy had been reforming in Kádár era from the 1960s and a shadow economy had developed, making Hungary ready for an economic transition.

This chapter provides a perspective on polarisation from the late communist period onwards. As background ‘data’ I have used contemporary Hungarian social scientists’ perspectives from the 1990s. It offers an interesting view of the era from the vantage point of near future. At the same time, these perspectives not only represent their era but also encapsulate political perspectives. They inform the ways in which antagonistic articulations took place. The list of authors, all male, reflects the gender relations in Hungarian political science. It is

extremely difficult, if not ultimately futile, to find a truly neutral voice accounting for Hungarian party politics, so my aim here is to provide a plurality of views. Intellectuals had a role in the transition, and academics had a duty to seek to discuss democracy from a practical perspective. To a large extent this understanding was also followed in the decades to come, and finding a middle ground was difficult (Bozóki, 2022). The chapter provides a very light version of intellectual history, in this discursive setting.

The ‘memory work’, to borrow a term from Jacques Derrida, that we do in this chapter is to allow sources mainly from the 1980s and 1990s to speak about Kádárism. This is a deconstructive practice that goes well with discourse-theoretical analysis. Each history will, of course, construct a narrative on the era, as this book inevitably does as well. In this chapter, I try to do some memory work seeking to investigate the antagonism in Hungarian politics. This is fleshed out through the framework of the populism formula and us-building. This cannot fully cover what was already there, but it can shed some light on what was discussed as being there. This chapter’s focus is on the establishment of the lines of antagonism – but also on the way in which they were eroded.

As in the rest of the region, which had been occupied by Soviet troops after the Second World War, in Hungary the pro-Soviet communists had established their power by 1949. What followed was a process of Stalinisation, with mass-scale heavy industrialisation, collectivisation of land, the erasure of any remaining opposition and the power of the church, and the setting up of a repressive regime. Some aspects of this period, with its emphasis on interventions by the state, mass industry and mass housing, were typical of the post-war development on both sides of Europe (cf. Judt, 2005). What differed was the restriction of freedoms and the establishment of a repressive regime, based on the Soviet model.

The Kádár period in Hungarian politics offers an interesting basis for understanding for bipolarity. For instance, there was the official economy and then the grey economy. But the leading maxim ‘He who is not against us is with us’ offers an interesting perspective on bipolarity. It set a limit on antagonism, asserting that those who were not explicitly against must be for. It also implied that people’s allegiance was no longer called for: they could be indifferent to the regime but still be included in the Kádárist ‘us’. There were no hermetically sealed camps.

The whole system was legitimated through the economy, through the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) which would provide the people with enough to keep them content and avoid criticism. The problem became that when one provides 'goulash communism', the expectation is that there will be soup for everyone. This was increasingly difficult. The idea in the 1960s was that although Hungarians would not have political rights, they would have a better economic future, reaching Western standards faster than others. Attila Antal (2021), in his insightful book on neoliberalism in Hungary, has explored this transition, tracking from the NEM in the Kádár era to the sedimentation it provided for a new thinking.

Although the NEM stopped providing enough, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia provided inspiration for dissidents, and Polish printing machines were important for the clandestine journals, samizdats. In the region criticism grew, and so did it find means of expression in Hungary. The political frontier between the West and Hungary was not strongly antagonistic. There was no impenetrable 'Iron Curtain': the ideals were from the West, and so was the capital. For the NEM to confer economy-based legitimacy on the regime, the West was necessary as it could provide a capital influx through tourism, and later even through International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. This in turn kept the worst attacks on civil liberties at bay and provided cultural openness. This logic can be witnessed in the European Union's role in contemporary Hungary.

In fact, intellectuals interacted across the spectrum. The antagonistic contestation was quite dissimilar to some prior and subsequent periods. Logics of equivalence and difference worked to generate new affective coalitions that our populism formula can capture. The assumed political distinction of *us vs those not with us* was not antagonistically presented, and made the regime durable in contestation. Generating a new popular front for the demands for democratic reform and national autonomy was difficult because part of the regime sided with change. So the system was negotiated, but while antagonism was not bipolar, it did exist.

In the terms we use today, Hungarian political scientists in the 1980s were already making science-based 'impact', unimaginable for most Western colleagues at the time. Demanding academic rigour and critical distance, Rudolf L. Tőkés (1988, p. 12) argued (with the authority of a Hungarian professor in a US research university):

In any case, in the last ten years Hungarian social scientists have been prominent contributors to assorted ‘reform debates’ on the radio, TV, and in the daily, but particularly in the weekly, printed media. Indeed, it is the intrinsic indivisibility of the public and academic personae of many Hungarian scholars which distinguishes them most from Western academics.

Besides compromising ‘objective inquiry’, Tőkés notes that ‘[i]n the broadest sense everyone, from a full-time agit-prop apparatchik to a Candidate of Political Science [PhD in Political Science], is a “political scientist” in Hungary’ (Tőkés, 1988, p. 10).

The transformation in Hungary in the 1980s and into the 1990s and beyond took place through the engagement of social scientists and others, and there was a huge need for their contributions. This also partly explains the administered nature of the transition to democracy and disengagement from the masses. There may be a lesson to learn in this: political scientists are involved in regime transitions.



A wave of commemoration of 1956 started immediately with the collapse of the Kádárist regime. The memorial erected next to the Mammut shopping centre in Buda includes commemorative woodwork that emerged around the country in memory of those who fought for the revolution but were not officially publicly mourned. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

Overview

After the death of Stalin in 1953, Khrushchev, his successor in the leadership of the Soviet Union, published a letter marking an era of change. A wave of protests and de-Stalinisation swept through much of the Eastern Bloc, first in the Polish samizdat press and later in Hungary. The post-Stalinist regimes in post-Second World War Eastern Europe were transformed into national paths. As a result, all of the East European states differed from each other. An emphasis on nationhood and the national or local way of being communist was allowed, even in countries which remained pro-Soviet throughout. Yugoslavia and Romania were exceptions, enjoying more autonomy.

In Poland, this implied more freedom for the Catholic Church and a failed collectivisation programme. In Poland, de-Stalinisation included strikes and the change of leadership from hard-line Stalinists to Władysław Gomułka, who led the country from the Polish October in 1956 until 1970.

Hungary opened its economy later. The reformists in the country wanted more independence from Soviet control. The new reformist prime minister, Imre Nagy, elected by the Hungarian parliament, undermined the absolute leadership of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe but wanted to keep the country socialist. What started as a reform ended up in a bloody, unsuccessful revolt – still referred to as the revolution of 1956. The Soviet troops invaded, shot demonstrators and forced the government of Imre Nagy to emigrate or seek refuge in neighbouring embassies. The Western powers failed to react, partly due to the Suez Crisis, in which they were involved simultaneously. After the failed revolution, Imre Nagy and some of his fellow rebels were executed in a trial similar to the Stalinist show trials of ten years earlier. They became martyrs in supporters' minds, but the regime commemorated as martyrs of the revolution the Soviet loyalists who lost their lives. The tragedy of 1956 was huge, and it affected many families. The level of cross-border transportation and flight was unprecedented since the Second World War. This wave of migration marks the history of Hungarian expat communities still today.

The Soviet-approved leader János Kádár took over the leadership, staying into the late 1980s as the head of the Hungarian Communist Workers' Party and, by extension, the head of the Hungarian state. The year 1956 was considered to be one of counter-revolution, although in

the minds of many it was a legitimate attempt to turn the tide. By the 1960s, many intellectuals had lost their jobs, and a counterculture of intellectual tradition emerged.

The logic of political antagonism and othering that was generated in this situation, in which many, though not all, of the believers in 1956 had fled, was important and remains central to the study of polarisation in Hungary. Kádár transformed the Stalinist slogan ‘Those who are not with us are against us’ into ‘Those who are not against us are with us.’ Using the proposed formula, the original Leninist formula linked those who did not already identify with ‘us’ with distrust:

$$\text{Leninism} = \text{Us}^{\text{Trust}} + \text{Not with Us}^{\text{Distrust}}$$

In short, this logically transforms into the political subject of us being limited by those who are not with the subject: $\text{Us} = \text{Leninism} - \text{NotWithUs}$. This refers to antagonism and the limited us.

This was transformed by Kádár to denote that there may be people who are not with us, but that we are only against those who are ‘against us’:

$$\text{Kádárism} = \text{Us}^{\text{Trust}} + \text{Against Us}^{\text{Distrust}}$$

Again, for Kádárism, the political subject of us is marked by those explicitly against: $\text{Us} = \text{Kadarism} - \text{AgainstUs}$. This refers to others who have explicit antagonism but also enlarges us, making it more ambiguous. We can also see a shift in emphasis: us is emphasised more than the frontier in Kádárism, as if the underlying antagonism – the illegitimacy of the regime in the eyes of those who had fought on the side of Imre Nagy – is being concealed.

This assumes that there will still be those against us, but that us will somehow remain undivided. Obviously, many considered ‘against us’ had left or remained mute. By the late 1970s, many intellectuals had given up on Hungarian universities and moved abroad, as I have discussed in relation to the Budapest School and particularly Ágnes Heller (Palonen, 2018b). One of the most crucial theoretical works of this time from the ‘kindergarten’ of the Budapest School was *Intellectuals on the road to class power* by György Konrád and Iván Szelényi (1979), originally written in 1973–74. Criticism had been curbed. Cultural life had become dominated by those who did not figure in the ‘against us’ camp. Cultural policy was also non-binary but based on the so-called

3Ts (*támogatott, túrt és tiltott*), a traffic-light model of 'supported', 'tolerated' and 'forbidden'.

Hungarian dissidents were part of an international scene. The Budapest School made it their target to bring out the voices of critical academics and worked through the networks of George Lukács as a strategy (Palonen, 2018b). Regional critics also organised; a long list of academics signed Charter 77 in solidarity with Vaclav Havel and Czech intellectuals (Domokos, 1991). The demand for human rights and democracy remained a key oppositional nodal point or empty signifier from the late 1970s until the change of regime.

While in the 1970s in Hungary the elite adopted the role of organic intellectuals limiting the cultural scene to only their own people, abroad there was an interest in understanding what was going on in the region, and regional intellectuals became interesting to hear. In the 1980s a multi-voiced debate began with criss-crossing lines of antagonism rather than polarisation, and philosophers sought power-averse answers to such a dilemma. However, first we will explore how 'us' is legitimated through advances in economy.

The economy that provides: Kádárist 'goulash communism'

The Kádár regime focused on economic freedoms in implementing de-Stalinisation measures in Hungary, keeping the country firmly allied to the Soviet Union – something Nagy had opposed. Deviating from the Soviet blueprint, consumerism was a feature of the Hungarian system. The NEM (1968) was developed as the new *Zeitgeist*: 'socialist in form and national in content' (Kornai, 2008). This was intended to legitimate the regime in the eyes of the people, leaving them out of decision-making but providing prosperity. From the late 1970s the economy did not grow as expected. Tourism brought in Western funds, and when that was not enough, the regime accessed IMF loans in the 1980s because they were so indebted. This in turn contained the brutality of the authoritarian regime.

So-called 'goulash communism' provided what my late professor in London George Schöpflin (1993, p. 216) called 'negative legitimation' for the power-holders – implying that things could be worse but now at least there would be food on the table and consumer products. The Kádár era introduced consumerism as a means of keeping

the population relatively content. The power-holding party sought to liberalise the country and pushed through reforms of the economy from the 1960s onwards, to maintain the status quo of party-led state socialism. As there was across the globe in that decade, there was hope of human advancement and of the reach of consumer products to the masses, making household and other issues easier.

What emerged as a private sector was a 'second economy' (Kornai, 2008, p. 123). The economy in the Kádár period implicitly diminished the role of bureaucratic coordination and increased the role of the market, as a key theorist of the reform economists, János Kornai (1986, p. 1691), has argued. A contradictory situation with hybrid outcomes, with market and state mechanisms, was implied, according to Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss (1990, p. 196). The 1970s saw the decline of the economy while the elite was becoming used to their lifestyle: in the early 1980s even Kádár himself became resistant to 'reform of the reform', as the 'negative legitimacy' of the Kádárist system (consumerism, small-scale entrepreneurialism and a functioning second economy) had made the population at large content with what they had. Their situation was better than in the neighbouring countries. But the appeal of 'negative legitimation' was wearing out.

Paradoxically, the early opening of the economy to the market now made it difficult for the state to impose the austerity measures that were required for the IMF loans. Short-term macroeconomic equilibrium was achieved in the early 1980s, but through non-monetary means: wage controls, increases in enterprise profits tax and the freezing of enterprise development funds. Private companies existed in Hungary, but the approximately 90 per cent tax on their profits by the mid-1980s was reallocated into the welfare system (Bartlett, 1996). Reform economists performed a double role: they advised the power-holders reforming the system from the inside, while they contested the system in their advice to those opposing it from the outside (Kovács, 1990).

Hungary was also a major tourist destination from the 1960s onwards, marked by large hotels dominating both the panorama of Budapest and some of the coastal towns of Lake Balaton. This was a way for the Hungarian political elite to access hard currency. Similarly, in Romania hard currency was brought in through the 'repatriation' to Germany of East German political prisoners and German-speaking Romanians. Westerners brought in capital and enjoyed the 'happiest barracks in the Eastern Bloc' and its glorious sights: 'Budapest,

including the Banks of the Danube, the Buda Castle Quarter and Andrassy Avenue' was included in the UNESCO World Heritage list in 1987. Easterners such as the East Germans could enjoy some of the freedoms that were not allowed to them in their own country.

The situation in the Soviet Union was transformed. This began through *glasnost* ('opening') to more freedom of speech, and *perestroika* ('restructuring') promised further economic reforms similar to the NEM in Hungary, as a means of gaining legitimacy through economic reforms. Hungary, along with Poland, was quick to establish round-table talks and start the democratisation process in the late 1980s. The existing holiday route of East Germans to Hungary also proved critical when Hungary opened its border to Austria in 1989. This gave East Germans access to the West, paving the way for the falling of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the Iron Curtain and the post-war division of Europe. Their aim was to reach the same living standards as those enjoyed in the West.

There was evidence from Western culture and an illusion – also fed by contemporary culture such as movies – that everyone there was better off than 'us', the Hungarians. This feeling of missing out was presumably quite similar in various parts of the West, but because of the inbuilt logic of economic legitimation, it had consequences for the emerging distrust in the authorities. As Schöpflin (1993, p. 189) explained in the early 1990s:

As greater numbers of people, particularly from Poland and Hungary, visited the West, they began to understand that the whole of Western society had some access to prosperity. Psychologically this was quite devastating, because it meant that most of the population began to understand that there was nothing to be done with the communist system except to get rid of it. In the Weberian sense, it had ceased to be exemplary.

The deterioration of the country's economy was one of the triggers in the change of the system. Despite all the efforts described in the previous section, the provision of goods stagnated in the 1980s.

To capture the logic of goulash communism, the following formula can be proposed:

$$\text{Goulash Communism} = \text{Hungarians}^{\text{Fantasy}} + \text{Others}^{\text{Jouissance}}$$

What is interesting here, besides the fact that the driving fantasy of consumption and reaching ever-better living standards would need to be sustained or the underpinning affect for us in goulash communism would erode – is the transformation of otherness. Under Kádárism, the othering was legitimated by the envious gaze of state-socialist peers in the region. However, when the affect moved from being envied to becoming envious of the other, the connotations of the affect were no longer positive. This suggests that we should be attentive to the kind of emotions, but also their positive and negative charges, that result from using the formula.

Homo Kádáricus

Paul Lendvai (2019, p. 13) has described the binary situation in the Kádár era as follows: ‘public and private life was divided under the guiding principle of “We up here play politics – and you down there live”. This tacit agreement, under which the ruling party and the people both knew the boundaries of what [was] and what was not possible, permitted a Hungarian variety of communism.’ Illustratively, in contrast to Homo Sovieticus, in the Hungarian petite bourgeoisie Homo Kádáricus was growing in numbers, as the Hungarian political scientist László Lengyel (quoted in Lendvai, 2019, p. 13) has argued. The ground for Homo Kádáricus was materialist rather than post-materialist: ‘the average Hungarian was bereft of choices of this kind’, yet personal interests could be pursued in the ‘non-political realm’, writes Tőkés (1996, p. 83). ‘As the result a survival of the fittest (or best connected) bargain culture was born in Hungary.’

For this book, it could be useful to take the example of Orbán as a Homo Kádáricus. Lendvai gives the example of Viktor Orbán’s own father as an example of this, making a class leap by becoming a party member, obtaining education and jobs with responsibility. Politics was a non-issue in Orbán’s family: it was not discussed (Lendvai, 2019). Yet, at the same age at which his father had become a party member, Viktor Orbán famously contested the party rule at Imre Nagy’s funeral in 1989. Orbán (b. 1963) was also the maverick in his family.

The narrative of Orbán’s education from the village to the university exemplifies the bipolarity of the Kádár era. Becoming part of the petite bourgeoisie and even the elite was possible, but it also revealed class differences and the fact that, while the maxim of Marxism was to

move to a classless society, class power remained. The gap between the educated Budapest elites and the bright Hungarians from villages became visible to the teenage Orbán at his college at Székesfehérvár – where he encountered running water for the first time (Lendvai, 2019, p. 13).

In a similar way, running water or not, the gap manifested to anyone from a village background who had the chance to study at an elite college or attend university – learning to speak their language without village accents. This gap still exists. In the Homo Kádáricus example, there are important aspects to recognise in seeking to understand Orbánism, but crucially, they are also vital to grasping polarisation in Hungary. Kádárism's open lie was about everyone being well off – when people encountered the gap, they either sought to improve their personal situation or became disillusioned about the impossibility of the key sustaining fantasy.

An example of this lie and the lack of trust was communicated in a film by Peter Bacsó, *The Witness (A tanú)*, made in 1969 but circulated only ten years later. It tells a story from 1949, when the communist regime had established an Institute for the Study of Orangery and sought to grow the first Hungarian orange, in a country that grows not oranges but wine and paprika, among other things. The film became a classic and was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1981, and a restored version was elected to be shown among the Cannes Classics in 2019. It illustrates the era and provides a reference point as a myth for post-communist political forces in 'the liberal pole' in particular. This metaphor that my one-time mentor, political scientist Heino Nyssönen (1999), frequently references in his work.

Many, like Orbán's family, were uninterested in politics and just tried to survive in the system. But several groups did organise in the 1980s, with diverse ideals. Democratising, if not transition, in Hungary started as an intellectual process, and the strategies or values of dissidents were crucial to institutional design (Bozóki, 2009; Renwick, 2011). They voiced alternatives and initiated broad reflection on democracy and politics, Central Europe, and liberalism (e.g. Laczó, 2013).

For Homo Kádáricus, the subject or self-image, the antagonistic formula would be as follows:

$$Kádárism = U_S^{(Merit \equiv Cunning)} + The Skum^{Distrust}$$

The key point for such a conceptualisation is that the lines between the us and the rest are not clear: there were no two sides as such, as the other in Kádarian terms did not constitute a side. Even the dissident groups were dispersed, intertwined and entangled with the regime.

The transitional 1980s: society and politics

In the 1980s it was clear that goods were not distributed evenly, and hierarchies remained, income gaps and the discrimination against especially the Roma population became known – though it was not possible to voice this, public officials thought. The system did not deliver, and the dissidents started to talk about the elephant in the room.

For those dissident intellectuals who stayed, in the 1980s things were getting brighter. Small printing machines were imported from Poland, and the samizdat scene grew. This unlicensed print culture (1976–90) was the social media of the day, as Piotr Wciślik (2021) argues. Dissident publications or samizdats also existed in Hungary in the 1970s (e.g., Csizmadia, 1994), but they gained a wider circulation with *Bibó István Emlékkönyv* (*Book in memory of István Bibó*), published in 1980, and the underground press gearing up to launch the widest-read publication, *Beszélő* (*The Speaker*) from 1981. Among the dissidents was Gábor Demszky, the longest serving mayor of Budapest in the post-communist period: it was Demszky who managed to bring over a printing machine from Poland to produce samizdats, most notably *Beszélő* (Lengyel, 2001).

For the vocabulary necessary for the change, Csaba Gombár published the *Political dictionary*, written in 1979, which included terms from ‘citizenship’ to ‘coercion’ and ‘tolerance’ to ‘grievance politics’, in 1983 (Tőkés, 1988, p. 15). *Beszélő* was published in 1981–89 across 27 issues, by the leading figures of the democratic opposition, with typical political scientists. Bozóki (2022) argues: ‘The most important samizdat journal was *Beszélő*. It was first published by the editorial team in late 1981, after the events of self-limiting revolution and state of emergency unfolded in Poland. The journal published high-quality analyses and the writings of many of the dissidents who later became political actors during the regime change.’ Another samizdat, *Hírmondó*, produced two issues, first appearing in November 1983 and continuing until 1988. It was a successor to *Tájékoztató*, which published three

issues in spring 1983, and was edited by Gábor Demszky and Róza Hodosán, with contributors from a sociology and social theory perspective.

This also led to a certain type of change, and its limits, Rudolf L. Tőkés (1988, p. 13) argues:

As concerned intellectuals, they are committed to promoting policies of rational, cost-effective and orderly change. As members of a privileged elite living in a highly stratified inegalitarian social system, they have a vested interest in preserving the socio-economic status quo and preventing the elite–regime dialogue from escalating into a politically destabilising debate about the 'first questions' of politics.

It also reserved the first row in the 'revolution' for the pragmatic intellectuals, rather than the people at large. The samizdats also had different styles. Bozóki (2022, p. 104), who compared the journals, sums it up:

Unlike *Hírmondó*, which concentrated on explicating the intellectual heritage of East Central Europe, writings in *Demokrata* concentrated on uncovering the workings and lies of the power elite in Hungary. Hence, instead of being broad and analytical, most of its content was critical, subjective, and related to current events. In their writings, opposition figures belonging to *Demokrata*'s circle displayed provocative, conflict-oriented, radical behavior, which was in contrast with the restrained, compromise-seeking attitude of *Hírmondó*'s circle of intellectuals.

However, there was something subversive in the intellectuals' claims. Demszky was a sociologist and, with his colleagues, revealed that an urban poor existed. The middle classes, rural workers, pensioners, civil servants, the constituency of the national-conservative government, benefited from the system. It simply 'was not for the poor' (Bartlett, 1996, p. 76). The revolutionary system claimed to have already eliminated poverty, so it could not be on the agenda. Therefore, it was subversive act by some of the visible dissidents in the 1980s to engage as sociologists with this object of study that did not exist: the Hungarian poor.

Sociologically, the problem addressed the whole elite. 'In the mid-1980s, Hungary was still a hybrid society entangled in, and stifled by, a web of étatist, one-party, oligarchic, clientelistic, corporatist and other networks', Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss argued in 1990. 'The

members of the ruling elite were deeply interested in keeping the country in this diffuse and hybrid state since they had thoroughly colonised and intertwined this system with their parasitic networks' (Hankiss, 1990, pp. 203–204). As Kádárism worked on the previously mentioned trust, the elites had an important role.

The demand for human rights had manifested its roots in the 1970s. After the Prague Spring and in the Cold War situation, the two-year Helsinki Process sought an agreement that would also respect human rights. The Final Act was signed at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in 1975. This enabled Charter 1977, which was signed in Czechoslovakia, to make claims on human rights grounds. It gave hope to the East-Central European region, although it solved few of the existing problems. In any case, it brought an important dimension of dissident-led transition, through which dissent could be voiced in the language of human rights.

Procedural democracy could safeguard those rights. In Hungary, philosopher János Kis, founder of *Beszélő* and later co-founder and first chair of the Free Democrats, developed a proposal that was in the background of the 'social contract' of 1987 that demanded Kádár's departure (Kis, 2012; see also Arato, 1985). Ultimately it sought to establish liberal democracy with 'legal, procedural and institutional guarantees for freedom', but through the party accepting the change of system (Schöpflin, 1993, p. 209). It took time for this to take place in some form, and then it was already the negotiated revolution.

Another key strand from the 1980s that still influences Hungarian politics was called anti-politics. Philosopher György Konrád wrote an influential book on anti-politics as a form of dissent, autonomy in the condition of Kádárism. It highlights some of the dilemmas in this transition, in the relationship between democracy and the political (Bozóki, 1999; Falk, 2003).

Schöpflin was critical that anti-politics was an expression of a phenomenon through which the opposition developed an 'aversion to power as such' as a response to state socialism concentrated in and permeating all sectors of society (Schöpflin, 1993, p. 207). His take on the democratic opposition and its unifying ideals was even gloomier: 'To take the democratic opposition beyond human rights posed certain difficulties, not least because the doctrine represented a kind of lowest common denominator on which all its supporters and sympathizers could agree.' Indeed, a call for democracy as such is not a rallying

point, especially once consensus grows that democracy has already been achieved. Radical democrats such as Chantal Mouffe would insist that democracy would always have to be radicalised and improved. However, in Hungary the idea was to reach democracy through institutional reform. The dissidents engaged were focused on their own circles, and the conversation was not taking place at a wider societal level.

As Hankiss (1990) argues, the ruling elite was intertwined in the parasitic networks. As we learned from the example of *Homo Kádáricus*, the people were interested not in politics but rather in survival or advancement in the system. As did many East-Central European theorists, the Hungarians also thought that mobilisation against a regime that mobilises would not work. They sought autonomy in their organisation into small samizdat-producing and reading groups.

The strong dissident movements were established and later transformed into political parties. For simplicity's sake it is often argued that they organised into democratic and national oppositions, and indeed such groupings participated in tripartite round-table talks with the Communists. The transition to democracy and liberalism was not a drastic change. The constitutional change was a negotiated process between these three parties – the power-holders and two dissident camps. The revolution was elite led, which had consequences for democracy later on.

'System change' and a 'performed' revolution

The notion of the Hungarian 'negotiated revolution' that Tőkés developed accounts for the long-term and non-radical character of the phenomenon (Sajó, 1996; Tőkés, 1996), and it already had firm roots – in the pragmatism of the Kádár era. The power-holding elites were following the process of dissent, and the reform wing of the party was in contact with them. The legitimacy of both the system and the leadership remained unchanged in the 1980s, as Schöpflin (1993, p. 187) points out: 'When one went the other would go too. Leadership conservatism had become the immediate real and symbolic obstacle to change.' Given that the main form of legitimation in the Soviet type of regime was paternalism, as Ferenc Fehér had pointed out (1982), this was a problem. There were several changes that then sought to simulate change.

In 1992, András Körösényi divided the transformation in six analytical periods: the years 1985–87, the golden age of communist reformism; the opposition entering the stage; the two-sided process of rapid decay of the Communist Party; the simultaneous slow, gradual rise of the opposition; the loss of self-belief in the legitimacy of their rule by the communists and lack of self-interest in maintaining it; and the power vacuum until the first post-communist parliamentary elections. Going back to the argument of the failure of the NEM and goulash communism, Körösényi calculates that the first period coincided with the economic decay of the past five years (see Bozóki et al., 1992, p. 1).

In 1985 the first multi-party and multi-candidate elections were held in Hungary (Millard, 2002), but the ‘multi’ was compulsory and the choice rather limited. Electoral reforms began in 1983, and the first competitive elections made mandatory the multiple nomination of candidates by each electoral district (Barány, 1990, p. 79). In 1987 a two-tier banking system was introduced, in which independent commercial banks issued credits and the National Bank assumed Western-style monetary policies (Bartlett, 1996, p. 52).

The leading figure in the reform wing of the ruling party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (MSZMP), was Imre Pozsgay, who ‘incorporated more and more national and democratic slogans into his rhetoric and gained prestige among the reform-oriented intellectuals, and also among professionals both within and outside the party’ (Bozóki et al., 1992, p. 3). His message was one of both ‘democratic socialism’ and ‘the nation’, and, ‘worked on by Mihály Bihari, a well-known political scientist, in the summer of 1987’, it spread like a samizdat under the title ‘Reform and democracy’ (Bozóki et al., 1992, p. 3). Pozsgay was also present at the Lakitelek meeting of dissidents which founded the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). Lakitelek, in September 1987, was the starting point for the re-emergence of political pluralism in Hungary, Körösényi argues.

In the same year the social contract from the opposition demanded the resignation of Kádár. It was finally the party conference in May 1988 that settled the issue: ‘The “putsch” against Kádár would not have been as successful without the anger of the dissatisfied delegates elected by the local party committees’, Körösényi argues (Bozóki et al., 1992, p. 6) argues, but by choosing the hardliner Károly Grósz, nothing was decided: he gave contradictory speeches and ‘by the end of 1988, he was considered a failing politician’ (1996, p. 5). At the same

time, negotiations were taking place and new parties were forming, the MDF with 10,000 members, and Grósz spoke about 'impending white terror' (Körösényi, 1996). Körösényi presented the confrontation as follows between the regime, composed of hardliners (MSZMP) and reformers (Hungarian Socialist Party), and the opposition, composed of moderates (MDF, Social Democrats) and radicals (SZDSZ and Fidesz).

Negotiating change was difficult, and the idea that necessary reforms were already under way was popular among the power-holding MSZMP. Körösényi (1996, p. 6) accounts for the distrust:

The communist rhetoric used the term 'socialist pluralism', which meant the liberalisation of the system without political democracy. According to this concept, the Communist Party would remain the 'mediator' between the different interest groups and organizations and define the 'social' interest. Even the most radical reform Communist party leaders, like Pozsgay, never spoke about free multiparty parliamentarism at this time. They spoke about 'democratic socialism' within a one-party system or with the competition of those political parties which accept socialism. So, the idea of a limited multiparty system was still very popular among communist reformers in this period.

For good reasons, therefore, the opposition was distrustful of the negotiating partner. They refused the proposed version of reforms. From the liberal pole, or the 'radicals' as Körösényi (1996, p. 6) called them, the Federation of Young Democrats (Fidesz) held its first National Congress in October, and in November the Alliance of Free Democrats was organised from among the democratic opposition.

In January 1989 Pozsgay made his move and, in a radio interview, took a stand on the events of 1956 in Hungary – it was not a counter-revolution but a 'national uprising' – while Grósz hurried back from Switzerland to hold a Central Committee meeting of the party, several organisations endorsed Pozsgay's statement. In February, the Central Committee not only accepted Pozsgay's reinterpretation, which went against the official historiography, but also agreed on a multi-party system. This is what Körösényi (1996, p. 7) explains as the fourth phase of the transformation. It included 100,000 people taking to the streets for the 15 March national holiday marking the 1848 revolution – yet another failed revolution but also a moment of hope and liberation, to which we will return in [Chapter 5](#).

The fate of Imre Nagy was still to be resolved; he was to be rehabilitated, and the ceremonial reburial of the former prime minister became a revolutionary moment in 1989. Körösényi (1996, p. 8) recounts: ‘The MSZMP were not even allowed to take part in the reburial ceremony, which turned into a huge demonstration against the system. The MSZMP never recovered from this humiliation, and psychologically collapsed at this time.’

This was crucial. In other words the demos or ‘us the people’ in practice included the negotiating mutually advice-giving parties, which sometimes confronted each other as the opposition and the regime, as Körösényi shows above. The reburial of Imre Nagy and his colleagues was the moment that crystallised the constitutive distinction that meant that the old MSZMP could not be included. Since Pozsgay had defined Nagy’s struggle as a ‘national uprising’ and not a socialist reform against Soviet leadership or anti-communist rebellion, now the us was nationally toned and it was the MSZMP that was excluded. This can be captured as follows:

$$\text{Revolution of 1989} = \text{Hungarians}^{(\text{Nationalism} \equiv \text{Freedom})} + \text{MSZMP}^{\text{Distrust}}$$

The revolution of 1989 was performed as a revolutionary break that included practices such as reburials speeches and masses gathering on sites of protest. For example, a crowd of 200,000 Hungarians attended Nagy’s funeral to support the revolution. The most ardent of the speeches was given by one of the young activists, Viktor Orbán, formerly of the MSZMP youth and now part of the Federation of Young Democrats. He expressed particular distrust of the former rulers and urged that the progression of democracy be ensured.

The affair led to round-table talks at which the MSZMP sought to establish the line of antagonism between the future and the past – or to be included in the negotiating parties. Here, the positive fantasy and negative guilty-pleasure *jouissance* operate as the affective content on the two sides:

$$\text{System Change} = \text{Negotiators}^{\text{Fantasy}} + \text{Past Regime}^{\text{Jouissance}}$$

The situation did not improve for several months, but the moderates sought a compromise. The radicals – Fidesz and the Free Democrats – found it impossible to sign. In the meantime, the power-holders changed their name and their outlook to a social-democratic

one. Party activities were banned from the workplace. Thus, the party dissolved in practice. Neither the reform-oriented Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) nor the newly established hard-line MSZMP gained the 700,000 members the party had previously had.

The sixth phase of Körösesny's periodisation includes the establishment of the first elections and agreement about the political system. However, the late 1980s worked as a general introduction of the lines of political division of the post-communist parties, i.e. those parties which worked in the present conditions and which structured the period after 1989. When the various dissident groupings and the former communist partisans organised themselves for the first multi-party elections, to be held in 1990, the parties were born. However, political parties were reluctant to name themselves as such, following the one-party era. Rather, politicians-to-be referred to their groupings as coalitions, associations and forums.

Conclusions

After 1945, the waves of communist industrialisation and the sense of progress that they produced brought up the question of the urban-rural divide, though this was complicated by the mythical unity of the worker and the peasant. Nevertheless, it has been argued (e.g. Fricz, 1997, 1998) that the urbanist-populist divide was kept alive in this period in the arts and sciences and to some extent translated into power-holders'/opposition positions. However, the use and implied meanings of these metaphors and the integrity of the camps and their values were more complicated than the black-and-white representation would suggest.

As Milán Pap (2021) has argued, Kádárism was a particular pragmatic version of post-Stalinism, in which the party-state leadership in Hungary followed the transformation in the Soviet Union. In so far as we can see a return to this kind of ideological control and attempts to legitimate policies on the basis of economic prosperity, we may also be raising the question: is the Hungarian leadership following this same path today?

There were also legacies for post-communism: in the whole of the region there was a strong distrust of the state. In contrast with the Nordic-style friendly 'state that provided', which was questioned from the 1980s onwards, the East European state was one of oppression as well

as welfare. The political transition emerged from the articulation of a new nodal point that could not fit the imaginary into the system. 'Poverty' was supposed to have been eliminated by the official ideology, and it was not supposed to appear as an issue in a consumerist version of state socialism. Although political rights were not provided for, greater access to goods was supposed to be available than in the neighbouring countries. But this did not reach everyone, even with IMF loans. Trust could not be bought.

As in the past, Kádárism also has a presence in today's politics. The Kádár era has not been officially recognised, but it has been alluded to by the political forces, of which many draw on a sense of nostalgia while being anti-communist. Kádár is still a popular figure, especially among the older generation, even though there was no personality cult around him when he ruled. László Andor (2000, p. 7) presents the 'best evidence' for the consensus-based rule of the period: 'in December 1999 a media survey found János Kádár at No.3 (after King Stephen I and Count István Széchenyi) in the race for being the Person of the Millennium in Hungary'. While the pre-1990 regime and era has been used as a counterpart in the construction of political identities in the post-communist era, it has also functioned as a positive nostalgic reference point for both the political left and right in contemporary Hungarian politics.

The mythical use of Kádár ignores the role of reform economists in the reform of this period. Acknowledging this, in turn, would deconstruct the polarisation between 'the communists' and the rest. The fact that the Central and Eastern European states became 'to various extents de-totalitarianized' (Arato, 1987, p. 597) was acknowledged already in the 1980s, and Andrew Arato (1987) has contested the idea of Soviet-led communism as a unitary system of oppression.

Analogically, the myth of 'Kádárism that provides' and suspicion of and by the state is replicated in the contemporary politics of Fidesz in Hungary. One of the key policies that has enabled Orbán to stay in power with support from the elderly, both at the turn of the millennium and after 2010, has been the '13th month's pension' (an extra month's addition to the yearly pension). This implies that reforms are not anti-state but offer economic ratification through what some regarded as the oxymoron of the 13th month's pension. One of the ways of pinning down 'us' is through trust in the leader to solve the problems of the world. In discourse theory, the ideas of Lacanian psychoanalysis

that recognise the role of the worldview-confirming 'big Other' can be recognised here. The above-mentioned paternalistic legitimisation may not be only a Soviet thing (Fehér, 1982).

In this chapter we have seen how the coup of 1956, based on students, intellectuals and a section of the party leadership, spread but was crushed by the Soviet troops. This kind of fringe populist movement could not be tolerated, as it put in question the unity of the Soviet Bloc. The Cold War dynamic was one of bipolar hegemony, but in Kádárism the attempt was to posit a mainstreaming populist position where dissent was seen only as marginal. This is why it was important for the fragmented dissident groups to unite in the 1980s for a confrontation with the regime, which the regime did not want to turn into a bipolar one. The reform socialists, unlike the hardliners in the party, also knew that they needed reforms, and they did not want to lose the possibility of holding on to some political power in the 1990s. Yet the revolution was enacted as a break, and bipolar logic emerged in the commemoration. However, that unity against the Soviet-style regime – and we should remember that the Soviet Union dissolved only in 1991 – was a temporary one, as we will see in the [next chapter](#).

This memory work on the pre-1990 period in Hungary, when democracy was established through free multi-party elections and the rule of law, has been important for the argument, in relation to the birth and death of democracy, to demonstrate how the Kádár period was not polarised, yet it serves as a mainstream populist inspiration. Furthermore, it has unveiled how in the 1980s, democratic confrontation was multi-voiced even if it took place in a period during which freedom of speech was limited. Civil society, or the Habermasian public sphere among the elites, was vibrant and active. The political groupings were diverse, and they had impact on each other. What happened in the 1990s, when groups had to take and share power, is a different story which will be narrated in the [next chapter](#). The unifying object of distrust was removed with the 'change of system' and the crumbling Soviet power. But antagonistic rhetoric and totalising claims of self-righteous rule did not disappear. They paved the way for new differentiation. In [Chapter 3](#), we explore the 1990s elections to investigate how transition and political identity-building took place in this period. The parliamentary terms provide a political periodisation in Hungary useful for this kind of study, due to the mobilisation around them, that entails political positioning and populist dynamics.

CHAPTER 3

Age of unity, age of difference: the 1990s

In this chapter I discuss 1990s politics in Hungary, and emerging polarisation. I explore performativity and positioning as important political activities, where distinction-making to others plays an important role. What emerges is a political field that is criss-crossed with antagonisms, divergent views and positions beyond single cleavages. There were several ways in which the parties sought to engage with the electorate as well as to claim authority and leadership. I am particularly interested in the way in which 'nation' emerged as a signifier and what filled the roles of 'us' and 'the frontier' for the political parties.

In post-communist Hungary, state socialism had been the dominant imaginary, uniting and dividing the country: now, new demands and cleavages emerged. The system change in 1989/90 provided a movement from unity to fragmentation and then back to unity, through polarisation. Fragmentation was the moment in which the structure of the division between the power-holding 'regime' and the oppressed 'dissidents' gave way to undecided, incoherent, plural and developing identifications. Due to the lack of other clearly defined collective identifications, nationalism became a new force in many post-communist countries. Although many on the left in the East-Central European region had eyed Nordic countries for a more social-democratic model, in these countries social democracy was being eroded and market liberal forces had for a while been contesting the status quo in Scandinavia.

Transition was supposed to bring with it a strong civil society, and it was assumed that there was one in Hungary, with dissident traditions. Free elections were held in 1990, but despite the varied groups of dissidents, their transformation into politicians in the 1990s led to the professionalisation of politics: politicians and apolitical masses became and remained distinct (Ilonszki & Papp, 2012; Ilonszki & Schwarcz, 2013). Korkut has argued that the positive effect of democratisation

on civil society has been taken for granted (Korkut, 2005, p. 149), and Rose-Ackerman (2005) has urged public participation. Hungary is often tied to the Western liberal democratic narrative and progress: in the 1990s, it was a fast-learning top student among the transitional countries.

One of the important features of 1990s politics was nationalism. Nationalism was not absent in the state-socialist period, but it had different forms. At the beginning of socialist rule in Romania, for example, ethnic Hungarians and Jews were part of the revolutionary elite, but they were persecuted during the communist period and especially after the Soviet-led turn to nationalism as a legitimating factor. What maintained unity in the Soviet leadership of the East-Central European region was respect for state borders, within which national projects could be articulated. The limit of state-socialist nationalism was the state borders, which did not coincide with the borders of ethnic communities. For Hungary this meant minorities in Romania, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Ukraine, mainly as the Austrian ethnic borders had been decided through plebiscites in the 1920s.

Broadly speaking, all major parties in Hungary have made reference to the nation, maintained a sense of community, and fostered liberal economic policies while in government. Therefore, beyond certain keywords it is important to study their relational meanings and the broader conceptual and temporal context. The national discourse was strong throughout the region, after the collapse of the USSR's hold on the Eastern Bloc. Regional integrity was a key to keeping together the Bloc. This perception was also strong, although from the age of Stalin onwards, the nationalist rhetoric of socialism had been important for the legitimation and the de-Stalinization process in East-Central Europe, allowing national stake paths – to a degree the limits of which Hungary in 1956 demonstrated – and becoming part of the official rhetoric.

For data and for providing some embedded experience of the 1990s period, in this chapter we go through both election videos and election debates. There is no particular corpus for these videos; their number is limited and varies by election and by party. They have been sourced from YouTube and online archives. The primary aim was to choose videos for each of the parties for each election. Nevertheless, in some cases we were confined to studying election debates. Even requests to party headquarters were not helpful in this regard, and in early 2020s access to archives of the period of analysis was not possible.

In this chapter, I operationalise the form of populism. Given that we are dealing with moments of political mobilisation – elections – it is possible to recognise this kind of populist confrontation: us-building and frontier-making in all political parties. The value of the formula of populism becomes apparent particularly in this chapter, singling out these dimensions of ‘us’, ‘frontier’ and ‘affects’ with transforming contents – as interpreted by the analyst using this available data and contextual knowledge – in the party discourse.

Overview

The events of 1989 should be seen within the continuum of Hungarian revolutions: a national tradition rather than a rupture (Palonen, 2011). Orbán has since 2010 questioned this period as a revolution, as the negotiated way in which it included the previous political forces speaks more of a ‘refolution’, as Timothy Garton Ash named the negotiated revolutions in late 1980s Central Europe: reforms. ‘System change’ is the Hungarian term for them. The ruling party, dominated by reformists, was eager to retain power and pushed through economic and even political reforms. The round-table talks were held with dissident groups, who later organised into political parties. This chapter shows that the changes had been under way throughout the 1980s.

The events of 1989 reoccur as a key reference point in Hungarian politics, as a break from the previous regime – a new start for the country. The symbol of this became the national flags with a hole cut in them to remove Soviet-style emblem. Similar flags are currently flown by the anti-Orbán Tisza Party and it will be interesting to follow this in the build-up to the 2026 elections, which will also mark an anniversary of the 1956 coup usually also called a revolution. They still function as key signifiers for post-communist political parties’ discourse.

In 1989 the heroes of the failed revolution of 1956 were celebrated. It was expected to be the moment when the change hoped for and anticipated in 1956 would finally take place, to restore the shattered dreams of democracy. The numerous spontaneous memorials and tombstones, as well as official celebrations and reburials, bear witness to this. The reburial of Imre Nagy, the PM of the reform government of 1956, was a key event, at which Viktor Orbán, still a student, delivered a memorable speech. However, already in 1990 the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) decided to consider Nagy a socialist, and started

to disassociate from him. The leading party of the first post-communist government, the MDF claimed its revolution was much more of a break than Nagy's revolution. The following Socialist-Liberal government returned to the memory of Imre Nagy's revolution, which was commemorated in 1996 when three memorials to 1956 were erected around the Hungarian parliament. These were removed in the Orbán era that started in 2010.

Instead, for the MDF the year of 1989 was termed as marking the 'return to nationhood', and it was claimed that after liberation from 'foreign' rule, finally national feelings could be freely expressed. The government set out to protect Hungarians, even ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries. As patriotism had emphasised civic pride in the socialist state, ethnic pride had been seen as a problem. In other words, the return to nationhood was a return of ethnicity. In extreme cases and for some, this was not unlike a return to the calls of the inter-war period for unification of the Hungarian lands (irredentism of the extreme far right), which had become widespread by the 2020s.

In this narrative, revolution seemed to be annulled, when the Socialists who were inheritors of the reformist wing of the pre-1989 regime were back in power in 1994. With their liberal coalition partners they sought to restore the Hungarian economy. The liberal party the Free Democrats (SZDSZ) had been very popular, but many saw them now as having betrayed their cause. Emerging from the liberal section and moving to the national pole, Fidesz who took the position of Hungarian Democratic Forum as the leading party of the Hungarian right. It could argue that the socialist era under the previous socialist-led government (1994–98) had been a rupture in the real community of Hungarian politics: that of right-wing rule that they sought to defend.

After the failure of the originally revolutionary hegemonic unity of 1989, Hungarian politics progressed to a state of pluralist fragmentation, in which different small parties and coalitions constructed their respective discourses. Hungarian politics was not automatically polarised from the start. In fact, there were many issues and events, such as the taxi blockade of the early 1990s, which broke with the existing distinctions or created new political frontiers. Nevertheless, the urge for steady political frontiers in the lack of politically articulated social cleavages contributed to the full-scale polarisation of Hungarian politics by the late 1990s and early 2000s. In this stage of fragmentation, general illusions of national or societal unity were still maintained, and



Political parties had their headquarters in community houses in smaller towns in Hungary. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

polarisation emerged only at the turn of the millennium, contemporary political commentators argued (Lengyel, 2004, pp. 81–82). Rather than moving towards consensus, then, the political reforms of the electoral system – outlined below – led Hungarian politics towards domination on the part of large parties, and towards polarisation. The rhetoric regarding the division was accompanied by a drive for unity.

