

# The Orbán regime as the 'perfect autocracy': The emergence of the 'zombie democracy' in Hungary

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**Abstract:** *All ECE countries have covered the same historical trajectory of 'the third-generation autocracy', but Hungary has been reaching its 'perfection', since the two-thirds, constitutional supermajority in the Hungarian case has allowed for the Orbán regime to complete this 'reverse wave' in all fields of society and turning it into a zombie democracy. The conceptual frame of this paper is that the decline of democracy and the turn to autocratisation can be presented in ECE in the three big stages of the Easy Dream, Chaotic Democracy and Neoliberal Autocracy in the three corresponding decades. The paper concentrates on the third stage in its three shorter periods taking 3–4 years as the De-Democratisation, Autocratisation and De-Europeanisation. The Hungarian case has been presented in this paper in a comparative ECE view as its worst-case scenario that also sheds light on the parallel developments in the fellow ECE countries.*

**Key words:** *autocratisation and De-Europeanisation, zombie democracy and zombie EU membership in Hungary*

## Introduction

As the point of departure this paper offers a historical overview of the autocratisation in a comparative ECE view in the last thirty years, indicating the contours of this backsliding from a basically weak and chaotic democracy to a modernised autocracy. In this historical process there has been a change of focus in the democracy studies in general and in the ECE states in particular, from the democratisation to the autocratisation as the ruling paradigm. With

the emerging autocratisation the change of paradigms between the democracy studies and the 'autocracy studies' has also been completed. In the third stage of the ECE developments by the early 2020s the systemic features of the new autocracies have been summarised in a new concept of the third-generation autocracies, focusing on the new ECE autocracies in their increasing confrontation with the EU mainstream (see V-Dem, 2021, Lührmann, 2021, Merkel and Lührmann, 2021).<sup>1</sup>

In the great outlines, after the first two decades there was a general feeling of deception in ECE, and the scientific perception of the crisis led to the recognition of the common ECE failures in the Europeanisation and Democratisation process by discussing the naïve hopes in the first stage and the resentment in the second stage in the chaotic early democracies. The ECE developments were discussed more and more in the 'crisis studies', while the new turn to autocratisation was described and systematised in the 2010s. As it will be presented in a comparative ECE framework in the Hungarian case, the ECE development began in the nineties in the *Easy Dream* stage with the expectation to 'Return to Europe' in a quick process, but its failure was felt already in the second stage of the *Chaotic Democracy*, especially during the global financial crisis in the 2000s. The ECE failure in the catching-up process in the EU with the increasing social polarisation produced the sharp turn in the early 2010s to the stage of the *Neoliberal Autocracy* that will be analysed in its three shorter periods. The first period of the *De-Democratisation* was 'destructive', since the constitutional foundations of democracy were attacked in ECE, and actually ruined in the Hungarian case. In the second period there was a rise of elected autocracies around the mid-2010s as *Autocratisation* with a 'constructive' process of laying the foundation of a new polity through the oligarchisation based on the politico-business networks in the formal and informal institutions. The shaky consolidation of these new autocracies since the late 2010s has deepened the Core-Periphery Divide that has produced an open confrontation of the ECE countries with the EU in the third period of *De-Europeanisation*. However, as this paper tries to argue in the Conclusion, the ongoing triple global crisis has provoked a creative crisis in the EU history with radical changes in the EU. This new turn in the EU has given a good opportunity for the *new systemic change* in ECE to the sustainable democracies in the 2020s.

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1 The theory of the third-generation autocracy in ECE, described in three stages and three periods, has been elaborated in my 'parallel' paper *Third wave of autocracy in East-Central Europe* (in the *Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2022), see also my recent books (Ágh, 2019a, 2021) and papers (Ágh, 2016, 2019b, 2020a, b). The current 'decline of democracy' literature, see for instance Bayer and Wanat (2021), Ber- man (2021), Coman and Volintiru (2021), Ghodsee and Orenstein (2021), Higgins (2021), Kochenov and Dimitrovs (2021), Lovéc et al. (2021), Maurice (2021), Sabatini and Berg (2021), Scheiring (2020) and Waldner and Lust (2018) cannot be discussed here in detail, but they have been taken into consideration in this paper.