Difficult start for democracy: the 'four-yeses' referendum

Before getting into the actual election results, a particular referendum needs attention in order to understand polarisation in Hungary. The first referendum was held in November 1989. It is known as the four-yeses (*négyigenes*) referendum. The debate was about whether Hungary should have a semi-presidential system with a directly elected president or not. The ruling party of reform socialists, the MSZP, was strong and popular, and Imre Pozsgay was the most popular politician in the country. The liberal parties SZDSZ and Fidesz did not accept the direct vote and wanted parliamentarism, with more restricted powers for the president. The MDF proposed a ceremonial presidential system, with the president indirectly elected by the parliament but with the first presidential elections held by public vote before the parliament was put in place. Fidesz and the SZDSZ still protested, with the Democratic Confederation of Free Trade Unions (LIGA) refusing to sign the round-table agreement. The liberals were suspicious of the public vote, fearing that the Socialists would win. The referendum consisted of four questions, and the SZDSZ called for people to answer with four yeses. The referendum passed narrowly with 50.1 per cent of voters in favour, in response to the first question, of electing the president in the parliament after general elections. The other three questions on discontinuity of state party involvement in working life and the workers militia were clearly passed. The presidential election question was a first sign of contestation and even polarisation in democratic Hungary.

The electoral law was a compromise. 'Its provisions ... difficult to grasp even for the most seasoned electoral experts, perhaps it is no coincidence that this document came from the country that also produced Rubik's cube', argued Barány (1990, p. 320), recognising affinities with the French, West German and Austrian systems. First-round majorities were sought, on the second pluralities, with a threshold of 4 per cent of the national vote for entry into parliament. In the end, this is seen to have fostered the reduction of the political space into two dominant parties, a two-party system just as in the US that would effectively foster polarisation. In 1990 the competition for the first seat was fierce. The first free elections led to the victory of the 'national opposition' that emphasised ethnic representation, the umbrella party Hungarian Democratic Forum, with the Free Democrats, i.e. the

‘democratic opposition’, emerging as the second-largest party and leading the opposition.

The 1990 elections: friends and enemies of the nation

In campaigning in Hungary, TV has had a steady role nationwide. The election videos from the 1990 parliamentary elections reveal performative contestation. YouTube’s materials present an unsystematic archive, but it is used in this rhetoric-performative analysis. The motivational video that encouraged people to vote briefly explained the ballots for the first round. Surveys at the time indicated that promises and leadership were the most important factors in decisions.

In its election video, the MDF introduced its political symbol depicting the unity of the national past, inheritance/heritage (*becsület*) and love. A quotation is used in the video from Gyula Illyés, a people’s (*népi*, populist) poet. Next, the party leader József Antall solemnly calls the Hungarian people (*nép*) to the polls. He explains that as the East-Central European region has become free and the countries are now building institutions and economies for themselves, the Hungarian people (*megtisztelteli*) would honour the MDF by electing it to serve by doing this for Hungary, and that they will build a better future by taking that lead (Bmeister, 1990b).

The Free Democrats video starts with a hatching egg and flying birds that make up the party’s logo in Hungarian colours. A folk song expressing freedom originates from the village Gyimesközéplek (Romanian Lunca de Jos, German Nieder-Gimesch) in Transylvania (Katona & Salamon, 2014). The text reads ‘With clean past to the clean future’, and the antagonistic articulation is a contrast to other parties’ historical baggage. Several politicians take to the stage for campaign messages: the artist Zsuzsa Koncz starts as someone outside parties: ‘I would rather trust in a party that does not change every day but changes the everyday’ (Bmeister, 1990c, 0:18–0:25). This seems to echo the anti-political sentiment present among many dissidents such as Koncz, with her anti-establishment songs, and among many of the voters in the first free elections.

The second spokesperson, actor István Darvas, unites nationalism, Europeanism and liberalism, contesting any claims of the SZDSZ as anti-nation. He argues:

There are 15 million of us to be Hungarians together, the whole of Europe must unite in the East as well as in the West. Borders need to become open, as if there never were borders. Freedom for religions and minorities, both in Transylvania and the Upper Hungary, as well as within our own borders. (Bmeister, 1990c, 0:26–0:46)

The notion of these 15 million Hungarians will be an important dividing line in future politics. It refers to the Hungarian minorities across the borders. This claim by the actor-politician, born in present-day Slovakia, and the audio track of the video, demonstrate that such an antagonism did not apply to the Free Democrats. They did embrace Transylvania in 1990, although later it became the exclusive property of Fidesz.

Poverty, a key issue for SZDSZ-leaning dissidents in the 1980s, was the topic of the third spokesperson: 'I want that meat will not be a guest at the families' tables,' argues József Székelyi, an actor and director, who talks about work and rents, the everyday aspects of the economy. A contrast is also made with dictatorships in the next contribution, letting the party's leadership take the stage in front of a family portrait with words of knowing, assessing and doing.

The Socialists released a few videos in the same year, the most energetic with rally drivers: 'almost everyone likes to drive, and everyone would like to drive really well' says the narrator's voice. 'Only those who drive safely drive well,' says the rally driver (László Oroszlán) ((Rallyautó, MSZP Média, 1990). 'Trustworthiness and safety' is the slogan accompanying the MSZP's logo (BalodaliHu, 1990). Some of the videos contain only music and the party's carnation, or the opening of an iron gate. For the Budapest edition, potentially for the local elections there, the carnation logo is filled with politicians – all male, with emphasis on Gyula Horn, who is meeting with both Gorbachev and Pope John Paul II. These are the videos of the establishment party, which already knows how to do it, as the line of antagonism would go for the 'new' actors.

The video by Fidesz, however, challenges all the rest. In contrast to the hymns and folk songs and the darkish image, they use Swedish rock band Roxette's tune 'Listen to your heart' – in English, which not many spoke in Hungary, but which, along with rock music, was a symbol of freedom and the new era. The video depicted an orange causing a domino effect of the crumbling of the Soviet power in Europe.

The logo 'FIDESZ – the party of youth' was featured in a graffiti-style font. The orange is 'the Hungarian orange', a reference to cult film *The Witness* (*A Tanú*), which criticised state socialism. It also became the symbol of Fidesz, highlighting the ridiculous nature of the previous regime. The slogans in Hungarian were simple commands.

On the basis of the videos, we can conceptualise the difference between the parties as follows:

MDF Discourse =

(Nation ≡ Nép)^{Freedom ≡ Ancient Heritage} + Communism^{Oppression}

SZDSZ Discourse =

(Nation ≡ Europe)^{Freedom ≡ Prosperity} + Communism^{Dictatorship ≡ Poverty}

MSZP discourse = (Party ≡ Country)^{Trust ≡ Opening} + Others^{Uncertainty}

Fidesz discourse = Youth^{New Era ≡ Freedom} + Old Guard^{Distrust}

Some of the references are quite ambiguous, and it is hard to find the exact term when they are implied rather than explicitly mentioned. In this schema we can see that many parties highlight nationhood. Of course, 1989 and the early 1990s was an era of the emergence of sovereignty and 'rebirth of nationhood', as discussed. But how the parties differed in their emphasis on the nation is relevant for our analysis. It is the relationality – the chain of equivalence – that constitutes the meaning of nationhood. With the MDF it was the eternal Hungarianness that was revived. In the SZDSZ discourse nation was connected to the protection of religious and ethnic minorities, including across the borders, emphasised by the folk song and the Slovak-born actor used in its video. The MSZP just refers to Hungary. Fidesz makes fun of the Hungarian orange but also adopts it as its symbol, as an ironical reference to the nation. Nationhood was thus not missing from any of the major parties we analyse.

The results (see [Figure 1](#)) were a landslide for the MDF, which was a coalition born from the national opposition. SZDSZ was the second-largest party, narrowly behind the MDF. Fidesz and the SZDSZ were the liberal parties running two joint candidate. Together the liberals would have been victorious, and there were attempts to generate alliances between the liberal parties in the early years. Instead of a grand coalition with the other main dissident party, the MDF formed a conservative coalition with the Independent Smallholders' Party and the

Christian Democrats. An emblematic figure of the transition was the first prime minister, József Antall of the MDF. After the 1990 election János Kis from the SZDSZ offered an opportunity for a grand coalition but Antall rejected this, saying that the MDF could not collaborate with the other side.

It has been often quoted how Antall named himself the prime minister of 15 million Hungarians – not only the Hungarian citizens but the ethnic Hungarians beyond the state borders. Through this rearticulation of the state–nation relationship, he addressed the hitherto taboo dilemma of the ethnic Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. In this narrative socialist Hungary had destroyed healthy national feelings. As we have seen from the election videos, the issue of ethnic Hungarians was palpable also for the main liberal party. There were, however, differences in emphasis regarding the Hungarians across borders as minorities or as part of the Hungarian nation. In the SZDSZ video we can see both perspectives, but political confrontation performatively formed such a distinction as criticism emerged of Antall's usage.

On the left, speech was interpreted as the re-emergence of Hungarian nationalism of the interwar irredentist kind, seeking to reclaim areas lost in the Treaty of Trianon that settled the First World War for Hungary. More than actual land claims, this revealed the Antall government's focus on post-communist nation-building and the re-establishment of congruency between the ethnic nation and the state – rather than economic reforms. The new imaginary would be an ethno-national one.

In terms of the antagonistic articulation that emerged, 'us' would be ethnic Hungarians, and the 'frontier' those who contested the ethnic vision, the communist power-holders and the rational liberals who would not understand ethno-nationalism, claiming it irrational.

$$\text{MDF Populism} = \text{Ethno-Hungarian Nation}^{\text{Patriotism}} + \text{Left Liberal}^{\text{Distrustful} \equiv \text{International} \equiv \text{Rational}}$$

In fact, this way of constructing political identities and coalitions with clear-cut borders is reminiscent of the previous communist era, where attempts were made to make the differences clear (at least at the level of rhetoric, although in fact they could sometimes be blurred) between the regime, party members, enemies of society or dissidents, and the rest of the population.

Yet perhaps Antall's assertion was not contesting rule of law or moving to irrendentist (calling to return the lost areas) claims for reuniting areas of the pre-First World War Hungary but 'patrician conservatism', as Gergely Egedy (2013, pp. 67–68) explains, 'committed to the doctrine of the rule of law and – in keeping with ancient Hungarian constitutional traditions – accept[ing] the legal-civic concept of the nation. This assumes that the identity of the members of the nation is based on the relation between the state and the individual.' Antall was a pro-European politician who saw the future of the Hungarian nation in the integration process: indeed the first steps were made towards European Community membership, then NATO. This form of nationalism was indeed international.

The two major non-socialist parties were quite quarrelsome, and the taxi blockade in the 1990s, six months after the election, was a test for the Antall government, with the SZDSZ siding with the blockaders. The confrontation deepened in October 1990 when, after petrol prices had increased by 65 per cent, the taxi blockade paralysed traffic in Budapest and later in regional cities. The PM was in hospital and several ministers were abroad. Antall was diagnosed with cancer later in 1990. It was already quite advanced, giving him a prognosis of three years, but he remained active to the end. His death led the MDF into a leadership crisis shortly before the 1994 elections. The party lost its position as the largest party to both the Socialists and the Free Democrats, despite their reluctance to cut down the welfare functions of the state and the celebration of ethnic Hungarianness.

The assumption by the national side was that the left would never be able to understand or accept the nation as a political subject (in the terminology of post-structuralism). This was confirmed in the articulations of the liberals and the left who, with different contents under the 'us', articulated distrust of irrationality and irredentism to expressions of ethno-nationalism:

Counter MDF Populism =
Democrats^{Patriotism} + Irredentist Nationalists^{Irrational}

While many different things could fall under the 'us' – and this has not yet been discussed much here – I chose the signifier 'democrats' here. This includes an idea of reform economy that under the hegemonic imaginary would imply liberal economy and minimal state. Paradoxically, from the perspective of Western political science and praxis,

it became the task of the Hungarian political right to take the statist stance and defend state ownership of enterprises and public property.

Generally, the left in Hungary is seen as technocratic, which in the Laclaudian framework is the antithesis of populism but is also contested by authors who have sought to make a distinction between the irrational nationalist populists and the rest (Müller, 2016). Current research has found ‘technopopulism’ to apply to East-Central European rulers in particular. The Hungarian left, socialists and liberals, would not fit this image either. What I do want to stress however, is that the antagonistic articulation, where the side of us was righteous and fit to rule but the others were to be treated with caution as illegitimate nationalist rogues, was present already in the early 1990s.

As far as images of the enemy are concerned, the Socialists were also considered illegitimate to rule, whether from the MDF or the Free Democratic perspective. They were the former power-holders, and their ability to follow the rule of law was suspect for the liberals and their fidelity to the Hungarian nation for the nationalists. Therefore, the coalition building after the 1994 elections was a shock to many liberals, who moved to support Fidesz as an alternative to an unholy alliance. The root cause, however, was the fierce rallying behind the flag among the political elites fostered through antagonistic discourses, which impeded the idea of coalitions crucial to multi-party democracy.

1994 elections: the liberal pole collapsing

In Northern Europe, the social democrats had been giving in to the Washington Consensus and liberal reforms were called for in the Scandinavian countries. As discussed in [Chapter 2](#), in Hungary this development had been taking place already since the 1960s, when consumerism had become a way to claim legitimacy for the state-socialist regime, particularly after the failure of the 1956 uprising. After winning the 1994 elections, the Socialists had two choices due to the distrust of them by the other parties: building a minority government or ruling with the second-largest party, the Alliance of Free Democrats. These parties had collaborated against the MDF government in the Democratic Charter (*Demokratikus Charta*) circles. Fidesz did not take part in this but since 1992 had begun to turn itself into a conservative people’s party (Tóka, 1995, p. 17). According to Tóka (1995, pp. 17–18), in 1991–93 the Fidesz leadership realised that the Socialists

would become their biggest opposition, and from 1993 Orbán made any question of such a coalition impossible. The question of coalition became a key issue in the elections and their outcome: how can a coalition of us form, and what is articulated as the frontier?

Before the elections the so-called media wars made it difficult for the opposition to access television. Hence, in this research we used sources that were available through YouTube and online archives. We chose the Fekete Doboz (Black Box) documentary film as our particular interest, as it covers the 1994 election campaign in a 38-minute film. The independent video-producing team had been established already in 1987 and became one of the most important actors documenting the changes. In 1993 it received the Hungarian Pulitzer Prize. Its archives are at the Blinken Open Society Archives, whose YouTube channel we used. Part of the film was to account for the music chosen in the campaigns – partly this gives us clues to the us-building and affects. The film was finished the year after the elections, so what was cut in was probably predicated on the results (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994).

The other source available from the Blinken archive was the Drót news show of the TV journalist György Baló, which aired between February and August 1994 (Blinken OSA Archives 1994, 25 February, 2 March) on the Hungarian independent cable channel TV4, popularly called ‘TV Tévé’, which ran between June 1991 and September 1994 (Wikipedia, 2024). Among other prizes, Baló had also won the Hungarian Pulitzer, in 1991. His choice of what to include and how to interview party leaders was journalistic and animated the pre-election period. The footage reveals many of the parties acknowledging that they had learned a lot in the preceding four years. The opposition parties criticise the government and want to see a change. The style of governing is something that all opposition parties mention as the problem of the MDF government.

The MDF had an election slogan that referred to security and comfort. It can be translated as ‘Steady steps – peaceful future’ (*Biztos Lépések – Nyugodt jövő*). ‘We work together with the country’, the video voiceover opens, zooming in on the parliament building where the chair, PM Péter Boross, still works at his desk late at night. The MDF election launch (*nagygyűlés*, 28 April 1994) has attracted predominantly older and emotional crowds (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 14:23–15:44). The part of the film showing the MDF campaign includes a statement by Boross that mockingly acknowledges that the polls are looking bad for

the MDF, and he is worried about the influence that the polls might have on the minds of the voters. This is in line with the urge to cut down criticism through the media wars. There is no question of the MDF's competence, as they have been 'professionals' since the late 1980s. 'And we will put the country in a worse condition, they say (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 15:31–15:43). Because somewhere it has been decided that we will already give it over.' The statement assumes that defeat is already decided. There is of course some ideology and national pride in the MDF campaign, but based on the chosen clips, they do not focus on nationhood as much as they did four years ago. They want to charm with their professionalism.

MDF Discourse = Strong Country^{Professional Leadership} + Others^{Misguided}

This opened up space for others. The main opposition parties were the Free Democrats and the Socialists, but Fidesz, which, among the many small parties running in the 1990 elections, made it into the parliament, also increased its popularity particularly from spring 1993 onwards. The confusion over leadership and weight of responsibility in government weakened the MDF. It opened space for the Independent Smallholders' Party (FKgP) and the new nationalist party the MIÉP, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party, and Fidesz, founded by an MDF internal critic, István Csurka.

In the Fekete Doboz film, the leaders of the FKgP and the MIÉP, István Csurka and József Torgyán, hold a campaign meeting, calling for a landslide, not a small victory (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 5:55–9:05). They contested those who have called them nationalists and promote themselves as the single-minded force of Hungarian progress, against the others – cosmopolitans, liberals and communists (Csurka). Torgyán claims that he will send the communists to the Soviet Union (non-existent in 1994) from peasant Hungary. The confrontation is quite clear, and can be captured as:

*Nationalist Populism = (Peasant \equiv Nation)^{Tradition} +
(Communists \equiv Liberals \equiv Cosmopolitans)^{Foreign}*

The biggest transformation was within Fidesz. The party not only mobilised the youth but sought to appeal to Hungarians at large. The opening of the campaign was held in Orbán's provincial college town of Székesfehérvár. The American rock band R.E.M.'s 'Shiny happy people' was played and orange balloons were blown up and bounced around

the audience (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 9 March, 2:05). The slogan on the wall states 'We need a team' (*Kell egy csapat*) and Orbán opens 'We have a team' (*Megvan a csapat*) (Drót, 1994, 2:07–2:08). He attacks the government in the name of the country's people (*az ország népe*) and argues for change as the government has not listened to the citizens (*polgárok*): 'Too many people are doing worse and too few better.' The interviewer asks 'Does it feel good to be adults?' (*Jó felnőttek lenni?*), referring to the change of outfits and appeal to older crowds. 'Not so much, but not tragically bad (either)', responds Orbán.

In a campaign advertisement, Orbán himself starts his account with 'A couple of words on the clothing', admitting that learning to wear a pocket handkerchief had been hard for them, but that 'it is a fact that it matters to the citizens how we look, and we have to follow conventions to some degree' as this will convey reliability, in his opinion. In the campaign opening Orbán had worn a suit with a vest, and he now appears in the same outfit without the jacket and looks at his colleague Tamás Deutsch (later to become the sports minister), who wears a silver shirt with a tie in the same colour and smiles wearily. He jokes about how they still will not look like Gyula Horn, the Socialist Party chairman, or Péter Boross, the MDF PM who succeeded Antall. 'People could of course try to mix us up, but perhaps not after all' (Fekete Doboz, 1995 2:32–4:49).

Going for the full suit to stand out may have been a joke, of course, but it performed the future platform of Fidesz: reliable, understandable and civic (*polgári*). In the interview Orbán stresses this aspect: they changed their outfits to appeal to more conservative crowds. He names the Socialists as the biggest contender, but he does not name any of the non-Socialists, although he had mentioned the SZDSZ earlier as 'propagating' against the MDF. Asked whether the MSZP is a democratic party, he responds that if the Hungarian court thinks this, it is. And asked if Fidesz would join a coalition with the MSZP, Orbán does not directly deny the possibility but mentions that there are other parties too. He adds that given the current state of the country, a very tough, decisive government with a strong majority is needed (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 9 March, 6:07–6:49).

The transformation signals that Orbán's Fidesz should be taken seriously. In its discourse, the old guard is present but the current government is absent. The Socialists are named as incompetent and somehow the antithesis of the people. We can try to capture this as follows,

with the affective dimension ‘fun’ still existing but only in the chain of equivalence with the grown-up, tradition-bound echoes of competence:

$$\text{Fidesz Discourse} = (\text{Citizen} \equiv \text{People})^{\text{Competence} \equiv \text{Trust} \equiv \text{Fun}} + \text{Government}^{\text{Incompetent}}$$

In the Fekete Doboz film the SZDSZ is given top billing, and prime-ministerial candidate Gábor Kuncze opens the campaign calling for a change to the status quo (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 5:03–5:25). An advert is shown in which small children describe how they feel about Kuncze (sweet, 150 cm tall, smiling, wants to do good things for the Hungarian people). It is noteworthy that the artists and the community that had sustained the party four years prior are absent. Looking at the election videos for 1994, we find a video with Kuncze, who states that the party has learned a lot in the past four years, partly as the opposition party, including the fact that there are different ways for the government to treat the opposition and, on the other hand, how to represent values and speak to society. His criticism of disrespect for the opposition highlights the opposition–government confrontation. The Drót film accounts for antisemitic vandalism of Kuncze’s election posters, but Kuncze contests the Budapest Jewish stereotype of his party, saying that he has travelled in the country and met with people and discussed with them the SZDSZ programme and how to improve the economy in order to improve quality of life in Hungary. He argues for lower taxes and reducing the national debt. What Kuncze is trying to articulate is the ‘us’ as Hungary (with economic prosperity and lower taxes), and he brackets behind the frontier the MDF government that generated this national debt and that addresses the opposition and society in the wrong way.

$$\text{Kuncze's Discourse} = \text{Hungary}^{\text{Liberal Economy}} + \text{Government}^{\text{Incompetent}}$$

Speculation about an MSZP-SZDSZ coalition circulated before the elections. The Free Democrats’ clip in Fekete Doboz begins with the party leader Iván Pető’s campaign speech:

We all see that our opponents want to riot [*sic*] our constituents with a possible SZDSZ-MSZP coalition, believing that they could cause damage within the SZDSZ as well. Well, I want to make clear to the general public what the majority of the Free Democrats know, as I do: that the

SZDSZ does not aim at the election success of the MSZP. The MSZP is a political opponent of the SZDSZ and must be defeated.

This is a clear statement from Pető, who argued later in the parliament that the SZDSZ would never join a coalition with the MSZP. But the party was divided on this, and the pragmatism of sweet, smiling Kuncze would lead the way to a coalition with the MSZP. Pető saw in the campaign a need to stress the confrontation between the SZDSZ and the MSZP, which – in so far as the logic of polarisation sustains both sides – may have also contributed to the Socialists' success.

The MSZP's campaign launch features a lot of music and arts – and the international only at the very end, as party leader Horn laughingly admits when answering the journalist's questions – and Gyula Horn saying that they regard it as their mission to take care of tax-payers' millions – in contrast to the government of course (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 13:14–14:03). They are also jokingly asked whether there would be just the Workers' International, but the campaign speech makes a point about arts. Horn remembers the campaign speech in his book, quoting his favourite Japanese saying, which featured prominently in the film: 'The bread is the life, the flower the life's meaning.' This refers to the party's symbol but also to manual work. Horn stresses: 'Our opponents would say we win. Let's not disappoint them. Let's win, and with us wins the country! And the audio would play: Go West' (Horn, 2012). Contesting the driving skills of the government and the rising inflation, Munkáspárt (MP) had a rally driver in its video, with party leader Gyula Thürmer saying that the left can drive – the governing wheel is on the left ('A kormány helye baloldalon van') – but contesting the national capitalism of the leading MDF and the 'pink capitalism' of the MSZP (Blinken OSA Archives, 1994, 15:44–17:00). The metaphor stuck.

In election campaigning sometimes what I call 'political feel-good' prevails. Feel-good affectively emphasises the us side without much antagonism on the frontier. This is palpable in the Fekete Doboz account of the MSZP campaign. They criticise those in power, but they do it with much affect and abstract us-building. Fidesz still retains some of this feel-good, but in moving to the serious side it also loses some. It is an impossible balance, of course. The MSZP is elected by a landslide, with SZDSZ second and Fidesz only fifth (see [Figure 1](#)).

The Socialists, as the election winners, formed a coalition with the SZDSZ. With 54 per cent of the seats, it could have ruled on its own, but there were several reasons for this coupling. First, the Free Democrat intellectuals had before also been advising reform socialists in economic policy, and joining forces demonstrated that the Socialists did not actually have their own economic policy. Second, there would be another party to blame for the economic situation and tough policies, which the Socialists did not promise. They knew ‘how to drive’, to borrow the metaphor of governance from before, but they needed someone to read the map. Finally, there was a message to the international community, which the MSZP wanted to convince that it was not returning to the previous regime but generating a new era through the democratic act of forming a coalition. It may also have been opportunistic in terms of hoping to join together the forces of the liberal left. This is not that unusual: for a comparison, in 1997 in the UK the Blair government came to power with a combination of neoliberal policies and Labour Party flair.

There were also reconciliatory markers. The Socialist Party was historically the reform wing of the pre-1989 establishment party, the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party. In the rough division of the participants in the negotiated revolution in Hungary, the liberals were inheritors of the ‘democratic opposition’ of the 1980s. It is important to note that many of them had advised the reform wing of the Socialists in economic matters, and vice versa (cf. Kovács, 1990).

The two governing parties, the MSZP and the SDSZP, also had common ideological roots. Their leading intellectuals established the Hungarian Democratic Charter in September 1991 as a ‘counteroffensive against the authoritarian and racist tendencies of the right-wing government’ (Andor, 2000) or a ‘citizen’s rights movement’ positioned against the Antall government and the rise of the Horthy commemoration (Szabó, 2001) – an oppositional action, in which Fidesz, notably, did not participate. They also shared a common vision of liberal economic policy. Members of the SZDSZ had steered the Kádárist regime of the 1980s towards a Thatcherite or Blairite economic policy, rather than a social-democratic model. Andor (2000) suggests that the Hungarian Socialists had not changed their policy since the 1980s. But the shock therapy and close following of IMF recommendations was characteristic of, rather than exceptional to, their politics. One could even argue that the Hungarian left, rather than moving towards the

right, had stayed on the right, even if their voters were on the left in terms of economic policy. Economic co-operation between the Socialists and the Free Democrats was enhanced in the national government (1994–98 and 2002–10). In contrast, Fidesz, as the main right-wing party, argued for étatism: more state control of the economy – and culture – in this period.

Considering what we have already covered regarding the confrontations, there were not that many other alternatives in the party spectrum, as the other parties equally or even more vehemently rejected the Socialists, and – as for instance Orbán above had mentioned – a strong majority government would be needed to take the country further from economic hardship. The liberals wanted to put their mark on the government, and they did so via the austerity package of the mid-1990s. The Bokros package proved unpopular and contributed to the opposition's success in the 1998 elections. Political scientist Anna Gryzmała-Busse (2002, p. 92) has studied 'the electoral punishment of parties that crossed the regime divide' and the failure at the elections after going into government with the communist successor parties. This punishment was great for the SZDSZ in Hungary in comparison with counterparts among its Visegrád neighbours. Its electoral support fell by 60 per cent in the 1998 elections.

Interestingly for the present study on polarisation, what the Horn government succeeded in was marginalising the 'liberal pole', as the SZDSZ was siding with the government and Fidesz, which had integrated many of the critics from the liberal party, moved to become the most reliable, serious-looking party of the national-conservative camp. The liberal parties' elites sought to come together despite some generational differences, and indeed the movement was not one-way: leading Fidesz politicians had left the party in 1993 during its conservative turn. The party had been polling much better prior to the elections, and the move towards the MDF was considered a major scandal by many, so liberals were moving in with either the conservatives or the socialists.

The poor result of Fidesz – 7 per cent of the vote – was related to a scandal that broke out within the party. It was revealed that Orbán had been making deals with the MDF and using party funds, while at the same time, internally, it became clear that he wanted people loyal to him in key positions. This led one of the key figures and challengers of the party, Gábor Fodor, to step down only six months prior to

the elections, and many centrist Fidesz people to leave the party, as Szelényi (2022, pp. 38–40) did along with others of her generation. Her view, echoed by many of my colleagues in the generation, was that Fidesz had represented the centrist pole and resisted the historical dichotomies and lines of polarisation, but that Orbán was not convinced by centrism and did not see himself being trusted by the SZDSZ as one of them, and that he thus took the opportunity to move into an opening on the national right (Szelényi, 2022, p. 40). By being confirmed in the Reformed Church and engaging with Christian intellectuals and politicians, he sedimented his connections on the right.

The question about the ‘liberal pole’ is also a matter of definition. For many like Zsuzsanna Szelényi (2022) it was the centre between the national right and the socialists. Liberalism was conceptualised in Hungary in various ways, and intertwined in different strands, particularly in the MSZP-SZDSZ government, but it was eroded in the 2000s through anti-liberal contestation that in the 2010s was named illiberalism, Mándi (2015, pp. 23–24) argues. For Mándi it is important that Ivan Krastev (2007) located the emergence of populism in Poland with the Kaczyński brothers, but my study shows how the seeds were sown already before this. Exploring the birth of polarisation in the first Orbán government (Palonen, 2009), and the election debates of 1998, leads us to see that the roots of such a polarising confrontation as populist articulation can be traced back to the mid-1990s and the period of the Horn government.

1998 elections: diversity before polarisation

Of the 1998 general election videos we found only three online: those of the MIÉP, the MSZP and Fidesz (Béla Szabadi, 1998). The three are quite different in tone. First, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) shows its ultra-nationalist colours at a 15 March rally in the Heroes’ Square, with a campaign song that argues that no one should be left behind, in the words of the Hungarian romantic poet Mihály Vörösmarty: ‘Majd, ha ember kell a gátra / Gyenge-gyáván / Ne maradjon senki hátra!’ (‘And when it is time for action / weakly-cowardly / Nobody is to stay behind!’ [transl. Marianna Nagy]). The narration reveals that party leader István Csurka has called for a ‘nation-building state’ to be established with the Nazi salute. This encapsulates the tying together of national heritage and authoritarian history. We could find

no video for the liberal SZDSZ, but the campaign advertisement for the MSZP features the tune and symbol of the Socialist Party and PM Gyula Horn giving a calm and reassuringly toned speech calling for people to go forward on the track that makes lives better for everyone. The MSZP's campaign message is only 20 seconds long.

Much more is included in the Fidesz campaign video, which shows the party leader engaged with children, the elderly, his fans, culture, sports and politics. The Fidesz film shows Orbán surrounded by his children, kissing and hugging – alongside friends from the party Tamás Deutsch. They then play in the yard of a house in a village. Moving to sports, Orbán plays indoor football with determination and speed, scoring a goal (the goalkeeper is in the red-and-white costume of the same team). They play a team in green and white, so the Hungarian football colours are present. Then moving to culture, he is shown at a reception with his wife: they dine in an official capacity and they go to an opera or theatre performance, where they congratulate the stars of the show. To feature supporting crowds of people, Orbán moves to the streets, where he is admired and photographed and receives mail. In the next scenes he hands out orange leaflets to elderly men in a crowd and kisses elderly ladies, both scenes also featuring younger supporters. Finally, he takes the mic and speaks to crowds day and night – with night scenes from next to the Hungarian parliament featuring the Lánchíd, the oldest bridge that connected Buda and Pest in the nineteenth century, and Orbán posing in front of the portrait of István Széchenyi, the hero of the era. These themes will return in the following years. Finally he also meets with politicians and receives a ratifying gaze from an unknown person.

To compensate for the scarcity of election videos, we found national TV debates online. These were transcribed (first using automated service Happyscribe, then reviewed by a research assistant), and they offer insights into what was debated. They make it obvious that after the preceding four years, many felt that there was still some need for political and economic transformation. Tight budgeting and austerity measures as part of the Bokros packages had not resulted in immediate improvements, and discontent is voiced by the political contenders.

In the all-party debate the themes are still much related to improving the formal features of Hungarian democracy and economy – and safety, unemployment and privatisation were also issues that emerged. The government and the main opposition parties promote NATO

and EU membership, but this was also contested by some parties. Joining NATO and the EU are priorities for the Socialist Party. NATO membership is supported by the small parties too. ‘The biggest problem of the system change was that those who once were Socialists believing in the Warsaw pact are now pushing the country to NATO just as in our history we remember those who moved from the Turks to the [Habsburg-supporting] Labanc’, argues Ágnes G. Nagyné Maczó, from Új Szövetség Magyarországért (USzM, New Alliance for Hungary), a splinter from the Independent Smallholders’ Party (VHS-turkáló, 2021, 23:27). The MIÉP’s Csurka argues that the NATO and EU membership should not be pursued without a referendum. Csurka says that his party is neither left nor right but Christian and Hungarian. The Hungarian Workers’ Party opposes the presence of foreign soldiers on Hungarian soil, but István Thürmer argues that all they want is to improve the politics from the left and if necessary this could be done from within NATO.

Iván Szabó from the Hungarian Democratic People’s Party (Magyar Demokrata Néppárt, MDNP) wants to retain both EU and NATO membership in long-term plans. He also highlights the many European funds that would become available through EU membership. The MSZMP is worried that it would not be able to implement its labour policies within the EU, but otherwise, apart from the USzM criticism of capitalism and the MIÉP’s insistence on the referendum, the parties are not critical of the EU.

Coalition partner the SZDSZ calls for a smaller and cheaper state, the elimination of corruption and action against the black economy, and provisions for public safety. Compared with 1994 its stance had become more economic-liberal than social-liberal. This set them apart from the other parties, including the MSZP, which they had seen not only as a current coalition partner but as a competitor throughout the years in the office. Some openings towards women’s rights are expressed by Maczó of Új Szövetség Magyarországért. The FKgP calls for improved living conditions with human dignity, the curbing of inflation and the black economy, and the reduction of public debt. Alike the MIÉP, they call for improvements for small and medium-sized entrepreneurs. Csurka’s aims are to review privatisation and generate economic progress and support for small businesses and families.

In this debate the Fidesz thesis is different from the others. Orbán takes time to explain how the party has been engaging with citizens for

a programme for a 'Civic Hungary' that would promote freedom and prosperity through the involvement of citizens. He talks not about the people (*nép*) or the nation (*nemzet*), but of people as persons (*embrek*) and citizens (*polgárok*). Like Horn, he is talking about Hungary.

Analysing the parts of the discussion that include reference to Hungary or Hungarians, there is no polarisation across the left-right spectrum. At the extreme far right, 'Hungarian Hungary' is mentioned by István Csurka. Or the collective of Hungarians (*magyarság*), just as Lőrinc Kerner from the Nationalities Forum (Nemzetiségi Fórum) or Sándor Lezsák from the MDF referred to. He does not call for Hungarians' wellbeing or Hungarian interests, like József Torgyán of the FKgP. But he does talk about Hungarian economy and Hungarian-owned small and medium-sized businesses. Kuncze was calls for a 'modern European Hungary' and Ágnes G. Nagyné Maczó talks about Hungarian society. Turmer stresses that foreign soldiers should not be on Hungarian soil and that Hungarian soldiers should not be sent out of the country: 'The Labour Party wants the Hungarian nation to live better in 2002 than we did 15 or 20 years ago.' In sum, the two large parties are less focused on the Hungarian nation than on Hungary itself.

The purpose of accounting for the diversity of views here is to highlight that Hungarian politics was not polarised in 1998, but that there were a range of positions on the left and the right – and the so-called neither-nor. There was an overall atmosphere of contesting the power of the Socialists, who had failed to satisfy the tangible demands of the people while in government but nevertheless managed to retain more support than the other parties. This was demonstrated in the second round of the 1998 elections, but they had already become the target of the opposition in late 1997, which the next debate also addressed.

The two-party debate between Orbán as the young challenger and Horn as the statesman took place between the rounds of the elections (MSZP, 1998). The difference between the all-party and the two-party debates was huge. The first opened up a Pandora's box of different parties, platforms and election agendas. The second set up a debate between two large parties that lifted Fidesz into an important position among the parties. In the second round the MSZP received 29.8 per cent of the vote and Fidesz, including its MDF coalition candidates, 22.8 per cent. It was noteworthy that SZDSZ support shrank by almost half to mere 10 per cent.

The debate addressed the fact that a smaller portion of the electorate had shown up to vote in the first round of the Hungarian general elections – only 56 per cent. In 1994 the turnout had been 67 per cent in the first round and 55 per cent in the second; in 1990 the proportions had been 65 per cent and 46 per cent. It was hoped that the two-party debate would perhaps excite people to go and vote. There were joint lists, but ultimately only six parties made it into the parliament, the SZDSZ reaching the threshold in the first and the MDF and MIÉP in the second round. In the second round, 57 per cent voted. The bipolar contestation between Orbán and the MSZP at least kept up the numbers of voters. Both parties' support increased, particularly that of Fidesz, but neither reached a majority of the popular vote or of seats (see Figures 1 and 2).

Summing up, many parties generated their own discourse that would become a norm in Hungarian politics:

Oppositional Discourse = Us + Government^{Illegitimate}

Who the people were was for many the Hungarian nation or Hungarian society – even the Hungarian collective (*magyarság*). But Fidesz stood out here, because for them the us was *emberek*, the non-nation. This was the civic 'crowd' that they had been activating in politics, gaining legitimacy from the participatory process. In contrast. The civic circles became the basis of Fidesz support (Greskovits, 2017).

The two-party debate also witnessed Horn accusing Orbán of 'populist' economic policies. A key point of criticism for Orbán was that the wrong kind of government coalition was taking the country in the wrong direction and was unable to collaborate. Horn promised to take Hungary into the EU and NATO by 2002. Rather than contesting this, Orbán challenged the government over the corruption that had been taking place since privatisation. Horn argued Hungary was not the most corrupt country in the region, but in turn contested the economic policies of Orbán, including taking government loans and subventing family taxation, raising pensions, and abolishing student fees in higher education (which Horn pointed out his party had supported already in 1994), as not matching the requirements of EU membership.

The distinction between the two parties, in my reading of the debate, lay in the way in which Horn aimed at steering the country to prosperity and security through EU and NATO membership in a process of government from above and opposed the irresponsible politics

of the opposition, while Fidesz contested the irresponsible politics of the corrupt, quarrelling government promising a better future through policies addressing different voter profiles. Horn did not see the need for us-building: to borrow a metaphor from the earlier MSZP campaign videos, he was already in the car driving towards victory (membership). He took Hungary for granted, while Orbán was building a vision of the Polgári Hungary (just as many of the other small parties had had this idea of generating unity in their party or list names).

Having received almost double the number of votes of Fidesz in the first round of the elections, Horn was quite confident. He could not discredit the coalition partner the SZDSZ or other parties, as coalitions would need to be formed in the future too. Fidesz was thriving in the leading opposition party's position, and since it had joined the list with other parties it also could appear coalition-ready. In the list seats the two parties were neck to neck but ultimately, with joint candidates, Fidesz overtook the Socialists. The collapse of the liberals was central to their demise. To follow the metaphor of the election video, they were driving in the same car. The liberal SZDSZ had moved even further from the ordinary people by 1998 with its emphasis on keeping tight reins on the economy, and this showed in the results. The collective it had referred to in the previous debate was simply a modern, European Hungary.

Interestingly, Horn actually described Hungary in more detail than Orbán did. It was he rather than Orbán who used the term 'nation' in this debate, in the rhetoric that he used regarding Hungarian excellence and competitiveness in science, creativity and adaptability – and agriculture, where he thought Hungary had leading potential in Europe. Some of this rhetoric would be reiterated in the years to come by Orbán. This was perhaps the most nationalist moment in Horn's performance, but one that merely highlighted Hungarian excellence rather than seeking much performative potential in it. In so far as it has been argued that the Socialists were not populist compared with Fidesz, 1998 is a case in point. The next elections would have a different spin.

In many ways, one could call Orbán in 1998 a populist, rather than a nationalist-conservative. Civic participation, democracy, anti-corruption etc. were key issues for him, at least until he made it to power. These were of course also means to get to power – projecting the future through the problems of the day as the choices of the future (*a jövő*

választása). He promised certain things for certain groups, but other than that it was an ambiguous platform of hope. In effect Fidesz promised a civic – with the connotations of bourgeois existence for everyone. The logic was that making Hungary increasingly bourgeois would also make space for moderate right-wing parties like Fidesz, rather than the ultra-nationalists or the social-democratic parties. Orbán accused Horn in the two-party debate of wanting to change the electorate, but in some ways the project that started in 1998 as Fidesz came to power had at its core a target of fundamental societal transformation.

Conclusions

From the perspective of the theory of hegemony there were different kinds of coalitions and political identities being formed in the 1990s. Political debates were live, and there were differences. Internationally, the transformation of Fidesz from a centrist party close to the liberals to a revolutionary party rooting itself on the national and conservative right was the most interesting development. I have operationalised here the form of populism to denote political mobilisation and the diversity of its contents. While Fidesz spoke throughout the 1990s from a fringe position, in 1998 the discourse changed, paving the way to the bipolar hegemony of competing populism.

The roots of polarisation lie in the post-communist search for friends and enemies when the collapse of communism diminished lines of division. The left-leaning political commentator László Lengyel (1998, p. 13) attributed this to the rhetorical strategy of Antall of seeing the party system as bipolar, between the nationalists' (*nemzetiek*) and Christians' right-wing political family (the MDF, the FKgP and the Christian People's Party) and the socialist and liberal 'left-wing' parties (the MSZP, the SZDSZ and Fidesz). In this bipolarity Orbán's Fidesz sought to move to the right-wing side and started to befriend the holders of institutional power, including religious leaders (Szelényi, 2022). This shows Orbán's ability to understand hegemony in a Gramscian-Althusserian sense.

As Antall did not manage to take up a mainstream populist position and form a large coalition government, and as he based the MDF political discourse on a confrontation that included the Socialists and tied nationhood with ethnicity, the confrontation became bipolar. The opposition saw the MDF as dangerous and irredentist and achieved a

good election result as the ruling-party leadership did not fully recover from Antall's death. The emergence of the competing populism dynamic took over when the Liberals joined the Horn government, and Fidesz and many liberals took this up as a setback for democratisation. By 1998 the competing populist dynamic was spurring Fidesz to power while also claiming the heritage of the national side.

A question also emerges as to whether the liberal and socialist parties were lacking in populist rhetoric, and because of the focus on caretaking, which was not bringing economic prosperity to the citizens, they lost their positive affective modality while being affectively described as the enemy in right-wing discourses.

One can of course speculate about what would have happened had the early 1990s Charter movement not developed, if József Antall had not been gravely ill as the first PM, leaving Fidesz space to move in the 'people's party' direction. However, the seeds of populist confrontation, where 'the people know' was always present in Orbán's confrontations, whether in the elites vs young and fresh contenders or later. What Orbán managed to do in the 1990s was to generate a new counter-elite (this was a conscious plan – in the embourgeoisement of Hungary). In *polgári* he deliberately chose a term that had had negative connotations in the state-socialist period, and gave it a new meaning. This, following Laclau, would be a catachrestical renaming which would enable the constitution of a people. This people, following also Orbán's non-Budapest roots, was the anti-liberal anti-Budapest *polgári*.

This idea of conquering Budapest and establishing a new era through connection to space is followed up in the [next chapter](#). In [Chapter 6](#) the elections of 2002 are discussed, and [Chapter 7](#) covers the period after 2002, when Fidesz moved into opposition, turning away from their earlier attitudes. Fidesz contested the policies of the government as anti-patriotic, internationalist and motivated by global capitalism. The extreme-far-right parties took a stronger turn to anti-semitic rhetoric. For the political right, the deliverables would be symbolic, embracing 'the national'.

CHAPTER 4

Symbolic politics and frontiers in Fidesz discourse 1998–2002

As we saw from the previous chapter, in 1998 Viktor Orbán's Fidesz came to power in a landslide. This chapter addresses the counter-hegemonic discursive moves by Fidesz during its first term in office. My attempt in the canon of work on Orbán and his rule is to take readers back to the turn of the millennium and remind them about these building blocks of revolutionary conservatism that mark the way in which he and his regime can be understood today (Fowler, 2004b). It unveils the character of the revolutionary-conservative party and how this party ruled through 'Orbán I' government, in what became a significant learning period for Fidesz and also the basis for the post-2010 period. A great deal of Fidesz politics has been about the performance of both togetherness and confrontation.

This is a very embedded chapter. As a student of Central European politics, I arrived in Hungary in autumn 1999, beginning to meet locals and read archived and current newspapers. My aim is to convey deeper insights into Hungary drawing on such materials but also on an immersed experience, and in this chapter this is particularly immersed as we enter the domain of culture and street life. The election campaign of 2002 was the deepest political experience of polarisation. While hanging out in Budapest with the generation slightly older than me, I met many people who had been disillusioned by Fidesz, such as Zsuzsanna Szelényi, who is quoted here. In the next generation, in a village outside of Budapest, I was surrounded by youth excited about Fidesz, and the feel-good factor it managed to communicate, elevating people to aspire for a civic-bourgeois future.

A huge volume of work has been published on Orbán and Fidesz at this point, most focusing on the period after 2010, but one of the early

pieces was a product of our working group at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Political Science Institute. The *Fideszvalóság* (The reality of Fidesz) volume, edited by the leader of the group Professor Márton Szabó, was published in Hungarian in 2006 and analysed Fidesz in power between 1998 and 2002 from a nuanced perspective, which in a very polarised country was important and challenging. It explored the newspeak that had been developing within the party. My work in this 2006 volume focused on the cultural politics in Hungary, and how polarisation was performed through engagement with the cityscape in Budapest. Symbolic politics and politics of the past have been a vital part of Hungarian post-communist politics (Nyssönen, 1999). This work and collaboration – alongside my pre-doc with János Mátyás Kovács at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna – enabled me to better understand the historical developments and discursive-hegemonic struggle.

Effective mobilisation is one of the important features of Fidesz politics. It has been a populist radical party since its foundation in 1989. It differed from the other party of ‘the liberal pole’ of the 1990s, the Free Democrats, from which many of the young politicians’ mentors came. At this point the Hungarian political system was still considered multipolar, including at least the groups of the round-table – the Socialists, the national and democratic opposition – although in each there was a multiplicity of actors. The Young Democrats’ Association from which the name FiDeSz comes had membership that was limited to those under 30, to make a strong distinction between the old elites and themselves. In contrast to his one-time friend and colleague Gábor Fodor, who sought to establish Fidesz as a liberal party, Orbán turned it into a conservative one when he saw a space opening for a new party on the right-wing front. Orbán was a pragmatist partisan, whereas Fodor was loyal to the ‘anti-party’ ethos of the early Fidesz (Fowler, 2004a, p. 108). When the popular liberal Fodor lost the leadership battle and left the party, Orbán was left in ‘unchallenged control’ (Fowler, 2004a, p. 85). The weakness of the MDF after Antall’s death offered a chance for Fidesz to advance towards the more nationalist-conservative position. Fowler (2004a, p. 85) gives a clear account of how the changes of leadership, and what in the context of my work could be seen as general political identity formation, profited Fidesz, which became the largest opposition party by 1997 (Fowler, 2004a, p. 85–90). Orbán was able to exploit the openings that occurred around him.

To understand the role of Budapest in Hungarian politics, the topic of this and the [following chapter](#), it is important to note that Fidesz as a political party had moved from the liberal pole to the conservative right (Csizmadia, 1999; Fricz, 1998). In that position, in 1998 it took the conservative pole to power, after four years in opposition, by forming a government with the MDF and the FKgP. As a discursive camp the Hungarian right was united through its mistrust of the cosmopolitan Budapest, and of the left that led the city. This is where the government wanted to create and maintain the political frontier, for instance by cutting funding to the city and cancelling the plans for the new metro line, in 1998. Besides the opposition, what united the right was the search for nationhood. Fidesz focused on articulating a new conception of nationhood, visible in Budapest in the calling off of the planned building of the National Theatre and the creation of a new, ‘more national’ one, a project which I will describe later in this chapter.

Transforming lines of antagonism and adding rhetorical dimensions both to the past and the future in the enemy image offered durability to Orbán’s populist rhetoric. Whereas populist movements might suffer from a populist ‘life-cycle’ – the populist hype wearing out in time just as scandals do (Mazzoleni, Steward & Horsefield, 2003; Herkman, 2017) – Orbán managed to avoid the bursting bubble. He moved fast and took chameleonic leaps in adapting other parties’ attitudes. One of these parties was the right-wing populist Jobbik. Political ideology never seemed vital for Orbán – who emerged in politics during the transition and ‘end of history’. He appears as a power-seeking ‘post-ideological’ politician, fit for an era in which meanings were fast reworked and lines of differentiation shifted. As a youth leader, he had potential for the liberal camp, but he chose the right.

Overview

This chapter is an authentic text from this era about which I have written several articles and book chapters. The focus here is on the way in which Orbán’s party continued colonising the cityscape of Budapest not only through architecture but through gatherings and by maintaining a symbolic presence in the city. Between 1998 and 2002 Fidesz sought to articulate a new cultural counter-hegemony through its symbolic politics and polarised political rhetoric. Confrontational rhetoric has been Orbán’s trademark. The personification of the discourse

of the party in the person of Orbán was tied to myth-making. In 1998–2002, Orbán's government articulated a new era and new nationhood through films, architecture and exhibitions, and political concepts. The symbolic character of the nation spread to popular culture.

Establishing new heroes and marking one's own space in the capital city, too, were visible practices in this process (Palonen, 2008). Yet instead of focusing on transforming the capital city, which was in the hands of socialists and liberals, the Fidesz government offered funds for the renovation of regional cities with loyal leadership. The regional aspect was strong in the party, which was establishing itself rapidly. The key visible investments were in architecture and culture: the new National Theatre, the Millennium Park, with an exhibition of 'Hungarians making the world', and the Terror House Museum, with numerous memorials and a costume drama of 'the Greatest Hungarian', Count István Széchenyi. This is also the focus in this chapter: discursive contestation between Budapest and the *vidék*, countryside, or 'the rest' as non-metropolitan Hungary. For every city there is the *vidék*, the surrounding villages, but in Budapest Orbán's aim was to make this non-city present in the heart of the metropolis.

The method I have developed is one of rhetoric-performative discourse analysis that sees meaning-making as constitutive: this meaning-making can also take place in urban symbolic landscapes (Palonen, 2019). In this chapter I will look both at Orbán's speeches and at the Fidesz discourse, as he had a key role not only in the government but also in the party, especially during his time as PM. This obviously worked to articulate the content of the party discourse. Orbán also embodied the Fidesz discourse of progress in 1998–2002, or rearticulated it, gave shape to it.

The theoretical dimension of this chapter relies on the late Doreen Massey's (2005) concept of space that enables the study of space and publics as co-constitutive. In my thinking, this construction of space/publics closely resembles the spatial view of discourse and community-building that Laclau has theorised, and through which we have been looking at frontier-building, proper to the relevant political discourses in this chapter. I want to discuss further the insights regarding the 'colonisation' of space and public architecture, vis à vis the construction of space/publics. Looking at the three cases of contemporary architecture, these could construct a space of their own. The space is not a smooth one where everyone is agreed on the function and character

of the piece of architecture. On the contrary, it is ‘criss-crossed with antagonisms’, to use Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) expression. Although, or because, there are disagreements about the character of each monument, relationships are created through the encounter in the relevant place of a public, a community. Emerging from the local environment into a space, created and marked by a complex set of relations, each of the cases discussed becomes a symbol. Symbolising antagonism in space was Fidesz strategy already in 1998–2002.

Fidesz in 1998–2002: *polgári*, anti-metropolitan and national political symbols

Another revolution was set in 1998 when Fidesz gained the space left by the ailing conservative party, the Hungarian Democratic Forum, and emerged as the largest party of the right. One of the arguments for Fidesz contesting the democratically elected Socialist-Liberal government’s rule in 1998 had been that it was not national enough. The globe was celebrating the millennium in 2000, and this coincided with the celebrations of Hungarian statehood. Fidesz also named the millennium finance package after a hero of 1848 revolution, István Széchenyi, who had been named by a commemorative law as the ‘Greatest Hungarian’ and was a moderate progressive figure. The man with a vision for Hungary and for the unity of Buda and Pest was celebrated in *Hídember*, a high-budget government-sponsored costume drama that came out prior to the general elections 2002. Through Széchenyi, a nineteenth-century reformer, Fidesz rearticulated revolution and made connection between it and the party’s own politics. The victory over the left-wing government was seen as a revolution, and a moment of establishment of a new order with a vision of new civic (*polgári*) Hungary. As a key but empty signifier, *polgári* captured the meanings of moderation, civic, bourgeois and revolutionary force. Thus Fidesz articulated its heritage as the bearer of the ‘Hungarian civic tradition’ and revolution at the same time.

Another meaning of *polgári* was anti-communism: a negative term in the pre-1989 period for all things ‘bourgeois’, non-socialist. Now Fidesz prioritised the *polgárok* over the proletariat. Yet the concept also entailed progress. In the Kossuth tér electoral campaign speech, Orbán (13 April 2002) uses the metaphor of different trains which the voters can board to reach their future aims: he argues that the left

have excluded those who cannot even make it to the station, let alone get on the (right) train. This seems counterintuitive, but as we remember from [Chapter 1](#), the poor were the most disadvantaged in the Kádár era. Statesman-like Viktor Orbán and Fidesz mobilised the new vision of Hungary, but to many on the liberal and left side of the spectrum, this seemed to be scary, expensive or too nationalistic. The competition was over nationhood, a floating signifier that gained different content from the two sides: ethnic nationhood and *polgári* Hungarianness on the right and state-bounded nationhood on the left. National unity is tied to concept of modernisation. Progress for Fidesz meant development with the *polgárok*, defined perhaps as people who had vision. This was the new political subject ‘us’ emerging. The myth of a New Hungary, the vision for the future, provided the Fidesz discourse with content, even if it always contained a binary.

The myth of the *népi-urbánus* debate in Hungarian politics is claimed as the dividing line even if another dividing line could equally well be argued into existence. The metropolitan–countryside divide is a tension which underlies the discourse and the suspicion about the contemporary urban Budapest that is reproduced in the practices of exclusion and articulation in the Fidesz discourse. Sticking to a mid-nineteenth-century reformer’s vision of Budapest, Fidesz managed to exclude contemporary Budapest from its rhetoric. At the level of practice it also avoided tackling contemporary problems in the city, for example by financial means, instead resorting to symbolic gains. At the same time investing in the mid-size and smaller towns across the country, Fidesz highlighted the mythical distinction between the countryside and the metropolis (*népi-urbánus*). This reference had also been strong in the interwar era, when suspicion of the metropolitan elites was strong among the peasant-populist and authoritarian politicians.

The *népi-urbánus* divide, not unlike its equivalents in other countries, had its roots in the period of mass industrialisation which, in Hungary, coincided with the era of nation-building (Bucur & Wingfield, 2001). While there was a great difference between the countryside and the metropolis in the late nineteenth century, the metropolis itself functioned as a centre of nation-building, which focused on the countryside, on traditional values and on the creation of a metropolis that would be of European value and thus would elevate the Hungarian nation to the level of other European nations. It was only later, more specifically in the interwar period, that the myth of the

distinction between cosmopolitan Budapest and the Hungarian countryside gained significant value, and it has since been reproduced in contemporary Hungary.

In the post-communist and post-Helsinki Accords era, a situation was created in which contestations of state borders were not allowed, and, consequently, in which the otherness necessary for the creation of political discourses and identities had to be created within the polity in question. Thus, the *népi-urbánus* myth converts an internal political enemy into the other. The myth upholds two distinct discourses: that of the urbanists and that of the *népiek*, where the latter carries connotations of both populists and nationalists (Fricz, 1997). Besides reference to literary and historical heritage, this bipolar positioning creates substance, since whatever the urbanist is, the *népi* is not (Szegegy-Maszák, 2001). Tamás Fricz argues that this was present in a latent way in the Kádár era and was imported into post-communist politics as the main dividing line (Fricz, 1997). It serves the function of frontier-building in contemporary politics. While it is maintained on the right by political scientists such as Tamás Fricz and in political rhetoric via comments regarding the left being anti-nation – *nemzet-ellenes* – it is also sustained by the left, which tries to insist that it is not anti- but pro-nation, thus reproducing the myth itself, as we have seen in the [previous chapter](#) and will observe in the [next chapter](#).

As a signifier for the Fidesz discourse, we discuss the national badge, the *kokárda*, which was the tangible symbol that Fidesz sought to monopolise in the election campaign of 2002. In practice, the *kokárda* is a banal nationalist symbol (Billig, 1995) popularly worn especially on 15 March, and it often stays on overcoats after that date too. The ribbon worn on the chest as a symbol of national affection dates back to the mid-nineteenth century and the fight for independence from the Habsburg Empire. Besides the revolution of 1848 and the freedoms and national independence of the Spring of Nations, the *kokárda* can be seen as symbolising the Hungarian people (*magyarság*), and even the cultural and historical unit of the Hungarian nation, the 15 million Hungarians (of 1848 and 1867–1920 Hungary). In this sense it is a unifying empty signifier of the Hungarian national pride, but in 2002 it was claimed by Fidesz for its *polgári* political subjectivity and New Hungary.

The extensive politicking regarding the *kokárda* (Bart, 1999, p. 91) is indicative of Viktor Orbán's conception of nationhood in 2002 as well

as of the revolutionary and polarising spirit of the election campaign. Political commentators Tóth and Török (2002, pp. 342–346) claim that with this symbol, the Fidesz government also signalled that it would take care of the Hungarians in the neighbouring countries (*hataron túli magyarok*), yet its heavy investment outside Hungary also led to domestic dissatisfaction with the Fidesz-led government.

This became a marker of the anti-nation/pro-nation binary divide. Closer to the elections, however, the symbol was ‘flagged’ through added significations. The Fidesz idea that the *polgárok*, citizens or the bourgeoisie of Hungary would wear it caused an angry reaction in the left and liberal press. The liberal political weekly *Magyar Narancs* (11 April 2002) related its absence to wearing a yellow star in the Second World War ghetto of Budapest. On the eve of the second round of elections, Orbán called for the *kokárda* to be removed to secure the secret ballot. And sure enough, on election day the symbol’s absence was noticeable in the cityscape. This was an ultimate sign of a takeover of the national symbol.

Finally, the Millennium Exhibition: 1896 had a special place in Hungarian history as the celebration of the thousand-year anniversary of the crowning and conversion to Catholicism of Hungarian King Stephen in year the 1000, at the start of Hungarian ‘statehood’ and the connection of Hungary to the West. Fidesz had missed the chance to celebrate it. The Expo 1995/96 never happened due to austerity measures of the government. Now Fidesz wanted to construct something new in a way that would be national, but not with the capital city. The need to celebrate nationhood through large state-funded projects, such as the Széchenyi Plan or the infamous Expo 1995/96 (planned by the pre-1990 regime and the 1990–94 government, cancelled by the left-wing government in 1994), rather than offer managerial or rational governance is a crucial difference between the nationalists and the left parties in post-communist Hungarian politics. Orbán sought a new term in government (2002–06) to implement an Olympic bid for Budapest 2012.

The following sections explore the constitutive absence of Budapest in Orbán’s speeches and three key cases of architectural projects in Budapest, which construct a vision of the past which should be divorced from the future or a vision of the past which will give inspiration to the future. Simultaneously, they demonstrate the presence of Fidesz in Budapest, which signals a break with the contemporary

Budapest and the flow of the cityscape. The cases are revealing in terms of conceptions of history/memory and progress.

Reading the lack of Budapest in Orbán's speeches

Reading Orbán's speeches, from 1999 to 2002, made available on his website, it becomes apparent that he makes only a dozen references to the Hungarian capital city (Budapest, Pest or 'the capital city', *főváros*). It might seem that Budapest does not matter much for Fidesz, since its leader makes little or no reference to the city, but in fact it is crucial to the party's discourse. Budapest has significance through its exclusion or absence. The earlier-mentioned imagined frontier between the countryside and the metropolis in Hungarian politics, and the pejorative or minimal use of synonyms for Pest or Budapest in Orbán's discourse, together indicate that one should take Budapest seriously in studying Fidesz's discourse. But how to study something which is not there? I have decided to focus on the rare cases when Orbán does in fact mention Budapest in his speeches. These illustrate that the city resides on the political battleground, and alongside the silences they demonstrate the important role of 'Budapest' in the construction of the political frontier.

On the few occasions that Orbán mentions Budapest, either he refers to it as the place in which the speech is being given, in the absence of other geographical references, or he uses it in a negative way. While 'Budapest-centric' (*Budapest centrikus*) appears in the rhetoric of the nationalists in the polarised election year, Orbán uses it in his speeches only once. The countryside, *vidék*, as a counterpart has a range of positive connotations in the rhetoric of Orbán and others on the Hungarian right. It is quite telling that in the closing speech of the election campaign on 19 April 2002 in the Millennium Park, which we discuss below, Orbán is apologetic about giving the speech in Budapest rather than in a small village. Here, obviously, the juxtaposition of the metropolis and the countryside draws the discursive frontier: the *vidék* is on the side of the government, the 'capital city' and the citizens of Budapest on the opposing side.

In international contexts, Orbán tries to avoid the elevation of Budapest: reference to the 'capital of the country' subordinates Budapest to the state. The only times he gives a positive characterisation of Budapest's centrality are in reference to the crisis in Yugoslavia in

1999 (31 May 1999; 6 June 1999) and in the election year 2002, in reference to the fact that an American firm (General Electric) had moved its headquarters from London to Budapest (26 February 2002; 3 March 2002) This shows that Budapest can have international significance, though rarely, but it is not raised above any other Hungarian town or city, since the countryside, i.e. non-Budapest Hungary, is still given preference over it.

Silencing by way of exclusion is crucial for identity construction, and the silencing of Budapest is constitutive of Orbán's nationalist discourse: paradiastolic redescriptions that diminish its significance or moral value, or practices of cutting funding. In fact, Orbán prides himself on the fact of his government investing outside Budapest. Practices and policies are crucial in the search for the discourse, since they reveal what is held to be important within the discourse and what is not. In this way acts are discursive, in the same way that 'words are deeds'. He describes the Széchenyi Plan, introduced to fund projects for the Hungarian Millennium (2000–2001), historical, in terms of its opposition to 'Budapest-centrism':

If we have a look at what sort of picture the distribution of the applications to the Széchenyi Plan over the geographical area shows, then I can tell you today that in every other Hungarian settlement, in every other Hungarian settlement [*sic*], investments that are linked to the Széchenyi Plan are taking place. Similar cases have happened in Hungarian history, which is notoriously Budapest-centric, only a long time ago, if ever. (24 January 2002)

Finally, Orbán seems to argue, Hungarians can be emancipated from Budapest.

In terms of large-scale events, the plans for the Olympic Games 2012 are a challenging case as here the pride is national but the location is the capital city, ruled by a Liberal mayor and left-leaning municipal council. Orbán emphasises the importance of the Olympic Games for the development of 'not only Budapest' but other parts of Hungary too and hopes that the co-operation between the 'capital city and the government' will succeed, calling it a common enterprise 'irrespective of whether we are Budapestians or country folk [*vidékiek*], independent of where we work and what we do'. Budapest is required to make the bid and Orbán hopes for 'a big common venture' (3 September 2001). In the election spring Orbán notes that Budapest will need Hungary:

‘the whole country is needed for Budapest to be able to organise the Olympics’ (27 March 2002). Through the Olympic bid the government could show that not all bridges were burned and that co-operation with adversaries, such as the Budapest administration, on issues of national importance was still possible. The bid, accompanied by the re-establishment of contact between the capital city and the government (27 March 2002), can be seen as an attempt to gain votes in the city: underfunded since 1998, it would finally gain funds for an urban development project. Underlying Orbán speeches is a suspicion of and antagonism towards the big city. To put it simply, he tells the Budapest leadership that if the city provides the facilities, the government will bring fame and funding. These were the terms of the reconciliation, which the Budapest mayor Demszky accepted, and the bid went ahead, supported by both the government and the capital city, until 2003, when it was called off by the left-wing Socialist-Liberal government.

This could be expected of the budget-conscious Hungarian left. Orbán uses as his platform in Budapest the former Expo grounds. Hostility to Budapest underlies Orbán’s speech at the opening of ELTE University’s new building in South Buda, the area where the Expo 1995/96 was to take place (28 August 2001). In the speech, Orbán creates an image of this place and its counterpart on the other side of the river, the National Theatre and its surroundings, as a ‘whole new town’. He establishes a mental devolution of the space from Budapest. And, indeed, the former Expo territory was formally owned by the state. This reinforces the discursive frontier through the continued, constitutive exclusion of the metropolis from Orbán’s discourse. Unity between other elements of Orbán discourse is now gained through their common opposition to ‘Budapest’.

Besides marking the enemy or creating the opponents, exclusion through renaming or redescription is also a crucial rhetorical strategy in the construction of the nationalist discourse itself. While nation and Hungarians are important elements in Orbán’s discourse, contemporary Budapest forms the constitutive outside found within the political borders of the nation-state. Budapest may represent the other with which Orbán does not wish to engage, but against which he articulates his discourses. The *népi–urbánus* myth, the historical opposition between the metropolis Budapest and the countryside, provides the frontier. In order to find out how Fidesz dealt with the dirty capital, as the anti-metropolitan discourse would have it, I will next look at

Fidesz's attempts to mark space and create a distinction between the old and the new (Fidesz) Budapest in the cityscape.

Millenáris Park: projection of a new era

Millenáris Park, the Millennium Park, became a showcase of the Fidesz discourse on the 'New' and *polgári* Hungary, which centred around concepts of progress and nationhood. Through it Orbán's government reinforced the situation of polarisation and claimed for itself the concept of progress, as well as maintaining its hold over the concept of nationhood. Terror House's contemporary – the Millenáris Park exhibition centre – which opened in late 2001, was an exhibition of Fidesz values. It hosted an exhibition, a theatre block and a separate entrance building. The exhibition celebrated the progress of Hungarians, from arts and sports to science and technology, and offered a national spectacle. The creation of this space was a political act by the national Fidesz-MDF government, and Fidesz also held its election galas there in 2002. It is a piece of contemporary architecture with a legacy of progress through entrepreneurship and excellence, concepts central to the Fidesz discourse. It also, through its form, is argued to have created a distance from the rest of Budapest – the dirt and shopping centres – and thus to have had an impact on the cityscape by creating a space in the city that can be associated with Fidesz.

The attempt to create a separate space, distinct from the metropolis, in order to promote the Fidesz discourse is visible in the character of the park and its buildings. Contemporary commentators argued:

the Park remains a closed world; its sphere is the result of the 'exploration of an interior block'. The noise and litter of the city stay far away. There is silence, which is a most precious value in itself. Visitors are advancing towards a park that is not surrounded by main roads and approach its even more protected centre. (Locsmáncsi, 2002)

However, what is achieved by the green area is the enclosure of the space, its detachment from the surrounding city. It is a self-contained space gathering aspects of countryside, even including the floods (*árvíz*), thereby building an imagery of the Hungarian plains and rivers. The combination of tradition and the contemporary, progressive character, and the illusion of detachment from the metropolis and production of a *vidéki* space, complement other elements in the Fidesz



In the Millenáris park, an exhibition called Dreamers of Dreams (*Álmok álmodói*) was held in 2022 to celebrate the Hungarians' advancement in Science and Arts. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

discourse: industry, enterprise and excellence. The building was once part of Ganz Electric Works, the renovation of which had already been planned in the early 1990s, when a competition for designs was held.

The view of progress was reinforced in the exhibition 'Álmok álmodói, világraszóló magyarok' ('Dreamers of dreams, Hungarians writing the world'), which was to be opened on the national day 15 March 2001 but was postponed until 3 November 2001. It expressed Hungarians' achievements in the fields of arts and especially of natural sciences and technology, in the form of a canon or a heroic order, and thus worked towards compiling a set of nodal points of the discourse of Hungarian national pride. As a nation-building project, it is comparable to the Hungarian World Exhibition of 1896, although of smaller scale, and the whole park can be seen as a substitute for the abortive World Expo 1995/96, which the Hungarian right had promoted but which the left cancelled once in government between 1994 and 1998. Andor Wes-selényi-Gáray (2002) highlighted the connection to 1896 in his review

of the Millennium Exhibition. The emphasis of the Millennium Exhibition was on the personalities behind the scientific revolutions, and also the products that transformed lives both in Hungary and abroad. The exhibition presented in the form of fragments the achievements of Hungarians who were famous in their own country, many of whom also made their fame abroad, while still being considered Hungarian. This also brought in an element of the Fidesz discourse to Budapest: the conception of the cultural nation of Hungarians, as opposed to the nation-state. With multiple-entry tickets and a scheduled stay at least until the end of 2002, which it completed, it also offered a sense of permanence.

In his opening speech at the exhibition, Viktor Orbán (17 December 2001) highlighted the role of ‘the people, who take forward not just their country, but often, as can be seen over there [in the exhibition], also the world’. This demonstrates how Orbán’s Fidesz assumed the specific task of emphasising Hungarian history, culture and achievements – not for the past’s sake but for the future. The emphasis on the nation’s past was not mere preservation but had prospective significance. The Millenáris Park was the space where Fidesz held its election galas in 2002. The park and the exhibition came to be seen as a collective space in which to escape from metropolitan Budapest, a space for reflection on national progress and values through the personalities and products on display. It was the showcase of Hungary, aimed at the West as well as the homeland, demonstrating that Hungarians had nothing to be ashamed of (Schöpflin, 2002). It was to function as a collective form of reference and a boost to national pride.

However, even if the park was argued to exist in contrast to the metropolitan space, in fact through its novelty and sleekness, it resonates rather well with the contemporary shopping centre Mammút II and the villas in the nearby Buda Hills, the most prestigious residential area in Budapest (Bodnár, 1998). It does so through its heterogeneous form and the way it contrasted with the grubby Moszkva tér. Through the play on surroundings, values and layers of history, in a ‘metropolitan way’ it offers the chance to enjoy national pride and a sense of progress – just as does the shopping centre it is supposed to counterpose. In so doing it promotes the vision of *polgári* (advanced and civic) Hungary in Budapest, and in making a break with the past and the ‘old’ cityscape, it reveals the actual discursive links between the contemporary, developing Budapest (or at least Buda and the well-off II district) and Fidesz.

Nemzeti Színház: polarisation and the vision for the national beyond theatre

The National Theatre, Nemzeti Színház, showed how Fidesz wanted to make a break with the previous left-wing government and to claim its space in the city. The politics of relocation and redesign of an already-planned building maintained political polarisation in Hungary, and rendered it visible and material in the Budapest cityscape. The National Theatre became the key imprint of Fidesz in the Budapest cityscape. It is located by the Danube and therefore manifests itself in the panorama of Budapest, as seen from the bridges and Buda Castle. The National Theatre has been perhaps the most debated building project in recent Hungarian history. Its rebuilding had been called for since it was declared unsafe in 1875 and subsequently dismantled. In the socialist era – and this is what seems to remain uppermost in the Hungarian popular memory – the site and the remains of the original theatre were removed in the 1960s with the building of a new metro line in Budapest, and a new National Theatre was created in contemporary and socialist style in the VII district in 1966.

The location of the new National Theatre was debated in the 1990s: the original site hosted an office building, and it was planned for Erzsébet tér in the centre of the city. Finally, the Orbán government of 1998–2002 drastically increased its budget and the theatre was located in South Pest by the Danube, in the area formerly planned for the Expo 1995/96. It was accompanied by another cultural complex. Subsequently it was the design rather than the location that caused controversy, demonstrating the mistrust embedded in polarised Hungarian politics. The new Nemzeti is a memorial, an exhibition and a tangible example of the interference of the politics of nation-building in Budapest from the 2000–02 period.

Fidesz's involvement in the choice of location and design was crucial. Ferenc Bán's modernist building, with a theatre flexibly modifiable to the preferred uses, was chosen as the winner in 1997. Protests came from the Hungarian World Association (*Magyarok Világszövetsége*), which declared the building, which had two glass walls, not Hungarian enough ('nem szimbolizálja a magyarságot'). In October 1998 the government decided not to build the theatre as planned but drew up new plans. György Schwajda was chosen to be the special advisor to the government (*kormánybiztos*). He was a key figure, who in March

1999 argued that there would be no open competition but that Mária Siklós would be the main architect of the new theatre.

The new design was first planned for the City Park, then in August 1999 – because of the trouble with the local government over the grounds of the abortive Budapest Expo 1995/6 – by the Danube. This relocation also meant that it was in state-owned territory, where there was no need to negotiate with anyone. As mentioned above, the territory was marked apart from the rest of the city. Around the National Theatre a new Millennium neighbourhood (*városrész*) was created with another culture hall and some new luxury housing. In this way Fidesz marked its discursive presence in the city, and its power to have an impact on the cityscape.

Architectural styles were made to follow the nation/metropolis divide. Finally, Schwajda and the Hungarian Chamber of Architects launched a competition in February 2000, which was won by György Vadász in May. Instead of György Vadász's modernist glass-walled theatre building, the government decided to take Mária Siklós's postmodern organic and historicist architecture as the design. Debate centred on what design would be 'Hungarian' enough, not too modern, late-modern; Vadász defended his plan by arguing that he combines the thoughts of two architectural circles, tradition and twenty-first-century technology, and simplicity whereby the design was contemporary and Hungarian. In Hungarian architecture, the dominant discourse seemed to have it that, almost by definition, anything 'organic' could be seen as national, whereby any glass-walled box must be foreign, metropolitan.

The division was articulated into a division between late-modernist and organic architecture. In the political usage of the *népi-urbánus* debate in Hungarian in these terms, architecture had a prior case, in the 'Tulip Debate' of the 1970s, when a group of architects in Pécs wanted to decorate high-rise buildings in housing estates with folklore decorations. This initiated the organic architecture movement, with the now internationally known architect Imre Makovecz as its key figure, but also by politicising architecture it essentialised the modernist and organic aesthetic styles into a polarisation, which was followed up during the post-communist period (Molnár, 2002, p. 14). As Virág Molnár has argued, the Tulip Debate demonstrated 'how the "urbanist-populist" discourse functions as a discursive trap in Hungarian society, as a symbolic frame that the architectural profession could effectively use

as a resource to police the boundaries of legitimate architecture' (Molnár, 2002, p. 14).

To question the polarisation, Iván András Bojár, a critic of contemporary Hungarian architecture, has argued that the two tendencies of Hungarian architecture – (late or neo)modernist and organic (or critical-regional) – can be united through their postmodern aspect and their regionalism (Bojár, 2004, p. 13). Bojár also stresses that post-1989 Hungarian architecture as a whole focused on identity-building, playing in between historicism and the attempts to imagine the future (Bojár, 2004, p. 11). However, the attempt to emphasise the distinction between the two aesthetic traditions was a strong component of Fidesz's politics. It was crucial for their aim of maintaining the *népi-urbánus* myth that they create and mark a frontier between them and their political opponents: this time the 'legitimate' or state-sponsored style was organic not (late or neo)modernist architecture.



The 'New' National Theatre brought back the facade of the 'Old' National Theatre, generating a memorial landscape with references to plays and actors. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

Siklós's design of a traditional theatre put forward eclectic and neo-historicist elements. Asked why she had chosen eclecticism as the architectural style, she replied that these were the wishes of the commissioner. The building, which resembles a ship, thereby portraying the journey from the old National Theatre to the current one, is constructed as a monument or, even more crucially, an exhibition. Its surroundings pay tribute to Hungarian theatre. Tied to the rear of the building is a memorial to the old Nemzeti, presenting a tragic face, and commemorating the year of its destruction. At the front of the ship there is a neoclassical façade 'drowning' in the water, while a live fire rages on top. This symbolises the fall of the old theatre. At the front of the building, hidden behind the façade, there are figurative plaques referring to famous authors and actors – and in the garden in front of it a statue park of famous actors. Staged too is the whole history of Hungarian theatre: even the death of the old National Theatre is played out.

Viktor Orbán, writing on the national day 15 March 2002, confirmed the way in which the Nemzeti was indeed a monument. Through this monument, Fidesz marked its space in Budapest, its vision for New Hungary and a new Hungarianness rooted in the past of the nation-building eras. The exhibition gives content to the pre-described and represented national identity and values.

Next to the Nemzeti Fidesz commissioned another cultural institution, the Palace of Arts. This included a concert hall and museum space, first planned for the House of the Hungarian Heritage but finally housing the Museum of Modern Arts. The building was to improve the status of the area, tucked away from the centre, by establishing a quarter for arts in South Pest. In contrast to and to work as a background for the new National Theatre, this new palace was of late-modernist architecture, a glass-walled palace with little decoration. The financial plan for the palace was quite expensive (the Socialist government negotiated cheaper terms after 2002) and therefore, even though it opened only in 2005, it works as a reminder of the Fidesz era.

Terror Háza: the presence of the evil past

The case of Terror Háza museum shows how Orbán's government rejected the communist past in the space of Budapest. This is an example of its political frontier-building and continued projection of polarisation, through the politics of the past and of the cityscape of Budapest.

The House of Terror Museum, Terror Háza Múzeum, opened on 24 February 2002, shortly before the general elections, and was a project through which to write national history. It was a memorial to victims of political terror and torture, but it also sought justice by investigating the past of the victimisers, the Hungarian national socialist Arrow Cross Party and the Communist Secret Police, the ÁVÓ/ÁVH. Both of these organisations had had their headquarters in the Andrassy út 60 building which now housed the museum/memorial. Attempts to write official history are always political. The political logic of the exhibition, which focuses on the communist terror and devotes only two of the 30-odd rooms to the ‘blood-thirsty’ Hungarian Nazis, was to make a distinction, which had been influential for the Hungarian post-communist right, between the Nazi years and the interwar period, and to highlight the terror of the communists. In the exhibition, the communist secret police was shown to have inherited the methods of the Nazi period, and to large extent its personnel. Historically speaking, this is most probably quite correct. What is not described in the exhibition but is implied in the way in which it is closely associated with Fidesz and the Hungarian right, in the polarised context, is that the Hungarian Socialist Party is an inheritor of the Stalinist and the Nazi legacy. These two aspects were emphasised by contemporary foreign press reporting:

The director of the Museum is Mária Schmidt, the advisor to the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Fidesz). She insists, however, that conservatives are simply redressing the historical balance. ‘Because history in Hungary was told by the Communists, it was a falsification’, she says. Hungarian governments before October 1944 were not terror regimes, Ms Schmidt says. Ms Schmidt believes the museum has boosted Fidesz’s campaign against an opposition she claims is still mired in the Communist past. ‘There were over 130,000 people coming for the opening of the house. They were showing that those people in Hungary who do not want to live under Communism or other dictatorships are ... very strong.’ (*Financial Times*, 3 April 2002)

The museum rearticulated the political frontier between the two sides in Hungarian politics – with the ‘good’ people on the side of Fidesz – in the form of a statement, rather than opening the past for interpretations or reconciliation.



The Terror House Museum stands out from the flow of the Unesco protected boulevard. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

It also had an impact on the cityscape of Budapest. It is located in an UNESCO World Heritage protected area, the Andrásy út Boulevard, and therefore its façade could not be radically changed. However, the museum marked the space: in the heart of metropolitan Budapest, on the Hungarian Champs Elysée, with its sky-blue colour and black cornice, it stands out from the streetscape. Besides marking a building with what it sees essentially as the dark side of the Hungarian communist past, it disrupted the flow of the metropolitan cityscape, which is seen as associated with the urbanists in Budapest, where the local government is led by the Hungarian left.

The opposition it created shows the extent of the polarisation, since anything of the left, the liberal SZDSZ and pre-1956-communism would be positioned by the right at the same pole. Therefore, it demonstrates both Fidesz's presence in Budapest and its governmental control over public commemoration and history, and it is also instrumental in the construction of the other, which this time is not Budapest (although it resides in the Budapest space) but the Hungarian left and the Socialists.

Nation-building around football

Another symbolic political act in election-time Budapest became a permanent part of the city: the renaming of the Népstadion Ferenc Puskas Stadium. This is of course an important part of the Orbán self-image as a football fan and the long-term aim of reconnecting with the golden years of Hungarian football.

This major renaming event also took place the week before the first round of the election. Back in 2002, the City Code of Budapest forbade street naming after elections had been called – streets could only be named after an individual 25 years after their death – but public buildings could be renamed. On 28 March the news broke that the People's Stadium (Népstadion) would be renamed after Ferenc Puskas, perhaps the most famous Hungarian football player of all time, although he was still alive. The deciding committee was the Friends of Sportsmen, including President of the Republic Ferenc Mádl (Hungarian Democratic Forum, MDF), PM Viktor Orbán and Minister of Youth and Sports Tamás Deutsch (Fidesz). Puskas, whose 75th birthday present this gesture was supposed to represent, was famed for scoring two goals for the Golden Team (*Aranycsapat*) which beat England 6–3 in 1953, perhaps the biggest sporting event in the Hungarian national canon.

Puskas left the country after the 1956 uprising and won the Spanish league five times and the European cup twice while playing for Real Madrid. He belongs to a rare category of ex-patriot Hungarians commemorated in Budapest. The public acknowledgement was a popular move and gained publicity. The renaming resonated well with the other projects described in this chapter, which were all about the symbolic creation of nationhood, the community of the cultural nation, and promoting Hungarian excellence at home and abroad, as well as anti-communism. Consequently, besides articulating Puskas as part of Fidesz discourse or its symbolic system, it also reinforced elements of the Fidesz discourse in Budapest. Furthermore, it removed some of the Socialist vocabulary (*nép*, people) from the city-text and thus marked once again the frontier between Fidesz and its political opponents. The city of Budapest responded by renaming the Népstadion metro station simply as Stadionok. This is how it avoided the new vocabulary introduced by Fidesz.

Conclusions

Through these processes Fidesz moved from the creation of spaces for the elites to recognising the masses in Budapest. Fidesz brought the *vidék* to the city and articulated the *polgári* people to confront the metropolitan elites, liberals and socialists as metropolitan and non-national. After all, 'national' here is an exclusive category that excludes those against the nation, as we will discuss in the [next chapter](#). The formula can be captured as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Fidesz Millennium Discourse} = \\ (\text{Polgári} \equiv \text{Hungary} \equiv \text{19th Century Nation} \equiv \text{Vidék})^{\text{Bourgeois}} \equiv \\ \text{Progress} \equiv \text{Heritage} + (\text{Communist} = \text{Liberal} = \text{Metropolis})^{\text{Non}} \equiv \text{National} \end{aligned}$$

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate that Fidesz marked or colonised space or reclaimed Budapest for itself from the left, or rather, for 'the new' from 'the old' in Budapest. This space-making and marking of the space of the other and also of one's own space helps to construct the communities of 'us' and 'them'. This is vital for Fidesz's politics in Budapest; they could demonstrate a crucial difference and yet project something of their own. The apparent disengagement from Budapest created the illusion that it was not really Fidesz's city, unlike many of the middle-sized towns in Hungary, and that Fidesz rejected the values of the metropolis. However, the nineteenth-century flair for nation-building necessitated large-scale projects whereby the government also needed its flagships in the national capital, affording it the same role as in the nineteenth century. Fidesz adopted a colonising attitude, a continuous frontier-making in relation to the surroundings. The sharpness of the frontier and the antagonistic relationships that created the spaces contributed to the frontier of polarisation and to a perception of clear-cut political communities, such as that of Fidesz itself.

While Budapest was not visibly present in the Fidesz discourse, Fidesz aimed to be visibly present in Budapest during the period of the 1998–2002 Orbán government. On the other hand, it demonstrated its conception of *polgári*, *Magyarország*, Hungary and Hungarianness with a prospective flair, cherishing excellence and achievement, high culture and enterprise. It placed its imprint on the cityscape, creating monuments which were to cover the tragedy of the loss of the Budapest Expo and would thus demonstrate the presence of the Hungarian

right in Budapest, and in the parliament, which after 2010 became the prime site of Fidesz activity. The Olympics became the symbol of New Hungary in the same way as the Millennium Exhibition of 1896 had in its time.

Fidesz also named and confronted its enemies in the city, tackling both the recent past and the Socialists through the Terror Háza museum, by disrupting the flow of the contemporary cityscape through architectural monuments, by rallying in the city – in short, by taking symbolic political control of the alien and showing the presence of the countryside in the metropolis. Adopting a policy of ignoring the metropolis was marked by its own impossibility in two ways: first, Budapest remains the political, cultural and economic centre of the country; second, to articulate and maintain a discourse through an opposition, the opposition also needs to be continuously articulated and thus tackled. Fidesz not only avoided Budapest but also engaged with it. It is evident from my account above that even when calling for unity around its vision of nationhood, Fidesz pursued a politics of polarisation and created rather than dismantled the political frontier as the defining social imaginary.

Interestingly, in Budapest Fidesz found itself in a fringe populist dynamic position but its discourse tried to work a mainstream populist dynamic, to ignore the fact that it was in an inferior position. A New Hungary with *polgári* flair was much easier to represent and fund in the small and medium-sized towns with the help of Fidesz-loyal mayors than in Budapest under Mayor Demszky. When it comes to architectural projects, it was able to perform a confrontation in a competing populist dynamic that also sought to be part of a mainstream populist dynamic. The high point was reached in the endorsement of Puskas and the removal of Népstadion, something closer to socialist vocabulary in *polgári* Hungary.

CHAPTER 5

In search of the liberal pole in Budapest: Demszky

The contestation between the nation and the metropolis, which was a topic of the [previous chapter](#), can be witnessed also through another politician of importance in millennial Hungary, the mayor of Budapest from 1990 to 2010, Gábor Demszky (b. 1952, SZDSZ). This chapter engages in memory work regarding the liberal discourse through yearly commemorative speeches that also offer a sense of the development of polarisation in Hungarian politics, and the mayor's transforming discourse. As my research in this work overall is intended to prove, the speeches also indicate the way in which the signifier 'nation' dominates Hungarian politics, given that on a national day we witness a developing sense of nationhood in Demszky's discourse. The chapter also links to the politics of cities. Mayors of metropolitan cities have become key actors in politics both nationally and internationally, and in his time in Hungary Demszky was the most important orator in the metropolis and on its behalf. However, he also stood as a metaphor or perhaps a metonymy, as the shorthand for post-communist Budapest, the city's governance and therefore opposition to a government that contested the metropolis: the negative other for Orbán's discourse that we discussed earlier.

In analysing the speeches, I aim to show how the units or publics of nation and metropolis, and the discursive frontier between them, are both recreated and negated by Demszky. As we remember, Derrida (1986, 1992, 1997) showed that the binary opposition is not one side's exclusion or expulsion of another but rather the border between the two is in fact contaminated (Norval, 1994). Nevertheless, as we can see from Demszky's rhetorical moves, he often attempts to negate this frontier with calls for unity, especially in moments of deep polarisation

(e.g. 2000–02). As we will see in the following sections, time and again he maintains the frontier and its imaginary existence, by referring to the frontier and by engaging with the discourse of his political opponents.

Typically, in his annual commemorative speeches Demszky projects towards the future through references to the past and conceptualisation of the present. He articulates moments of danger – threatening political situations and positioning, often the drift between the government and the city – in his speeches and gathers momentum through them. The way in which Demszky re-describes the present through the past indicates a move to re-describe the normative content of the present. The present appears as the synonym of the recalled past, as a moment of danger and of revolution. The present condition is no longer seen as having to do with a happy, cheerful well-managed national day, on which a crowd has gathered to celebrate the heroic moments and personalities of the past. It is problematised, seen in terms of a threat.



Gábor Demszky, photographed at the 2012 Römerberggespräche in Frankfurt am Main. Photograph: Dontworry / Wikimedia Commons. Released under the license CC BY-SA 3.0

Overview

Demszky's biography demonstrates how he always sought to transform his field or his rhetoric. In the rest of the chapter, I will look at Demszky's discourse and the rhetorical movements towards frontier-making, first via his speeches focusing on the nineteenth-century image of Budapest and then via those given on 15 March, from 1995 to 2002. I chose this time frame partly based on the availability of the speeches (1995–) and close the selection at the height of the polarisation, 2002. This also follows analysis of polarisation which places emphasis on the late 1990s and the turn of the millennium. Prior to the split of the 'liberal pole' caused by the departure of Fidesz to the conservative camp and the rapprochement of the Socialists and the SZDSZ in government from 1994, the political spectrum was already fragmented in the early 1990s, even if temporary alliances were made. Therefore, studying Demszky's speeches from 1995 enables me to see the attempts to contest and reinforce the emerging polarisation – in the ethos of discourse theory, to go beyond the obvious and to look and see where the overdetermined systems of meaning were present, alongside other elements of the Demszky's discourse of the primacy of local politics, decentralisation, the nineteenth-century past and pluralism.

The frontier as a strong imaginary offered Demszky a chance to construct his discourse against other discourses, left and right. The rhetorical description of the type of paradiastole implies normative changes (Skinner, 2002). In the polarised politics of Hungary, the right and left have turned into 'right' and 'wrong', into an us/them divide of two normative orders. This is what floating signifiers in discourse theory are about – when used in research, they describe contestation, sometimes implicit, at other times explicit, between discourses. In these speeches 'nation' is a dominant floating signifier in Hungary, being mobilised and claimed by different political parties, and even its counterparts such as internationalism and metropolitanism are articulated with the idea of nation. This contests the idea presented in the [previous chapter](#) that the metropolis should be tamed and occupied by those who are the rightful representatives of the nation.

The underlying theoretical contribution of this chapter is that political polarisation is also visible where it is contested, and counter-ing political polarisation through contesting it only contributes to its existence. The second contribution is that to see polarisation at work,

it is important to try to reach where it is supposedly not taking place. Doreen Massey (2005) has argued that space and public are co-constitutive and continuously created through social relations and conflict, and this motivates the current study.

The national day speeches are delivered in the public space of Budapest, next to a statue commemorating a historical period. They address the citizens of Budapest and Hungary on a national day, also thereby creating conceptions of these publics. The liberal celebrations take place by the statue of the national revolutionary poet Petőfi in commemoration of the student revolts and the war of independence of 1848/49. The gathering in this place is broadcast live on national television. The audience is more extensive than party membership but still relatively favourable to the Free Democrats, since the different political groupings in Hungary use the spaces of the city selectively and gather around certain statues. The extreme far right, by contrast, gathers in Heroes Square, which was a major site for meetings in the authoritarian interwar period.

Methodologically the focus is on rhetoric, used hand in hand with discourse theory. I operationalise the idea of crossing the floor or transforming the moral value of two terms that Quentin Skinner, in his (1996) reading of rhetoric, has highlighted as a particular politically interesting trope, as politics par excellence (Palonen, 2003). Paradiastole implies a change of moral character, turning vices into virtues and vice versa. It is a sister term to 'floating signifier' implying the contestation of different elements whereby they can be seen as belonging to different discourses.

In contrast with Viktor Orbán's speeches, available on his website, Demszky's speeches present a less explored archive, kindly provided for research use by the mayor's office in 2003. The speeches quoted here are a representative sample of Demszky's rhetoric and discourse in general, and the chapter suggests a particular technique for reading political speeches given at a specific place and time when temporally tracing a discursive transformation.

Demszky: a dissident and a politician

To understand Demszky's rhetorical moves, I will look into his past. He went against the 1980s anti-politics: the politics of disengagement from the political system (Konrád, 1984), during which many former

dissidents' refusal to form 'traditional parties', with heavy party structures and all of the associations related to the Party, gave birth to post-communist alliances such as the SZDSZ and Fidesz. From 1985 and the introduction of a multi-party system in state-socialist Hungary, dissidents turned into politicians (Kovács, 1998).