In this regional approach, this paper points out in a comparative framework that Hungary has been the classical or model negative case in this controversial transformation process of autocratisation. The Orbán regime has completed the state capture in these three periods, and it has performed the political capture of all social fields in several steps as a ‘stealthy putsch’, so the Hungarian case offers itself for the deeper analysis of the autocratisation. The special analysis of Hungary – ‘the country I know best’ – as a *zombie democracy* provides a concept of the comparative autocratisation in the Eastern periphery of the EU. This concept – by continuously comparing it with the fellow ECE countries – gives the hope of provoking a discussion on this topic. Finally, this reconceptualisation leads to the conclusion about the ongoing radical reforms of the EU in the recent management of the triple global crisis, which not only offers, but in fact necessitates the *redemocratisation* in ECE.<sup>2</sup>

## The Hungarian blind alley to the perfect autocratisation in the 2010s

This paper argues that Hungary has been the worst-case scenario in ECE with the crazy ride to autocratisation, and turning away from the road to Europeanisation and Democratisation through the above mentioned three periods. The Orbán regime has been conquering the full power not by one attack, as in the traditional case of power change, but in a long process of ‘coup d’état’, while maintaining the democratic façade for the regime. It has occupied the power positions in several domains one after another, and finally it has reached the ‘perfect’ autocracy by completely ruining all democratic mechanisms, the checks and balances system in the legal, social and cultural fields. The three consecutive elections in the 2010s have produced a parliamentary, constitution-making *supermajority* for the Orbán regime to finish this *stealthy putsch*, in which the consecutive elections have also been the major turning points in these three periods of autocratisation. This supermajority has facilitated the full ‘society capture’ by completing the stages of the state/economy/culture capture. At the same time this has also been a continuous process of institution-building through these critical turning points, which have opened step by step a new field of action to occupy the next vital territory of society.<sup>3</sup>

In the main outlines, this new systemic change of the autocratisation began with the landslide electoral victory of Fidesz in 2010 because in the late 2000s –

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2 This short summary only introduces the main concepts and terms widely discussed in the parallel paper mentioned above, which is actually the first part of the longer paper, and this paper can be considered as the second part.

3 Hungary has been qualified by many experts as the worst-case scenario in ECE (see Ágh, 2016). This paper adds that the long process of a stealthy putsch has been completed in the early 2020s by the full social capture in the recent ‘cultural war’. The term zombie democracy has appeared for the complete decline of democracy, see *The Economist* (2013) and, recently, Roth (2021)

due to the socio-economic crisis – there was a deep fatigue and a shocking deception in the Hungarian population. It resulted in the collapse of the chaotic and weak democracy by the political tsunami of the neopopulist Fidesz winning 52.73 % of votes and 68.13 % of parliamentary seats. Since then, the Orbán governments have concocted a manipulative electoral legislation to craft a constitutional majority repeatedly through ‘democratic’ elections. The general background of this process has been the parliamentary supermajority, through which everything has become ‘legal’, since Fidesz could make all kinds of legislations in a very short time – including a series of the Constitution’s amendments – in order to turn all violations of democracy to ‘legal’. As a start, the Orbán regime introduced a new Constitution in the traditionalist-nativist style, called Basic Law. It was not mentioned by Fidesz in the 2010 election campaign, and was not followed by any popular discussion and plebiscite in order to confirm it and to give legitimacy to it. There has been, however, so far nine amendments of this Basic Law that has always been changed according to the given political situation. The electoral system has also been changed several times, and the social and financial preconditions for the fair electoral campaign in a free media have been removed. These elections have remained *free* at the very formal level, but basically less and less *fair*, due to both the distortion of electoral law and to the dominant media capacity of the Orbán regime to influence the voters.<sup>4</sup>

The masterminded legislation for the unfair, manipulated elections started by the incoming Orbán government, abusing its two-thirds majority, and changing the rules of elections very often, even right before the 2014 parliamentary elections. As the evaluation of these manipulative, unfair elections, Scheppele has noted that “Orbán’s constitutional majority – which will allow him to govern without constraint – was made possible only by a series of legal changes unbecoming a proper democracy... Remove any one of them and the two-thirds crumbles.” And she continued with a warning: “The European Union imagines itself as a club of democracies, but now must face the reality of a Potemkin democracy in its midst. The EU is now going into its own parliamentary elections, after which it will have to decide whether Hungary still qualifies to be a member of the club” (Scheppele, 2014: 17, see also 2015).<sup>5</sup>