Demszky's personal transformations and the attempts to transform politics used the political skills of paradiastolic redescription: the initial rejection of party politics which lead to the turn towards local politics; the move from an oppositional attitude to an all-Budapest or all-Hungarian disposition, from taking care of the poor to the transformation of Budapest into a business-friendly, high-culture metropolis. These transformations meant not that Demszky necessarily left the 'old' position behind completely, but that he found new ways of placing the dissident attitude, the extra-political position or social awareness. We can witness changes at the micro level of the discourse when looking at his 15 March speeches. Similar analysis could be carried out elsewhere, but here we see articulations of polarisation and political strife.

The dissident past influenced Demszky's becoming the radical and the opposition politician he later was. In a biographical interview from 1994 Demszky (Jasper & Demszky, 2014, pp. 11–27, 15) stressed the importance of the dissident past, which began 'very early at 20 years old', since in 1972 he had already been banned from university after a student demonstration. Outlining contemporary politicians, László Lengyel (2001, p. 118) argues that Demszky was a product of 1968, an era of global protests. Lengyel (2001, pp. 120–122) describes how Demszky started from the New Left but moved on to something more radical and began studying the poor. This connection and the comradeship of the Szegények Támogató Alap (SZETA) became an important part of Demszky's life and activism. In the early 1980s he spent time in Poland, learning printing from the Solidarnosc movement. He imported a printing machine from Poland to a local cellar (Lengyel, 2001, p. 128). In 1981, with László Rajk, the son of a famous Hungarian communist leader who had died after a show trial in 1949, he founded the independent publishing house Független Kiadó and participated in samizdat publications, especially *Beszélő* (*The Speaker*). However, Demszky did not put himself forward as a candidate when the opposition was allowed to run for the Hungarian parliament in 1985, in order not to legitimate the system (Lengyel, 2001, pp. 131–133). He could have proven to be too young to be elected, but youthfulness was

a significant part of his character and appeal. Demszky, like many young dissident scholars, received a scholarship to the US and spent the year 1988/89 at Columbia University thanks to an International Federation of Journalists' Freedom to Publish prize. Once back in Hungary, Demszky joined his former dissident colleagues in the SZDSZ, participated in the 1990 elections and gained a seat in the parliament for Budapest's VII district. He was made the mayoral candidate, leading the SZDSZ list in the local elections, and was elected as mayor by the newly formed city council on 31 October 1990, giving up his place as an MP. Until 2010 he was the main actor in the politics of the city image of Budapest and one of the most popular politicians in his party, which he led for six months at the turn of the millennium, from December 2000 to June 2001. In the first European Parliament elections in 2004, he was the leading politician of the list, elected as the one of two Free Democrat MEPs, the other being István Szent-Iványi.

I have been asked why I study Demszky's discourse, given that his tenure as the leader of SZDSZ was very short; despite this brevity, it was a particularly interesting period and Demszky's career was nationwide in a way that few leading politicians' careers were who covered the whole two decades of multi-party democracy. Also, at the point of his party leadership, in opposition, the SZDSZ parliamentary faction was weak, and Demszky exercised his power. He had a discourse of 'equidistance', and tried to turn SZDSZ into a pole between the big parties, Fidesz and MSZP, rather than an affiliate of the Socialists. In polarisation small parties end up being swallowed by large ones. The transformation in Demszky's political character, challenging his position for the autumn 2006 municipal elections, was a scandal over an expensive villa in Croatia, to which he had travelled using vehicles of the municipal transport company BKV. This image of a neo-gentry leader was in contrast to the image of Demszky as a man of the people, which had been particularly powerful in comparison with the SZDSZ intelligentsia. But it is a telling example of the transformation of a politician who was described as 'value free' with power, and one which is not without comparison in Hungary.

In 2010, after the two-thirds landslide of Fidesz had taken place, Demszky lost his position in the local elections. In an interview he accounted for the transformation of dissidents to office holders, evoking Max Weber's concept of a politician: 'When you are a protestor, you can follow the ethic of ultimate ends, doing what you know is right.

When you are a politician, you have to pay attention to the consequences, all of them. You are judged by the consequences of what you do.' He also emphasised his and his party's liberalism, the importance of finance to urban policy, and the improvement in Budapest's credit rating as a key to the liberal Budapest model of governance: 'We were liberal in the American sense of support for those in need, but we also believed that free markets were a key way to build a new system.' (Jasper & Demszky, 2014).

15 March: the national day of the radicals

The fifteenth of March can be seen as the 'radical' national holiday in Hungary. As it commemorates the start of the war of independence against Habsburg Austria, it is an independence day of a sort. The choice of the official national day was subject to debate in the first post-communist parliament, and the order of importance of such days still varies for the different political groupings (Nyssönen, 1999). For example, the conservatives favoured 20 August whereas the liberals celebrated 15 March, which resonates with nineteenth-century liberalism and nationalism. Dénes Némédi (1997, p. 259), analysing the Hungarian press coverage of 15 March during the early 1990s, reveals the lack of a constitutive political frontier between the right/conservative/nationalist camp and the left/liberal/cosmopolitan camp. The way in which *Magyar Hírlap*, of the Hungarian liberal left, covered the national day differed from that of *Népszabadság*, the daily of the Hungarian socialists. The commemoration of 15 March was valued more often from a 'sacred cult' perspective by the conservative, right-wing, nationalist press (*Magyar Nemzet*, *Új Magyarország*, *Pesti Hírlap*) than in *Magyar Hírlap*, which emphasised it from an 'activist sacral' perspective. In contrast, sacred elements of both sorts are missing from the *Népszabadság* coverage. That sacral wordings of both kinds are scarce in *Népszabadság* points towards the fact that the cultist-activist differentiation is not identical to the politically oriented, pragmatic and a meta-empirical conception of the nation. The concept of nation in *Magyar Hírlap* is pragmatic and political, but it places strong emphasis on its exceptionality – that the revolution is run for the signification of the active ecstatic totality (Némédi, 1997, p. 259). This emphasis comes across in Demszky's speeches.

An analysis of the speeches from 1995 to 2002 reveals Demszky's reading of the political context, the rhetorical development of his relationship with the concept of nation, the emergent myth of the urban-rural divide, a treatment of the relationship between the government and the city, and the polarisation of Hungarian politics in general. The confrontation between the opposition and the power-holders is, then, already built into the character of this national day. Sometimes the confrontation is between Demszky and the government, sometimes between the party's parliamentary faction and Demszky. However, the confrontation – like the memory of the revolution of 1848/49 – can exist only through its continuous articulation.

In the moment of speech-giving, Demszky articulates 'his public' in the space created by relationships surrounding the statue of Petőfi. These publics work at several levels, like the spaces which are produced through the references. Demszky's speech on 15 March 1995, like those every year afterwards, reveals the way in which he establishes a parallel between Hungary and Budapest. *Polgártársaim* – 'my fellow citizens' – refers to the citizenship of Budapest and Hungary alike, as the reference to *Magyarország-város polgárai*, citizens of Hungary and the city, at the end of the speech reveals. While Demszky creates his own constituency, he also articulates the space and public of the metropolitan city, as well as that of the nation or state. Demszky's concept of citizens, like those of nineteenth-century Hungarian liberalism and the French Revolution, derives from the geographical-political unit, which reinforces the importance of the metropolis alongside that of the state.

The choice of political heroes has been an important way of building political identifications in Hungary. These heroes work as nodal points in political discourses and can be contested by different political groups. Their choice refers both to the location of the SZDSZ vis à vis the other parties and the government or opposition, and Demszky's position towards the party section in the parliament and his city administration. It shows that there are many political frontiers, but that the bipolar situation is reinforced even when the dominant frontier is put in question. In this chapter I demonstrate that the division is not as clear-cut as is sometimes argued, but also that it exists through its negation: by contesting the frontier, Demszky legitimises it.

Something about the connection between MSZP as the party canvassing votes across the country and SZDSZ as a predominantly urban party is reflected in the speeches I analyse starting in 1995 and



The statue of Petőfi by the Danube provided a basis for a yearly articulation of metropolitan nationhood and oppositional rhetoric for the Budapest Mayor Gábor Demszky. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

continuing until the late 1990s. The speeches must be seen in the context of the national day, opening up the rhetoric that is particular to the 15 March celebrations, but in the comparative perspective they reveal a discursive transformation.

For many years, we citizens of Pest have gathered by this statue, and cheated ourselves a little bit.

We speak of Sándor Petőfi and Lajos Kossuth but we think about ourselves. For them we brought flowers, because of them we carry our *kokárdas*, but with the symbols of freedom we are remembering our own desires; we were citing their ideas [in 1988 and 1989], but even then those arose from our hearts. (Demszky, 15 March 1995)

Demszky uses a version of the word *polgár* – citizen – which was adopted by the right, especially Fidesz while in power in 1998, in an exclusive way. This memory work demonstrates that the word was used by Demszky, but in the whole database these are the only

speeches in which he uses this word. In Demszky's usage it bears a reference to the liberal ideal of 'citizens', of the French Revolution, an idea which endured during the revolutions of 1848. For Demszky, the development of democracy and citizenship appear more important than the national flair of the 1848 revolution. Later, in 1999, he refers to the nineteenth-century Hungarian liberal priorities of constructing a modern nation. Here we can talk about paradiastolic moves. Orbán claimed *polgári* from the liberal urban tradition, even if it did not appear much in Demszky's rhetoric. Demszky claimed the nation from the discourse of the Hungarian right, particularly in these speeches on the national day.

In short, the populist logic of articulation on 15 March follows the same form:

The 15 March Populism = (Petőfi's People)^{Trust} + Oppressors^{Distrust}

Here, in a metonymic replacement, different forces take the position of 'us the people'. Others, often the elites, former or current, take the place of oppressors, marking the antagonistic frontier. The national hero becomes a symbol of Demszky and his colleagues.

The rest of the chapter shows how Demszky articulates the memory of the revolution, drawing parallels to the contemporary situation, and thereby the elements and frontiers which construct his own discourse in 1995–2002.

An uneasy coalition between the Free Democrats and the Socialists – and the Pest mayor

After the loss of the MDF the years 1994/95 witnessed wars of position in which the two governing parties fought over the agenda (Bozóki, 2003, p. 424). In the earlier-quoted opening of the 15 March speech from 1995, 'We speak of Sándor Petőfi and Lajos Kossuth', refers to heroes of 1848 as well as to the alliance between the Free Democrats and the Socialists. It reinforces the idea that unity has been created among the governmental parties. Demszky (1995) opens the second section of the speech as follows:

Friends! Those who joined us last year also know that we came here full of concerns. We could see hope vanish again. We had just freed ourselves from dictatorship and the new politics were already crushing

the country. It invaded our privacy, corrupted our friendships and used up our air. In March many of us came here to say 'Leave us alone!' And when faced by a choice we made our choice. The country decided overwhelmingly to replace those who had given in to temptation. (Demszky, 15 March 1995)

Here Demszky draws the frontier between the democratic left, which made it into government, and the right, which he sees as anti-democratic or corrupt. The claim of illegitimacy of the other that we discerned as the core of polarisation is obvious. But then he also issues a warning on the corruptive character of power and does not see the coalition as fully unproblematic.

Demszky's Revolutionary Rhetoric 1995 = The People (Liberals ≡ Left)^{Concern} + (Former) Powerholding Elites^{Suspicion}

On 12 March 1995, finance minister Lajos Bokros launched his neo-liberal stabilisation programme – the subsequently notorious 'Bokros package' that at this point increased SZDSZ's loyalty to the government, as Bozóki (2003, pp. 425–426) later pointed out. Demszky defends the government's controversial financial policy (without directly mentioning the Bokros package) by saying that it is truly post-communist, and calls for patience for effect of the reforms to be shown. He recognises this dilemma of the moment of revolution carrying forward: 'Breaking free feels good. What's more, it feels ecstatic. For a day or two. But on the third day we ask ourselves, "What else is there? What to do next?" and later ask "How to go further?"' (Demszky, 15 March 1995).

Demszky's anti-étatist position invests more trust in civic organisations and local government than in the state (Demszky, 15 March 1995). This goes well with the spirit of 15 March 1848, which entailed a popular uprising against an oppressive empire. It also contrasts with the statist policies theorised by Schöpflin (1993). Demszky argues that Budapest citizens know better than most Hungarian politicians what a free society is. This is in keeping with the aforementioned idea that Budapest is the most liberal point in Hungary. Through this he indicates to his party that under his leadership, Budapest is the liberal stronghold. Demszky also creates frontiers between Budapest and the rest of Hungary, between Budapest and national politics, and between the anti-étatists and étatists, in which instance he wanted to see the Socialists remaining on the same side as the Liberals.

Some uneasiness in the speeches on 15 March 1995 and 1996 reflects both the coalition of SZDSZ and MSZP and the position in which Demszky, as the mayor of Budapest, found himself. The start of the 1995 speech reinforces polarisation in Hungarian politics but later questions the unity of the left. A key issue is the cancelled plans for the Millennium Expo that was to have taken place in collaboration with Vienna. From the Budapest mayor's perspective the Expo would have provided massive investment for Budapest, and Demszky sided against his own party. In his 15 March speech of 1995 Demszky insists that the accountability of the government should involve carrying through decisions made under the previous government. He attempts to undermine the idea of two united fronts in Hungarian politics.

In 1996, Demszky argues that 15 March 1848 provides the basis for the 'political institutions of a modern civic state', insisting that the state is self-limiting, as opposed to the oppressive empire. With the words 'Our homeland is looking for its image' (Demszky, 15 March 1996), Demszky refers to the modernisation process that the left-wing government had carried out, but also to the construction of community and nationhood. While Demszky does not yet use the word 'nation', 'homeland' falls importantly into the same category, as had been emphasised in the period of the previous national-conservative MDF government, to denote difference from the state-centred discourse during the socialist period (Fowler, 2004b, p. 61). Demszky retains the idea of homeland from the national-conservative period, 1990–94, but the argument that it is 'looking for its image' indicates that it was being rethought or redescribed (Demszky, 15 March 1996).

Both the 1995 and the 1996 speeches address the post-communist situation and transition as novelty. They construct and question the unity of the left-wing government, they create a distinction between Budapest and the state and between Budapest and the rest of Hungary, and they ponder the character of the state and the 'homeland'.

For Budapest, Hungary, nation and Europe

The speeches in 1997 and 1998 witness the creation of three overlapping spaces/publics – the metropolitan, the national and the European – and at the same time the illusion of unity. These issues were crucial, since in the 1998 election year the anti-metropolitan nationalists accused the left-wing government of deserting the nation with its

neoliberal policies (Bozóki, 2003, p. 326), and the Liberal mayor goes to great pains to try to establish a link between the nation and Hungary's position in Europe – the EU membership the government was striving for. Yet, simultaneously, he projects a vision of national unity and of the importance of nationhood for the left.

In the 1998 election year in his speech Demszky emphasises the role of Budapest in the Europe-wide movement of 1848, the 'Spring of Nations' – *Népek Tavasza* – which liberated people in general, and Europe in particular, in an eastward movement, starting from Paris, spreading later to Berlin and Vienna and finally to Budapest on 15 March 1848. The speech included the following: a stress on the cities of revolution and the inclusion and elevation of Budapest into the league of European metropolises alongside Paris, Berlin and Vienna; a stress on Europeanness; the idea that the 1848 movement was liberal, and in Hungary also a national movement; and the use of *magyarság*, the community of Hungarians, alongside the peoples in general. Demszky makes an implicit reference to Hungary joining Europe, first in 1989 and then through its future membership of the EU, which the MSZP-SZDSZ government had been working towards. The nation, Europe and the community of Hungarians are all in the same chain of equivalence.

The national day and the related national pride are situated within the European tradition. In 1999, Demszky makes an even more obvious link between nationhood and the EU, describing membership as a 'national aim'. Rather than calling for celebrations of the thousand years of Hungarian statehood at the millennium – a popular theme for the Fidesz government – Demszky (15 March 1999; emphasis added) argues that 'the most important *national aim* at the turn of the millennium is: the union with Europe!' This paradiastolic movement rearticulates ideological-moral content from one order to another – turns something that had been seen as bad and elitist, anti-national, and having to do with the cosmopolitan politics of the left into something 'national'. In stark contrast to the discourse of Orbán that we saw in the [earlier chapter](#), Budapest is elevated to the status of the 'engine of progress in Hungary': through the common goal of progress, Budapest and the nation, or country, cannot be separated. Budapest had been the centre of the country since 1848 (Demszky, 15 March 1997), and it is in the same league as other European cities (Demszky, 15 March 1998). Demszky implies that the Europeanness of Hungary exists via

Budapest, a European metropolis, where the revolution of 1848 happened following the larger European movement.

The discursive construction of the nation also becomes more important in Demszky's rhetoric in the late 1990s, and this is mirrored in his vocabulary. In 1998, 15 March preceded the elections which took the Fidesz-MPP conservative coalition to power, ushering in an era of state-sponsored celebrations of nationhood. During the election campaign the conservative right accused the Hungarian left of being cosmopolitan, too ready to bow to the West and reluctant to respect and celebrate Hungarianness, Bozóki (2003, p. 236) argues. Notably, up until 1998 Demszky avoids the word 'nation' (*nemzet*) and prefers to speak about the people (*nép*), as this is the traditional term in leftist discourse and also because the revolution of 1848 was one in which other nationalities participated, in the fight against the Habsburg Empire and the imperial order in Europe. In this way, by creating its own space/public, the word 'people' can refer to citizens of Budapest and Hungary alike. In the 1998 election year the audience addressed by the 15 March speech shifted from fellow citizens and 'friends' to fellow citizens and 'Hungarians'. As we saw above, Demszky also mentions the community of Hungarians (*magyarság*). 'Nation' is mentioned in the context of turning toward the West:

The one-time experience of the liberation on 15 March helped the Hungarian nation through the coma of one and a half centuries. And since the slow and difficult wasting-away of the soft dictatorship did not offer a similar experience, today we have to draw from there [15 March] too. From there we can gain push-power, which is necessary for the creation of economic prosperity, for the modernisation of the country and for catching up with the developed Western world. (Demszky, 15 March 1998)

These references to the nation and the past and progress is similar to Orbán's discourse seen in the [previous chapter](#).

The turn to nationhood in parliamentary politics had its impact on Demszky's political rhetoric as the party leader. In 1999 he ties the concept of the modern nation to the liberal tradition in Hungary: 'The Hungarian liberals strove [in the nineteenth century] to create a *nation* first of all. They envisaged the modern nation not as a small circle of the privileged but as a wide community of people identifying with being Hungarian.' This move contests the Hungarian right's claim that

the liberals are against the nation (*nemzet-ellenes*). The leftist concept of nation, based on the territory of the Hungarian state and typical of the late nineteenth-century reformers, re-emerges in Demszky's rhetoric in 1999.

Besides claiming progress as floating signifier from Fidesz discourse, Demszky's strategy is to maintain a steady chain of equivalence between Budapest, Hungary, nation and Europe to contest the attempts by the right to claim the nation-state and reject Budapest, let alone Europe. Going against the myth of the nation–metropolis divide, in 1999 Demszky articulates a new dividing line between the government and the rest:

'Freedom-cutters' [*Szabadságyírbálók*, i.e. the government] still intend to play off Budapest against the provinces. Just as they intend to do away with the difference between quality and unreadable newspapers, they hope to eliminate the unequal position of the capital and the regions. Every decent attempt at civilisation strives for that. But attempts at civilisation up until now aimed at the urbanisation of the regions, not at making the city provincial. (Demszky, 15 March 1999)

By using the term *szabadságyírbálók* – those who quite randomly restrict freedoms – Demszky criticises the Fidesz government and reinforces the idea of a frontier between the national government and the metropolis. He names as the crux of the problem the government's strong opposition to Budapest, articulating a strong frontier in Hungarian politics. In contrast, Demszky wants to restore the link between the regions and the metropolis, for example by reminding his audience that both in 1848 and in 1956 'the Hungarian regions stood by the revolutionary capital city'. Concluding his speech by saying that the capital city will also help the regions, Demszky again tries to relativise the juxtaposition of the regions and the metropolis that is fundamental to the imagination and constitution of the discursive frontier in Hungarian politics. However, by doing so he rearticulates the same frontier, by calling the government anti-Budapest.

Demszky's Revolutionary Rhetoric 1999 =
(Budapest ≡ Hungary ≡ Nation ≡ Europe)^{Patriotism} +
(Freedomcutting ≡ Anti-Budapest Government)^{Distrust}

As it appears from this formula, having Budapest on both sides is somewhat problematic. The dilemma is that it reproduces the polarised discourse that sustains Orbán's government.

Blurring polarisation: against Fidesz, with nation

In 2000 Demszky's 15 March speech starts to reflect the polarised politics more clearly, provoked by the extending of the Fidesz government's hostility towards Budapest more tangibly. The speech starts with the address: 'My fellow citizens! Budapest people [*nép*]! Hungarians!' This seems to be the left-wing construction of nationhood, based on citizenship within the geographical-political unit. However, Demszky refers to the nation when addressing the polarisation in Hungarian politics. Arguing that 'During the past week the best of the nation – conservatives, left-wingers and liberals – wanted the same as the 1848-ers: Hungarian independence, the freedom of every citizen and accountable governance', he crucially includes his liberal party and the Hungarian left within the nation. He reminds his audience that in 1848 – in contrast to the situation in contemporary Hungary – the people could unite and form a common manifesto for peace, freedom and unity: 'At the end of the nineteenth century all of them together made Budapest into the fastest-developing city in Europe. If the city led by the opposition constructed schools and hospitals, the government responded by [building] new routes and the first metro line on the continent' (Demszky, 15 March 2000).

Once again, the government's politics regarding Budapest are the core of the speech. The above quote is a direct reference to the shelving of the plans for the fourth metro line in Budapest by the Fidesz government, and the lack of co-operation between the parties and between the government and the capital city, as well as the construction of barriers, instead of unity, by Fidesz.

Demszky blames the polarisation on the drift of Orbán. He reminds the crowd that 12 years earlier in 1988, when the anti-communists ('dubbed "hooligans" by the state-socialist press') interrupted the 15 March celebrations, 'Viktor Orbán was among us'. He continues with the constitutive exclusion:

[But n]ow the Hungarian prime minister is no longer with us. This is the first time since the change of the system that Hungarian state television

is not sending a broadcast from the Petőfi statue. Maybe this means that the Hungarians forgot about it? Voilà! Here we are. And next year there will be even more of us. (Demszky, 15 March 2000)

Demszky signals the break in the government's policy – the lack of the revolutionaries' faith or 'fidelity to the event', in the words of Badiou (2005). As a campaign message, he gives an illustration of the exclusion that the government has attempted to construct in its rhetoric and practices. Demszky usually sought consensus, but now he argues that Orbán has deserted the democratic coalition and its ideals. This was a response to claims that the left would have deserted the nation and its interests. The other exclusion is of the PM: 'Orbán is no longer with us.' Just as he calls for a metaphor of the constitutive outside, Demszky here imagines Orbán as standing apart from the protesting crowd united around the statue of Petőfi. Demszky cunningly ties his own discourse around elements of SZDSZ, Petőfi, 1848, the Budapestians, freedom, democracy and the other ideals of those gathered around the statue, as a counter-discourse to Fidesz. While he tries to deny the frontier and move to the middle of the dividing line between the Socialists and Fidesz, at the same time he exploits the idea of strong frontiers in Hungarian politics to gain unity around his own discourse.

Two months later, on 20 May 2000, political scientist Tamás Fricz argued in the conservative *Magyar Nemzet* that the polarisation in the Hungarian parliament was so deep that there was no chance for compromise or consensus (Kosztolányi, 2000). In what follows, we will see how Demszky contested this incompatibility by integrating a concept of nation into his discourse that challenges the divide between 1999 and 2002, to contest and thereby revive the idea of polarisation.

In 2001 Demszky made a significant rhetorical move: he fully adopted the terms most associated with the opposite side into his own rhetoric. It is a paradiastolic speech in which he claims for himself the vocabulary of his political adversary, that which constitutes Fidesz discourse. Demszky starts the speech with the very term that Fidesz had claimed for itself, which was Demszky's key term in these speeches: *polgártársaim*. The Hungarian compound structure enables him to add here the fellow *polgári* (civic/bourgeois): people with a plural and genitive.

But the key paradiastolic move is with the term 'Hungarians'. Demszky finishes his nation-centred speech with the words of the

‘Kossuth Song’: ‘Long live Hungarian freedom! Long live the homeland!’ This usage of vocabulary common on the Hungarian right (*Magyar* and *haza*, homeland), yet in a form which is stripped of extremism and ‘innocently’ used among all Hungarians, in part questions the stereotype that the liberals were anti-nation (*nemzet-ellenes*), propagated by the Hungarian right, and the implication that nation and the metropolis are not compatible.

Thus, Demszky challenges Orbán and contests the idea of the particularity of and difference between ‘nation’ and the nationalist discourse (Demszky, 15 March 2001). As I will discuss below, this can be seen as the contestation of a floating signifier, in which the two sides want to claim a concept for themselves. By reclaiming the term ‘nation’ alongside ‘Hungarians’, Demszky attempts to destroy the monopoly that the Hungarian right claimed on nationhood. Yet by avoiding the use of the term earlier, Demszky had contributed to the hegemonising claims on the ‘nation’ by the right. The idea that ‘nation’ would no longer be a term only of the right in Hungary but could also be of the left would now contest the whole conception of polarised politics and the discursive frontier. Nevertheless, in a crucial dimension of the paradox, since Demszky uses it explicitly to respond to the precise phenomenon of post-communist polarisation, he therefore reconfirms its existence.

A speech marks a moment in which political loyalties are called for, a moment of choice, or of politics. In 2001 Demszky tries to claim freedom and nationhood for his own discourse, which is constructed against those ‘freedom-cutters’ mentioned in 1999 – the national right – whom he had argued were against freedom. By contrast, Demszky argues for their unity: ‘The interests of the nation and the interests of freedom never stand against each other’ (Demszky, 15 March 2001).

Against illiberalism

Here Demszky rejects Orbán’s rhetoric of national goals. Reconciling the opposites, Demszky also highlights how they had been thought of as opposites. Yet he also constructs the dividing line between those who call for freedom and those nostalgic for the repressive eras of right-wing authoritarians Miklós Horthy and István Tisza and the Communist János Kádár.

We are loyal to 1848 if we know that freedom and order, freedom and prosperity, are not each other's opposite. Over 150 years there has always been someone to offer us false options: we were promised order and prosperity in return for our freedom. But the freedom-less consolidation of the Horthys and Kádárs was no real order, nor did it bring long-lasting prosperity. And yet some wish to evoke nostalgic feelings towards these eras. We must not fall for this! Those who think of the Hungary of István Tisza, Horthy or Kádár with nostalgia reject the legacy of Petőfi and Kossuth. We show respect to our forefathers of March by believing in the power of our freedom. (Demszky, 15 March 2001)

Demszky evokes the fear of the possible return of these two eras, and this is a direct reference to the Fidesz government in which nationalist rhetoric sets them apart from the previous government.

This is echoed in the opening line of the 2001 and 2002 speeches, Petőfi's classic question, stated in 2001: 'On the greatest day of celebration, we stand in front of the statue of the greatest poet of Hungarian freedom. "Are we slaves or are we free?" was the question the poet posed 153 years ago to the mutinous Pest crowd' (Demszky, 15 March 2001). This is an attempt to mobilise the public to realise their potential for the common fight, to create unity for the common cause. Demszky argues that the 'freedom-loving Hungarians' had gathered on 15 March even when there was no freedom. At the time, 'freedom loving' echoed the rhetoric of US president George W. Bush. The majority of East European post-communist politicians saw the US as their ally in the dissident struggle against the dominance of the Soviet Union in the region. Six months later, on 11 September 2001, Demszky argued in a public speech in Budapest's Heroes Square that 'We are all New Yorkers' (Demszky, 21 October 2001).

In the 15 March 2001 interpretation, these 'freedom-loving Hungarians' are from different groups, of which Demszky names the 1848 heroes: 'conservative Batthyány, liberal Kossuth (László et al., 2003), radical Petőfi, left-wing Táncsics' and the following generation, Endre Bajcsy-Zilinszky, the most acclaimed Hungarian World War Two hero in socialist times, and the 1956 hero Imre Nagy, applauded in 1989. He again stresses the idea of unity and national pride regarding these 1848 leaders who fought together for freedom (Demszky, 15 March 2001). Obviously, Demszky is attempting to construct a frontier between an oppressive regime and the liberals, the conservative

Fidesz government being the oppressors and the left-wing opposition the freedom-loving revolutionaries. This mirrors the 1995 speech, in which the previous conservative MDF government (1990–94) was seen as the post-communist oppressor (Demszky, 15 March 1995).

In the 15 March speech of 2001, Demszky describes his opponents and outlines certain problems with the national government. His opponents are influential anti-liberals:

There are fellow citizens, some in high elected positions, for whom freedom is an excess. They outspokenly discuss how freedom of the press, the rights of the opposition, freedom of conscience and religion, render effective governance difficult. They find multicoloured-ness disturbing and unnecessary, as it impedes the emergence of their favoured set of values. (Demszky, 15 March 2001)

The echoes of contemporary illiberalism are palpable. Demszky is referring to the emphasis on Christian values (Fowler, 2004b, p. 60), xenophobia and anti-metropolitanism. He problematises étatist ideas such as centralisation, increased taxation and preferring efficient government to government by people. The rule-of-law argument is echoed in the statement that ‘Delimitation of the government is not only important when our views are not represented in the government, but also when our people are in the government’ (Demszky, 15 March 2001).

In other words, in 2001 Demszky attempts to adopt the signifier ‘nation’ and thus move the frontier of Hungarian politics from nationhood to freedom. Finally, he tries to hegemonise politics through the use of the term ‘freedom’ (and democracy, delimitation of government) by simultaneously calling for others to join a common front against the oppressors or anti-liberals. Strikingly, during a single speech he proceeds in turn to demolish, rearticulate, reconstruct and hegemonise the imaginary political frontier, to put it to work as a uniting force in his discourse rather than that of the nationalists. He also may be seen as creating a continuum between the left and right in which he can position the SZDSZ in the middle.

While in 2000 and 2001 the unity of freedom and nationhood was created against the government parties which were trying to restrict freedoms, the following year he has a more straightforward task: to counter-hegemonise nationhood, which was important in the government’s rhetoric. During the polarised electoral campaign of 2002, when

the symbol of the patriotism of 1848, the *kokárda*, became monopolised by the Fidesz-led front, 15 March as a revolutionary day crystallises in Demszky's speech. He tries to contribute to the creation of the space and the public in the revolutionary moment and, as in previous years, refers to the past and to Petőfi's question. '[T]hen, 154 years earlier, just as now, we know how to answer', Demszky (15 March 2002) says, naming 15 March as the celebration of 'Hungarian democratic powers' in each era. He includes in the same chain of symbolic events the 1956 demonstrations, the 1972 student protest against Kádár's regime, the 1988/89 demonstrations and the election time of 2002, and he argues: 'Today again we stand against the powers that restrict our freedom, peacefully and democratically, with dignity' (Demszky, 15 March 2002).

In this speech, Demszky redraws the frontier between the power-holding Hungarian right and the coalition of Socialists and Liberals. He affirms the existence of extreme deep polarisation and the need for mobilisation prior to the elections in 2002. He emphasises the unity of the Budapest and the Hungarian revolutionaries, through Kossuth et al., against conservative Fidesz-ism. He points out that in 1848 the citizens of Pest and the opposition in parliament, Petőfi and Kossuth, were fighting together for freedom, against the repressive powers (Demszky, 15 March 2002). These two figures, symbols of SZDSZ and MSZP, who represented the radical forces, were left off the list of names and groups he had enumerated in 1999 when calling for unity. The moment of danger is again evoked by the memory of the past, recalled to gain political progress:

If after April [and the general elections] everyone can feel that there's nothing to be afraid of, that the laws and regulations are not toys at the mercy of the government, that there are not two classes of citizens – protected and unprotected, if politics ceases to be a boxing match, spurt, punch-up, sensation, then for sure more has occurred than a change of government – i.e. the return to the normal, fearless, consensual, Western Hungarian democracy which was envisioned in relation to the system change, to the democracy that Kossuth, Batthyány and Petőfi fought for in 1848/49. (Demszky, 15 March 2002)

Again, Demszky makes a crucial exclusion. He names Petőfi, Kossuth and Batthyány as the democrats but does not mention a more moderate contemporary politician, Count István Széchenyi, 'the

Greatest Hungarian' claimed and celebrated by the Fidesz government as the [previous chapter](#) showed. This reinforces the idea of a discursive frontier.

By contrast, in a press conference the previous day, Demszky (2002b) had taken a more moderate stand in favour of consensual politics. He had even quoted Széchenyi and argued that Kossuth and Széchenyi's heritage ought to come together to foster 'normal, consensus-based, intrepid, parliamentary democracy'. Perhaps this was a difference between the two audiences, where for the greater and more critical audience Demszky wanted to stress the lack of a frontier and for the other, smaller and more partisan audience, he aimed to construct a frontier whereby the crowd could easier unite against the 'other side'.

By telling a story of Kossuth, born 200 years earlier, the defender of press freedoms, an issue close to Demszky's dissident's heart, Demszky draws the frontier between 'us' and 'them' the government. He criticises 'them' for their dominance of national radio and television, the clientelist 'new aristocracy', antisemitism, the distrust of neighbouring countries and great powers, and the division of the nation:

Kossuth convinced the Hungarian aristocracy to renounce their feudal rights. In contrast to this, the current government is building a new vassal upper class, with rights, out of the party's clientele [*klientúra*] ... Kossuth moulded the nation by unifying interests. The current government intends to split it into two hostile camps. (Demszky, 15 March 2002)

Yet after this description of the opponents, which strongly implies the existence of an imagined frontier and the need to offer an alternative, Demszky once again retreats to the terrain of consensual politics and criticises the frontier: 'We call for the unity of the Hungarian people. For us they are not our enemies – those who voted for the party in power four years ago – but our fellow citizens [*polgártársaink*]' (Demszky, 15 March 2002). His new alternative is to do away with polarisation, but at the same time he is always reminding his audience of the existence of the two camps.

In line with the great projects on which the government and the city had different stands, the metro emerged as a 'vital, nature-preserving construction project': Demszky (15 March 2002) argues for 'a government which sees a partner not an enemy' in Budapest. He sides with the left-liberal order. By describing the current government and offering an alternative, he rearticulates the frontier in existence.

By 2002, the political polarisation had progressed to its apogee. Demszky stresses the frontier between the Hungarian political right and the left, embracing the unity of the left. There was no question that a political divide existed, but the divide was again rearticulated by the mayor himself. We can summarise his populist formula as follows, using some of the contemporary terms:

*Demszky's Revolutionary Discourse 2002 =
(Budapest ≡ Nation)^{Freedom} + Illiberals^{Distrust}*

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have provided a reading of the developments of the Hungarian politics in the 1995–2002 period that demonstrates intensified polarisation. Demszky increasingly articulates his discourse through the frontier. The annual speeches at the statue of Petőfi, his political hero, are ‘statements’ which reveal Demszky’s description of the political situation and articulation, within the same, of the frontier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ because of the revolutionary flair of the moment.

It can be argued that my choice of the national day speeches leads to an analysis of Demszky’s rhetorical focus on issues, keywords or rhetorical devices such as nationhood and the people. The occasion itself limits the opportunities for usage of certain other rhetorical devices and may therefore overshadow those which often appear in his rhetoric. Nevertheless, here, I am interested in the way in which Demszky deals with the concepts of the people and nationhood, which are often appropriated by the other political parties. Therefore, this chapter does not attempt to capture any totalising picture of Demszky’s discourse, but it offers significant insights into it. I have undertaken detailed research into Demszky’s metropolitan discourse and his politics regarding Budapest, of which this piece is only a part (Palonen, 2006). Much of the contestation and frontier-building occurs around the concept of nation, and increasingly since 1999 Demszky adopts this as part of his discourse.

As we will see in the [next chapter](#), in the polarised politics in Hungary, the government focused on the celebration of the Hungarian millennium and ignored Budapest, and ‘nation’ emerged as the concept that structured the discursive field of politics. In the 15 March

speeches, Demszky tries to deny the binary opposition of the metropolis and the nation, which, as we discussed earlier, has been a dominant frontier in Hungarian politics at least since the 1930s. By denying the frontier, he reconstructs the myth of the frontier. The contest became one over the 'nation', which can be seen as a floating signifier contested by different political groups that attempt to tie it to their discourse. Demszky wanted to equate it with concepts such as metropolis, liberalism and freedom. In this way he contests the imagined frontier between the nation and the metropolis but constructs a frontier between 'us' and 'them'. Whereas we can see that in the mid-1990s the frontier was sometimes between the two 'left-wing' parties – the SZDSZ and the Socialists – in the most polarised situation of 2000–02 it clearly had to do with the Fidesz government. The divide is one between two moral orders: 'us' and 'them', 'good' and 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong'. Therefore, the crossing of the frontier, the reclaiming of different elements or floating signifiers, is not a redescription but is specifically paradiastolic.

After the initial attempt to provide more nuanced contestation, the fringe populist dynamic moved to a competing populist dynamic, according to the evidence presented in this study. Going through the contents of the argument on which Demszky bases his contestation of the Fidesz government in power, there are uncanny resemblances to the politics of Fidesz in power after 2010. This chapter offers evidence for the fact that contemporaries saw a problem in Hungarian politics already in the early 2000s. Of course in this case we considered the rhetoric of the Budapest mayor, mostly a minor actor in national politics also for a party that was increasingly becoming marginalised in the 2000s, but nevertheless, like many of the mayors in this period, he had been a well-known political figure in his country since the late 1980s. The [next chapter](#) will investigate polarisation in the 2002 elections and how the Socialist-Liberal government started its term in office after Orbán dramatically lost power.

CHAPTER 6

The high point of polarisation: the 2002 elections

Several historical examples demonstrate that almost hypnotic effects may be evolved by ‘Magyars’ being shouted in a crowd, and this suggestive influence may result in the most irrational crowd behaviour. (Csepeli, 1989, p. 41)

The affective element of national identity gains significance in provocative situations (crowd, insult, aggression and prejudice) when normally low emotional tension is increased by situational cues ... enhanced manifestations of national sentiment reduce the field of decision-making, pushing rational calculations into the background. Emerging from latency, national feelings become the prime mover of unexpected social turmoil and revolutionary events. It must be borne in mind that national self-identification is shared by the overwhelming majority of people in Hungarian society. (Csepeli, 1989, p. 56)

As we saw in previous chapters, the middle ground had disappeared or become difficult to hold by the 2002 elections. Distrust was building on both sides. This chapter engages with these historic elections which became a high point of political polarisation in Hungary.

The Fidesz-MDF election campaign in 2002 culminated in a gathering in the Kossuth tér (the square in front of the parliament) on Saturday 13 April (Gerő, 2002). Earlier that week huge and agitated crowds had gathered in front of the University of Sports Sciences in Budapest. The plan here was to show the presence of Fidesz in politics and in Budapest and to mobilise people for the election campaign. On Saturday Fidesz supporters streamed into the city on buses and trains. The crowd, described on the opposition-oriented commercial

TV channels as numbering some tens of thousands and in the more conservative media as comprising one and a half million, was generously portrayed by the Hungarian media. In some it provoked feelings of national pride and confidence in the bourgeois coalition, whereas in others it aroused feelings of fear, originating in the historical memory of pre-World War Two events. From 13 April on, for a few weeks at least, Kossuth tér became synonymous with the massive Fidesz-MDF rally, its Hungarian tricolour and *kokárda*. This was one way in which the party claimed or colonised the city for itself.

The elections and the politics of that period have been studied in-depth in Hungary (Kurtán et al., 2003; Sükösd & Vásárhelyi, 2002). The existing research demonstrates what an intensive and totalising campaign the elections represented, that a lot of negative campaigning was involved, and that the media was divided and partial on politics and to a large extent remains so. Finally, the research shows that party politics spread to people's personal lives, for instance via schools and text messages. For example, Géza Boros (2002) shows how negative campaigning was done in the streets of Budapest through a range of posters, and through modifications to them. The first studies on the elections of 2002 indicated the urgent need for ordinary citizens to take sides in their everyday life, to deal with the polarisation (Sükösd & Vásárhelyi, 2002).

In polarisation there is no middle ground. Rather, one has to choose sides, since there is a return to the Marxist-Leninist 'If you are not with us you are against us' and not to the reformist communist claim under Kádár: 'If you are not against us you are with us'. The political opponent is turned into an enemy who has chosen an illegitimate and threatening position. Studies demonstrate the drastic character of the opposition between the two-party blocs (using negative campaigning), as well as the emergence of polarised politics in everyday life. An individual's political identity was important in the job market and in many workplaces, since there were prejudices against those who were suspected of voting for the 'wrong' parties (e.g., Fowler, 2002).

In the yearbook of Hungarian politics, Ágnes and Gábor Kapi-tány in particular (2003) take issue with the values and symbols of the campaigns, and the differences between the two sides. Their argument is that the 'left' and 'right', with their current and traditional meanings have been confused and articulated in a mixture of ways. They distinguish a campaign of two cultures: one mixing elements of

individualism, focused on the present, open to other cultures, with conflicting elites and clear distinction from lower-status associations; one past and future oriented, focused on the community and the need to show power, independence and a sense of location of nationhood, bringing together different groups.

Overview

This chapter shows how the election campaign put forward mutually opposed concepts of nationhood and progress, which are important for my discussion of later events in the next sections. The concept of the nation promoted by the largest parties was tied in to those of progress and national interests. The absence, or one-sidedness, of the national question in the public discourse during communism complicated the discussion on the nation. The ‘ten million’ represented the position of the *Velünk az ország* campaign, in which the Socialists claimed to be the party of the Hungarian citizens. The ‘15 million’ referred to Hungarians both within the country and in areas near to Hungary, i.e. the emphasis on ethnic Hungarians that the Hungarian right-wing government had maintained (Bozóki, 1994a; Csepeli, 1989; Geró et al., 2001). These were the two conceptions of nation which featured as the dividing line in Hungarian politics during this period. The Hungarian right emphasised *nemzet* (nation), whereas the left emphasised *ország* (country) and *Magyarok* (Hungarians).

As another key nodal point in this period, ‘progress’ generally had positive connotations in Hungarian politics, in which there was consensus among the main parties that the goal for the country was accession to the EU. However, the parties had very different ideas about the meaning of progress and preferential policies. Fidesz accused the MSZP of lack of vision, technocracy and a readiness to sell the country to foreigners to get into the EU at any price. The MSZP accused Fidesz of focusing on exclusive high-profile projects such as the Millenáris Park and the new National Theatre, and using them to raise Fidesz’s own profile and its conception of progress, as I discussed in [Chapter 4](#). The Fidesz government had invested in symbolic capital, from the renovation of town halls to museums and exhibitions, while the opposition had its mind on refuting these symbolic gestures towards the nation. Ultimately, the sense of progress and nationhood would

show who the party believed were the people in whose interest democratic government is expected to rule.

Regarding the method and data in this chapter, I wanted to convey the atmosphere and testimonials of the early 2000s by drawing on my original field notes and the early drafts of my research on this period, while also communicating it for audiences 20 years later. In 2002 I was in Budapest for several months to undertake fieldwork, but my research focus was not political polarisation or party competition but the politics of memory as recorded through the transformation of street names and memorials. Reading four newspapers daily and engaging in conversations in Budapest and in a Hungarian village in the Pest region, travelling around the country, I was fascinated by the political strife during the elections and the ways in which it engaged and estranged Hungarians. Finally, I made it to political events prior to the elections when upon reading my notes I followed Hungarian sociologist György Csepeli's framework and had the chance to discuss ethnographic methods (or at least ethos) and readings with esteemed Hungarian scholars Gábor and Ágnes Kapitány. I have tried to convey this experience. My research and insights have been discussed retrospectively with colleagues in the political science community in the mid-2000s, and I have sought to bring insights from contemporary literature.

The symbols and slogans of the 2002 elections

In this section my aim is to show how national identity is constructed, manifested and reinforced in action. The two political camps tried to mobilise based on their concepts of nation. I will study this in the context of two campaign days in Budapest. Csepeli (1989, p. 40) argues that identity is activated in rituals and ceremonial occasions in which the 'goal is to demonstrate identity or stress other aspects connected to it'. He enumerates five requirements of an event which 'jointly induce the individual to define himself as a member of the in-group', which all featured in the two analysed events: scene, distinction among participants according to their roles, non-contingency of interactions, visual and auditory indicators of affiliation or identity, and regulated behaviour. In my study below, these categories help to indicate differences between the two parties or camps, their discourse, and the conception of nationhood.

The plan in this chapter was to show the presence of Fidesz in politics and in Budapest and to mobilise people for the election campaign in April 2002. From 13 April on, for a few weeks at least, Kossuth Square (Kossuth tér) became synonymous with the massive Fidesz-MDF rally, its Hungarian tricolour and *kokárda*. This was one way in which the party claimed or colonised the city for itself. In contrast, the Socialists claimed their own spaces and mobilised people in the City Park (Városliget).

The Városliget City Park was a characteristic choice for the MSZP and SZDSZ. As András Gerő has argued in his article on the political use of city spaces of Budapest in the 2002 elections, there were only two squares in Budapest in which a mass could gather: Kossuth tér and Hősök tere, as the park of the National Museum and the Szabadság tér were under construction (Gerő, 2002, p. 75). The former was used by the government parties and the use of the latter for mass gatherings had strong authoritarian and fascist connotations (as did Szabadság tér, where interwar irredentist statues had been proposed to be returned, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). Irredentism means that they were nostalgic for the lost territory to the point of revanche. The left opted for the parks, which perhaps reveals their elitist rather than mass character, as Gerő (2002) would indicate, but I argue that MSZP's choice expresses specifically the difference from the mass mobilisation of Fidesz. This is evident in other aspects of the gatherings.

Of the few parks in Budapest, they could have chosen Margit Island, which is accessible only via bridges, or the Népliget, People's Park, in the area in which the MSZP candidates had already won in the first round. The name sounds state-socialistic, but it originates from the late nineteenth century just like the Volksgarten in Vienna, handed over to the people of Budapest by the ruling Habsburgs (Pallas Nagylexikon). The City Park borders the areas of Budapest where the second-round elections would be decisive. And it was precisely the city, Budapest, led by Mayor Demszky of the SZDSZ, which voted left in the elections. The Városliget also evokes feelings of metropolitanism and progress, being the location of the 1896 Millennial Exhibition, one of Hungary's heydays. Városliget, referring to a territory, also fits the MSZP slogan 'Velünk az ország!'

As we will see below, the number of references to the Fidesz event was notable in the MSZP festival. In the next paragraphs I will analyse the events using Csepeli's categories.

Scene: Both events were cast in an open-access space. As the parties in government, the Fidesz-MDF chose the parliament square as their platform. This is not a sacral but rather a power- and politics-oriented square, argues András Gerő (2002). The left-wing parties instead chose Városliget, the City Park. ‘The more obvious the definition of the situation, the easier it is for the category of identity to be activated’, argues Csepeli (1989, p. 41). Perhaps on these grounds, political national identity was more readily evoked on Kossuth tér than in Városliget, where the event took the form of a popular festival in striking contrast to the right-wing coalition’s more politically oriented gathering.

Besides mobilising voters, the Kossuth tér event’s secondary aim was to show the left the power of the *polgári* movement. For a while at least, the event monopolised the name of the square, which came to symbolise the Fidesz-led gathering. From 13 April on, for at least few weeks Kossuth tér became synonymous with the massive Fidesz-MDF rally, its Hungarian tricolours and *kokárda*. This had another effect of claiming the historical heritage of the progressive 1848/49 revolutionary Lajos Kossuth, traditionally claimed by the MSZP. Now having lost the first round of the elections, the Hungarian right was on a revolutionary quest, reinforced by the association with Kossuth (László et al., 2003). They even sang the 1848 revolutionary ‘Kossuth Song’ calling people to the polls as to a revolution for ‘Hungarian freedom’.

Distinction among participants according to their roles: There were fairly clear divisions between the technical staff, the main speakers, entertainers and audience as well as passers-by in limited numbers in both cases. The main distinction was that the Fidesz-MDF brought high-profile supporters, such as sportspeople and artists, into the scene while the left-wing parties did not, perhaps as a response. In the Kossuth tér event people came by train and bus from the Hungarian towns and countryside, whereas people came to the more low-key MSZP-SZDSZ event mainly by local transport from parts of Budapest. The difference in the atmospheres, between that of a political rally and that of a festival, caused a bigger distinction between the acting PM and his team and their audience than between the opposition politicians and their audience.

Non-contingency of interactions: Both events had characteristically ceremonial features: speeches accompanied by never-ending applause, artistic entertainment, and the shouting of slogans and the waving of flags. To note the differences, the MSZP-SZDSZ festival

music was notable as non-aggressive historically anti-racist jazz, whereas Fidesz-MDF's choice was popular Hungarian music. In Városliget the atmosphere resembled that of a festival which people attend to be entertained by music, comedy and speeches and to consume sausages and beer, implicitly echoing the *májális* of the communist times and the peace times of the pre-1920 era. *Májális*, originally a pagan festival, was taken over as the May Day celebration by the workers' movement, and during the state-socialist era there was a parade on this day. Bart (1999, p. 111) points out that from the 1990s onwards, the First of May had taken on a more 'Sunday atmosphere', a relaxed mode which was reproduced in the Városliget gathering.

The people who went to Kossuth tér considered it to be an important event in terms of showing their strength and unity: it had a revolutionary mood. Here leafleting was popular, whereas in the Városliget event there was none of that, apart from the demand also to be considered as Hungarian and to be allowed to wear a *kokárda*. 'Please choose' was a classic Fidesz slogan, where the choice was between the old and the new (Kapitány, 2003, p. 82), and it is an important one when looking at the continuity of Fidesz discourse.

Visual and auditory indicators of affiliation or identity, and regulated behaviour: The Városliget gathering was marked by the lack and incoherence of symbols, apart from the *májális* feeling. Near to the stage there were a couple of SZDSZ flags, along with a purple umbrella, and some people wore red paper carnations or self-made pins supporting either of the parties. This contrasted with the uniformity of the crowds on Kossuth tér, where the presence of the *kokárda* and national flags dominated the scene.

Both events drew a huge crowd of people and were the main events of the respective campaigns. The election campaigns of 2002 showed that Hungarians can get excited by national rhetoric on any side of the political spectrum. Besides mobilising a visibly agitated and nationalistic crowd in Kossuth tér, the Fidesz-MDF election rhetoric also evoked a reaction in the leftist gathering. The accusations of being betrayers of the nation (Tóth & Török, 2002) and the mobilisation of the 'national civic front' against the 'communists', as the MSZP was branded in the some of the leaflets of the right, were present in MSZP prime-ministerial candidate Péter Medgyessy's speech in Városliget.

A single line, 'We too are Hungarians', evoked a huge wave of shouts of '*magyarok vagyunk*' ('We are Hungarians'). Medgyessy

continued: ‘and we wear the *kokárda* when we want – and take it off when we want’. The latter referred to Orbán’s recent call for people to remove the *kokárda* on the eve of the elections to minimise the incidence of election fraud, which made a further claim on the status of the *kokárda* as a party-political symbol (Népszabadság, 19 April 2002). These references to nationalism were received with huge enthusiasm. Thus, while the right attempted to monopolise national feeling and mobilise a crowd with it, references to the nation were present in both campaigns.

Writing about Hungarian nationalism, Csepeli (1989, p. 58) refers to a study from the 1970s according to which national shame was rejected by 93 per cent of the Hungarians, while fewer acknowledged national pride (82 per cent). Csepeli argues revealingly: ‘The affective element “pride” of Hungarian national identity is sensitive to negative stimuli of attack’. The issue here was that, from opposition, Orbán effectively denied the right to national pride – in this identification with a symbol that glorifies the 1848 demand for national independence.

To sum up, analysis of the election campaign in Budapest demonstrates how the two political camps manifested their positions in different ways. The left organised its event in direct contrast to that organised by the right. Yet when the right claimed a monopoly over signifiers of the nation such as the *kokárda*, the left was eager to claim them back. This contributed to the continuous politics of articulation over the frontier, which also simultaneously constructed the frontier. The final floating signifier became the *kokárda*, through the question of whether one would wear the *kokárda* or not. But could it be worn by those still not voting for Fidesz? Orbán’s claiming of the *kokárda* on the eve of the polls was seen as being problematic not only among the small parties but also among those who thought that the Spring of Nations in Hungary signified not only ethnic nationhood but also a Hungarian struggle.

To capture the distinction in the moods, we can present the contrast as follows:

$$Fidesz \text{ Mobilisation} = \text{Nationhood}^{\text{Revolution}} + \text{Communist}^{\text{Threat}}$$

$$MSZP \text{ Mobilisation} = (\text{State} \equiv \text{People})^{\text{Togetherness}} + \text{Fidesz}^{\text{Shame}}$$

Country and nation: the slogans and their connotations

The MSZP sought to draw a contrast with the nationalist rhetoric associated with recent events in Fidesz foreign policy, such as the criticism of the ‘Beneš decrees’ that had affected Hungarians’ status in Czechoslovakia and affected Hungarians’ property ownership in Slovakia, and the row caused by the Status Law, which gave members of the Hungarian national minority from the neighbouring countries preferential treatment over others from the region (Purvis, 2002; Tóth & Török, 2002). In 2002 the Socialists again appeared to be modernising social democrats, but the images of the reformers now had a stain. Negative campaigning included the Fidesz campaign referring to the communist past and the opening of the Terror House Memorial/Museum. My notes reveal that the leader of the MSZP László Kovács wanted to rename the House of Terror (or torture) the Museum of Remembrance and Reconciliation if the MSZP gained victory in the elections (BBC Monitoring, 24 February 2002).

The ‘Hanging Speech’ by László Kövér (2002) became one of the key points of polarisation, as it propagated a clear division into two completely different groups where the ‘ethical choice’ was to choose between the two camps, and he reminded Hungarians that as ‘Russians are no longer in this country’ they were free to choose politicians. He made it clear that the political others could not be trusted to govern. However, what his speech became famous for was his attitude to the present – which was somewhat unfortunate, as Fidesz had been ruling for four years – and his words were taken out of context and used against him by the MSZP politician Ferenc Gyurcsány, whose own speech is the topic of [Chapter 7](#). Kövér (2002) said: ‘So if this is what we think of ourselves, let us go to the basement, find a nice strong rope, and a relatively strong beam and a nail, and let us hang ourselves.’ The speech encapsulated the polarisation and negative campaigning but also the disappointment with and strong need to change the present. This was a reason why the past was so sought after.

This speech was in contrast with Orbán’s 2002 election campaign, which witnessed a populist attempt to unite Hungarians and especially the middle classes (citizens as *polgárok*, the bourgeoisie) through the concept of a cultural nation and a sense of progress – progress (Orbán, 2002, 3 February) – or love and coming together (Tomikgb, 2002).

This explains the relative lack of emphasis on nation, which was downplayed with the concept *polgár*. Fuelling the enemy image, the government parties conducted a scare campaign about the economic shock therapy years of the left-wing government of 1994–98 and the memory of ‘those communists’, as the MSZP was branded, in pre-election leaflets.

More than any other aspect in the MSZP’s rhetoric, the stress on the ten million Hungarians and the political unit *ország*, country, as the basis for the concept of nation would emphasise rule in the interest of the citizens of Hungary. The slogan ‘Velünk az ország’ (‘The country is with us’) has a range of references. First, it refers to the way in which the country was not with Fidesz. This implies that Fidesz had divided it or ignored certain parts of it, and that now the Socialists would integrate the country. The existing exclusion, as the attempt to reclaim ‘the country’ indicates, refers to the idea that Fidesz had concentrated power in its own elite. Second, the emphasis on ‘country’ indicates that civic Hungary, rather than the Hungarian nation, was the primary reference for Socialists. This stresses the importance of the state borders



The 2002 campaign was visually interesting and remains widely discussed in Hungary. The Hungarian orange remained a parody promotion tool for the anti-Fidesz MSZP, who argued for security. The Fidesz campaign called for following the head rather than what is said. SZDSZ said ‘enough with the football’, criticising the government’s symbolic politics and calling for investments in hospitals. All images reproduced with permission from the collection of the Archives of Political History and Trade Unions at the Institute of Political History.

and Hungarian citizens, as opposed to the emphasis on the cultural nation or the post-1920 ‘Trianon Hungary’ on the part of the conservative parties. Third, it plays against negative conceptions of nationlessness and cosmopolitanism, attributed to the MSZP by the Hungarian right. Conversely, since the country was with the Socialists, the MSZP was also with the country, i.e. Hungarians throughout Hungary, not just in the cities.

While the two camps were seen as far from each other in some terms, their competition over key signifiers demonstrates how close to the frontier they stayed in their articulations of their positions and, crucially for that aim, the frontier. The two sides necessarily engaged with each other, as they needed the other to construct their identity and unity. This will be further highlighted in the [next chapter](#), in which I will study frontier-building politics around the question of nationhood in the context of the referendum of December 2004.

The symbols and slogans of the elections reveal two distinct conceptions of the past and the present, and of nationhood. These were aimed at creating unity within the camp or the party (Kapitány, 2003). Keeping with the logic of the post-communist polarisation, the right-wing parties campaigned against the return of the past – against the returning ‘mummies’ of state socialism (seen as Stalinist/Leninist) and the neoliberal Bokros packages of the previous left-wing government (Boros, 2002, p. 267). Therefore, the slogan of Fidesz, ‘*Jövő elkezdődött*’ (‘The future has begun’), can be seen as referring to the continuation – building a second term in office but at the same time rejecting the ‘communist’ past. This was only the start. Later this idea of a real start, a beginning, became part of Fidesz’s triumphant 2010 election victory, which implied again a revolution to end something that still remained the *ancien régime*. The myth of the revolution (discussed in [Chapter 9](#)) was strongly present.

Even if the emphasis on the 15 million Hungarians had been the watchword of the civic coalition (Fidesz-MDF) in the elections of 2002 and especially its second round, they did not manage to attract the majority of the votes. In the second round, the discourse of the Fidesz-MDF coalition filled the space left by the MIÉP and the FKgP, which had failed to pass the 5 per cent threshold in the first round of the election. Fidesz focused on their strongholds in the countryside and the traditional Hungarian values such as the family and nation, which had previously held less interest, in a future-oriented campaign. In his

speech on Kossuth tér, after the first round, and knowing that he would have to secure a majority of the votes in the forthcoming round, Orbán (13 April 2002) argued in front of thousands of people that in the *polgári jövő*, civic future, the homeland would be more than the Hungary of ten million. ‘Coalition and co-operation is a good and important thing, but little. We want more: national unity. ... Co-operation turns into national unity when everybody knows how to say yes [to the current government].’ However, their concept of progress, which Bozóki (2008) called ‘civic radicalism’, shows that this national unity has its limits. It could be captured as follows:

$$\text{Polgári Hungary} = \text{Future}^{\text{Nation}} + \text{Past}^{\text{Non-Hungarian}}$$

The defining of Hungarians in relation to fixed borders benefited the MSZP. In fact, its opposition to the Status Law was also downright nationalist, making it clear that the party did not want 23 million Romanians in the Hungarian labour market. This was something that Ferenc Gyurcsány particularly emphasised. Paradoxically, it resonated with ideas of restricting access to state benefits to Hungarian citizens only, while the policies of the MSZP-SZDSZ government had eroded, and would continue to erode, the welfare system. In any case, this was one of the reasons I did not want to argue in the early 2000s that there was only ethno-nationalism and cosmopolitan civic nationalism in Hungary: ethnic emphasis was clear, but the numbers tied the floating signifier of Hungary and Hungarians in either a state or an ethnos-bound way.

During the first round, the Socialist candidate for prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, sought to bring a pragmatic tone to the proceedings. Attacked about ignoring Hungarians in neighbouring countries, Medgyessy explained that he wished to be the PM of the ‘ten million’ Hungarians but would also take care of the ‘15 million’. Although technocrat Medgyessy was the polar opposite of Orbán, he adopted this language to make the point that the country should not be polarised. At the same time, he was referring to polarisation itself, reproducing the frontier, constituting his camp through the other once again.

My field notes indicate that the SZDSZ campaign stressed security, guarantees and know-how, in an amusing but perhaps patronising way, though in retrospect with an interesting take on gender roles. In the election posters a doctor’s bag was pictured, whereas in the TV

commercial a father changed a baby's orange (Fidesz's colour) nappy to a new blue one.

In this period there was a lot of discussion about the way in which Fidesz used cultural policy to promote its own exclusive vision and how this *polgári* discourse was a synonym for neo-feudalism, through which some ancient, even aristocratic, traditions were sought by Fidesz to generate a progressive upper middle class. In a sense, the left had managed to gather the masses behind it with a campaign run from the position of opposition which could also be seen as populist, making reference to the nation, the country and the people rather than the ruling elite. This was a similar strategy to that emerging on the right in 2005 around the concept of the *magyar emberek* ('Hungarian human beings' as opposed to the people as a folk), to which I will refer below.

The election results: deep polarisation in 2002

In 2002 Hungarians first went to the polls on 7 April, to vote in the single-seat constituencies and for a countrywide list; in the constituencies, if no candidate were to secure a simple majority of the votes during the first round, a second round of voting would take place two weeks later, on 21 April. Nine parties ran a national list. I will focus on the largest parties: the right-wing coalition Fidesz-MDF and the left-wing opposition MSZP and SZDSZ, which united for the second round of the elections. According to opinion poll predictions, the main parties – Fidesz-MDF and the MSZP – were neck and neck in February. By March Fidesz-MDF had a slight lead over the Socialists. The intensive campaigning and the dominance of the election in the mass media led to a turnout of 71 per cent at the first round, the highest during the post-communist period. Of the single-member district candidates, 45 were elected directly during the first round, compared with only one in 1998.

During the second round the campaigning intensified, with the remaining parties organising themselves even more clearly along two fronts – the left front and the *polgári* government front – after defeat in the first round, following an opposition campaign. The Socialists' TV ads included negative campaigns on families uncovering the state of economy (MSZP Media, 2002a) and serene statesmanlike Medgyessy calling for national unity (MSZP Media, 2002b).

Turnout was still high – 68 per cent. Ultimately the MSZP gained 42 per cent of the votes while Fidesz-MDF gained 41 per cent. Crucially, both blocs were able to celebrate a victory after the second round: the Socialists and the Free Democrats because they had gained a simple majority for their coalition, Fidesz-MDF because they had narrowed the gap and won the second round. This created ideal conditions for maintaining the polarisation.

Both concepts, the ten million and the 15 million, were present in the speeches of the party leaders on the eve of the election. On election night outgoing PM Orbán constructed the frontier again in his speech, arguing that ‘as was heard from the headquarters of another party’, the future of Hungarians would be the future not of the ten million but the 15 million Hungarians. This kept alive the idea that the elections had been a contestation between two concepts of nationhood. For Orbán at the moment of his defeat, Medgyessy’s post-election acknowledgement of the existence of the 15 million Hungarians meant that his Civic Bloc’s campaign had been successful – at least in putting forward its conception of the 15 million. While it marked the *différance* (difference and continuity, Derrida, 1982), it sought to speak to the other side with respect.

Ultimately, by a small majority, the citizens of Hungary sided with the left. They voted for a government to take care of their affairs, rejecting the cultural national identity and the sense of progress which focused on the best members of the nation, the *polgárok*. As a floating signifier with reference to the nation, Medgyessy’s MSZP managed to occupy ‘country’ and therefore reject the ethno-nationalist claims of Fidesz without giving up completely on their claims regarding Hungary – and Hungarians.

Trying to conceptually unite the two major opposition parties’ discourse, the formula can be expressed as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Left} = & \text{Country of 10M Hungarians}^{\text{Return To Normalcy}} \\ & + \text{Ethno-national Hungary}^{\text{Neofeudalism}} \end{aligned}$$

The election results were also interpreted on the right as selfishness from the Hungarians who lived within the current borders of the country.

The elections of 2002 clearly indicated the way in which polarisation was performed, acted out and created in the political campaigns. The contestation between the two camps was organised around different

claims on nationhood, and around claiming other universal constructs, such as the country or the future. When the figures of the ten and the 15 million were taken as part of the campaign, space was also opened for fundamental differentiation – a single frontier between the camps.

For the smaller political parties, the contestation between the two camps was of course a challenge. In their rhetoric they stressed the frontier. Analysing the election slogans, sociologist Ágnes Kapitány (2003, p. 82) argues that the small parties rejected polarisation. The Workers' Party claimed to represent the workers and the MIÉP 'real Hungarians'. The Centrum party devised a formula in which it was on one side and the big parties on the other (saying that 'besides vegetables', i.e. the orange of Fidesz and the carnation of the Socialists, 'there are other alternatives'). In doing so they still repeated the idea of polarisation, except that the frontier was now shifted to that between them and the two big parties, and therefore, there were only two alternatives.

As a small party in 1990 this was Fidesz's rhetorical strategy for the election, and it still used the bipolar us/them rhetoric, which contributed to the situation of polarisation (Kapitány, 2003, p. 82). It is vital to note that this aspect of Fidesz rhetoric had not changed. It was a bipolarising party from the start that made it look bigger than its original size. But the current small parties did not manage to challenge the polarised frontier. The above account shows how the frontier was created to a large extent by making contrasts, but also by making claims that would cross the frontier and make it visible. Importantly, it reveals how Fidesz had an oppositional, polarising discourse, strongly marking the frontiers between 'us' and 'them'. The Socialists played with this discourse by opposing it or reclaiming elements that Fidesz had adopted for itself.

Conclusions

Going through the slogans of the time reveals an emphasis on that political frontier that time and again was constructed between the two opposing camps. The Fidesz and MSZP slogans contested country and nation, seeking to demonstrate the difference from 'we' the people. At that time, as suggested by supervisors and discussants, I wondered whether we could use two conceptions of nationhood – the civic and the ethnic – as the easy reference out of the complexities of the struggle, but that did not quite satisfy me. It would have sedimented the

frontier itself where the right sought to sediment it: those for and those against the nation.

The election campaign of Fidesz and the MSZP put forward alternative concepts of nationhood and progress, which are important for my discussion of later events in the next section. The concept of the nation promoted by the largest parties was tied in to that of progress and national interests. The absence, or one-sidedness, of the national question in the public discourse during communism complicates the discussion of the nation. Even if there was a notion of great socialist patriotism uniting the citizens (Verdery, 1991), ‘generations grew up in the belief that political and not “national” organs were acting in their place and for their interest’, Csepeli (1989, pp. 103, 110, 108) argues. This was the basis for the MDF’s post-communist emphasis on the Hungarian minority abroad (Bart, 1999, p. 182). ‘Progress’ had generally positive connotations in Hungarian politics, where for instance there was consensus among the main parties that the goal for the country was accession to the EU. However, the parties had very different ideas about the meaning of progress and preferential policies.

This numbers game is an example of a debate in which there cannot be right or wrong answers: both can be true, but they cannot be supported at the same time with the same status and claims, reaching an understanding of political positions in which one faction has a legitimate claim from their perspective and the other from theirs and only the popular vote can prove them right or wrong. This kind of understanding of agonist or liberal democracy was still missing in the post-communist context, as claims were made on the basis of what would be legitimate and what not. If the other is illegitimate as an opponent, it is no opponent at all but a political enemy.

Furthermore, the numbers game reverted from discussing policies relevant to most of the voters to the identitarian question of ethnic responsibility for Hungarians across the borders, or the need to preserve the territorial integrity, which resonated with welfare chauvinist undertones. Clearly, there were two political agendas, one with the ever more numerous *polgári* of Hungary in mind rather than attention to the welfare state.

In terms of populist dynamics, then, we can see that competing populism was palpable. More substantive debates at the policy level were overshadowed by the identification between the two conceptions – or their demonising views. Of course, this is part of modern politics,

but somehow the ways in which the differentiation spread across the society as the primary identification was significantly different from what was being felt in most democracies. The crucial difference was that it was invested with the affective reference to the illegitimacy of the other.

This chapter has worked through the election campaign in Budapest, at a moment when actually Fidesz was spreading in the countryside. The 1998–2002 period had been about the New Hungary and the influence of Fidesz had spread across the country. For a liberal party in Hungary it would have been a practically impossible task, as liberal discourse was strong in Budapest and othered in this sense. In contrast the Socialists had strong networks in all of the villages. However, many did not appreciate the previous power-holders, and anti-communist discourse was strong. These factors had high symbolic value in the regional Fidesz-voting cities and in Budapest: memorials of the refurbished main squares mark their erection, the era of Fidesz.

But the nostalgia for the Kádár era was still something that in 2002 the Socialists were able to tap into nationwide. The next chapters show how Fidesz went for nationwide appeal, moving from the *polgári* and a somewhat elitist position. And at the same time the budget-conscious Socialists found it difficult to deliver the public services that the Kádárist nostalgia would have expected them to deliver to the people nationwide. Even during the Fidesz era, anti-capitalist rhetoric was combined with neoliberal pro-business policies.

CHAPTER 7

Orbán's change of shirt: the oppositional challenge

In this chapter we explore how the Fidesz discourse shifted from the *polgári* position to a more oppositional, fringe populist dynamic. As the [previous chapter](#) testifies, the key themes of Orbán's campaign were the future-looking embourgeoisement of Hungary and unification of the nation, but the discourse was swiftly abandoned after the elections (Horváth, 2006). Statesman-style politics was over, as the 'nation cannot be in the opposition'. Orbán opted for a route that would contest the whole system that had impeded his future. He shifted from his statesman look to a checked shirt and started to mobilise popular discontent. He resorted to the extra-parliamentary tools available. For several years Viktor Orbán did not step into the Hungarian parliament. The regime that was established was later called a plebiscitarian democracy (Körösényi & Gyulai, 2020). The path described in what follows demonstrates the building of such a regime.

The fact that in June 2002, two months after the elections, the Socialist prime minister Péter Medgyessy (b. 1942) was revealed to have worked for the secret service in the 1970s and 1980s changed the dynamic for the Socialists. Their trustworthiness was put in doubt, and the anti-communist discourse of Fidesz was again able to gain ground. This revelation was also news to the liberal coalition partners. We do not explore this in more detail in this chapter, but it affected the discursive field in the period. In May 2004 Hungary joined the EU, with nine other countries, after a positive referendum in 2003. The European elections the following year were the first in which Hungarians could vote for their representatives. The national interest dominated, and Fidesz won 47.4 per cent of the vote and 12 of the 24 seats. The Socialists received nine seats with their 34.5 per cent of the vote and

Free Democrats two with 7.7 per cent. The MDF gained over 5 per cent of the vote and one seat. Fidesz turned this into a referendum about nation and against Medgyessy. Having seen the results, the then sport minister Ferenc Gyurcsány contested Medgyessy's ability to beat Orbán in 2006. Furthermore, the junior partner the SZDSZ ended up in a corruption scandal. All of this opened space for Orbán to mobilise. The question arose as to whether or not the small parties would still exist in 2006.

Overview

This chapter explores the way in which Fidesz discourse transformed after 2002. The referenda and the presidential elections offered an interesting way to mobilise while in opposition. What was taking place in Fidesz rhetoric was something that may be helpful for all of these theoretical conversations. As discussed in the previous chapters, the party wanted to make a distinction between the nation and the people by moving on to the concept of the *polgári* future. As we remember from previous chapters, Fidesz had already decided to dress up smartly in the early 1990s, and by the 2002 elections they were still in suits, standing for an embourgeois *polgári* party. The party wanted to generate a new middle class that could take on political representation. In 2002 it realised that appealing for this would not be enough to secure a majority. What the contest was about was an extra-parliamentary mobilisation and the generation of a new consciousness. This took place via mobilisation through referenda, consultations and civic circles. One of the tools of extra-parliamentary mobilisation was the presidential elections held by the Hungarian parliament.

There is another reason to cover the presidential elections of 2005. Crucially for my analysis of what polarisation implies, the event raises the question of how any ideas or critique may enter the camps of the polarised system, which rejects any contestation. This process reveals the downplaying of political frontiers within the camps. It demonstrates how the polarised frontier generates a forced consensus behind it. The dual-hegemonic polarisation is one of two consensuses. In the case of the presidential elections, consensus was forced upon the right, whereas there was a breakdown of consensus on the side of the government parties, which nevertheless kept the internal party line free of visible conflicts. Instead of engaging in deep empirical analysis with

particular materials, the method in this chapter is more discourse-theoretical and revolves around the two events that were most important for the subversive anti-parliamentary practice of Fidesz.

The discursive transformation of Fidesz

One might argue that the defeat of Fidesz was caused by the strong emphasis on nationhood: did the stress on the 15 million Hungarians and the nation backfire so that Fidesz finally lost because of this? I argue that the reality is not so simple: it has more to do with a failure of a sense of progress, combined with a strong nationalist rhetoric. Bozóki (1997a, pp. 27, 29) attributes Fidesz's image change prior to the 1994 elections as one of the reasons for the Socialist Party's victory. Fidesz was a revolutionary anti-system party, and it was hugely popular among the youth from the start (Fowler 2004a; Szabó 2006). Established in March 1988, Fidesz grounded itself on the myths of the national revolutions: the system of reference. Viktor Orbán began the speech that gained him national fame at the reburial of Imre Nagy in June 1989 by stating: 'Since the Russian occupation and communist dictatorship started 40 years ago, there has been only once an open chance, only once enough courage and strength, to undertake the aims set in 1848: national independence and political freedom'. He also questioned the claims made by politicians-to-be representing the heritage of Nagy. 'No one believes that the party-controlled state would change by itself', he stressed, calling for a revolution (Benziger, 2000).

Also, in 2002 a minor transformation could be observed when Fidesz decided to campaign in the streets and use the *kokárda*. Accounting for the failure of nation-focused parties, Bozóki (1994b, p. 29) argues that Csurka's nationalist rhetoric failed to gain ground in the early 1990s due to his inability 'to address the middle class with his proposals'. In Hungary, unlike in the Balkans, the Socialist Party emphasised modernisation. One of the decisive factors was political strategy. The MSZP managed, in 1994,

to connect the hope and instinctive attraction of the public to 'strong sound' and expertise, with the interests of the party members and their satellites. Though MSZP never promised that bread would be as cheap as in the socialist era, neither did it do anything either to dissolve the existing illusion.

By contrast, Orbán's 2002 election campaign witnessed a populist (in logic or form) attempt to unite Hungarians, and especially the middle classes (citizens as *polgárok*, the bourgeoisie), through the concept of a cultural nation and a sense of progress. This explains the relative lack of emphasis on nation, which was downplayed in favour of the concept *polgár*.

After the 2002 elections, the habitus of Orbán changed. The suits that symbolised the future vision of civic-progressive Fidesz people as winners rather than losers were tossed out. This occurred as a new generation of the masses were ready to be fooled (from the Fidesz perspective) by the Socialists. The contrast between the Kossuth tér PM-led gathering and Városliget party that I witnessed in 2002, explained in the [previous chapter](#), would now be transformed. Orbán did not set foot in the parliament for two years. The political contestations witnessed in this chapter took place outside the parliament or supporting extra-parliamentary groups.

Even if in some ways the two camps were seen as being far from each other, their competition over the same key signifiers demonstrates how close to the frontier they stayed in articulating their positions and, crucially for that aim, the frontier. This shows how the two sides necessarily engage with each other, since they need the other to construct their identity in its unity. This was further highlighted in the context of the referendum of December 2004.

The observation made before was that nation became a floating signifier, occupied by both the left and the right, so that the contestation did not hold, and the signifier had to be changed: *polgári-nemzeti* would no longer work. So, what Fidesz sought to include in the signifying chain was the idea of *népi*. This term was at odds with *polgári* – as that had been a forward-looking term for the people slightly better off than the rest. The term *népi* would include not merely those who could afford to look like Fidesz supporters and representatives who had been accused of neo-feudalism, but also the rest. And now with the left in office, they would appear as the men in suits –enabling Fidesz to communicate and mobilise mistrust in the government more easily. Instead of presenting themselves as competing elites, Orbán changing his outfit, and could claim to represent the wider spectrum.

Furthermore, in terms of claiming total control of the spectre of national representations in Hungary the party would need not only to occupy the position of the nation but also that of the people. The

discourse of peopleism and nationalism would intertwine with the logic of populism.

In terms of the formula, and the adjacent chains of equivalence, the Fidesz discourse looked like this:

Fidesz Until 2002 =

*(Nemzet ≡ Polgári aka National & Bourgeois)^{Righteous} +
(Liberal ≡ Left ≡ Communist)^{Distrust}*

*Fidesz After 2002 = (Népi ≡ Nemzeti aka Nation & People)^{Trust} +
Government^{Distrust}*

As the political other was not legitimate (to rule), the confrontation had to be staged outside the parliament, on the streets, where the necessary potential voters were.

As Sándor Kurtán and Gabriella Ilonszki (2004, p. 1018) argue, Fidesz became more integrative after 2003; in discourse-theoretical terms one can see how it focused on the articulation of chains of equivalence and difference between the elements within its own discourse rather than confrontation with the other. Nevertheless, as we know, every system also needs to mark its frontiers: the 2004 referendum offered the first chance for this since 2002. Despite the failure of the proposition, for Fidesz the event provided a chance for mobilisation and publicity which it might be able to exploit in the following parliamentary elections in 2006.

A new style of mobilising

Conflicts started to emerge for the conservative side of the political spectrum as it appeared that their deepening would not bring further votes, Kurtán and Ilonszki (2004, p. 1018) argued. Fidesz 'stopped blaming the average citizen for "collaborating" with the communists in the former regime or for voting for "post-communists" now. Also, it stopped the mobilisation strategy that it sought to follow after the 2002 elections with the help of the "civic circles"' (Kurtán & Ilonszki, 2004, p. 1018).

Béla Greskovits (2020) has studied the way in which the civic circles movement boosted Fidesz from summer 2002. The basis for this was already there, but this was the anti-parliamentary way of mobilising, including working within the church. Greskovits indicates that

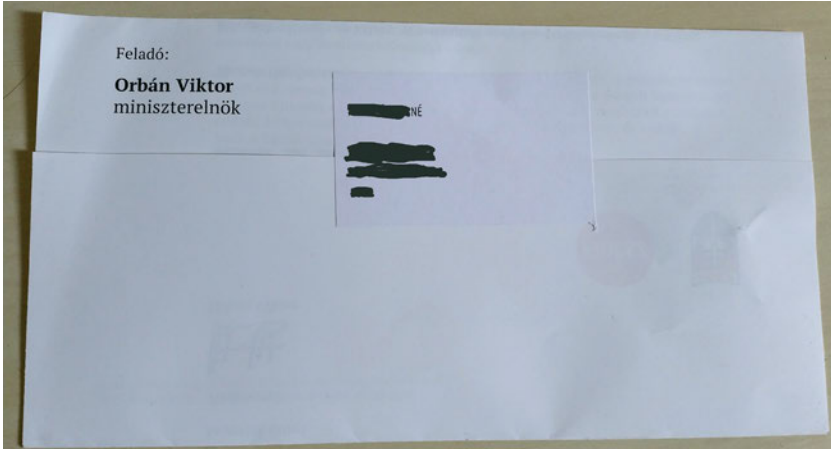
the events in 2002–06 took place mainly in Budapest and the metropolitan area. The usually unregistered ‘circles cooperated with hundreds of other, officially registered church-bound, patriotic, professional, cultural, and local-level political organisations, and many small and medium-size private businesses’ (Greskovits, 2020, p. 252). They had to register with a central database and the watchdog the Democracy Centre, and became internetworked through social media sites. Clearly the mobilisation was not as intensive as prior to the elections, but it remained a key theme in Fidesz rhetoric. ‘Their appetite for contention is explained by their disappointment with the outcome of the 2002 election and mistrust in the rulers,’ Grekovits’ (2020, p. 253) data indicates.

There are clear conservative underpinnings to this strategy, engaging with religious and patriotic institutions and identities. Alongside this mobilisation Fidesz began to emphasise the concept of the people rather than the nation. Already since the elections of 2002 it had undergone significant changes. It appears to have been trying to create a hegemonic front by emphasising particular identifications and struggles (of women, youth and workers) as well as permitting dual party membership, which targeted both MDF and FKgP membership. Fidesz’s organisational attributes changed after a two-year break: Orbán returned to the party leadership, a small presidium replaced a larger body, and a larger body with non-deliberative functions was put in place in parallel as an instrument to integrate formerly overlooked interests – women, youth and workers – in a party criticised for its ‘closed and middle-class nature’ (Kurtán and Ilonszki, 2004, p. 1018). In this instance they engaged with the party’s own discourse rather than merely contesting that of the others.

For Fidesz the referendum was a way to carry out its constant mobilisation, begun in 2002. Some concluded that Fidesz had lessened this mobilisation. Kurtán and Ilonszki (2004, p. 1081) argued:

After the conflictual former (election) year an understanding seemed to develop in 2003 particularly on the conservative side of the political spectrum that the deepening of the conflicts would not bring further votes. Thus, in this vein, the conservative opposition (Fidesz) began to use a new style.

The 2004 referendum offered the first chance for frontier-marking since 2002. Despite the failure of the proposition, for Fidesz the event provided a chance for mobilisation and publicity which it might be



'Sender: Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister'. Directly addressing the people became Orbán's policy: in the opposition it was through national consultations that reached Hungarians by mail; in power, such as here in 2018, citizens received post directly from the Prime Minister.

able to exploit in the following parliamentary elections in 2006. The only reason it would fail would be if mobilisation fatigue crept in and the people rejected the party that had been visible for so long, whereas in the previous Hungarian elections the opposition parties' advantage had been their freshness and anti-elitist position, which the left managed to use to its advantage in 2002. The collection of the 200,000 signatures kept alive the presence of the opposition on the streets of Hungarian cities and towns and reminded people of the polarised political battle (Kurtán & Ilonszki, 2004, p. 1018).

The work was pursued in the civic circles, which at the same time were an institutionalising and mobilising tool for Fidesz power. Greskovits's (2020) data shows that majority of these activities in 2002–06 happened in the greater Budapest area. The discursive appeal registered across the country. While in the catchment area of the metropolis there was more competition, the countryside, apart from the industrial towns, was very fertile ground for Fidesz anyway. Referenda were a way to reach the wider populations. The presidential elections enabled Fidesz to generate a deeper connection with the civil society – or at least some of it.

The referendum of December 2004: protecting the frontier

After the election defeat of Fidesz, the World Association of Hungarians called for a referendum that would initiate discussions in the parliament over the possible extension of Hungarian citizenship rights to ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries. This initiative was backed by Fidesz, which saw here an opportunity to keep the *polgári* community active and push forward reforms, even while in opposition. After the civic organisation backed by Fidesz managed to gather the 200,000 signatures required to demand a referendum, it was held on 5 December 2004. In fact it was based on two questions taken up by the opposition: the extension of citizenship rights to ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring countries, which had been taken up by Fidesz; and the privatisation of hospitals, which had been taken up by the ex-communist party (Workers' Party, Munkáspárt).

The exact questions posed were: (1) 'Do you agree that public health service providers and hospitals should remain in state and local government ownership, and that parliament should therefore repeal the law which is inconsistent with this?' and (2) 'Do you think parliament should pass a law allowing Hungarian citizenship with preferential naturalisation to be granted, at their request, to those who claim to have Hungarian nationality, do not live in Hungary and are not Hungarian citizens, and who prove their Hungarian nationality by means of a "Hungarian identity card" issued pursuant to article 19 of act lxii/2001 or in another way to be determined by the law which is to be passed?' (ILO, 2024).

The 'national question', or the question regarding the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, continued to play a role in Hungarian politics even after 2002. This was made certain by the opposition, which saw its chance to maintain its discourse and function in politics by pushing the issue and expressing paranoia regarding the way in which the minority might be otherwise forgotten by the government. Under the Fidesz government (1998–2002) the parliament passed a 'Status Law' regarding the Hungarian minorities, which granted Hungarian speakers in neighbouring countries special rights in Hungary.

As could have been anticipated, given the prominence of the national question, the biggest debate was on the extension of citizenship rights.

In fact, both questions failed to be passed. The closest to the 25 per cent required for passing a referendum was the Workers' Party's question on the privatisation of hospitals, which had often been ignored in the public discussion on the referendum. This policy was quietly defended by the Socialist-Liberal government, and thus they could also be seen as the losers of the referendum.

The Socialists backed the proposal once it contained a conception of nationality based on self-declaration, rather than blood ties (Kántor et al., 2004; Laihonen & Nyssönen, 2002). The Hungarians' World Organisation declared it a question of conscience.

Nevertheless, there were no winners or losers. The low participation rate of 37 per cent showed that the people were not interested in the national question, even if, or perhaps because, this had been on the agenda since the first parliament. Whatever the voters may have wanted to express with their votes, either cast or uncast, was lost in political rhetoric. The 2004 referendum revealed the weakness of the opposition party. It managed to mobilise only 19 per cent of eligible voters, whereas 18 per cent came to the polls to oppose the double citizenship, although this small number fell far short of the required 25 per cent. More efforts were needed.

Generally, the political scientists' and sociologists' response was that the theme was still valid and would be debated as an election theme in 2006. In responding thus they sided with the political elites by not questioning the previously formulated political priorities. Some even argued that the people were still too inexperienced to participate in referenda (Hack 2004; Török & Fricz 2004). This was perhaps true of the 1990 referendum on the form of presidential elections, which reached only 10 per cent of the electorate (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)), but the referenda on NATO and EU memberships in 1997 and 2003, with almost half of eligible voters turning up, revealed that Hungarians do participate and vote, on even less contestable and inevitable issues.

There were competing claims regarding participation and, finally, significantly fewer people went to the polls. Whereas the Socialist premier opposed the poll and sided with the no camp, the right wing urged people to vote on patriotic grounds. However, many Hungarians also thought that it was not the duty of citizens but of the parliament to decide on 'giving' citizenship to citizens of other countries. László Lengyel (Népszabadság Online, 2004) brought up the lack of appeal of nation politics in his comment in the Slovak *Pravda*: 'The

referendum also showed how the anti-Trianon slogan managed to draw to the polls 1.4 million people from the 8 million eligible Hungarian voters. It is not enough for winning elections. Hungary is not a really nationalistic country.' Extending Lengyel's comment, I would stress that the national is a sign of the de facto weakness of the mobilising force of the 'national question'.

Orbán declared that the two yeses won; SZDSZ figurehead Gábor Kuncze argued that there was little participation, but that the case might show the bipolar division among the people; and MDF leader Ibolya Dávid stressed that the dual citizenship issue had to be dealt with. Socialist leader Gyurcsány claimed that the referenda had failed but that there was a need for 'responsible nation politics', and that he would govern responsibly regarding the 15 million Hungarians (Népszabadság Online, 2004). Not wanting to back down in their plans for privatising the hospitals, or to draw attention to this issue, the Socialists' resolution in the post-referendum analysis was that the national question was important after all. This was highlighted by MSZP chair István Hiller in the post-election themed TV programme on the Hungarian state channel ('Nap kelte' on MTV, 6 December 2004). The Socialists followed the Fidesz discourse, claiming that the issue of the cross-border Hungarians was an important one to look at. By doing this they ignored their minor defeat on the other question of the referendum.

While a justified interpretation of the referendum result was that the government had won over the opposition's challenge, this was obviously not the way in which the reading of the results went in Hungary. For reasons of political frontier-building, its simultaneous questioning and sedimentation, Gyurcsány did not declare a victory and denounce the right and its focus on the national question. In sum, the referendum revoked potentially revisionist rhetoric, and gave victory to 'Europe' as well as the nation. It marked the continuation and importance of the politics of nationhood in Hungary, for the political parties.

The discursive results of the referendum

The referendum had both numerical and discursive results. In the post-referendum rhetoric, the victory of nationhood over other discursive elements was clear. The rhetoric prior to the elections even combined extreme far-right forms of nationalism with Europeanism. It was

argued across the English-language online media commentary that Europeanism had beaten nationalism in the December 2004 referendum (Weinstein, 2004). Nevertheless, 'Europe' was also used as a symbol and motivation on the side of the pro-dual-citizenship campaign. One of the claims for solidarity in the referendum posters was that dual citizenship would bring EU citizenship even to ethnic Hungarians across the border. The yes camp, however, also called for national reunification (*nemzeti összefogás, új nemzetegysítés*).

The rhetoric of Orbán around the referendum had an irredentist aspect (revanchist nostalgia for the lost territory), Romanian-Israeli sociologist Michael Shafir (2004) argues, recalling Orbán's wording in a speech at a rally on Heroes' Square – 'The invitations to the 5 December wedding were sent 84 years ago', he said, before adding that 're-creating a nation of 15 million, from a ten million country is a historic deed'. Emulating former West German leader Willy Brandt's famous 9 November 1989 speech at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, Orbán told the crowd that the vote was about 'forging together what history has broken to pieces'. The place of enunciation only supports this interpretation: Heroes' Square was the centrepiece of symbolic politics and mobilisation of interwar revisionist Hungary, its cenotaph containing soil from different parts of the country. The squares of the Andrassy út boulevard, leading to the Square, were named after Mussolini and Hitler in the interwar period.

The worry about a recovery of irredentist rhetoric in Hungary lies precisely in the transfer of discourses. As long as the left saw elements of the right-wing rhetoric as successful, it would also try to claim them. This is how the discourses around the frontier change and the frontier itself changes location, while the frontier itself is maintained. Due to the varying political ideas and claims of Orbán, the progress of the frontier is not constantly in one direction. Orbán continuously reinvents his political positions, moving between the antisemitic, the populist and the conservative-national at the national level, and in economic policy between neoliberal and conservative statist. He has moved from being an early 1990s liberal, to being critical of neoliberalism in 1998, back to some sort of neoliberalism again once in government (between 1998–2002), to conservatism in opposition, proposing at the time that a flat tax should be an issue for the 2006 parliamentary elections (Shafir, 2004).

The rhetoric on the left was directed in opposition to this. It emphasised modernity, Europeanness and civilisation, and raised concerns about the consequences of such a vote for Hungary's progress in its integration with the EU. In contrast to nationalist-populism the left had an economic populist appeal. It put financial issues before emotional ones, appealing to the masses to think about the financial costs involved in the process, while supporting the idea of both the ten and the 15 million Hungarians (Nyyssönen, 2005). In this way Orbán tried to tame the frontier: he still made claims about the distinction between these two concepts but claimed both for himself and his camp.

An issue ignored by much of the general analysis of the referendum is that while the discursive divide between the countryside and Budapest is continuously invoked in Hungarian politics, the numerical results of the referendum speak against the thesis that the division between Budapest and the countryside is a left–right division. The result of the vote demonstrates support for dual citizenship in Budapest, while the countryside, especially eastern Hungary and the northern and southern border regions, were against the extension of citizenship rights. As the yes for dual citizenship was a campaign Fidesz was involved in running, the result disputes the argument that Budapest is anti-Fidesz, or that Fidesz represents the countryside, since the most rural parts of the country voted against Fidesz's proposal. This indicates that the political division is not such a totalised and cultural one as it was considered to be by the political elites (Kitschelt et al., 1999). There would be a lot of mobilisation work to do.