This façade or Potemkin democracy leading to the perfect autocracy with an almighty legislative and executive power gives the specificity of the Hungarian case. The Big Reverse Wave began in 2010, and these three consecutive elections (2010, 2014 and 2018) – won with the two-thirds majority by Fidesz –

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4 On the Hungarian developments see for instance Buzogány and Varga (2019), CIVICO Europa (2020), Coakley (2021), CoE (2020b, 2021a), Csehi (2019, 2021), Csehi and Zgut (2020), Glied (2020) and Scheiring (2020). There are many joint analyses about Hungary and Poland, see Cianetti et al. (2018), Csehi and Zgut (2020), Cianetti et al. (2018), Theuns (2020) and Varga and Buzogány (2020).

5 The unfair, manipulated elections have been described by Scheppele (2014 and 2015), see also the very critical OSCE (2014) and Council of Europe (CoE, 2020a, b and 2021a, b) Reports.

give the three periods of the Orbán regime, reaching its ‘perfection’ in the early 2020s. In the first case, at the 2010 elections, the mass discontent with the failed Europeanisation and with the pernicious social polarisation ruined the former chaotic democracy. Hungary – with Poland – was the trendsetter in ECE in the late eighties, therefore the expectation for Europeanisation and Democratisation after the systemic change in 1989 as a convergence dream was very high in Hungary. Consequently, the deception was also very high, the highest among the new member states, resulting in the collapse of the chaotic democracy at the 2010 elections. This popular discontent already came to the surface in 2006 with the mass demonstrations against the government, and it was deepening year by year, mostly due to the global fiscal crisis starting in 2008. Finally, the new wave of discontent led to this collapse of the weak democracy in the 2010 elections. Altogether, there has been a process of the new systemic change in three big steps from the *political* through the *socio-economic* to the *cultural* capture to complete this new systemic change by the quasi-full *social capture*.

From the point of view of the big social subsystems, these three periods – De-Democratisation, Autocratisation and De-Europeanisation – have followed the logic of a masterplan by capturing the political power in the related fields. This cumulative process of the extended state capture or the consecutive state/economy/culture capture has not been a ‘spontaneous’ process at all, since the political capture in the *first* period gave the legal means of *De-Democratisation* for the new political elite. By changing the free and fair elections to the unfair elections in a basically pre-programmed fake system was fatally damaging the democracy. It was a conscious process with a masterplan, conquering the basics of political power in both the formal and informal institutions in the first four years. In the *second* four years – in the *Autocratisation* period of the system building – the second electoral victory allowed for the autocratic elite to occupy all chief positions in the economy and society by ‘privatising’ them. This oligarchisation took place within the pyramid of politically arranged redistribution across the whole society as a systematic catch of the socio-economic control. It started earlier at the state and/or the central government level to prepare the next step of the social transformation/polarisation according to the logic of this power pyramid based on the politico-business networks. Finally, the Orbán regime has managed in the *third* period to complete the process of social capture in the cultural life, which has also meant a fierce attack on the EU, on the European rules and values in the recent *De-Europeanisation* period. The Orbán regime has engaged in the ‘cultural war’ – usually called *Kulturkampf* – for the quasi-full control of the media and by 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.

All in all, for the more detailed overview of the historical itinerary, the Orbán government in the *first* ‘destructive’ period made a complete overhaul of the legal-political system for the rule of the hegemonic party. Basically, the Orbán government fundamentally weakened the checks and balances system, and replaced the heads of all constitutional institutions – Constitutional Court (AB), State Audit Office (ÁSZ), Chief Prosecutor’s Office (FH) and National Tax Office (NAV) – with loyal Fidesz party soldiers. The main political weapon of this overextending ‘state party’ as Golem party was the legal instrumentalism of the state machinery, using the legal rules for direct political purposes, since the two-thirds majority was in fact a constitutional-making majority, and therefore all the anti-democratic actions of the Orbán government were strictly made ‘legal’. This process of converting all former democratic rules through the majoritarian ‘democratic’ legal mechanisms into non-democratic rules in the first period can be termed democracy capture, since it meant turning the basic democratic institutions into a mere façade or simply to a ‘fig-leaf’. Thus, the Fidesz-Golem reregulated the entire Hungarian legal system in this constitutional coup d’état by abusing the parliamentary supermajority for the hostile takeover of the leading positions in the constitutional institutions. This systemic change in the polity – laying the foundations of the autocratic regime in the institutions – also included the programme for the takeover of the media rule through a new repressive law, right at the beginning of this process of de-democratisation by turning to a new system termed officially as ‘illiberal democracy’ (Orbán, 2014).