The Socialists also avoided the discursive void which could have emerged had the national question proven irrelevant. After all, the whole system of polarisation was reliant on this, in the same way as the Socialist-Liberal government was reliant on the centre-right opposition to bring up issues that it could criticise. As we saw in [Chapter 5](#), Demszky's rhetoric had been confrontational towards the right, as well as at times towards his own party in government, and yet where the Fidesz rhetoric was confrontational towards the 'past' and thus the Socialists, it more actively promoted visions of the new 'civic' Hungary. The left was used to constructing its discourse against Fidesz while in opposition, and it continued the habit even when in government. The Socialists' message seemed to be: there will be nation politics, but since the referendum failed, we will do it our way (whatever that is).

In terms of polarisation, the referendum of 2004 provided a tool from its very preparation, the gathering of signatures for the campaign. Its 50:50 results reproduced an appearance of political polarisation. Yet the turnout indicated that people did not care, even if for many analysts it reasserted nationhood as the line of contestation in Hungarian politics. The rhetoric after the referendum showed that it is difficult for the electorate to counter the assumption or claim by the political elites that certain issues should be debated. The question overshadowed other new questions that might have emerged and prevented them from being tackled. One of these could have been the privatisation of hospitals, where new division lines could have emerged had this issue not been dwarfed by the question of dual citizenship, in the media and in party rhetoric. In any case, the referendum created a way in which the opposition could stress the polarisation of Hungarian politics.

Integrity or difference: the presidential elections of 2005

Another way for Fidesz to mobilise during the period in opposition was through the presidential elections of 2005. This political event showed how in the situation of polarisation, maintaining the integrity of the camp is important. In the Hungarian political system, the parliament elects the president. In the elections the integrity of the right and the manifestation of differences on the left became more decisive than the elections or the victory itself. The right kept control over the MPs voting in the elections. On the left the elections emerged as an issue which would highlight party-political identities, rather than those in the camp which was put in question.

The Hungarian presidential elections of 6–7 June 2005 were not about the unity or disunity of the nation, as can often be the case in the situation of an election of the symbolic figurehead of the nation-state. Instead, they were all about party-political unity. Hungarian presidential candidates are nominated by the parties and must be elected, with a two-thirds majority, by a secret vote in the parliament. If during the first two rounds of votes none of the candidates gains such a majority, then in the third vote the candidate with the largest number of votes wins.

With a simple majority in the parliament the government parties, 'the Hungarian left', should have won the elections. However,

the elected president was supported by the right. And, surprisingly perhaps, no one seemed to care about the narrow victory itself. Judging by the press and political commentary, the result of the vote – Sólyom's presidency – seemed less interesting than the questions about party and coalition unity. These questions dominated on both left and right.

When the 'eco-political' non-governmental organisation (NGO) Védegylet (Protect the Future) called for László Sólyom, one of writers of the Hungarian constitution, to be made president, it aimed at creating a coalition which would break the polarisation between the right and the left (Wheatley, 2005). Sólyom had a strong record of accomplishment in defending social and environmental rights, being against corruption and narrow party interests. His campaign hoped that Sólyom could be supported by both parties to become the president, and the NGO would get maximum visibility in the media, where it was usually dwarfed by political parties. Nevertheless, the coalition was never finalised as the Socialists wanted to set up their own candidate. The SZDSZ leadership hoped that it might have a chance to have a common candidate with the Socialists, while many of the party's members and electorate would have been ready to support Sólyom.

In 1995, the left-wing government tried to introduce the Bokros package of austerity measures – neoliberal and monetarist restructuring that surpassed the expectations of even the World Bank in its rigorousness. As president of the Constitutional Court, Sólyom defended the rights that would have been lost, social rights guaranteed in the constitution. The Bokros package went ahead, slightly amended (Wheatley, 2005). The conservatives were reluctant to tie their support to anyone and would have preferred the president Ferenc Mádl (MDF) to remain in the post, but because of his decision, they sided with Sólyom. Fidesz nominated Sólyom instead of sending one of its own candidates to the game. Its candidate would have been unlikely to win since it did not have a majority in the House.

However, the Socialists selected a candidate that the SZDSZ was not ready to support. Katalin Szili was known for her hasty and even anti-globalisation remarks; she was also a Socialist partisan candidate, 'Our Kati' among the rank and file. She was quite well known nationwide, as the speaker of the House of Parliament, and was also quite popular in the countryside. The SZDSZ parliamentary faction, apart from three MPs who were openly ready to support Szili, decided not to vote in the elections. Even after the first round of voting they aspired to go for a

common candidate with the MSZP. However, the Socialist leadership had decided to keep to the party line and support Szili, who was chosen by the party congress to run. Also, the SZDSZ then decided to keep its line and not to be subsumed under the Socialists. Neither of the parties seemed willing to turn this into a question about the coalition. By abstaining, the SZDSZ demonstrated that the left is not always united, and it also played its part in the final results of the elections. Nevertheless, it also did not 'change sides' in the situation of polarisation and vote for the Fidesz candidate.

The numbers were telling. Sólyom was elected president in the third round of voting with 185 votes to 182. Fidesz played tactically from the first round of voting. Whereas the SZDSZ went to collect its voting slips and returned them empty, Fidesz did not even pick them up. It could see how many MPs would support Szili. Szili got 183 votes of the 199 cast in the first round – mainly those of the Socialists. Sólyom received 13. In the second round, having seen that Szili did not receive a single majority of the vote, Fidesz declared its already-expected support for 'the candidate of the people' and participated in the vote. The second round gave Sólyom a lead, with 185 votes to 178 (Dobszay, 2005, pp. 8–11).

Fidesz also asserted its authority among the right-wing MPs in the House. Szili still got more votes in the first round than the Socialists, and since the SZDSZ simply handed back empty voting slips (Dobszay, 2005, p. 9) (with the exception of one known Szili supporter), the Fidesz leadership was in a good position to observe that there were some who would deviate from the party line. The elections became a witch-hunt for dissenters. The Fidesz faction leader, János Áder, called for the 'bunnies in the bushes' (Dobszay, 2005, p. 11) to come out. The independent MPs took a group photograph with their voting slips clearly ticked for Sólyom; some other MPs took pictures of their tickets with mobile telephones and sent them to the leadership to confirm that they were standing on the right (Dobszay, 2005, p. 11). The witch-hunt discredited some MPs with their own side, but it showed the strength of the camp and, particularly, of the Fidesz leadership on the right (Dobszay, 2005, p. 11).

One of the people on the right suspected of voting for Szili was Ibólya Dávid, the leader of the MDF. Since the 2002 elections, MDF had been the fourth and smallest party in the parliament and it had struggled to show independence from Fidesz, with which it had

been in electoral coalition before losing the 2002 election. Dávid had expressed sympathy with her fellow female parliamentarian prior to the elections. She also fainted in the parliament at the second round, which added to the suspicions (Dobszay, 2005, p. 11). What may have added to Dávid's shock is that Sólyom, a one-time founder of the party, had been the MDF's favoured candidate. Fidesz, by supporting him, not only claimed the candidate for itself but also established the position of the party on the political map. By asserting its authority, Fidesz sought to wipe out the differences within the right, and thus also discredit Dávid, one of the most successful politicians of the national-conservative right and the figurehead of the only other right-wing party remaining in the parliament. Nevertheless, Dávid's public image improved for a while after the vote (Szonda Ipsos, 2005).

While the presidential elections were about the reinforcement of unity on the right and downplaying the role of the small parties, on the left a precisely opposite process took place, with the SZDSZ abstention from the vote. The SZDSZ played, along with the MSZP, a differentiating role in the coalition. The two parties emphasised party discipline and difference within the left camp and let the right wing win the contest over the presidency. The damage to the coalition was maximised, since it had to measure up to the extremely tightly held ranks of the right. This damage was caused mainly by negative and confused reports in the Hungarian press throughout and after the election campaign about the disagreement between the SZDSZ and the MSZP, which did not value differentiating or conflictual discourse. This shows the extent of polarisation and the way in which the left/right dichotomy and the imperative of unity is reproduced by the press.

Both large parties held conferences on the weekend following the vote. There was some speculation before the Socialist conference that the leadership might be changed, but party leader István Hiller and PM Gyurcsány continued at the top, after having expressed their apologies for poor coalition work (*Magyar Hírlap*, 13 June 2005). In Fidesz the former prime minister Viktor Orbán reinforced his position in the party leadership (*Magyar Hírlap*, 13 June 2005). The party also nominated a fourth party chair – a chairwoman, in fact, perhaps to address a pertinent issue of gender balance and votes lost as a result of sisterhood since the orchestrated non-election of Szili (Nagy, 2005).

In his speech as president, Sólyom promised to be a quiet president who would avoid his party-political contacts and be beyond the

polarisation – as he and the Védegylet had planned (MTV, 2005). In his speech on the national day 20 August 2005, the first he gave after the post-election ceremony, Sólyom (2005) made reference to both 'Hungarian citizens' and 'members of the Hungarian nation', i.e. the ten and the 15 million Hungarians. He raised a point about the local knowledge and ties of Hungarians who had lived in neighbouring countries for the past 80 years: 'But what do we know about the neighbours of the mother country's people? And, painful to ask: what do we know about the Hungarians living there?' These were, indeed, issues rarely taken up in public debate in Hungary.

However, this was not an easy undertaking, as he had not only been nominated by a relatively conservative NGO but had also been certified as Fidesz's populist choice as a candidate. Orbán claimed that the 'people's candidate' had won (*Magyar Nemzet*, 2005), whereby it was clear that Fidesz had done a great favour to the Hungarian people by supporting him. Hereafter the populist move of Orbán was to turn from the nation and *polgár* rhetoric of 1998–2002 towards an emphasis on the people, since populism refers to the situation in which he claimed to represent a universal category – even more universal than the nation or the *polgár* (Bozóki, 1994b; MTI, 2005). This is a story that has yet to be followed up in Hungarian politics, just like the rhetoric and impact of the president Sólyom.

The event of the election of the Hungarian president was marked by the questioning and sedimentation of the integrity of the two camps in the polarisation. It demonstrated how the politics of unity and integrity can be fought at several levels – at the level of the pole/camp of polarisation as well as of the party unit, such as the SZDSZ and the MSZP. The search for unity blocks dissent and any questioning of the policies and morals from within (i.e. from the legitimate side in the situation of distrustful polarisation). In the situation of polarisation, the Hungarian right constantly articulates and maintains the frontier. The left participates in the process by questioning it and competing over the same signifiers. It thereby reinforces the frontier by following the rhetorical moves of the right. The above accounts show how political polarisation in Hungary is an ongoing process.

Conclusions

After the 2002 elections, the game changed for Orbán; as he no longer led the parliament, he sought to mobilise outside it. Even if it may appear odd, in the logic of polarisation those who led the House, albeit with a small minority, were not to be trusted as they were anti-national and neoliberal. For two years Orbán avoided the party leadership and being complicit in the parliamentary processes. Even afterwards, knowing the limits of Fidesz support in the Hungarian parliament, he cunningly supported an outside candidate in the 2005 presidential elections. The failure of the government parties to find a shared candidate backfired on them.

The referendum of 2004 and the presidential elections of 2005 sought to demonstrate how political polarisation exists through the contestation and sedimentation of the frontier, as well as the creation of a bipolar consensus. Contestation and sedimentation refer to the marking of the frontier – us and them. If the frontier was not contested it could not be made visible, and therefore reclaimed, reaffirmed, relocated to suit the situation, and the discursive changes or contingency which inevitably take place would not emerge.

Another recurring theme in the chapter has obviously been the concept of nation. This demonstrates the existing contingencies and discursive changes. It is always rearticulated in the contestation of concepts – mainly the people, citizens and, finally, *emberek* (the more abstract reference to human beings). This framework of reference, closeness and distance gives meaning to the concept of the nation. In the previous chapters I have shown how Fidesz focused on the nation of 15 million Hungarians, as well as the *polgári Magyarország* – the Hungary of the progressive civic bourgeoisie. I also have shown how, in contrast to this, in 2002, the MSZP argued for the ten million Hungarians, i.e. the civic concept of nation. This could now be extended to 15 million, as after the referendum of 2004 it was suggested that this extension should be done ‘responsibly’ by the MSZP-led government, which indicated that it could also be done irresponsibly by the Hungarian political right. Whereas the political rhetoric continued with the theme of the nation in the 2004 referendum, in 2005 Fidesz shifted from *polgári* representation to the people’s choice – the human beings’ choice, that is, with the emphasis on the human and the popular, rather than on progress. This extension somewhat overshadowed the role of

the nation and extended the chain of representation to an even larger or universal group.

The competing populism offers a bipolar consensus that indicates how a strong frontier requires considerable unity, particularly as the groups, discursive elements or identities united on each side of the frontier vary a lot, due to the attempts to universalise representation using large umbrella categories such as the people. To create unity, the frontiers, division lines and differences within the unifying group are minimised. This implies that dissent from inside is silenced when it threatens unity, and criticism from outside is rejected. Rejection of criticism is particularly important in the bipolar situation where unity within one's 'own' is based on common difference from the 'other'. This explains the need for the Fidesz camp to reject the criticism of Orbán. It also sheds light on the building of political groupings in the presidential elections, in which the MSZP and the SZDSZ constructed themselves through the frontier in between them (yet still were both opposed to the political right, and united along their own party lines) and Fidesz sought to minimise internal dissent and the visibility of political frontiers within the right-wing camp.

CHAPTER 8

(Social) democratic fantasy collapsing

This chapter, covering the period between the parliamentary election in April 2006 and Hungary's second European Parliament election in June 2009, will demonstrate problems in Hungarian democracy, with a focus on the left. The issue of polarisation is easily to portray as fully the responsibility of Fidesz given that it has ruled Hungary since 2010, but in fact the 2006 election was tight and the left won the elections, because it was able to maintain unity by not unveiling the dire straits of the Hungarian economy. The comment of PM Gyurcsány – 'we have been lying day, evening and night' – spread beyond the country's borders as an indication of the 'lying' Prime Minister, but it is rarely cited as one of the reasons for the success of Fidesz in 2010. This became the watershed and a powerful myth in Hungarian politics ever since. Crucially, I interpret it as the collapse of an illusion or fantasy of post-1989 democratisation. In part it was replaced by a fantasy of popular revolution.

The re-election was crucial, as democracy can be measured in many ways. One test for democracy suggested by political scientists is the so-called 'turnover test', which for Huntington (1991, pp. 266–267) determines a consolidated democracy. This requires that there be two shifts from one party to another. Hungarians learned this trick fast, completing the 'test' as soon as they could: power changed from right to left for the first time in the second free election in 1994 and back to the right in the following election in 1998. And then the people switched back to the left in 2002. But in 2006, Hungarians re-elected a government for a consecutive term for the first time in the free elections after 1990. Every time power changed hands a whole set of bureaucrats and state employees also changed. As we have witnessed in the preceding chapters, projects that had already been planned, agreed upon or even launched were also cancelled.

After the election, the crisis started to unfold. As one commentator argued, ‘The government blew up the largest bubble in the public finances between 2002 and 2006 by misleading people with wage rises in excess of economic performance – nearly double its growth rate – and making them believe that this would last for ever’ (Farkas, 2009, p. 2). First, the news broke in June that the economic situation in Hungary was worse than the prime minister and the minister of finance had claimed prior to the election. They proposed tough measures, and the opposition launched a popular campaign to find out to what extent the government had lied and to deny the legitimacy of the government. After the 2006 election, it was clear that the election promises could not be carried out. And as they were not, the opposition had even more reason to call the government unreliable than it had before 2006 (Csizmadia, 2008).

Overview

In this chapter I explain how after 2006, as I have written in an earlier article (Palonen, 2012), the emperor was revealed to be naked: politicians who in the conditions of anti-politics Hungarians had been reluctant to trust in the first place, and who in the situation of polarisation were distrusted by half of the voting population in any case, were revealed to be untrustworthy. We saw some of this in the period of 2002–06 which was covered in the [previous chapter](#); this chapter looks particularly at the declining trust in the Socialist Party. The parliamentary term in 2006 started with the prime minister admitting to having lied. When key politicians admit to having lied, there remains little trust for any politicians. In the chapter I also go through the alternatives that emerged for the Hungarian left, which got hung up on polarisation and was ultimately incapable of delivering on the issues that appeared most important to people and to the left itself: public services and security. This demonstrates how new parties emerge to contest the failed parties of polarisation.

Political polarisation implies that the government for which one has not voted can never be trusted. In polarised politics each parliamentary term sets out to boost the confidence of the population in the government. The aim is to gain another consecutive term. As Schiemann has argued, by 2002 parliamentary democracy in Hungary had been transformed into a ‘chancellor democracy’, with two-thirds

parliamentary support required in certain areas (Schiemann, 2004). Phillips et al. (2006, p. 603) have argued that ‘finance-driven government bureaucracies’ were ‘born out of pressure to conform to the decision-making standards of a neoliberal model of economic governance’. Similarly, both sides argued that the other focused only on accumulating wealth in the hands of a certain elite, while portraying themselves as fighting the corrupt establishment using anti-elite rhetoric. Hanley et al. (2008, p. 429) has argued this about the centre-right in Hungary and Czech Republic, but in Hungary it was equally true of the left. The centrist parties on both sides adapted this tactic.

Furthermore, there were economic underpinnings. The public had silently accepted that politicians were corrupt and often that none of them were better than the others, so long as the economy ran properly. This logic from the Kádár period was still in operation. Now, as European Union membership was achieved, it became apparent that Hungary would not be catching up with the ‘West’ any time soon. The confrontation in Hungarian politics had changed somewhat since 2002. After the 2002 election, PM Medgyessy began to delivering on electoral promises. The previous government’s Millennium Package (*Széchenyi Terv*) had provided funding for all kinds of projects. Apart from in a brief period after 2002, the policies and the rhetoric of the government had not been congruent.

However, this trend had begun earlier. Already in the Fidesz period criticism had started that almost half of the Hungarian banking sector was in the hands of foreign banks (Várhelyi, 2001). State-backed first-time buyers and the banks’ willingness to offer mortgages contributed to the real estate bubble in the country. The distrust of the national currency favoured foreign currencies. Many Hungarians took up favourable Swiss loans while the Hungarian forint lost its value and monthly payments rapidly increased. The financial crisis hit Hungary early, already in 2006. The new government introduced austerity measures, including abolishing the popular ‘13th month extra pension payment’ introduced by Fidesz, a symbolically crucial signifier in Hungarian politics. Public spending cuts led to reductions in the budget deficit, but the crisis deepened after 2008.

The chapter is largely adapted from my article ‘Transition to crisis in Hungary: Whistle-blowing on the naked emperor’ (Palonen, 2012), in which I indicated, with no direct reference to ‘populism’, problems of contemporary Hungarian politics and explained the way in which

the Socialist Party collapsed to the extent that Fidesz could receive a two-thirds majority in the polls. The article dealt with the social, political and fantasmatic logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) in Hungarian politics, while here we mainly refer to fantasy and imaginaries as discourse-theoretical heuristics. The special issue in which the article appeared was edited by my colleague Jonathan Luckhurst and the article has not been cited much, maybe also because of the omission of the keyword 'populism', even if the topic was important. Adding two metaphors in the title was unwise, but I thought that they captured the phenomenon: Hungary was a whistle-blower for both the financial crisis and, as we have later discovered, democratic backsliding. The origins of the latter were disappointment with the left-wing and liberal parties.

The Hungarian third way and grassroots mobilisation

The Socialist Party's image was one of being both for the 'normal people' and for public managers, the socialist period's elite. During the run-up to the election, negative campaigning was part of both campaigns. It centred around arguments that one side was nationalist and the other opposed to the nation. In contrast to the newer parties throughout the former Eastern Europe, the formerly state-socialist ruling parties had the advantage of an existing party structure. They even had loyal voters, to whom they still represented the good old days. Yet they also had to battle to demonstrate how they had overcome their state-socialist past. They had to show that they were not the socialist elite turned into democrats but that they were close to the people in order to get the votes of the poorest in society, whom many party loyalists also cared about.

From this perspective it was pretty fatal that Socialist PM Péter Medgyessy was revealed to have worked for the secret service during the Kádár era. He claimed that he had merely secured Hungary's interest through IMF membership, which the Soviet Union opposed, and only resigned two years later. After the landslide victory in the European Parliament elections in May 2004 Ferenc Gyurcsány, the minister of sports and youth, was chosen to replace PM Medgyessy before the local elections in September 2004. Millionaire party leaders such as Gyurcsány, the party leader and PM from 2005, had to look like men of the people. Internal criticism was difficult in a situation

of stark left–right confrontation. Little critical reflection or discussion on personality or policy options took place within the Socialist Party. After the 2006 victory the prospect of four years in office offered room for post-election reflection and policy changes. Continual transfers of power imply that one can report on the shortcomings of the situation when in office. Now it was the coalition government's mess that had to be dealt with. Now the Socialist Hundred Steps Programme would put the country in order and the national budget in balance.

While emphasising social-democratic values the party also had to demonstrate that its economic policies were up to date. In the UK these were the years of the Blairite Third Way, which shaped social democracy across Europe. This form of reformed Thatcherism suited reform-socialist parties, but they had the same problem as the neoliberal social-democratic parties in the West: how to combine neoliberal policies with social-democratic values, or even how to clean up the welfare state without the too large, vocal and important crowds noticing it. For the former state party, the most important thing to do in order to demonstrate their post-communist nature was to get rid of state structures. Or perhaps that was only the view of the junior coalition partner SZDSZ, but quite efficiently it became part of government policy.

The election in 2006: performing and contesting polarisation

The 2006 election was a close call. All parties engaged in negative campaigning and 'coalition' and 'opposition' identifications were strong. Policy issues lost importance (cf. Korkut, 2007). Prior to the elections the parliament was expected to be composed of only two parties, but the extreme polarisation was halted. The Socialists (winning 42 or 43 per cent in the first round and 47 in the second) and their junior coalition partner the SZDSZ (winning 7 and 3 per cent respectively) emerged as the victors in the election, defeating Fidesz-KDNP (44 and 47 per cent) and the MDF, which received 5 per cent of the vote in the first round – a surprise success in the election. The turnout was 62 per cent in the first round and 64 in the second. This relatively high turnout also indicates a fierce contest, typical of polarisation with a high level of mobilisation.

The media had been an important vehicle for maintaining polarisation in Hungary. With each media outlet coming from a particular political orientation, they always represented the two sides from the perspective of one of the sides. Multiple identifications seemed more difficult to manage. The small parties were rather marginalised.

Three days before the election on 6 April 2006 the Hungarian state channel hosted a debate between the leaders of the two main parties. In the two-person debate the Socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány defeated Orbán by challenging his position on the basis of his previous arguments. This reaffirmed the idea that perhaps Fidesz had gone too far



Making it to the parliament was an achievement for Ibolya Dávid (on the left), but also the aim of the MSZP and the SZDSZ, to keep a balance of small and large parties in the Parliament. The MSZP entered the election under the leadership of Ferenc Gyurcsány (on the right), while some party actives had been advocating elderly people to vote for Dávid's MDF. Photograph of Ibolya Dávid: Derzsi Elekes Andor / Wikimedia Commons. Photograph of Ferenc Gyurcsány: Adam Csaba Szegvari / Wikimedia Commons. Both images released under the license CC BY-SA 4.0

in its ideological rearticulation – the turn from a radical liberal party to a national-conservative one and further to a centrist populist one.

A key moment in the 2006 election in restoring the role of the small parties was the four-party TV debate the day after this, just two days before the election. Arguably the four-party parliament was saved because of this debate, which made visible that there were more than two sets of options and discussions. It demanded from the participants more answers, less outright rejection of the proposals of the other side. On the election day many traditional supporters of the large parties voted for one of the two small parties as a voice for pluralism.

Interestingly, what I witnessed as the response to the TV debate in the press was quite different to this assessment. Some ‘experts’ considered it a boring event, not worth repeating. Indeed, it had been quite convenient for journalists, publicists and political scientists, lacking any willingness to engage on policy issues, to support polarisation because of its simplified and exciting match-like character.

The actual debate revealed personalities. The Socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány and the liberal Gábor Kuncze, Viktor Orbán of Fidesz and Ibolya Dávid of MDF managed to tease out policy differences, and finally one by one the parties had to reveal what they were for – not only what or whom they were against.

Speaking clearly and concisely, Dávid became an election icon, successfully confronting Orbán’s and Fidesz’s increasingly populist policies. She argued that the MDF was a neoconservative party, and following the election, in a speech on 13 May, she also promoted the establishment of a ‘new’ right wing. Fidesz had been openly against the MDF’s success and for a broad centre-right party, but it needed the MDF’s support in the second round of the election. Between the two rounds, Fidesz, which had hoped that the MDF would not get in, was desperate to get its electoral support in the remaining single-member constituencies. The party insisted on the need for unity in the ‘national’ camp. Dávid remained strong. On the election night an alliance traditionally seen as unholy emerged: many MDF supporters had voted for the Socialists in those constituencies where the MDF candidate had stepped down. On the other hand left-wing activists had promoted the MDF to more conservative voters.

Fidesz had collaborated with the FKgP and other right-wing parties for the 1998 election and formed a coalition with the MDF in 1998–2002. In December 2005 it formed an agreement with the Christian

Democratic People's Party (KDNP), which had sought in vain to pass the 5 per cent threshold for entry to parliament, for a permanent coalition. This satellite party had strengthened the connection with the conservative-Christian right, and probably enabled attention to be paid to the global networks in this field where Orbán has since become an international figurehead. This is in a relatively secular country with an initially secular politician, who in the 1990s moved strategically closer to the Christian Democrats.

The events of the election in 2006 show how polarisation was put into question by the inclusion of the small parties in the parliament. This was a step towards pluralism, shaking off some of the legacies of the post-communist condition that had been pushing for the black-and-white worldview reproduced in the two-party system. Bipolar hegemony includes consensus on both sides of the main frontier with little space for diversity.

The famous speech about a lie that destroyed a fantasy

For once the winning concept had been continuity not revolution as the Socialists managed to secure a second consecutive term in office. The Socialist-Liberal coalition won the fierce contest with a high turnout by a small margin, and it set out to rule.

On 26 May 2006 in Balatonőszöd, the newly elected PM Ferenc Gyurcsány spoke to an MSZP internal gathering. The speech was frank and informal; it expressed leadership, expected consensus and called for an end to internal fighting. A recording was leaked and can still be found online today, including in English translations. The speech in itself is a testament to political problems in the period of polarisation. It has been analysed time and again, one of the first times being by my colleague Attila Gyulai (2007).

Gyurcsány argued that the support figures for the party had looked grim still a year before the elections, and in the polarised situation it was a small miracle to have won. Expectations were high. Election promises had been made. He claimed that actually there was nothing noteworthy to praise from the previous term in office, apart from the unity that had been achieved. This was an indication that in the polarised situation the party had managed to mobilise the ranks, but after elections the bubble was at risk bursting. It had been impossible

to carry out radical economic reforms and still win the elections. They decided to prefer winning the elections. It was directly mentioned that they did not want Orbán to win. The legitimacy of the other was not there. And indeed the 2010 takeover could have happened four years earlier.

The PM explained that when he had come power he had realised how bad things were economically. Only a small group knew the real economic figures and they had been lying for 18 months, ‘day, evening and night’. The IMF had estimated that the 2006 budget deficit would reach 10 per cent of GDP – the highest in the EU. The truth of the public deficit had not been revealed prior to the elections, when promises had been made, but now the party leadership admitted that there was no money to carry out the promised reforms.

Gyurcsány listed the backing of experts, from János Kornai, mentioned in [Chapter 2](#), to the minister of finance. They had made calculations. The plan would not be what had been promised for the New Hungary programme. Taxes would have to be raised and services would have to be improved. He gave the example that the Roma population in Hungary had access to health services only a tenth as good as that which he had access to, and explained how his mother had been to hospital and told him that services had improved. He had told his mother that this was only because of his name. This made everyone laugh. He also made reference to the fact that politicians may have other reasons for running for office than improving the conditions of the ‘fucking’ country: because there are no other jobs, or because they will get better service.

At the same time he insisted that the rich would need to be taxed, property tax would be a good revenue source and that this would enable improvements to services. There would be ways forward, but it would be difficult and the policies would be grim. Of course for the left and the liberals there would be good opportunities to fight over details. He was dreading this and hoped that the group would stay focused on the core issues. The demand for consensus was indicative of the polarised situation but also potentially of the leadership style of Gyurcsány.

The claim was that the real lies were in the system, one that the Socialists had taken part in and were now planning to change. Nothing had been done in the 2002–06 period. Polarisation was a pernicious thing. The system of bipolar hegemonic contestation that is often referred to as polarised politics was also a result of the system

that Gyurcsány had been lying about, to maintain the position of the party in the dynamic of competing populism. Now, revealing that they had lied, he must have believed the party could also recover. And he famously pointed out:

I almost perished because I had to pretend for one and a half years that we were governing. Instead, we lied in the morning, at noon and at night. I do not want to carry on with this. Either we do it and you have a person for it, or someone else will do it. I will never give a single interview at the end of which we part with each other in argument. Never. I will never hurt the Hungarian left. Never. But it is only worth doing it to touch the big issues. (Gyurcsány, 2006)

The Socialists would have the summer to plan what to do and then in September the effects would need to be felt. Indeed, the new programme was initiated and the speech was leaked on 18 September, first by Hungarian state radio and then throughout the Hungarian media. Internet sites where the audio file was available crashed due to high demand, and transcripts were offered.

As Gyurcsány had predicted, people were upset and demonstrations were held in front of the parliament, with people calling for the resignation of the lying prime minister. Nights of riots followed. The premier argued to the media that, in fact, it was not he but the whole political elite promising prosperity and avoiding reforms that had been lying. He was only the brave first one to admit his mistakes. He would not resign. He even argued that everyone in Hungarian politics had been lying for the past eight to ten years. This also included the first term of Fidesz. Now he regarded it as his party's, and the Free Democrats', mess to face and deal with. In four years in office something could be done right.

This juxtaposition can be captured through the fringe populist dynamics: anti-system and anti-corruption. This is difficult to maintain when you have been a prime minister for two years already. Gyurcsány envisioned that demonstrations would follow, and he took a strong stand on the need to withstand this criticism: there was an emotional response for good reasons

The protesters attacked the building of the state TV station, and the police. Critical citizens, even supporters of the left parties, students, hooligans, neo-Nazis, ordinary right-wing people and other disillusioned Hungarians, took to the streets. The police arrived heavily

armoured. In time the protests became less violent, more institution-
alised, but the riot offered an occasion for the continual display of the
confrontation, and not only by those mobilised by Fidesz in national
consultations and petitions and mass gatherings – the already familiar
pattern set up by the post-2002 opposition to keep large sections of
population mobilised and to maintain an image of the power-holding
political elite as the enemy.

Polarisation and lying: the interpretations of lies as lies

Fantasy maintains our structures of belief and trust, and when it is
contested, achieved or made void it has to be restored or replaced by
another to maintain the status quo of the existing significations, as
Lacanian psychoanalytical thinking in political analysis indicates (c.f.
Glynos, 2001). The fantasy that was crushed was about democracy
and post-communist democratisation. The new order was supposed
to replace the Soviet-style system of lies and pretention. Second, the
long-awaited democracy included both a Western style of governance
and a Nordic-style welfare state. People expected welfare returns from
the MSZP, while the right-wing parties offered national sentiments.

Furthermore, in principle everyone in Hungary knew that poli-
ticians lie, and those on the side they opposed lied even more, were
even more ‘power-hungry’. They detested politics in the anti-political
stance, but accepted that someone had to do the dirty work. Gyurcsány
had shaken the country, by revealing the actual state of the economy
but importantly he reversed the political order: he did not just call oth-
ers liars but admitted that his own faction had been lying – consist-
ently. As I wrote in 2012:

The emperor had revealed himself as being without clothes, and fanta-
sies were shattered. The political leader, as the uniting father-figure of
the left, lost much of his esteem. By calling everyone in the political elite
a liar, he also broke down the frontier of polarisation, the social logic
that had structured political identifications in Hungary.

However, the whole debate focused on the lie. It became an impor-
tant watershed (Csizmadia et al., 2008, p. 8), whether those close to
the government agreed publicly or not. As Gyulai (2007) put it: ‘The
identity of the Balatonőszöd speech is defined by the strategy of the



In the negative campaign ads, the Orbán regime sought to highlight the omnipresence of Gyurcsány, in the opposition coalition in 2022. 'Let's stop them', says the add. Are they dangerous (*veszélyesek*) or just in place (*élyesek*)? Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

political interpretations, too. The same text produces different meanings as conflict emerges about the referent of truth and lie.' There were two sides, as usual: the truth about lies as truth and the lies as lies.

The interpretation of the exposure of 'lies as lies' emerged as the more powerful one. The tight contestation denied space for internal critique from the left, policy discussions or contestation of Gyurcsány's position. This is what he effectively pre-empted in his speech, as if he knew that there would be scepticism within the party. There was no chance for anybody to emerge as his successor, and it was even difficult for the Socialists and the Liberals to agree on a common candidate for the presidential elections in 2005, so this kind of collaboration was not

to follow either. Nor did they want to rock the boat because if the prime minister had lost a vote of confidence, the Fidesz-backed president could have nominated another candidate to form a government and sought the backing of the parliament. If such a replacement could not be found, the parliament could be dissolved and a new election called. The left wanted to avoid this dream scenario of the Hungarian right.

The local and regional elections were held on 1 October and Fidesz, which had been leading in the polls from June, won them by a landslide, with victory in all but one of the 19 provinces. This changed the balance of power, as Liberal and Socialist mayors were ousted for the first time since 1990 in many localities. Viktor Orbán declared it a 'victory for truth'. In Budapest, the Liberal mayor Gábor Demszky narrowly stayed in power.

As sentiments of dissatisfaction remained, the political opposition planned extra-parliamentary constitutional reforms. On the local and regional election day, the Hungarian president asked the Socialist prime minister to proceed to a vote of confidence in the parliament. The speech of 26 May was made public on 18 September, and only on 6 October did Gyurcsány finally apologise publicly. With the backing of his own party and the liberal coalition partner he passed the vote of confidence. At the same time some 50,000 demonstrators called by the opposition leader Orbán waved Hungarian flags outside the parliament.

Viktor Orbán and the Hungarian right were quick to respond to the situation and reconstruct the frontier. Ironically, on both sides the unifying principle was the myth of the revolution, a social logic that stresses confrontation. Although it might commonly be perceived as a political logic, in Hungary things are different. In earlier chapters, particularly [Chapter 4](#), we discussed the revolutionary tradition of 1848, 1956 and 1989 that is constantly recalled in public speeches and symbols. In autumn the 50th anniversary celebrations of the 1956 revolution had already started. In the moment of disillusionment, the people's fight against the power-holders was seen as the inspiration for restoring the lacking sense of unity. There was nothing between the two 'truths', no third view.

In fact, the revolutions of 1956 and 1989 had been revolutions of reform, 'refolutions' as Timothy Garton Ash termed it in 1989. Also, Gyurcsány called for a new era through reforms. His rhetoric was 'revolutionary' in the sense of shaking the old patterns of thought

and speech. The nation and the country had been idealised in the political rhetoric of all parties, especially prior to the election in Hungary.

But the loyalty that was requested in the speech and in the dismissal of the protests, which Gyurcsány already promised in the famous speech to do, was no different from what the left had criticised the Fidesz government of 1998–2002 for: loyalty was rewarded. This is no different from the pre-1989 situation. In [Chapter 2](#) we discussed how the goulash communism of the Kádár regime saw the political other ‘us’ as ‘those who are not against us’, but at the same time it assumed there was a minority who was ‘against us’: this is typical political rhetoric from the dynamic of mainstream populism, assuming itself to be in the centre and bracketing criticism as coming from the margins, from those who are not us, the mainstream.

Holding on to power: the Liberals in dilemma

The Liberal Party had been in turmoil already for a while and its status was remarked upon by Gyurcsány in his speech. The polarisation and the freezing of the conflict by the Socialists also affected the Liberal Party. There had been accusations of corruption, and there were policy differences and personality issues that made it difficult for the party to stay united.

By 2008, it ended up drifting to the left on economic policy. This led to a break-up of the government in April 2008 which lasted until Gyurcsány’s resignation in April 2009. The Liberal Party leaving the coalition faced a crisis. The leadership fight polarised the party between economic and social liberalism. The contest was between two figureheads and policies in the SZDSZ: on 7 June 2008 Gábor Fodor beat János Kóka by two votes, 346 to 344. There were accusations of the vote having been rigged: that Kóka should in fact have become the leader.

János Kóka, who had been narrowly elected in the second vote to become the party leader on 7 February 2007 and was advocating neo-liberal policies, remained for the time being the head of the parliamentary faction, partly in an attempt not to break the unity of the party. In 2008, Gábor Fodor became the new leader. He was a one-time roommate of Viktor Orbán and member of the inner core of Fidesz who had left the party in late 1993, when he lost the power contest with Viktor

Orbán and his turn towards a more populist-nationalist line (Tamas, 2007, pp. 86, 161). His appearance and comments on the SZDSZ website captured the ethos of polarisation at the time of his election: ‘We need to forget that parties are for themselves. We represent the citizens [*polgár*] of a nation, with national interests, and according to European traditions.’ Fodor rejected the usual accusations levelled at the SZDSZ of being anti-national, elitist, intellectual and cosmopolitan. Yet by negating the frontier he reaffirmed that such an imagined divide existed. Under Fodor the SZDSZ could join the government again, but the internal tug-of-war in the party, which had received only around 5 per cent support in the previous election, proved quite lethal (Palonen, 2009). The SZDSZ did not recover in time for the 2009 European Parliament elections and began to lose support even to another small party. Fodor stepped down from the party leadership after the election, only a year in the office.

When two weekly magazines reviewed the political legacies of the SZDSZ, they both argued that internal critique – which here is seen as a potential premise of democratic behaviour – was so deep and counterproductive that it had led to the downfall of the party. There had always been two sides to the party. Many people had left it over the years due to internal fragmentation. It had realised many policies in the government, keeping its direction focused on the liberal reforms and also contributing to the fact that the MSZP lost the vote on the Hungarian president (*HVG* magazine, 4 July 2009).

One of the important reasons for the SZDSZ’s failure had been corruption, as pointed out by the liberal magazine *Magyar Narancs* (2 July 2009). In both accounts, the de facto existence of widespread antisemitism in Hungary meant that neither of the large parties (each of which would have only a few hundred antisemitic voters) argued vehemently against the emergence of anti-Jewish and anti-Roma political rhetoric and movements. Yet although the Free Democrats had been the target of antisemitic expression, even if they could not gain representation in the next Hungarian parliament the antisemitism in public spaces would probably not disappear.

One of the reasons why the SZDSZ had failed was because it was not able to posit its own identity, apart from these perspectives of minorities and rule of law. There had been a moment around 2000 when Gábor Demszky had been the head of the party that the SZDSZ was trying to be the third force; in addition to falling into the rhetorical

trap that this study demonstrated in [Chapter 5](#), the attempt became lethal in the Budapest municipal council. The Budapest mayor relied on the support of the MSZP, as the largest party, to push through policies, and this support would have been withdrawn had Demszky maintained the strategy of distancing the Free Democrats from the Socialists.

The LMP: a new force in politics

The mobilisation against Gyurcsány generated critical masses and disillusionment with the Liberals suffering under corruption and leadership scandals. A new generation of Budapest-based activists, a new Green Party, emerged in Hungary. The green movement had grown in strength with the presidency of László Sólyom, who gained the backing of Fidesz, but it had behind it a crowd that was critical of politics in the country but still active in environmentalist, alter-globalist movements. Some of these were local activists. Many became unsatisfied with the way in which the presidential campaign had become part of polarisation rather than an alternative to it.

It was indeed curious that even though environmentalism was one of key concerns in opposition to the regime in the 1980s, concretising many demands against state socialism, in the 1990s no real green parties emerged in Hungary. This can be also traced to the condition of anti-politics. Some of the green arguments had been voiced from both sides of the spectrum, but they had not been sustained in the same way as they were in some other countries.

Now, a new generation had become interested in climate and social justice and that as dissatisfied with the polarised politics and what had become of the Hungarian welfare state. Solidarity had been talked about in the speeches of other parties, but the new generation took issue with the availability of the shrinking of public services. This too Gyurcsány had indicated in his speech, which is the main topic of this chapter, arguing that his party had failed in this respect. Now, three years later, a new party was emerging on this basis. The founding text included the language of rights and ‘democratic deficit’, even local and workplace democracy, as well as criticism of global capitalism, and it linked this to environmentalism. As the name indicated, the party wanted different politics and particularly to ‘cure’ (*orvosolni*)

democracy with a new multi-party order and fight apathy. On the left-right polarisation, it argued:

Our fellow citizens on the right are not ‘Nazis’, and those on the left are not ‘communists’. But the atmosphere of hatred and fear can fulfil even our worst expectations. In 2006, racist violence appeared on the streets on the one hand, and police arbitrariness on the other. For both, the current political forces of the right and left bear a heavy responsibility. Fear and hatred serve their interests in power. We cannot stand in its way otherwise, only if we, Hungarian democrats, regardless of our political tastes, can count on each other regarding the basic issues of democracy. (LMP, 2009)

LMP’s founding made it possible for a new generation of politicians to emerge in Hungarian politics. Many of the same names had been in the forefront of Hungarian politics from the 1980s or 1990s onwards. Dissatisfied with what the 1989/90 change of system had brought them and equipped with the spirit of the social movements of the 2000s, this new generation was calling for a new start. The heterogeneity of backgrounds and the focus of its argumentation made it difficult for the LMP to stay together, but this was a start for alternative parties to emerge and contest the differentiation that was initiated in the 1980s and 1990s, which this book has been about.

The party was launched in the spring of 2009 to stand in the European elections of that year along with the Humanist Party. The campaign followed the model of Barack Obama’s social media campaign in the 2008 US elections, and mobilised also via YouTube. It sought to reach those who had not had their voices heard or who were dissatisfied with the decade of polarisation. The formula can be filled with content where a new people was sought to be generated. I add brackets around ‘green’ as this is what later also caused debate within the movement.

LMP Discourse =
New (Green) People^{Solidarity} \equiv *Democracy* + *Powerholding Elites*^{Polarisation}

There were many of these people. Some also tried to tackle polarisation through humour, such as the Two-Tailed Dog Party (Magyar Kétfarkú Kutja Part), which was begun in 2006 and took part in activities in 2009 but only registered as a party in 2010 (Hyttinen, 2024).

In addition for the left, the social democrats in the Socialist Party were a large and heterogeneous group, but there were also intellectuals, parties and movements to the left of the Socialist Party, although these are not covered in length here. There were the inheritors of the Hungarian Workers' Party but also some New Left intellectuals, who could be left-wing liberals or simply socialist in a wider sense. Their presence in the discursive field as well, as the presence of the left-leaning intellectuals who had emigrated from the country, was felt particularly in Budapest circles. They included Gaspár Miklós Tamás, TGM for short, a permanent figure on the intellectual scene until his death in 2023, and members of the Budapest School, who time and again reappeared in Hungary, such as Ágnes Heller.

The alternative from the right (or maybe only partly): Jobbik

The extreme far right managed well in mobilisations on the streets – especially after the prime minister came out as having lied. The movement grew stronger and more visible. Not only were the state, the Roma and Jews the targets, but Budapest Pride and the LGBT community were also attacked. The anticipation after its success in the European elections was that Fidesz would lose votes to Jobbik. As both large parties may have lost some supporters to Jobbik, the party has questioned the line of polarisation. Crucially, however, Jobbik claims that it is beyond the frontier, but sides with the right. In the future developments in Hungary one of the crucial lines will be the articulation of (ideological) distance between Fidesz and Jobbik.

The extreme far right in Hungary had been represented by the Hungarian Justice and Life Party, MIÉP, founded in 1993 when István Csurka was ousted from the MDF. He formed his own party, which was heavily personified in himself as the leading figure, and exploited the national feeling and antisemitism. On the right, many have argued that there was nothing extreme about the MIÉP, that was merely a national party. The same argumentation with claims and denials of extremism is still typical in the reaction to the very nationalistic small right-wing parties. The first elections for the MIÉP were difficult. With only 1.6 per cent of the vote it failed to gain representation in the 1994 general election. In 1998 by contrast, it got over 5 per cent in the first round and 14 representatives in the Hungarian parliament. During the

Fidesz government it sat in the opposition. In 2002 during the tight campaign that Fidesz eventually lost, it fell short of the 5 per cent threshold, with 4.4 per cent of the vote. The party experienced a kiss of death from Fidesz, which also sought to represent MIÉP views. Jobbik rapidly replaced it as the party of the extreme far right. Its founding statement in 2003 was launched with a claim that a real change of system had not yet been carried out – that politics was still on a single pole, and parties did not represent Hungarian interests. There was still no talk about real democracy and no real and natural selection in the media, for instance. This anti-globalisation and anti-elitist movement sought to represent Hungary as in its eyes no one else really did so. It made further claims against the Roma, for the Hungarians outside the borders of the country, and for the protection of the environment, land being important to it, while the MIÉP seemed to have been domesticated into the Fidesz camp. The subtle embrace of death did not happen to Jobbik, as the party and Fidesz maintained some distance from each other. In the general elections of 2006 the MIÉP ran with Jobbik and gained only 2.2 per cent of the votes. In this light the success of Jobbik in the European elections is interesting and describes disillusionment with politics and the political polarisation.

Related to Jobbik and the mobilisation in 2006/07, the Hungarian Guard, Magyar Gárda, was founded on 25 August 2007, ‘for Hungarian [*magyarság*] physical, spiritual and moral self-protection.’ It claimed to be ‘above political parties and frontiers.’ It took as its symbols the Hungarian Crown, which is associated with the Holy Territory of pre-Trianon Hungary, and the flag of Árpád House – the house of the first Hungarian kings. The flag was also used by the Hungarian Nazi party in the interwar period. Bumper stickers featuring these symbols become widespread and marked a whole movement (Hytinen, 2022).

Sensitivity to the past has been important for bringing about political identifications. The nodal points in Hungarian historical consciousness, regularly re-evoked in political discourse, are the signing of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, considered to be a ‘historical injustice’ against Hungary and the Hungarian nation; and 1956, the national uprising crushed by Soviet tanks, which similarly stimulates feelings and ideas of the Hungarian national community as a severely punished ‘victim’ of twentieth-century history. Von Klimó (2009) argues that dichotomic worldviews and polarisation were a result of victimisation of the national community and justified aggression against ‘them’

in ‘self-defence’. This can also easily be related to conspiracy theories such as antisemitism or homophobia based on hate for minorities and imagined others. It is no surprise that lack of faith in democracy and discourses on ‘fraud’ and ‘true people’ emerged.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that alongside all the nationalist, anti-semitic and xenophobic sentiments, Jobbik managed to argue for certain things that were generally associated with the left, such as opposing capitalism, the privatisation of property and the call for land rights. The economic situation in which Hungarian men young and old found themselves was palpable, with low participation in the labour market. This situation had been there too before 1989, in a shadow economy in which society could not afford to cater for the poor. To capture Jobbik’s mobilisation, the formula highlights anti-elitism and anti-polarisation just as the LMP did, only with a different definition of the political subject.

$$\text{Jobbik discourse} = \text{Ethnic Hungarians}^{\text{National Trauma}} + \text{Powerholding Elites}^{\text{Polarisation} \equiv \text{Fraud}}$$

A shift to the right: the European election of 2009

The European elections are not necessarily a great testing ground for politics in Hungary. The parties representing the national colours, Fidesz and Jobbik, did well in the 2009 elections. Fidesz distributed material shaped and coloured like the Hungarian flag, with just one word: vote. Even more manifestly than Fidesz, Jobbik sought to rescue Hungary from foreigners. Disappointment and disillusionment kept MSZP voters away from the polls. Besides beating Fidesz and Jobbik, there was no reason for them to go out and vote. The Socialists had a very humble request in their slogan: ‘MSZP again’. The left had lost its virtuous position – due to the lying and due to corruption claims, and the memory of similar accusations against Fidesz when it was in power to Fidesz had begun to fade. The left across the EU did badly in the elections of 2009.

But there was an interesting phenomenon evident in the June 2009 European Parliament elections: the rise of Jobbik. Fidesz led the pre-election polls with two-thirds support (Wikipedia, 2025). It managed to get 56 per cent support and 14 of the 22 seats, adding two to its

previous number. This was less than what was expected. In April 2009 a third of voters had not even heard of Jobbik, a Medián poll discovered. In June, the party took 15 per cent of the vote and three seats in the European Parliament. The Socialists underperformed, getting only 17 per cent at the polls and four seats – thus losing more than half of its previous nine seats. The neoconservative MDF managed to pass the threshold with 5.3 per cent of the vote and keep its one MEP. The SZDSZ got only 2 per cent and lost its two seats. The LMP in coalition with the Human Party fared better than the SZDSZ, gaining 2.6 per cent of the votes, but even together they did not reach the 5 per cent threshold. The election showed disillusionment particularly with the government. The turnout of 36 per cent was lower than in 2006 or than in the referendum of 2008.

Still, if we break down the Jobbik vote we can see an interesting picture emerging: 39 per cent of its votes were cast either by young first-time voters (24 per cent) or by those who had not been to the polls before (15 per cent), while a quarter of its voters had voted for Fidesz in 2006. Only 13 per cent of Jobbik voters had voted for MIÉP-Jobbik in 2006. According to a study by Forense and Századvég quoted on the MTI news service, while the two main parties' supporters had decided a year earlier who they would be voting for, Jobbik supporters decided only in the last few weeks before the election and the LMP's supporters often on election day. In those localities where the MSZP was strong in the 2006 elections, Jobbik fared relatively better in 2009. The Free Democrats made the vote a contest between themselves and the antisemitic, anti-Roma Jobbik, but negative campaigning and fear alone did not bring people to the polls to vote for the SZDSZ. Maybe it only enforced the message, as studies found a correlation between the Jobbik vote and the number of Roma inhabitants in a locality: where this exceeds 5 per cent, support for the party increased to 15 per cent, and to 19 per cent in towns (HVG, 27 June 2009).

The criticism of the main parties became even more palpable in this combination of new voters and former Socialist voters. Jobbik had criticised Fidesz for elitism and unreliability, and now it appeared that Fidesz knew where the main challenge to its discourse could emerge from: the right rather than the left. This was a fringe populist dynamic that could contest the whole polarised system, including Fidesz.

To the extent that both main parties in Hungary could profit from nostalgia for the Kádár era, the Socialists had largely lost it. Fidesz had

not had to take responsibility for decision-making: rather, it had mobilised on the argument regarding state ownership of property and later welfare provisions without on-site user payment. For years, Fidesz had argued against the sale of Budapest Airport and other state property. On the other hand, the Socialists and the Liberals had thought it would be a good idea to reduce the power of the state and let the free market fix things. Fidesz's vision of a strong state also did not necessitate the existence of a welfare state of a Nordic or Christian Democratic kind, yet nor would it be excluded from the picture – as the party would be for 'normal' people. In comparison with the left, for Fidesz voters it was a time to unite and beat the unreliable government of lies. The party ran under the national flag and the slogan 'New direction'. This would resonate well in 2009, after seven years of the same government and global economic recession and the discourses on lies. The new direction would be against the internationalist-neoliberal framework of the government where 'everything was for sale'.

Conclusions

This chapter began with the lying prime minister and how the fantasies of democracy, the accountability of politicians and economic prosperity and the welfare state were crushed in one go after 2006. The chapter testifies to the failure of the left to govern in an accountable way in 2002–06, and the response to this by Gyurcsány. It does not review the exact policies and the impossibility of actually carrying out the reforms, especially as the financial crisis hit Hungary already before it arrived in 2008 in the US and from late 2008 globally. Nevertheless, we have indicated how internal debates on what to do in terms of economy were pre-empted by Gyurcsány. The questions of the nature of the reforms and the tactics through which the ailing economy in Hungary should be healed were left unanswered. After the incident, the Socialist Party did launch some discussion on its own character.

The Liberal Party in coalition was unable to debate policy options and had leaders who had spent their lives in politics, appearing as trustful figures but ultimately revealed as corrupt. Even in the internal vote, questions of democratic behaviour were posed.

The prime minister sought to establish a new era, but this did not happen. The new era was contested by Fidesz in opposition, where it

had no need to take responsibility for carrying out reforms – many of which had been called for already in the 1990s, Gyurcsány had argued.

The new generations established their own parties. It was only after the 2009 European election that an opening emerged for the MSZP to rediscover itself, perhaps even as a left-wing party. A left-wing competitor, the LMP, the Hungarian Green party (Fábián, 2010), emerged.

A referendum took place on 8 March 2008, when Hungarians were asked whether they agreed with a certain set of state provisions. Just over half of the eligible voters turned out: 50.51 per cent. Answering three different questions, 84 per cent agreed that ‘inpatient care should be exempt from daily hospital fees’, 82 per cent that ‘family doctor care, dentistry care and special outpatient care should be exempt from consultation fees’ and that ‘students in state-subsidised higher education should be exempt from tuition fees’. This was another landslide victory to Fidesz, which had called for the referendum, another sign that roughly half of Hungarians wanted to keep the welfare state.

The prime minister finally resigned in 2009, but he remains a key figure in Hungarian politics in his party Democratic Coalition (DK), founded in 2011. In his speech Gyurcsány often referred to the way in which left parties and activists debate among themselves and how he would write books about the Hungarian left if he were forced to resign. This could have been a threat to unveil the secrets of everyone involved. But Ferenc Gyurcsány is still involved himself: alongside the US-Hungarian Jewish millionaire George Soros, he was demonised as one of the biggest obstacles to Hungarian prosperity and threats of the future.

The populist dynamic here was one of competing populism between the major parties: while polarisation eliminates space for internal critique, it can also be used to gain an advantage in this case by political leaders, as it was here by both Gyurcsány and Orbán. Polarisation also provides an imaginary, a fantasy in which the enjoyment (guilty-pleasure fantasy, in Lacanian terms) of the terrible other maintains one’s faith in the party. The new emerging parties the LMP and Jobbik tried to contest this imaginary of polarisation from a fringe position and operationalise the fringe populist dynamic.

The interpretations construct one against other without an opportunity for interaction, but they still need each other. As Gyulai (2007) argues:

any of these strategies fail without a counterstrategy. The literal and the figurative interpretations are both political as they cannot avoid being deconstructed by the other side. As Paul de Man puts it: ‘The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it’. As it became the subject of political debates, there is no Balatonőszöd speech in itself: there are only political interpretations which construct several texts.

I witnessed the election in Hungary personally, but I followed the events that unfolded after the lie was revealed through my friends and media accounts, and some visits to Hungary. I could interpret the disappointment after the euphoria. The dissonance of experiencing rubber bullets being fired at protesters and the denial of this by power-holders was palpable. I returned to this thought later when studying Hungarian left-wing anti-Soviet intellectuals, as during the polarised 2006 crisis for example Ágnes Heller, who refused to believe that their Socialist-led government could have done such a thing – and then lied about that once more. Now when I talk about the rubber bullets with some of my colleagues and friends, some of them say the whole issue was blown out of proportion and others insists it was a decisive turn and should still be remembered – this from people who may well be on the same political side in many respects. There are so many ways of interpreting political events, and mine is one of them.

Ultimately the confrontation became apparent through the levels of trust:

Gyurcsány's Discourse =
(Economy ≡ Professionalism)^{Trust} + *Fidesz*^{Distrust}

Fidesz Discourse =
(Accountable People)^{Trust} + *Lying Government*^{Distrust}

The political theorist Chantal Mouffe captures the failure of political parties, which we can also locate here with the liberals and the left, to define democracy in a fuller sense. In Hungary too it was too narrowly understood by the governing parties and, as we have seen, the new and old opposition parties all highlighted their failure to provide more than frustration and confusion.

When democratic politics has lost its capacity to mobilize people around distinct political projects and when it limits itself to securing the necessary conditions for the smooth working of the market, the conditions are ripe for political demagogues to articulate popular frustration. (Mouffe 2005, p. 70)

In the [next chapter](#) we will discuss how political frontiers can emerge within and outside the system, in which corrupt politics becomes one side and moral ground the other. In 2010, as we already know, Fidesz won the elections by a two-thirds majority.

CHAPTER 9

The revolution at the polls and the death of democracy

As we know, disappointment led to a radical change in Hungary, when Fidesz won the 2010 elections. Receiving a two-thirds majority in the parliament did not require two-thirds support in the polls. We know that after the event Fidesz was capable of changing electoral laws and media laws to stay in power. It was able to appoint the judiciary. It controlled many institutions of culture already after the local and regional election victories in 2006, but this was also the opportunity to take over cultural policy at the national level, and it could control schoolbook writing. Following Gramsci and Althusser, we can see this as a full ideological takeover of the state apparatuses (Althusser, 2008; Gramsci, 1996). Economically, what Fidesz was interested in is great projects for building symbolic infrastructure and channelling state and EU funds to certain firms with leadership loyal to the party.

The change was argued for in the name of a revolution, as the radical break from the communist past that, from the perspective of Fidesz, never happened in 1989/90: privatisation was in the hands of those in power in this period and many of the contemporary politicians also dated from this period. Paradoxically the practices meant an inversion, back towards the Kádárist regime. At the same time, compared with the leaders of Jobbik or the LMP the key faces of, and particularly the background team in, Fidesz dated from the 1990s.

Revolution is an almost imaginary and fantasmatic routine in Hungary (cf. Palonen, 2011). However, over the past 15 years policies and legislation in the country have radically transformed. Hungary, this former loyal student of EU and IMF policies, has decided to act against them. This is not surprising considering the background: the smooth transition from the 1980s to 1990s; the black-and-white polarised

politics; the economic downturn; the landslide victory and will to power of Fidesz; and the disappointment with the material delivery of the new democratic system.

Overview

This chapter explores the 2010 elections. It discusses what paved the way to this event and how academics and intellectuals conceptualised the polarisation that emerged, including the bipolarity in the party system. The chapter explains how the logic of political polarisation is difficult to grasp from the perspective of political science, which is focused on the contents rather than the form of politics: political scientists are interested in the ideas rather than the dynamics, which can take pretty much any content. At the end of the chapter I will briefly discuss politics after 2010. The chapter borrows from my article (Palonen, 2011) and my PhD thesis (Palonen, 2006) on how polarisation could be conceptualised in political science at the time of polarisation in Hungary. It addresses also the democratisation and transition paradigm.

The ‘revolution’ in the 2010 polls and three reasons for its rhetorical use

After the event 2010 was hailed as a revolution marking a watershed in Hungarian politics. However, the term was already used increasingly in the course of the electoral campaign in 2010. I have selected five speeches for analysis from Orbán’s online speech archives. Each of these can be considered to be among the key speeches during the year, and as providing an epoch-marking perspective in that they reflect on their era.

In a speech on the 20th anniversary of the revolution in Timisoara, Romania, on 4 December 2009, Viktor Orbán stressed that there were lessons to be learned from the past 20 years. One of these was the claim that democracy and the market do not work on their own, without state or society’s control. The liberal economic position of leaving it all to the invisible hand had been the claim of the left in Hungary, so there was a lot of space on the statist side. Rather than overall change, Orbán argued for moderation: ‘This knowledge would be the guideline, showing to us what and how we must change after the next elections.’

Ten days later in the party meeting on the elections, Orbán argued that Jobbik was a Trojan horse claiming to be on the right and that the Gyurcsány government had turned its back on the people. This would be the first thing to change: a turn towards people (*emberek*), rather than nation or Hungarians. Referring to the Hungarian Socialist Party through the previous PM Gyurcsány, Orbán pointed to the liar whose name had become notorious. Furthermore, stressing that the Socialists still had the ‘Gyurcsány flag’, he claimed that nothing had changed despite the change of leader. Orbán argued that what had been heard in Hungary over the last eight years was ‘There is no other way’ or ‘We cannot do otherwise’. This had to change: ‘just imagine how should it be heard in Angela Merkel’s Germany or Sarkozy’s France, and how we heard 1989 and prior to our victory in 1998’. It was time to end the Gyurcsány era, Orbán concluded, calling for justice.

In his opening speech of the year 2010 in Budapest Orbán insisted that that end should come to the Gyurcsány era. The current state of affairs could not go on. He stood against the current form of finance capitalism (*pénzkapitalizmus*) but also against the ‘one-way road’ of anti-capitalism. The next government should build the economy on a different basis: on the values of work, home, family and health. He emphasised social security and the love of fellow nationals (following an ethnic conception of the nation). This was not in fact a particularly revolutionary speech except in one thing: the changing of eras. The reference to the music of ELP that he listened to in his youth provided a link to the past in this call for rupture (Orbán, 2010).

In the election speech from after the first round, on 11 April 2010, the revolution was much more present. Orbán made a clear and explicit connection to 1956 and 1990. ‘In 1956 judgement was made on communist dictatorship opting for freedom. In 1956 Hungarians made a judgement on the party-state system and opted for democracy. In 2010 judgement is made upon the failed era, choosing health, order and security.’ Orbán went even further: ‘We wish for you to do everything you can to make 2010 follow in the line of the important dates of the Hungarian nation’ (AFP News Agency). This revolution was not about rupture but about continuity. Capturing this in the formula, we can see there has been a full circle:

$$Fidesz \text{ Discourse} = \text{People}^{\text{Revolution}} + \text{Communists}^{\text{Oppression}}$$

The word ‘revolution’ was used in the title of Orbán’s speech after the elections. The results showed 68 per cent support for the electoral coalition of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People’s Party. He returned to the idea that the previous 20 years had been a time for important lessons. The first lesson was that ‘one cannot change the system; the system can only be overthrown and demolished, demolished for new to be established in its place ... This is what happened today’ (Orbán, 2010, 11 April). In other words, this was not a system change, as 1989/90 in Hungary provided, but a revolution, in Orbán’s mind.

Why perform it as a revolution? First, revolutions are important in the cultural life of Hungary. They inform the understanding of history, or history consciousness, knowledge of the past and the cultural history of the present. As politics in Hungary has been heavily focused on cultural identity-building, political articulation has its effects on the cultural life of the country and especially on government-sponsored productions and commemoration. In [Chapter 5](#) I discussed the speeches given by the Liberal mayor of Budapest Gábor Demszky on a day celebrating the 1848 revolution, the Spring of Nations in Hungary, by the statue of the revolutionary poet Petőfi, and outlined the political situation and the direction of his politics, including relationships with other parties. A similar affinity to a chosen hero can be witnessed in other political parties and politicians.

Second, a revolution is a bipolar logic that fits the hegemony of competing populism. Focusing on this balanced competition, Fidesz managed to ignore the fringe populist dynamic, claims, criticism and the call for recognition put forward by Jobbik and the LMP. Orbán still managed to stage the confrontation with the now weakened socialists, as if they would still be important in politics. Even in 2022, the key figures to oppose were Gyurcsányi, leader of one of the many opposition parties, and George Soros, a millionaire who had funded Orbán alongside many other aspiring Hungarians in the past.

Third, a revolution gave legitimacy for radical changes that were adopted once in power. It provided urgency, explained the need for them and offered a counter-pole for the regime that had little ideological baggage as yet in 2010. Fidesz had no coherent ideology besides its discursive confrontation with the socialist past and anything that represented that past. Having moved to cover the space on the Hungarian right it also embodied ethnic nationalism and sought to highlight moderate progressive values in office in 1998–2002. It also knew that if

it continued with policies similar to those it had before, just renewing its rhetoric, it would risk being defeated again after four years.

The elections were won by Fidesz with 52.7 per cent of the vote, while the Socialist Party led by Attila Mészterházy received 19.3 per cent and Jobbik led by Gábor Vona 16.7 per cent – impressive for such a new party. Even the LMP led by András Schiffer managed to pass the 5 per cent threshold, with 7.5 per cent of the vote. Ibolya Dávid's MDF fell short with 2.6 per cent. In terms of mandates Orbán's Fidesz got 68 per cent, which was just enough for the two-thirds majority in the parliament.

Building a new, revolutionary, illiberal era

Viktor Orbán's revolutionary drive did not slacken for one minute after 2010. My friends, who on the 2010 election night hoped that Orbán's political maturity or perhaps the system of checks and balances would protect the integrity of the democratic system, were proved mistaken. Fidesz dismantled the checks and balances in the first year after it came to power. By amending the constitution and personalizing politics, Hungary came to acquire a level of concentration of power never seen in European democracies. Within one or two years, Orbán had placed his own friends in all the leading positions of the state. After twenty years, few of Fidesz's early team had stayed with Orbán, but they all held important positions in the Hungarian state. (Szelényi, 2022, p. 20)

The rhetoric of revolution had been very much present in Hungary for 20 years in many forms, from the celebration of 1956 and 1989 to the calls for changes of government. In 2010 Fidesz won a landslide victory, which it named a 'revolution at the polls', making a clean cut with the previous era. What was remarkable about this victory was that it gave a mandate for large-scale transformations, with a two-thirds majority for the coalition parties, large enough for constitutional changes. The rhetoric of revolution was important for Hungary as it offered a contrast between us the rightful people and them the oppressors. In the process where democracy had been instituted in the early 1990s, the state had been a foreign agent deriving its model and legitimation from the Soviet ideology. Therefore the nation's importance emerged in contrast to the state, which was later reflected in the ideas of Schmittian

constitutionalism that rejects the state-bound rule of law in favour of nation-bound legitimacy.

Fidesz's nationalism was different from that of the extreme far right but, seeking to maximise votes, it also sought to integrate some of the rhetoric of the right, including some references to antisemitism. In opposition it had mobilised against hospital fees and privatisation and moved from the middle-class civic-bourgeois position to integrate larger groups of people. For example, Orbán left behind his formal shirts and went for a more casual appearance. In 2011 the discourse on 'national bourgeoisie' returned to Fidesz policy, enforced by the values of home and order (Balogh, 2011b; Korkut, 2012).

In 2010 it was deciding on new policies. Based on what had become a social logic, the new right-wing government introduced symbolic changes: street names in Budapest were changed, replacing foreign names with mainly Hungarian ones apart from commemorating Elvis Presley with a strand boulevard. Later the removal of the past was extended to consider any potentially communist heroes, even those of the 1956 revolution. Citing a critical blogger on Hungarian politics at the time, Eva Balogh, 'The rewriting of history is a favourite pastime of Fidesz politicians'. Imre Nagy would give way to the interwar period's authoritarian leader Miklós Horthy during this term in government (Balogh, 2011a). Naming Nagy as a hero of the left restored the right-left frontier. Old heroes were back, with the new economic package called the New Széchenyi Plan. This was followed by the Széll Kálmán Plan – named after a little-known civil servant whose name was given to a small square on the Buda side of the city, which later became a metro station and an important public transport node, Moszkva tér, renamed in 2010 with the old name. Underneath the symbolic policies lay controversial economic policies.

The policies that made headlines and led to Hungary's eligibility for regional cohesion funds from the EU and IMF bail-out packages being contested were those related to political freedoms. The government decided to lower the retirement age for high court judges, in order to open new posts for new appointees. National Bank and National Media and Communications Authority (NMCA) posts would be politically appointed. After the appointments in the NMCA, a new political authority, in October 2010 new legislation was introduced forcing journalists to reveal their sources. In light of criticism from the international community regarding the European Convention of Human

Rights in relation to online media, a new hazy wording was adopted that media providers ought to ‘respect human dignity’ – leaving out an argument for ‘balanced coverage’. Any criticism was treated as an attack against Hungarians.

Such a law can be particularly destructive in a situation dominated by, in the words of a disappointed analyst, ‘two politically biased, socially destructive and culturally undermining worldviews, using weapons of ideological slogans, election promises, campaigns aimed at demonising the opposite camp [which] substitute actions with the media as a scene, indoctrination talk shows and NGOs organized from above’ (Miszlivetz, 2009, p. 634). Still, the new media law prompted widespread criticism and mobilisation also in Hungary. Activists organised especially through the Facebook page ‘One million for Hungarian press freedoms’ (Egymillióan a magyar sajtószabadságért, a.k.a. Milli), which a year and a half after its founding had over 100,000 likes.

The final aspect of Fidesz’s revolution was constitutional changes. It claimed that the constitution that brought it to power twice was prepared by the communists and that a new constitution would enhance democracy. Going back to the earlier discussion on nation and state, the constitution was for members of the Hungarian nation – ‘Mi, a Magyar nemzet tagjai’ – rather than citizens, potentially going beyond the actual borders of Hungary. Going back to the unemployment benefit scheme, the constitution refers not only to rights but also to the duty to seek work, while to claim social provisions one is required to act for the benefit of society. The final straw of the revolution can be seen in the electoral reform, which transformed electoral districts in such a way that even in the 2002 and 2006 elections, which the Socialists won, Fidesz would emerge as the largest party (Korkut, 2012).

Polarisation became a powerful tool for Fidesz even in 2010: it contained the opposition, but in the end the bipolar dynamic of polarisation offered too much space for the political other. Fidesz feared that Jobbik would take over the leading opposition party’s role from the Socialists. Therefore it sought to integrate Jobbik’s anti-migrant discourse into its own, which from 2015 got easier as Orbán had the chance to build a wall on the Serbian border. It also eradicated symbols of the left and liberal opposition, changing statues and memorials in the capital city, for example. The opposition was seen as marginal from the dynamic that the mainstream populism enabled.

Polarisation in Hungary is not a political cleavage

In this section we discuss how in the 2000s scholars tried to capture polarisation. In political science we usually refer to ‘political cleavages’ to cover the issue of division lines. Alan Zuckerman (1975) suggested in his seminal review of cleavage literature that cleavage comes with ‘semantic baggage’, referring in its dictionary definition to ‘natural lines’. Predominantly, cleavage studies assume a pre-existing dissonance or conflict in society. Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan’s (1967) work, which deals with the specification of cleavages as well as the role of political parties in maintaining them and has resulted in detailed characterisations of the cleavages proper to West European parties, is either applied tout court or debated in relation to the historical differences in the Eastern European context. What is studied, then, is how particular party systems represent certain existing cleavages, such as class or religion. This, as well as a debate on ‘which of the cleavage types is most likely to be held “intensely” and to result in “polarisation”’, as Zuckerman (1975) outlined in his influential article, ends up dealing with essences rather than logics of polarisation.

My argument is that there is little substance or naturalness to this political frontier in Hungarian politics. But increasingly, I have thought that it does not fit the other countries any more either as a form of spatial mapping, to measure the differences between the parties, or between parties and their voters. As an anti-essentialist researcher of politics, I am more prone to explore the emergence and politicisation of conflicts. The dividing lines are politically created, through their rearticulation as a system of differences and the processes of political confrontation.

In comparative politics the conversion from one system to another does not always work. Applying Lipset and Rokkan’s four cleavages – the centre/periphery, state/church, agriculture/industry and class cleavages – of Western Europe to the East European political parties, mainly of the early 1990s, Kostelecký (2002, p. 177) locates four cleavages, along with other Western ones, in the different party systems in Eastern Europe, but contends that they will not become cleavage based, like Western parties – although perhaps European integration would change this. In the superimposing of imported categories and the concept of ‘political stability’, even with attention to political culture and symbols, he fails to understand the particular situation in Hungary.

An expert on the Hungarian political system, András Körösényi (1999), has distinguished three cleavages in Hungarian politics: the religious–secular cleavage, the political class or nomenklatura cleavage, and the urban–rural cleavage. Nevertheless, none of the elites were clearly from the previous system, which manifests itself through its reluctance to deal with the recent past, as for example Éva Kovács (2001) has shown through her study of memorials and street names. Körösényi’s account differs from views such as that of Tamás Fricz (1997, 1998), who argues that the urban–rural divide is the main cleavage in Hungary, or Evans and Whitefield, who emphasise the social-liberal vs nationalist divide in Hungarian politics. Evans and Whitefield (1995) and other students of Hungarian cleavages have argued that the economic cleavage in Hungary is weak, or at least weaker than the cultural–social one, while Körösényi (1999: 62–70) finds no economic class division. In his article Körösényi (1999) identifies the MSZP as the nomenklatura party, religion as important for the small, right-wing FKgP and KDNP, and, to lesser extent, for the MDF, and urban–rural conflict as central to the FKgP.

Körösényi (1999) also looked at how these cleavages are represented and reproduced by the Hungarian political parties. Without going further into the construction of the cleavages, he argues that the ‘ideologies and worldviews of the parties correspond to the socio-cultural character of their electorates’. What is noteworthy is that Körösényi launched his study from a survey of MPs, whereas Evans and Whitefield were more focused on the electorate’s views. He argues that there was a consistency between the political cleavages among the elite and those among the electorate, whereas Kitschelt et al. (1999) argue that there is a distinction between the cleavage produced by the elites and the views of the electorate. It is important to note the different planes upon which the political discourse formation, or reflection, happens.

Kitschelt et al. emphasise the role of historical legacies in party formation, in contrast to the ‘tabula rasa theorists’, and also the non-contingency of various factors, in contrast to their colleagues such as Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter (1986), whose approaches deal with contingencies. Through doing so they hope to claim theoretical rigour (Kitschelt et al., 1999, p. 21). They proceed by creating categories in relation to the historical legacy but offer neither substantive evidence for them, nor a theory to deal with them. These categories do much of the work of explanation in the work of Kitschelt

et al. They attribute the coalition that emerged between the Socialist Party and the Liberals to the historical legacy of 'national-accommodative communism' whereby 'the critical actors can less credibly announce sharply diverging policy positions in the most salient policy issues, especially in the economic area' (Kitschelt et al., 1999, p. 378). In this study the actual legacies are attributed to the longer-term praxis of collaboration and ideas that emerged from this rather than ideas themselves.

Using survey data analysis of the 1994 elections Evans and Whitefield set out to 'investigate which political issues form the basis of party competition and how attitudes towards these issues structure party support choices' (Evans & Whitefield, 1995, p. 1177). The assumed ideological contents of the parties are not critically reflected upon, nor are the schemata of survey questions and their applicability to the Hungarian context further considered. The assumed cleavages do not derive from the particular Hungarian context. However, Evans and Whitefield (1995, p. 1198) point to something to which they do not award the importance required, because the assumed cleavage systems and lack of contextual analysis limit the conclusions they can draw. In discovering the cleavages around the time of the elections, their main claim is that the dominant cleavage was the social-liberal and nationalist one, rather than economic-distributive one. They recognise ideologically loaded issues:

Hungarian politics appears to remain centrally oriented around long-standing divisions relating to social liberalism, attitudes towards Gypsies, and the status of Hungarians in the neighbouring states. Thus, although the quite marked attitudinal differences between, for example, Democratic Forum voters and those opting for the Socialist Party indicate that ideological cleavages have arisen in Hungarian politics, the key to understanding public division over these issues appears to be factors such as religiosity and education. (Evans & Whitefield, 1995, p. 1198)

Discussing the formation of the cleavages, Evans and Whitefield (1995, p. 1184) mention that the right-wing government parties 'have emphasised their own Catholic or Protestant identities and even the purported Jewish character of some of their competitors, as well as raising the status of Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania as salient issues'. They acknowledge that the issues of the minorities within and outside the borders and traditional and religious values were the main

discursive content of the Antall government, while economic issues were downplayed. They accurately predict that the more pragmatic MSZP government will take up the economic issues.

These conservative contents in time became the discursive core not only for the Orbán regime in the 2010s and 2020s but for the transnational movement of illiberalism. They were adapted by Fidesz in the 1998–2002 period. But in my study, the argument is that the key dividing line in Hungarian politics is not this kind of substance but a form of polarisation that changes its contents over time, and that is persistent for this precise reason.

Due to the search for ‘the dominant cleavage’ of substance, Evans and Whitefield are unable to name the difference as that between the two camps itself: rather than a substantive claim, it is an antagonistic frontier that functions as the main dividing line. The formula of populism enables us to capture it.

Hungarian political scientist Zsolt Enyedi (2004, p. 3) has argued – in line with the classics of the relevant literature, from Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan to the more recent Oddbjørn Knutsen and Elinor Scarbrough (1995) – that ‘we can speak about cleavage-based political conflicts when opposing social groups withdraw into themselves’. This withdrawing does not necessarily mean total disengagement. But interestingly in the case of Hungary, they do not engage with themselves but only with the other. Indeed, Enyedi’s account starts to resemble polarisation: ‘The isolation between the groups comes into existence because the socio-structural categories (denominations, classes etc.), collective identities, political attitudes and political leadership, strengthening each other, draw a wall between the groups.’ It seemed to me that Enyedi lacked vocabulary for this phenomenon that he was describing and living through.

In my thinking political polarisation is about form and process rather than content. Rather than natural or unnatural lines of division it is about the ‘drawing of the boundary’. Therefore it is important to look at the processes of drawing, in which both actors and value structures are involved.

Left–right dichotomy

As I have argued before, the traditional concepts of political science were unhelpful. Indeed it is possible to think that precisely because of

the lacking tools, such as the non-functioning left–right scale, political polarisation enabled Fidesz in its search for its place on the party map. Many of the parties wanted to ‘conserve’ things from the pre-communist era or the Kádár era alike. All parties had historical figures they made reference to. It was a competition over which ones. All of them imagined and performed the nation. The polarising logic of nationalism existed under state socialism, where it was used for legitimacy.

At the same time the supposed confrontation between left and right became the dominant imaginary in Hungarian politics. Even if these two terms do not necessarily match with their West European counterparts, in Hungary everyone knows what left and what right are, at least socially. This gave a headache to political commentators as they had a performative rather than a substantive role. ‘Hungarian voters are only moderately successful in selecting parties that support their own positions on key policy questions. Hungarian voters are much better at selecting parties whose elites have positions on the L–R scale similar to themselves than at selecting parties which support their preferred policies’, Todosijević (2004, p. 430) has noted.

In the two sides of the polarisation ‘left’ refers to the Socialist Party, which has liberal economic policies (as do its social-democratic counterparts in most European countries) and to the left-liberal SZDSZ. ‘Right’ refers to the moderate and radical nationalist and ‘conservative’ parties – conservative in terms of traditional, mainly interwar, values – such as the Hungarian Democratic Forum, the MDF, Fidesz (the Hungarian Civic Party) and the radical nationalist Hungarian Justice and Life Party, the MIÉP, and later Jobbik. These two sides are also often dubbed the urbanist and the national-populist (*urbánusok* and *népiek*) sides, but the anti-nation/nationalist divide often appears to be just as empty as the right–left divide. Often their bases are outside of Budapest for the right and in the metropolitan core for the left.

Restoring the interwar-period ‘traditional Hungarian political divide’ – of national and urbanist camps (Fricz, 1997; 1998; Kovács, 1998; Szegedy-Maszák, 1998) – was a strategy whereby the Hungarian ‘right’ would be defending the nation and national values, in its extreme being anti-Western and isolationist, whereas the left would be internationalist, cosmopolitan, anti-nation (*nemzet-ellenes*). Using dichotomies like this could suit the largest parties, in so far as it would also deliver enough votes on both sides. Indeed, one needs to work on a diversity of cases to explore categories in comparative politics.

Polarisation has traditionally meant fragmentation: centre-fleeingness in political science, to follow Sartori (1976). However, I have made the point that political polarisation is centrifugal (Palonen, 2009): it focuses on the mutual contestation around a frontier rather than signifying a move further apart. In their book on Eastern Europe, Herbert Kitschelt and his collaborators (1999) identified four dividing lines in post-communist politics: the regime (anti- and post-communists), economic–distributive, national–cosmopolitan, and the socio-cultural or traditional vs individualist libertarian divide. Of these, the last two were attributed to Hungary, mainly through the values of the MDF as contrasted with the SZDSZ. Their data is from early to mid-1994, when the MDF and the SZDSZ were the largest parties. Nevertheless, later in the situation of polarisation one can notice how all of these divides have been rhetorically constructed into a single divide.

Polarisation as concentration, not fragmentation

Typically, the terms ‘polarise’ or ‘polarisation’, for Kitschelt et al., refer to the fragmentation or unconcentrated-ness of policy issues. This broadly follows Sartori’s (1976) definition. Kitschelt et al. (1999, p. 267) write:

Because Polish and Hungarian politicians cannot polarize electoral competition around economic issues in the face of reformist post-communist parties that embrace essentials of market capitalism, they have sufficient incentives to construct a single powerful socio-cultural divide on which to display meaningful programmatic differences and employ those to attract voters ... The relative diffuseness of socio-cultural divides in the Polish and Hungarian population surveys may signal that mass publics in these countries are not entirely willing to follow politicians in creating a socio-cultural super-conflict.

While they use the term ‘polarisation’ with a different meaning from how it is used in this book, the above quote shows that Kitschelt et al. recognise polarisation in our terms, in Hungary. It is seen as produced at the elite level, and, at least in the 1990s, it did not (yet) exist among the population. The ‘super-conflict’ refers to the way in which all of the divisions turn into the same place.

I have argued for anti- or post-foundational research. This is in contrast to the usual methods in political science, particularly in the past.

Relying on databases of fixed questions which hypothesise the existence of certain kinds of cleavages, this kind of analysis challenges the traditional or stereotyped essences of the lines of political division. It does not allow for new lines, which may not (yet) appear on the surveys sets, to emerge and it does not explain and show how the transformations occurred. These are often designed to capture cleavages that already exist, so even if there are some random questions, they may not capture the new and unforeseen lines of differentiation or demands.

While the parties transformed themselves in opposition and in government, they maintained the frontier. This is not brought out by cleavage research or research on political parties, which tend to focus on the singular dividing lines, essences or characteristics of party behaviour. For theory-building we had to locate political polarisation as bipolar hegemony or competing populist dynamic that was no particular substance.

Polarisation as an emerging study in the 2000s: the Hungarian perspective

In the Hungarian literature there was a discussion already in the 2000s about what polarisation is. The claim was made, first, that there were two Hungaries, and second, that this 'two Hungaries' concept was a historical construct – or even, third, that it had always already been there. These arguments moved from more open-ended argumentation to a fully foundational and unquestionable position. If the latter were the case, the only thing for the Hungarian parties to do would be to represent this primordial divide. If that were to be achieved, there would of course not be any space for third views or pluralism. There could not be an outside to this system. My aim in this book has been to demonstrate that there were different kinds of potential political bases for the Hungarian political parties as they were mobilising in the 1990s. If the structure of two Hungaries were to overtake them, it would be a discursive operation that would serve those who were looking to limit competition to a balance between two options. This system would ensure that each would have their turn in power.

The idea of two Hungaries as competing camps which direct resources to each other was addressed in a project organised by László Lengyel and Csaba Gombár, who began a public discussion in autumn 2004 on whether or not there are two Hungaries, as the situation of

polarisation would suggest, and if so, in what they consist. Experts such as Hungarian socialist Elemér Hankiss wrote and opened a forum for civil society under the heading of ‘Divided Societies’ (‘Kettéhasadt Társadalmak’) and ‘Reinventing Central Europe’ (‘Találjuk-ki Közép-Európát?’, F. J., 2005). Lengyel’s (2005) starting point is that ‘the Hungarian political class got involved in a kind of “tribal war” and cut the society into two hostile camps: into “two Hungaries”. This made it impossible to solve the problems in a successful and dynamic way and has slowed down the country’s development.’ Lengyel’s analysis is again a descriptive-prescriptive one, and it does not address the logic and function of the situation of bipolar hegemony.

Csaba Gombár, Zsolt Enyedi, István Romsics, Ákos Szilágyi, Mária Vasárhely and Péter Kende (2005) authored a book called *Két Magyarország* (Two Hungaries). Kende argues that unlike the other authors, he takes it as evident that there are, politically speaking, two Hungaries. Romsics outlines the situation in the interwar period and reveals that there existed many different categorisations, for example in the literary canons, indicating four different politico-ideological directions. Gombár, who introduces the whole book, writes about the lack of identifications with traditional social classes. Vasárhely finds in the historical past the roots rather than ideologies, and the origins of the differentiation between and identification with the two groups. Szilágyi sees tribalisation as the key to the conflict. These historicising and psychologising explanations, based on myths about past differentiations and the historical two Hungaries or the creation of collective identifications lacking in ideological content, may have been a response to the over-ideologised past that also exploited class identifications. The tribalisation appears in the differentiation between two camps as the need to demarcate the ‘us’ mainly through the construction of the ‘them’ as the political tribal enemy, particular to Hungary.

Core substance or an empty form: the nation–urban debate

There is a strong myth in Hungarian politics that there are two poles organised around conceptions of the ethno-cultural nation and cosmopolitan identity. This myth is maintained by the discursive strategies of political elites. I discuss here two important attempts to tackle this form of polarisation from a descriptive-prescriptive perspective.

Tamás Fricz's reading of polarisation is well known in Hungary and influential in Fidesz circles and in the contemporary establishment of the frontier of polarisation. Fricz (1997) argues that the nationalist–urbanist debate (*népi–urbánus vita*) is an old dividing line in Hungarian politics and culture, which has its roots in the 1930s and in the peasant-populist and urbanist literature. In this he is perfectly well informed: there is a powerful myth in Hungary about this kind of divide. This is also confirmed by János M. Kovács's (1998) account, an attempt to show the Hungarian case to an international audience dealing with cultural and political polarisation. While Fricz, writing in Hungary, is close to Fidesz, Kovács, located in Vienna as well as Hungary, is loosely connected to the Hungarian liberal left.

However, because this dividing line has such strong roots, let me account for its background and then I will elaborate on Fricz's and Kovács's positions on the issue. Fricz (1998) calls it the *népi–urbánus vita*. *Népi* means 'populist', which for Fricz is an unproblematic label in Hungarian politics when compared with 'nationalist'. It particularly refers to the peasant populism of the interwar period. For simplicity's sake, the word 'nationalist' is used here, to avoid the pitfalls of the uses of *nép* in reference to people's socialism and the general problems of denotation with 'populism' (cf. Laclau 2005). Fricz (1997, p. 24) sees these as ultimately empty categories, and Kovács (1998, p. 116) argues that '[u]mbrella concepts such as populism ... and Westernism ... are contrasted as if their meanings were unambiguous.' I fully support this idea of the de facto emptiness of the categories. However, politics in Hungary is done through assigning meanings to the two camps, which then maintain the frontier of polarisation and the political identities on both sides.

The empty character does not imply a lack of historical existence and continuity. Fricz and Kovács both argue that the roots of the debate lie in the interwar period, with its resonances of industrialisation and the mass influx of country folk into the city during the nineteenth century. The debate has been revitalised in Hungarian politics over the years, particularly from the 1970s to the present. It has coincided with a literary debate and, for instance, the antisemitic comments of the leading Hungarian populist writer Németh in the 1930s, which in turn strengthened the urbanist, i.e. 'Jewish', camp. Fricz (1998, p. 206) rightly argues, while downplaying the role of antisemitism in the nationalist–urbanist debate, that 'the nationalist–urbanist debate

is first and foremost a contestation and discourse of societal-political-cultural concepts', whereby the Jewish question may become part of the discourse. The divide was taken up by the communists for their own political needs, as Kovács (1998) argues.

The revolution of 1956, however, froze the conflict, Kovács argues. Therefore, in the 1970s the memory of the revolution and the writings of the Hungarian democratic theorist István Bibó, who managed to stay out of both camps, could have led to peace between the two camps, as Kovács points out. The same could have happened in the post-communist period, as this was the time when the memory of 1956 was brought into public discussion, as were the works of Bibó. Instead, the conflict, with its empty categories, was brought up in the context of 'political alternatives', in the late 1980s when the changes began, Fricz argues. It had the element of restoration of the interwar political divide in Hungary and was strengthened by the emerging challenges of autonomy, modernisation, embourgeoisement and national independence. Through the years of post-communism, the MDF fought the left and the extreme *népiek* ('populists') and the MSZP was confined to the urbanist position, Fricz (1998, pp. 48, 24, 69) points out. Fricz (1998, pp. 204–205) also claims that the debate, which had recent roots in the ideological conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s, presented itself as an alternative for political positioning in the post-communist era, and is the strongest dividing line, rather than a pseudo-debate in Hungarian politics. This resonated with projects on Europe and on modernisation and the search for a national identity.

In his account, Kovács (1998, pp. 132, 137) refers to the disciplining and group-forming character which the divide had in post-communist Hungarian politics. Furthermore, the populist–urbanist divide was 'a rhetorical drama that contributed to the prolongation of the old debate'. Kovács argues that the urbanists had won in Hungary, since '[i]n the 1990s, that is, in a post-totalitarian phase and in a Western (or global) environment, it became rather difficult to represent utopian, dirigist, autocratic, etc. programs', and that 'multiparty politics with all its lobbying mechanisms helped to break the PU [populist–urbanist] dichotomy by cross-cutting the confrontation' (p. 139). In his article Kovács ponders what the future will bring. Pluralism and marketisation of the cultural sphere, which would reduce the importance of the 'state-sponsored intellectuals', who would then depend on the right government being in power, would help in bringing down the

frontier of polarisation (p. 140). In the project of Peter Berger (1997, 1998), where Kovács' article is published, the stress is on finding mediating institutions, which might bridge the gap of the social division. One could argue that rather than disappearing, as the archaic divide that Kovács implies it to be, it re-emerged in a new formulation, in the form of the Westernising but nationalistic government of Fidesz. Fricz (1998) points out that rather than modernism–traditionalism, what is at stake is competition between two concepts of modernisation, which in post-communism have found new dimensions through – for example – competition in the nationalist camp.

While offering important insights into the development of the myth of polarisation, and its importance in different periods in Hungary, these accounts fall into the same descriptive category as the essence-loaded cleavage literature. They differ from the cleavage literature by taking a historicising rather than a survey-based quantitative approach.



The experience of Hungary demonstrates the decline of liberal democracy. The surroundings of the Hungarian parliament, with their design from the authoritarian Interwar period, include a massive flagpole. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

They also offer their own prescriptive advice. Fricz suggests that polarisation is the way Hungarian politics should be seen and carried out. Kovács suggests that it does not have much to do with the realities of contemporary Hungary and should be avoided as a remnant of the past, which brings in worrying visions of the interwar period. Fricz argues that this dividing line exists and is continuously filled with different contents.

Is it the system that polarises?

‘The electoral system of Hungary provides very strong incentives for political parties to build electoral coalitions, which are also identified as alternative governments before the electorate’, argues Csaba Nikolenyi (2004). An institutionalist perspective would be to study the electoral system, which offers possibilities for the emergence of political polarisation (Birch, 2003). In the same way that the design of the electoral system offers a chance for politicians to seek their fortunes, they can also try to manipulate the existing system for their own purposes. In Hungary, the structural potential of the party system was exploited in order to develop political polarisation. The round-table negotiations sought to ensure maximum compromise between the political parties and groupings, and consequently the Hungarian electoral system was a mixture of proportional representation and single-member constituencies. Nevertheless, the logic of this incredibly complex system could foster or be utilised by particular parties.