The deviation from EU norms and from the EU mainstream development was already evident in the first period, still with some efforts to pay lip service to the EU about democracy and EU values. The EU often mentioned ‘the red line’ in the rule of law violations, but it proved to be empty rhetoric already in the early 2010s. Actually, crossing this red line by drastically violating the rule of law has been tolerated for more than one decade within the EU. The first indication of the serious violation of rule of law by the Orbán regime was documented in the Tavares Report in 2013, voted by the EP with a large majority, but leading no sanctions. After the Tavares Report many observers noted, “As for Hungary, how much tolerance should Europe show towards the wayward behaviour of one of its members with respect to democratic norms and human rights?” (Tsoukalis, 2014: 58). In the same way, the international ranking institutions recognised this start of the new systemic change in Hungary: ‘Events in Hungary in 2010 demonstrated that the positive trajectory of democratic development cannot be taken for granted, within the new member states in particular. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party used the two-thirds parliamentary majority it won in April 2010 elections to push through a number of measures that were viewed as clear challenges to the country’s system of democratic accountability’ (FH, 2011: 7, see also later FH, 2021a, b). This statement leads back to the Hungarian



worst-case scenario, since the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) later issued another strong statement that ‘Some negative trends have recently worsened. Hungary is perhaps the prime example among the EU’s new member states in the region. Since winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the 2010 elections, the centre-right Fidesz party has systematically taken over the country’s previously independent institutions’ (EIU, 2015: 22–23).

In the *second* ‘constructive’ period between 2014 and 2018, right after the 2014 elections, Orbán made an often-quoted official announcement on the ‘il-liberal democracy’ that meant a programme of the full autocratisation by the extension of the power grab from politics to the economy and society. While in the first period the emphasis was on the big formal institutions in the emerging centralised autocratic system, in the second period – based on these almighty formal institutions – the emphasis was shifted to the informal socio-economic and civil institutions. It enabled them to conquer the economic power, and through it also the social power by building the big socio-political dependency pyramid among the population controlled by the politico-economic elite. The oligarchisation brought in a radical change in economy and society based on *systemic* corruption regulated by the political elite. It means politically organised procurements by turning the EU’s resources and the state funds to the friendly oligarchs as the mechanism of the institutionalised corruption through closed channels, but all actions were formally legalised. This economic capture had a direct extension to society through this redistribution pyramid, building an extensive social network. Hence, in this period the emphasis was on controlling the whole population through a socio-economic dependency system. It proceeded as stretching out the political capture to the institutions on the other fields, including the government managed owner-changes in the media, by creating the *parallel* state with the drastic intervention of the market’s workings, too. There was a wave of (re)nationalisation of many enterprises, and vice versa, giving them to the friendly oligarchs through the (re)privatisation of these state assets. With this interdependence this joint socio-economic and political dependency system produced a new meaning for both the nationalisation and privatisation, since in fact the state was *privatised* by the political elite and the huge properties of friendly oligarchs actually were ‘*statised*’, that is state controlled by the central political elite, by the small group of leaders around Orbán.

This *parallel* state – sometimes also called *background* state – introduced a strange mixture of the public and private, a modern form of the party state in the neoliberal autocracy built on the systematic and hierarchical political favouritism for those who are politically connected to Fidesz through the formal or informal party membership. In the second period, however, the *deep* state was also built by removing all kinds of the genuine self-governance, although keeping their democratic façade, but actually conquering and emptying them.