Bridget Fowler (2004a) outlines the polarising character of the system in her article on the Hungarian centre-right: ‘Hungary has a mixed electoral system in which majoritarian effects dominate proportional ones’ – the running of party lists and converting votes into seats advantage large parties and penalise small ones. Two rounds in single-member constituencies and multi-member regional ones, where votes are distributed proportionally to closed party lists, ensures that votes are not ‘wasted’ but top-up seats are awarded proportionally based on these ‘unsuccessful’ votes. ‘The national lists thus link the single-member constituency and list-based regional elements’ (Fowler, 2004a, p. 94). And the two rounds really highlight the bandwagon effect on voters. The 1998 victory of Fidesz was sealed in the enthusiasm with which people voted for the party in the second round. The 5 per cent threshold was increased from 4 per cent in 1993 (Millard,

2002, pp. 57–61), further benefiting large parties. This was to shield from the far right and left. In the Hungarian 386-seat parliament the number of parties dropped from eight in 1990 to four in 2002–10. The electoral laws that Fidesz introduced shrank the numbers of MPs and reshaped the districts.

While the 5 per cent threshold and the importance of single-candidate constituencies in the Hungarian electoral system contribute to polarisation in Hungarian politics, there must be other explanations for the turn towards a two-party system. This is suggested by the way in which the MDF and the SZDSZ, once the largest parties, later became weak and struggled to stay in the parliament. The parties that drive towards the two-party system are mostly Fidesz and, to a lesser extent, the MSZP. Polarisation implies not just any two-party system, but one where the two poles find their meaning through the creation of the frontier between them. As the discussion below on political cleavages also illustrates, this covers over the potential incoherence and confusion of the poles' ideologies and the lack of concrete policy issues under debate.

The paradigm of the transition to democracy

Part of the problem in the study of Hungarian politics and politics in the Central European region in general has been the linear perspective of the transition. Indeed, changes in 1989/90 seemed pass quickly, with Hungary as a textbook case of transition to democracy. The Hungarian case challenges the idea of a unidirectional 'transition' (cf. Carothers, 2002), yet the linear metaphor is still present (e.g. the "bumpy road" and 'backsliding' of democracy; Ágh, 2014, 2013). Hungary's democratisation was seen as consolidation of democracy (Lengyel & Ilonszki, 2010; cf. Herman, 2015). Scholars focused on the constitution (Jenne & Mudde, 2012). Until recently fewer studies explored discourses or concepts (for these early studies, see, on good governance, Hajnal & Pál, 2013; on liberalism, Korkut, 2012).

The fantasy of progress in democratisation has blinded us from seeing how the seeds of polarisation were sown a long time ago, and in this the present volume starts from the failed 'revolution' of 1956 and the goulash communism of the Kádár era and the New Economic Mechanism. While the 1990s included competing perspectives on nationhood, the antagonistic construction of the two Hungaries

occurred in the period between 1998 and 2002. In this book we explore the sedimentation of the polarisation, for example in the developments between 1995 and 2002, covered in the analysis of the speeches of Demszky and in the construction of oppositions in the Fidesz discourse between 1998 and 2002. These investigations demonstrate that there are always processes which will sediment and contest the polarised frontier.

The fantasy of progress also disabled the European Union, which has been slow in reacting to Hungarian developments. Part of the reason for this was that in the European Parliament, the largest party, the EPP, was also the home of the power-holding Fidesz for a long time. In contemporary Europe, Hungarian trends have increased visibility and generate theories of populism and nationalism. Illiberalism is a product of political polarisation and the way in which it is rhetorically maintained and operationalised for political gain. For the power-holding Fidesz an aversion to liberal democracy is symbolic. In populist rhetoric and meaning-making, invented terms are common (Laclau, 2005); 'illiberal democracy' enables Orbán to define the Hungarian and European liberals as the enemy. He exploits the thesis that the people as an abstract community does not fit in liberal democracy (Müller, 2016). Illiberal democracy is proposed to respond to the political demand made around 1989 to found the nation as the basis of legitimacy.

Post-communism was once conceptualised as an era in which the legacies of the previous era prevailed (Schöpflin, 1993). Looking at the revolutions in Hungary since then, post-communism in this sense does not seem to wash away. The naïve idea that the elites could gather and simply switch off the previous system and implement a required set of institutional arrangements to ensure democracy needs to be challenged. The process appeared to be technocratic, and they did not ensure the engagement of the wider population or the further development of democracy, which was seen as a model rather than a process. They sought mainly to include the requirements of democracy from the comparative politics and rule-of-law perspectives.

Illiberal democracy: the mainstream populist dynamic in the takeover

The tools of hegemony in terms of epistemic power and leadership were in the hands of Fidesz after the legislative changes. Few people trace the roots of Orbán's illiberalism to the failure of the transition itself. Reflective as ever, Ágh (2022, pp. 3–4), explains 2010 briefly through the socioeconomic crisis and 'deep fatigues and shocking deception in the Hungarian population'. Obviously, what happened afterwards is more exciting. There are several studies of Orbán's Hungary in the 2010s. Because of their attention to typologies that link it to discourses, I particularly like those by my one-time professor Attila Ágh (2022, p. 5), who names three periods of Fidesz in power: de-democratisation, autocratisation and de-Europeanisation. Of these, the third is a 'culture war': 'quasifull control of the media and ... occupying the universities and other cultural/scientific institutions in order to control the minds of citizens through the education/socialisation in the cultural/academic scenery and in media/communication systems' (Ágh 2022, p. 5). Instead of parallel economy he refers to a parallel state on which 'the neoliberal autocracy is built on systematic and hierarchical favouritism' (Ágh 2022, 5). At the end what emerges is 'zombie democracy' (Ágh 2022, p. 12), as an 'internal Easternisation' that had already begun in the early 2010s.

When, after the second subsequent election victory in 2014, illiberal democracy emerged as the name for the new era, it also marked the enemy: liberals. This made clear a confrontation with liberals and the system implemented in the 1990s: liberal democracy. In many ways, this was a central rhetorical trope with little content but the power to generate affective ties and disgust. When the enemies of the past are made discursively present, they do not need to be powerful in the present. Fidesz also knew that dichotomous articulation maintains the opposition, and too strong an opposition could challenge its power – to follow the logic of polarisation (Palonen, 2009).

Besides finishing 'decommunisation', to borrow a term from neighbouring Ukraine (Shevel, 2016), by ordering the removal of 'communist' statues and street names (Light & Young, 2015; Palonen, 2008), the new order was symbolised. Besides investing in football stadiums and renovating public spaces, a new commemorative turn was launched. The Hungarian parliament legislated on the commemoration of the

traumatic Trianon peace treaty (Feischmidt et al., 2014; Pytlas, 2015) that ended the First World War and dominated the interwar period. Interwar memorials were restored around the parliament and a memorial to the Second World War ‘German occupation’ of Hungary was erected in 2014, provoking debate and a counter-memorial. A year later, a wall was built on the southern border of Hungary to impede the access of refugees to the Schengen area through Hungary. These symbolic acts provided other ways in which the dichotomy between us and them could be articulated by the power-holders. If there were not a crisis that required the defence of the people and prompted the articulation of such an imagined unifying figure or universal, they would have invented it.

One of the key areas where international and national attention was targeted was freedom of the media and restriction of possibilities for the opposition to mobilise prior to the election period. People typically mobilise when internet access is threatened or controversies emerge in the possibilities for freedom of expression. In the first period in power, for the forthcoming elections, electoral laws were changed to benefit the largest party. In a country marked by extreme politicisation and polarisation, depoliticisation may have appeared to many locals as a citizen-friendly measure, as many Hungarians, disillusioned with politics and politicians, were tired of the constant confrontation that had penetrated social relations and everyday life. Yet despite the revolution in the polls, the connection between parliament and politicians and citizens did not increase, at least from the citizen perspective (Ilonszki & Papp, 2012). Furthermore, in Eurobarometer surveys (2015) Hungarians indicated that they trusted the European Union more than their own government.

In the summer of 2014, months after his second consecutive election victory, Orbán denounced liberal democracy. Many of the reforms were decidedly ‘illiberal’ but also argued for in a way that resonated with the people. The reform of media law and the constitutional reforms strengthened the dominance of the strongest political party. A year later, the wall on the southern border of Hungary blocked the flow of refugees to Hungary and the Schengen area. The notion of ‘illiberal democracy’ marks the dichotomy between the liberal and the populist-national. This repeats the line of polarisation between socialists and liberals: rejecting liberalism and the previous system of 1989–2010 as something rotten. As was the case back then, Orbán had little content

in terms of his ideology, and he has always needed to proceed through negation.

In 2015 the ‘refugee crisis’ hit Hungary and Orbán declared early on that the country would build a wall against refugees. But the figurative wall was even more significant: the branding of the refugees as the enemy that the government was protecting the country against. Similarly, opposition to the European Union is defined in terms of Orbán as a European leader defending the interests of the country. Therefore, any sanctions by the European Union can be reduced to the line of polarisation between Hungary, represented by the Orbán government as the Hungarian nation, and its enemies. This has enabled Orbán to display ethno-nationalism of different kind in comparison with what Jobbik had done through its entanglements in anti-Roma discourse.

More and more the discourse has taken on neoconservative and illiberal undertones. While the church had been an important partner for Fidesz for a long time, the religious component intensified. Orbán’s discourse has been highly gendered (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018), with strong anti-gender rhetoric and even discourse on sports (Linnamäki, 2021), and there has also been ‘banana populism’, the banal use of the everyday (Szebeni et al., 2025) or simply the use of social media (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). Siding with Putin rather than the European Union was not a surprise from the perspective of the logic that has been outlined here. Confrontation enabled Fidesz to cultivate its own position and stage Orbán as a European leader. This kind of discursive position started to be followed elsewhere; what happened with Orbán was that when honour had been lost – in the attempt to stay in power indefinitely from 2010 – reputation could only grow, and so it did. From the rather unknown figure he was in the 2000s, Orbán became a world leader.

Conclusions

For Fidesz, which called for a revolution, polarisation was a tool that could hold back the plurality that was emerging in Hungarian politics as a response to the power-holders and polarisation as such. Exploring the literature reveals that polarisation in Hungary has been treated mainly as descriptive. Political science analyses during the period were reliant on pre-existing and Western conceptions of cleavages. Indigenous approaches focused on the case of a historical debate which

opened up, and which we could see as a form for political argumentation whereas for them it was an already built-in substance, a historical cleavage or pre-existing identity. The idea of polarisation as a permanent state of things in Hungary makes the analysis void of both the nuances of the context and the universal character of certain developments producing and fostering polarisation. The political system, however, also played a role in consolidating the power of the largest parties.

In the situation where fringe populist parties were emerging, Fidesz sought to close the ranks with a focus on a competing populism that reduced all confrontation to the usual political other: the socialists, inheritors of communism, the liberals and other anti-national groups. With time in power it used institutional means to shrink the space of the opposition in such a way that, finally, the other could have not the place afforded to equals but only a marginal role. Therefore it assumed a new mainstream populist dynamic.

The case of Hungary shows how democracy and constitutionalism ought not be taken for granted but rather always need to be argued for and explained, as there is always a possibility of choosing otherwise. Transition is not a predetermined linear path. Behind the Janus face of populism there lurks a possibility present in every attempt to articulate the people. The us may be institutionalised, monopolised and essentialised. Those who are not with us may be pointed out and excluded. When the us and the other remain fixed and uncontested, the democratic ethos behind the temporary constitution of the people as an ultimately impossible collective subject is lost. Or in other words, when democracy turns to authoritarianism the us and the other become fixed and cannot be contested. In the [concluding chapter](#) that follows I discuss polarisation, hegemony and the potential for a rebirth of democracy. We also observe that democratic othering is more fluid.

CONCLUSIONS

From democracy's death by polarisation to its rebirth by the political

Most commentators attribute the emergence of illiberalism to Orbán coming to power. In my book I have tried to argue that it is not as simple as this. An illiberal regime does not just appear from nowhere as a result of a political election or other takeover. The chronology of the book is designed to uncover logics of political contestation in Hungary from the reform communist period onwards, because after the death of Stalin in the late 1950s, the Khrushchev era in the Soviet Union negotiated some openings and compromises. In Hungary, after the crushing of the uprising in 1956, economic reforms were brought in. I conduct 'memory work', in Derrida's (1986) terms, on the period when democracy emerged through dissident mobilisation and the round-table talks that established a multi-party liberal democratic system in the 1990s, and the period that followed in the 2000s when political polarisation also emerged. Many histories have been written of these periods, and in this book my humble attempt is to remind readers that there was also dissident activity and political debate in Hungary. Writing in the 2020s, the parallels were clear: the underground journals, samizdats, were transformed into YouTube channels as the power-holders controlled the media and cultural institutions.

Around the millennium, the dichotomy between the left and the right became a self-sustaining system which began to lose its original meanings. Polarisation became established as political rather than a primordial line of division. It provided a tool through which political parties or party coalitions in Hungarian politics could avoid describing themselves, as it was enough to portray the other negatively (Cox & Gallai, 2014; Körösényi, 2013). By the end of the 2000s, some of this partisanship had transformed – a deep disappointment with

democracy as such, or with either of the two camps, led people to seek out new alternatives. This affected voters for the Socialists and the Liberals, with many opting for Fidesz in protest rather than other, minor political parties. Hence, Fidesz emerged as the largest party in a campaign that Orbán declared was a revolution. Once in power, the party knew how to maintain its position: how to aim at hegemonic control, or state capture as some would argue. For many this was also a full circle, back to the symbols, cultural policy and media control of the Kádár era (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2021; Kristóf, 2021).

For today's Hungarian youth it may come as a surprise that there were several options – some more popular than others – to vote for. Politicians stood on equal ground in TV studios, next to each other. As Fidesz has not taken part in TV debates and airtime on national TV has been limited to a few minutes per party, political debate has been quite transformed. This chapter provides a reading of the differences between the parties and their demands, and the transforming dynamics. It also offers a view of the past.

Consumerism was mainstreamed but the political system started changing in the 1980s, aided by the clandestine magazines through which the opposition organised from the 1970s onwards and increasingly in the 1980s when printing machines were brought to Hungary. The transition was led by political scientists, whose role has more recently been discussed by Hungarian scholars themselves. In the [previous chapter](#) I discussed how finding a Hungarian way was useful for the regime and its development (e.g. Csizmadia, 2017; Greskovits, 2010). We should reflect the role of the profession in, for example, defining democracy, particularly now in the era of demonstrating impact. In the discourse of the hegemonising New Right – Trump, Milei or Orbán – citizens are reduced to consumers online and materially. Their role is limited to an anti-political one.

In Hungary the role of the state shrank to tackling legislation – rather than redistribution. By the 2000s, Hungarians' willingness to pay taxes had shrunk, yet they increasingly expected welfare to follow (Csepeli, 2009). The ideology that put individual interests above collective ones did not match the preferences on welfare state (Gille, 2011, p. 115). It is wrong to assume that state socialism would have produced a strong collectivist ethos among the citizens. Arguably the Stalinist ideology fostered competition of the fittest and highly individualistic identifications and broke down horizontal ties: society consisted

of individual citizens and the party (cf. Schöpflin 1993, pp. 87–88). This paradoxical legacy of the state-socialist period matched quite well with Thatcherite and New Right ideals that spread also among reform economists. What happened in the UK with New Labour in the late 1990s had already been happening in Hungary, transforming the so-called left. The economic downturn hit Hungary already in 2006 and had significant effects on the households that had been encouraged by the left in power to take up foreign-currency loans. When the value of the Hungarian forint shrank, these households were in trouble. In 2010 Fidesz came to power with a popular landslide, establishing an era of de facto one-party rule with media control.

Fidesz's term in power since 2010 has been widely discussed, but Orbán was in fact in power also in 1998–2002, when political polarisation was established in Hungary. For Orbán, initially, coming from a small town to Budapest to study at the university, a key realisation may have been the need to create a counter-elite. Rather than anchoring himself among the liberal Budapest elites that were welcoming the young orator with open arms and a Soros-sponsored stipend to study in the US, he moved on to a concept of the political wherein the political subject would be formed in a discursive battle. Similarities could be found in the concept of the political among the post-Marxist, anti-communist left. This was only strengthened after the loss of power in 2002.

I have tried to argue that the narrative should focus not only on Fidesz itself. It is important for the liberals and the social democrats to reflect on the past. Perhaps the best summary account of the era we have as narrated here is that of Hungarian dissident philosopher Ágnes Heller (2024). In a text posthumously published in English, the title already refers to the process I have tried to capture: 'Hungary: How liberty can be lost'. Heller argues that the transition was smooth and that popular support behind the strongest voices for liberal democracy was weak.

First of all, liberation came to Hungary as a gift. Other than a few thousand intellectuals, no one fought for it or did anything to make it happen. Representatives of the old communist party and of the new parties sat at a round table and decided the future of the country, the character of its institutions, and how its 'peaceful transition' would take place. The general population was excluded from the hard work of the transition

(far more than in Romania or Czechoslovakia, for example) and consequently did not receive the education that inclusion in the process would have provided. In essence, Hungarians received liberty for free, but nothing is ever truly for free. Sooner or later one must pay, and that time has come for Hungary. (Heller, 2024, p. 267)

She argued that in this transition, ‘Hungarians were and remained subjects, not citizens’ (Heller, 2024, p. 268), and that even the Kádár era was a simple reproduction of feudalism. When power changed hands to the Socialists, Heller argues, the Liberals were invited to join as the Socialists knew people craved the previous era and now wanted to share power with the Liberals. Heller, and her husband Ferenc Fehér, actively contributed to debates on Hungary and as dissident intellectuals abroad, first in Australia and then in the US (Palonen, 2018b). There is a difficulty in Heller’s statement, however, in the way in which it makes a distinction between Hungarians as the unliberal masses and the educated elites. The disconnect is illuminating. At the same time Ágnes Heller was herself unable to accept protesters’ criticism of the lying prime minister whom she defended until the end, in a way that was symptomatic of political polarisation. In some ways Hungarians were a lost cause.

The transformation of the Liberals and of Fidesz is palpable in Zsuzsanna Szelényi’s (2022) account of the emergence of Fidesz and how she also was part of the regime, became disappointed, and re-engaged in other movements. Listening to my liberal colleagues, this is actually quite typical of many. Those who are engaged with society and politics put their trust in different projects. At the same time there are many people who trust the regime and do get some material benefits from it. These benefits no longer reach the wider population, as services have been shrunk and the establishment of a new oligarchy in Hungary means that funds have had to be moved from somewhere. Indeed, we have returned to an era in which poverty is not really talked about and those with privilege are the few believers in the system.

Now after some 17 years of Fidesz rule in Hungary, things have evolved. Politics have shifted towards the mainstream populist dynamic. Many parties have sought to contest this as fringe alternatives emerging from the left or from the far right. The united opposition ended up replicating the same line of polarisation in 2022. There were few options left for how to challenge those in power. But obviously

not everyone is happy in Orbán's circles either. In 2024 a new fringe populist dynamic emerged as the former husband of a former key minister in Hungary, an entitled member of the Fidesz elite, began to confront the government. Rather than being from the left or the right as traditionally defined, this challenge cannot be located in the party spectrum that was developed in the 1990s – and which Orbán argued was still a communist product (despite himself also having roots in the transitional symbolic politics). It is too early to say anything about the future, but for local and international audiences this history of political dynamics in Hungary can be helpful in understanding what is going on, and the heuristic tools can be used to analyse the future of Hungarian politics.

Polarisation as the object of study, and a word on heuristics

In this book I account for the way in which democracy was built as a multi-party contest, and how it ended up polarising into two competing camps. The study is not a history of politics in Hungary, although it does narrate a history. Some would argue that Hungary has always been polarised (cf. Kende, 2002), and that in this Central East European country there have always been two camps, even tribes, which have been fighting against each other since the peasant riots of the sixteenth century (the *kurucs* and *labanc*). Unfortunately such essentialism would also render futile any vision of fragmentation of the party system and potentially also multi-party democracy. Although the claim and its consequences are important and interesting, they merely reproduce polarisation as a myth or imaginary. Polarisation is not 'eternal', or in a primordial way cultural. It is always articulated in the political context, with certain political aims.

In writing this book I have addressed the perennial question of who 'we the people' are in whose name politicians rule, in theory and in praxis. For me the answer is not to demonise those who speak in the name of the people. Rather, it is important to work to articulate collective subjects in politics. The criticism should be targeted at questions of (1) the way in which 'the people' is articulated, (2) who gets to do this, (3) in the name of whom, (4) how long each configuration takes and (5) with what means and justifications? If we jump straight to the outright demonisation, claims of authoritarianism and Nazi cards, we

lose track of this exact process and the crucial question of why citizens would sign up for it and keep voting for elected authoritarians.

In the chapters in this book I demonstrate the way in which politics was understood on the right, manifested by Fidesz as a hegemonic contestation, while on the left, liberal democracy was understood in a more technocratic way. This also meant an inability to deal with the cognitive dissonance in the revelation of the ‘naked emperor’, in the form of the lying prime minister case in 2006, which transformed the direction of Hungarian politics from institutionalised polarisation to Fidesz dominance. In highlighting this dimension in politics, the need for social imaginaries and points of identification rather than redistribution and interest, I hope to also go beyond contemporary political science reflection not only in Hungary but also abroad. Only by equipping ourselves with the right theoretical tools is it possible to understand polarisation as part of a hegemonic battle on the way to widespread illiberalism.

Furthermore, I have tried to account, through the case of Hungary and certain theorising, for how the focus on ‘we the people’ – the political us – may, in an antagonistic way, start to erode democracy by turning the field of political identities into a polarised system in which political difference is always articulated in relation to the political other. In this situation the responsibility is on both sides who use the other to construct their own discourse through the enemy image rather than generating a political us that gives hope and voice to people.

Recently political polarisation has received a lot of attention. US journalist Ezra Klein (2020) wrote a book about why we are polarised, analysing the US system and ending up both defending and finding ways to contest polarisation – depolarising through attention to identity-building in the media or moving to more local politics. George Lakoff (1996), in *Moral politics*, gave another psycho-social reason for why US politics is divided, and more recently has expanded on how certain metaphors we live by are affective in producing polarisation. Polarisation is therefore seen in these examples as an already lived-through experience, something more embodied than a mere political discourse. This is also the case in Hungary, where it became the dominant social imaginary (Taylor, 2004), a discursive point for all political difference, but it also trespassed all aspects of social life, right down to the choice between wearing a national symbol or not (Chapters 4 and 6).

Polarisation is not unique to Hungary. I discuss it regularly with colleagues from Turkey, Venezuela, Brazil, India and even the United States. Hungary has enabled me to theorise polarisation, adding to the literature from the angle of hegemony theory. This is a back-and-forth strategy of theory-building, situated political theorising – a crucial part of the technique of narrating in discourse theory. It enables me to write a book that is about Hungary but also to engage in more far-reaching (theoretical-analytical) consequences concerning populism and polarisation.

The practical production of populist discourses takes place on both sides of the confrontation. Hegemonic polarisation can of course also be contested from outside. This book offers heuristic tools for exploring populist articulations of any colour at any time.

In my PhD thesis I already theorised the logic of polarisation as bipolar hegemony. Later, in the mid-2010s, I had the crazy idea to simplify Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism, which was feared and loathed or abused in essentialist ways – as I thought as a discourse theorist. For me the role of theory is first deconstructive, so that we can dissect the phenomenon we are studying to look at what it is composed of and explore its logics. This does not mean that the theory could not be used for political mobilisation too.

Now I have operationalised the form(ula) of populism on all kinds of discourses that have an antagonistic feel, I have realised that the tool – which I derive from the theory of populism, and therefore I have been, in a revisionist way, abusing the term to reappropriate it in the name of the formula – is actually quite accurate for capturing the logic of polarisation too.

When one thinks about polarised discourses, they tend to take the same shape: the us and the frontier. The us is anchored in some fantasy of fullness and the other exists as part of one's own discourse through negative fantasy. The guilty pleasure of collective othering fulfils the function of political (dis)identification in polarised discourses. Anti-woke discourses are a good example of this.

Furthermore, as we know from this logic, when one focuses on othering and signifying the frontier concept affectively, one does not need to work hard on defining the us and whose demands are really included on the side of the collective subject.

The populist dynamics I have captured engage with the ways in which othering takes place. How are the us positioning themselves

in discursive space such as the political spectrum or the field of political parties? When I was thinking of illiberal democracy, I was coming up with a particular hegemonising practice: rather than providing a fringe challenge to liberal democracy, illiberals seek first to take the position of competing populism, reducing the field of political meanings into two. They then seek to operate a mainstream populist dynamic, wherein everything else is simply marginal.

Post-politics, consensus and polarisation

The mistake of liberal rationalism is to ignore the affective dimension mobilized by collective identifications and to imagine that those supposedly archaic 'passions' are bound to disappear with the advance of individualism and the progress of rationality. This is why democratic theory is so badly prepared to grasp the nature of 'mass' political movements as well as phenomena such as nationalism.

...

To be able to mobilize passions towards democratic designs, democratic politics must have a partisan character. This is indeed the function of the left/right distinction and we should resist the call by post-political theorists to think 'beyond left and right'. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 6)

Here, having studied Hungarian politics and having particularly highlighted its antagonistic nature, I will again take up Chantal Mouffe's discussion of consensus and passion in politics. I will outline her early thesis and discuss it in relation to Hungarian politics. I will also show how this case contests some of the points she is making, based on the illustrations in the previous sections of this last chapter. As the above quotes show, Mouffe criticises contemporary political theorists who stress the situation of 'post-politics', which says that, since 1989, there is no need any more to emphasise the role of political frontiers, and politics can be made on the basis of rational discussion. She argues that this situation draws politics further to the elite level and creates space for right-wing populist movements, which mobilise in relation to public dissatisfaction with elite politics, in the name of the 'people'. While she acknowledges that populist right politics is problematic, she puts forward a defence of partisan politics.

Mouffe (2005, pp. 14–15) argues that politics is always a creation of identifications, wherein the identities are relationally constructed; 'reading Schmitt against Schmitt', she argues that the political is about the construction of a 'we', which then also implies the existence of a 'they'. She shows how this relationship can take different forms, the one she is advocating being agonism:

While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that, while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place. We could say that the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20)

Had Hungary democratised, antagonism would have turned into agonism and the parties would have shared the same political association, or the 'common symbolic space'. Mouffe (2005, p. 52) writes: 'Adversaries do fight – even fiercely – but according to a shared set of rules, and their propositions, despite being ultimately irreconcilable, are accepted as legitimate perspectives'. In Hungary, 'right' and 'wrong' appeared already in the 1990s as though they were participating in the same competitions, and around the time of the millennium the system of polarisation required the other side to remain in existence: it should not be 'killed' in order to achieve victory, since this would mean the disappearance of the 'they', which keeps the 'we' together. Nevertheless, the rules of the game can be twisted, as we saw already in the presidential elections, and the other can start to be seen as illegitimate. I have shown in the previous chapters that it is characteristic of the Hungarian situation that many projects started by one government are not carried through after a change of power. My previous accounts indicate that the antagonistic situation prevails. They also demonstrate that while the factions participate in the same elections and the same parliament, there are reoccurring claims about the illegitimacy of the other's action. This indicates that political association is not shared in a way that would stress the other parties as political adversaries.

The 'common symbolic space' is an interesting case. In Hungary, where history is politicised and national and political symbols are

debated and drawn from the past, the past is commonly acknowledged as the source of inspiration and symbols but is interpreted in different ways. There exist, then, both the common heritage of a symbolic space and strong claims over it. There have also been attempts, mainly by the right, to rearticulate the symbolic space in a highly exclusionary way. This turns political adversaries into enemies who have no other space in the symbolic realm apart from their role as others, enemies or the excluded. However, as I have demonstrated throughout my work, the enemy is always present in the identity-building of politicians and parties. From this perspective the articulation of political discourses and identities occurs in roughly the same, if not yet a 'common,' symbolic space.

Nevertheless, the Hungarian case could fit into Mouffe's description of passionate politics. For example, elections, for Mouffe, are not about an expression of interests but about identification:

In order to act politically people need to be able to identify with a collective identity which provides an idea of themselves they can valorise. Political discourse has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving them hope for the future. (Mouffe 2005, p. 25)

In the first section of this chapter I discussed the election campaigns of 2002 and showed that the decision at the ballot box was a moment of identification, as the campaigns were aimed at projecting identities.

One of the instances that shows that Hungary is not an agonistic passionate polity is that politics there, as in the case of the liberal post-politics that Mouffe (2005, p. 21) writes about, 'is merely a competition among elites'. The problem with Mouffe's works becomes visible in her assumption that passions imply the construction of real political alternatives: 'Politics has always a "partisan" dimension and for people to be interested in politics they need to have the possibility of choosing between parties offering real alternatives. This is precisely what is missing in current celebration of "partisan-free" democracy' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 29). I have argued throughout this work that the 'alternatives' offered by the political parties are simply a way to maintain the frontier of polarisation and, thus, the positions of the political elites, even if they are mobilised and mixed with passion. Rather than substantive articulation of demands which might come from below, the contestation is mainly over who should not run the country.

The danger arises that the democratic confrontation will therefore be replaced by a confrontation between essentialist forms of identification or non-negotiable moral values. When political frontiers become blurred, disaffection with political parties sets in and one witnesses the growth of other types of collective identities, around nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 30)

In other words, it appears that the left and the right in Hungary are not a functioning left and right; instead they are constructed on moral grounds – of right and wrong. The keeping of ‘politics in a moral register’ is a phenomenon Mouffe detects in consensual democracies, where anything outside the consensus is simply denied a voice by the argument that it is absolutely wrong (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 72–76).

This is as worrying as post-political technocracy or consensual politics. I have sought to demonstrate in the course of this study that there was no ‘conflictual consensus’, or consensus with strong dissent – as Mouffe envisioned – in Hungarian politics. The political division lines were organised in part essentially, in part against the other group’s position. The division line ended up creating a situation of polarisation. This is a situation of bipolar consensus or competing populism.

Similarly, we see in the case of the referendum of 2004 how the left acknowledges the right’s claims at the moment of victory. This is important, since despite the claims of illegitimacy and a situation where the two sides are enemies rather than adversaries, they realise that their existence depends on the frontier. This idea that Chantal Mouffe has stressed in her conceptualisation of agonistic politics was still strong at least on the left at that point. Mouffe decisively criticised Carl Schmitt’s idea of annihilating the political other: democracy would be about contestation where political others are needed.

Death or rebirth of democracy?

This study has discussed how polarised politics and the building of Fidesz’s hegemony shaped Hungary, discursively. What are the lessons learned, what are the potential points of contestation, and is there a way out? The theoretical contribution is to focus on a new conjuncture in populism studies – one that takes populism as a heuristic device rather than as content. I show how performative political differentiation and identification work in Hungary through demonstrating how

the foundations of Hungarian politics are overridden with nationalism and the populist dynamics of antagonism, and finally, how the overriding political polarisation helps to explain illiberal constitutional reforms. The heuristic tools, introduced in [Chapter 1](#), can be useful for other contexts too.

My attempt here is to take readers to the episteme of the previous decades to understand the roots and developments that generated a democratic deficit in Hungary in the form of polarisation. In its many iterations in articles and this book manuscript, my reading has been advised by various readers of the book's chapters, among whom there were many scholars living and working in Hungary. For them my attempt here is to narrate the birth and death of liberal democracy in Hungary.

But is it all lost? In 2022 there was an attempt by the opposition parties to unite and seek to conquer Fidesz as a popular front. From the theory of hegemony and populism one might have thought that this would be enough: the heterogeneous people uniting against the oppressive regime. Now, the discursive power of Fidesz was overwhelming.

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine was responded to in Hungary with reference to history and memory. While it might have been thought that it would remind Hungarians of the crushing of the Hungarian democratic uprisings in 1849 and 1956, the collective memory was full of commemoration of the trauma of Trianon, the loss of land after the First World War. Importantly, one of these areas was Ruthenia, on the Ukrainian side of the border: Hungarians were more sympathetic to the Russian arguments about Ukrainian nationalism having been forced on minorities than to the safeguarding of democratic liberties or national integrity. The opposition, which wanted to support Ukrainian independence, were accused of being warmongers and wanting to use public funds, or what remained of them, to send troops and weapons to Ukraine. As the logic of polarisation entails, once one starts accusing the other of things, it does not matter whether they are true: the seeds of distrust have already been sown.

In the elections to be held in spring 2026 according to the regular parliamentary term schedule, there will be new political symbolisms but also a new political contender. The millionaire businessman Péter Magyar broke away from the Fidesz inner circle and revitalised the Tisza Party, which overtook Fidesz in the polls at the end of 2024.



In an electoral autocracy, the parliament holds the possibility for political change. Photograph: Emilia Palonen.

Magyar combines a discourse of solidarity and social services, local democracy and participation with Hungarian traditionalist nationalism.

The promising thing for the mobilisation from the polarisation perspective is that it has not been embraced to death by either Fidesz or the other opposition parties, but both appear suspicious of it. It opposes the whole line of polarisation of all the political elites. In this kind of political discourse, anti-populist Hungary appears an asset and an ally. In [Chapter 5](#) we discussed how Demszky failed to contest polarisation, but this does not indicate that Péter Magyar cannot succeed. First, polarisation is not as strong now, as Fidesz clearly has an upper hand in the position of mainstream populism. Second, Magyar has not so far needed to side with either group, as SZDSZ had to. He has also not held political office and so bears no responsibility for the decay of Hungarian society in economic and social terms over the past years. And to the extent that he has participated in the regime, he has regretted it. This stance has been difficult for other politicians who

were revealed to be incompetent or morally dubious, as we saw from Chapters 7 and 8.

Therefore there are some signs of hope for a Hungarian multi-party democracy to come. The two concerns that the opposition seems to have regarding Magyar is that supporting him would only replace Orbán with a new populist leader: here they are right in that Magyar has a strongly antagonistic populist discourse, but unlike many populists he does not intend to stay in power. It is possible that only full-scale antagonism can challenge Orbán. Now that Magyar is emerging from a fringe populist dynamic, he needs to land on a competing populism. And in this, popular support is emerging from different parts of the country, former Fidesz supporters are siding with Magyar, and support for the former established opposition parties is significantly shrinking. It is also possible that Magyar will not follow the limits of the terms of office that his party has outlined if he were to become the prime minister. This new politician, the former spouse of a minister, has argued that he would not seek to stay in power, and this is a key asset in his campaign for my version of agonistic democracy where more parties would need to populate the space to avoid polarisation.

Time will tell. The role of discourse theory is not to predict the future. Nevertheless, the heuristics outlined in this book may help in capturing potential logics of future developments. My aim here has been to develop and test tools in the case of Hungary to enable the analysis of polarisation in other cases.

In this current study I have explored democracy, polarisation and populism, developing a conceptual understanding to better address contemporary politics in general. I hope that for its readers this book has offered a new way of thinking of political polarisation and populism, based on the case of Hungarian politics. It offers a reading of the emergence and sedimentation of polarisation which finally led to a vivid sense of democratic decline that took a very long time to uncover.

It has also sought to demonstrate that there is not only one side of the polarisation to be blamed for this competing populist dynamic that impedes democratic debate over issues and puts the focus on disidentification. The bipolar hegemony, after all, become just a consensual regime with a singular political frontier and a limited conception of the political. Perhaps it is time to uncover how the us-building political fantasies and enjoyment of othering take shape in other cases.

EPILOGUE

Farewell to a democracy and beyond

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In 2010, general elections were held in Hungary, which resulted in Fidesz obtaining a two-thirds majority in parliament that enabled them to change the constitution. This also marked the beginning of a new era and the end of 20 years of experimentation with democracy. This authoritarian transformation did not come out of nowhere, and many of the frontiers drawn and the ideological elements that emerged in the post-democratic era had already appeared on the horizon long before that: sometimes, as if they had been completed in the de-democratisation process. The discursive constructions, their relationships and transformations, that Emilia Palonen describes in this book are the antecedents of Hungary's authoritarian transformation under Orbán. They may also be able to suggest some kind of answer to the conundrum of why people choose autocracy – probably only in a limited form, and almost without exception under the conceptual aegis of 'democracy' or even the 'real' one. In other words, we may wonder if such transformations do not come out of nowhere and are more the result of human choices than the intervention of some unavoidable external force. That is, how is authoritarian transformation possible, with what constructions and what can justify it to citizens who choose it or just experience it – and thus provide a ground for refusal as well?

The country that broke free from state socialism in 1990 entered a 20-year period of democracy. Emilia Palonen's formula captures the world of political identities and differences (frontiers) in this initial period, shaped fundamentally by actors in relation to one another. Later, in the post-democratic era after 2010, the political opponent

– the left and the liberals – has always remained on the other side of the frontiers drawn by Fidesz. However, throughout the Orbán era, another type of enemy – no longer just an opponent but a true enemy – has been continuously present. Although closely linked in a fictitious way to the ‘left’, this enemy is either external, weak or does not even exist in original human experience (people often do not even understand its name). Examples include migrants (*migránsok*), gender (*gender*) and Soros (nobody from everyday people knew him before) – key elements of an emotionally powerful chain of equivalence. Maintaining this chain is crucial for the regime, as it reinforces the antagonistic frontier together with the internal enemy. This, in turn, sustains the image of an ever-present enemy against which the regime fights, preserving its identity and its offer of protection towards those whose active or passive support secures its power and legitimacy.

This is a massive logic of frontier-making, not merely antagonistic but one that builds an exclusive hegemony, which can rightly be called enemy construction. One of Palonen’s earlier arguments (‘Democracy vs. demography: Rethinking politics and the people as debate’, 2021) can be applied here as well, serving as a distinguishing criterion between the two eras: that, according to Lefort, in a democracy, the place of power is empty. What, then, is the case with Hungary? Although there was a struggle for power between 1990 and 2010, and the logic of differentiation that animates politics was sometimes weaker and sometimes stronger, those who gained power were neither able nor necessarily willing to dominate it indefinitely; thus, as a structural position, power remained empty, to be temporarily occupied by political actors who secured a majority. After 2010, this changed: Fidesz, or rather Viktor Orbán himself, took over the now-not-empty space of power. But maintaining and legitimising this exclusive hegemony requires the continuous presentation of an enemy.

From this perspective, the distinction between democratic and non-democratic eras is sharp. At the same time, it also becomes clear that the former serves as the precursor to the latter – and this may be important in understanding how a country can transition relatively smoothly onto the path of de-democratisation. The contemporary situation suggests that the breakdown of democracies can be driven by internal dynamics. In this sense, ‘Orbán’s political laboratory’, in its entirety and with its historical trajectory, provides a significant case

study for citizens and their communities seeking to sustain – or defend – their democracies.

The discursive sphere described by the Palonenian formula and its transformations between approximately 1990 and 2002 provide a picture of an evolving political world, where antagonistic frontiers are not yet fully stabilised and institutionalised. In other words, while certain elements of polarisation are present, the overall dynamics of the political sphere are not yet defined by polarisation. In a sense, this is an era of political experimentation that vividly demonstrates that politics – and any politics – is driven by the dynamic of differentiation. Politics is about differentiation, not sameness; this fundamental political logic runs through the entire era. Moreover, what Palonen's formulas, when placed side by side, highlight with particular clarity is that the political sphere itself is constructed through these differentiations. The period following the *annus mirabilis* of the East-Central European regime changes can also be seen as an era of discovering politics, the formation of differences and identities. This does not take place in a vacuum but always in relation to the political other, often characterised by striking animosities and emotions. This is the inhabitation of political sphere, perhaps surprisingly at first by drawing frontiers.

The first major era – primarily the 1990s – was about differentiation and carried the feeling that things could be different from how they currently were; revealing to us in real-life practice how the conditions of democratic politics and the ontological conditions for rhetoric in the Aristotelian sense are the same. Politics is a sphere of competing alternatives. Perhaps one disagrees with the government, but there is always the next election to vote it out. The political 'we' carries the potential for change, the idea that things could indeed be otherwise. This sense of freedom – and the liberating feeling it brought – was the great promise of politics, which only really became apparent to us after its loss. The post-2010 period, especially the agony and political apathy following the 2022 elections, is also a time of losing politics itself.

Politics, one could say, was primarily lost with the authoritarian turn, but this dynamic also goes back a long time. The exclusive 'only us' bipolar structure that Emilia outlines for the period between 2002 and 2010 marks the transformation of the political space into an antagonistic structure, marginalising smaller parties and effectively establishing an essentially bi-party discursive system by the late 2000s. All this while the left-liberal counterpart of this system of differences

collapsed in terms of voter support, leaving behind an asymmetrically bipolar discursive space. The result was a polarised polity but with a single dominant player, unchecked by any real counterbalance in terms of power. This is the point at which we arrive at the birth of the Orbán regime in 2010.

The process begins earlier, however, and reading this book and looking at it retrospectively, what stands out is the simultaneity of polarisation solidifying and the emergence of political counter-movements against it. In other words, simultaneously with the emergence and sedimentation of polarisation, parties/movements appear that become political actors addressing the issue of polarisation. One of these movements even carries a name that directly opposes the logic of polarisation: *'Politics Can Be Different'* (*Lehet Más a Politika*) – a direct challenge to the bipolar political logic. These challenges incorporate not just political logics but also emotions – in this case, the counterpoint to a growing sentiment at the time. That prevailing sentiment, shaped by an increasingly polarised public sphere dominated by two major parties, could be summed up as: *politics cannot be different*. Politics – what we see and experience – is nothing more than the mutually exclusive play of two variations, where the two actors ultimately create each other and are the mutual frontiers of each other's identity.

Can the logic of polarisation be broken? The ideological-discursive bipolarisation of politics becomes pronounced towards the end of the democratic era, followed by experiments from the left (the green *Lehet Más a Politika*) and the right (*Jobbik*). In hindsight, and this is also the tragedy of a generation, it seems that politics could not have been different. Earlier, even before polarisation was institutionalised, during the formative period, there had been attempts to cross the boundaries between 'right' and 'left', as the [Demszky chapter](#) of the book demonstrates. One of the notable conclusions that can be drawn, however, is that it is not possible to start completely anew. The logic of frontier-drawing will remain there and continue to function. It is possible to borrow from both sides, but it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to make this intermediate space, a political *khora* in the first place, self-existent and consolidated. It is not difficult to borrow elements or redescribe them, but it is difficult to consolidate the space torn out from the logic of differentiation and create a new defining frontier, or more precisely, frontiers, in the plural. Nonetheless, the rewriting of the existing and drawing of a whole new horizon – a completely new

social contract – is an exceptional operation, and the political creativity required for this has been glaringly lacking in Hungarian politics, especially after 2010. Put differently, the unsettling conclusion is that the power of polarisation, the mutually exclusive antagonistic political logic, is overwhelming. In fact, the Demszky experiment raises the even more disturbing thought that even from a less intense polarisation logic, a logic that is much more agonistic than antagonistic, it is nearly impossible to break out in a way that could open a new horizon, pluralise the divisive frontier and bring a halt to the antagonistic dynamics of the political space.

At the beginning of 2024, Hungarian politics certainly entered a new era, after a new player emerged on the political scene – leaving and opposing the Fidesz elite – and at an astonishing pace became a potent actor supported by the masses and a real challenger to Fidesz for the first time in 14 years. Péter Magyar’s rhetoric adopted ideological-discursive elements and symbols from the left and the right simultaneously, while also rejecting the logic of polarisation. It is neither right nor left but Hungarian, say Magyar and the Tisza Party sympathisers. They make the nation (*magyar*) the main category of integration, and maintain a radical distinction, this time against Fidesz, which is no less strong than the previous distinctions that characterised polarised politics, since they want regime change. But in addition to Fidesz, they also reject the opposition, saying that they together mutually maintain the Orbán regime in a kind of intentional co-operation.

The new political formation rejects polarisation not on the basis of intensity (which is above all an abstract category of political philosophy), but *politically* – that is, it rejects the whole relation itself. Ultimately, it rejects an antagonism (left/right, Fidesz/‘old opposition’) in order to consolidate another, decisive antagonism, this time between its own political formation and the regime. However, this leads to the same problem: is it possible to overcome polarisation, and will mutually exclusive conflicts not be replicated again after the eventual overthrow of the Orbán regime, thus recreating the discursive ground on which authoritarian transformation could eventually take place? And if the new opposition fails to change the regime, will it not lead to an intensification of conflicts underlying polarisation, further autocratising the regime and its transformation into a truly repressive one?

These are troubling questions, and we need to understand from diverse academic perspectives why and how an authoritarian transition

takes place and how to avoid or find a way out of it. We need to understand what is happening and what possibilities we have of seeing from the perspective of political discursivity, as in Emilia's book. We need to be able to have the (political) philosophical reflection that allows this type of understanding and analysis, as did in our case especially Chantal Mouffe's conception of politics and agonism, or Ágnes Heller's reflections on Hungarian politics. However, there is one thing that is crucial for us to be aware of, because this is true not only of the Hungarian situation, although it is of its exemplary case: these de-democratisation processes go hand in hand with curtailing and subsequently destroying academic freedom. Academia is a rival to authoritarian politics, and it is in the fundamental interest of these regimes to first exploit the epistemic authority it can provide and then, as we see in the evolution of the regime, to use it as infrastructural background for hegemony-building to create a new elite (or new people in general). Academia is traditionally the sphere of freedom, so it is a necessity for any authoritarian regime to challenge it.

All this has consequences for whether it is possible to think freely about these dilemmas. Even if this becomes hard or impossible within the domestic academic context, science and academia, at least according to their guiding principles, are international. Therefore, international academia, its leaders and its colleagues can play an extremely important role in ensuring that these opportunities do not disappear completely, even if they become impossible in a given country as democracy recedes. Dark clouds appear on the horizon of democracy these days we are living in, so academic solidarity, which goes beyond words and supports this research and these émigrés, can be of fundamental importance to our societies.

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