This process concerned first of all the lower levels of public administration from power by drastic centralisation of the county and local self-governments. Also, all kinds of interest organisations were marginalised and disempowered, especially the trade unions. This direct control of public/civil and private/interest organisations was masterminded, then executed by the formal legislation, furthermore it was supported by the economic restrictions and personal intimidations against the outsiders. Hence all of them worked through the channels of personal dependencies in the centralised network of political dependencies. With the decline of professionalisation, the parallel state caused poor governance at the national level due to the overwhelming political interests in all state decisions/actions of the party nomenclature. Still the deep state was more painful for the citizens at the local level because the legal security was missing in this model of neoliberal autarky with the 'strong power above – anarchy below' in the power pyramid. This anarchy was increased by the serious attacks on civil society, stigmatising the most active organisations as foreign agents. At the level of the NGOs versus QUANGOs, there was also a big effort to marginalise the genuine institutions versus the fake ones that presented the democratic façade for the government controlled civil society. It was a shadow oligarchisation at the civil society level in the closed political patronage system, controlled by the big government and super-ministries with many state secretaries and government commissioners under strict personal dependence, actually in a one-man rule, both formal and informal.

Altogether, this declining democracy as 'populism from above' tended in the *second* period towards a new kind of authoritarian rule, and Hungary indeed became an elected autocracy after the fake elections in 2014. The reasons for the new electoral victory were clear, since the supermajority was preprogrammed in the new electoral law with huge preferences for the big party in many ways, including gerrymandering. There was just one round of elections in the new electoral system in order to avoid the alliances of opposition in the second round. Instead of the dominance of proportional results on the party lists, there were more places for MPs from the individual districts. Thus, a huge contrast was produced at the 2014 and 2018 elections between the electoral support of Fidesz and the size of its parliamentary majority. In 2014 the Orbán regime received only 44.87 % of votes that gave 66.83 % of seats, and in 2018 49.27 % also giving 66.83 % of seats, in both cases the safe supermajority. It means that taking the participation in the elections into account (60.09 % and 70.22 %), in 2014 somewhat less than one third of the population and in 2018 slightly more than one third of the population gave a supermajority to Fidesz in this electoral system. Still afterwards, the Orbán regime referred all the time to representing the large majority of Hungarians. All these formal events were combined with the pressure of the personal dependence in the new power pyramid for the population, above all in the countryside, and reported under the



quasi-monopoly of media by the government. Already no popular resistance was possible in the formal-legal system because the checks and balances system was destroyed on the top. The central constitutional institutions were conquered and fully packed with Fidesz appointees, usually for 9 or 12 years in office – including the National Electoral Board with a wide range of competences – in order to monopolise these institutions for the long run.

In many publications the term of hybrid regime has become accepted for these Potemkin democracies with a double face, that is for the polities with an institutional/constitutional democratic façade, but actually with a tough autocratic system behind. With some reservations the ‘hybridisation’ term may even be applied to the first government cycle between 2010 and 2014, since the Orbán regime had the full capacity of the voluntaristic legislation for the ‘de-democratisation’ already in this first period. In the vast international literature Bozóki and Hegedűs have focused on the Hungarian case and they have pointed out (2018: 1173,1175) that the declining democracies ‘can be best described along a continuum’ between ‘liberal democracies and totalitarian regimes’. Moreover, they have emphasised that the ‘unique features’ of the Orbán regime have made it into ‘a new subcategory of hybrid regimes’, which have to be analysed in comparison with Poland. Indeed, the autocratic feature of the Orbán regime has been dominant from the very beginning, with the well decorated democratic façade and the increasing democracy capture from the top, but after the first fake elections in 2014 it clearly deserves more the title of elected autocracy. The second period meant a new phase in emptying the democracy and the extension of government power to all layers of political administration, since it produced a new quality in the disempowerment of citizens. However, to take this second step the Orbán regime needed a fake legitimisation, provided by the constant reference to the danger of the mass invasion of migrants, in order to create a new enemy and to launch a mass mobilisation against it. During the second period the refugee crisis gave the opportunity for it, and the bugaboo of migrants was the chosen enemy of the Orbán regime to fight against. In 2015 the Orbán regime introduced the emergency situation, which has regularly been renewed and it is still valid.

The hysterical campaign against the migrants dominated in the government-controlled media, marginalised all other problems in the public mind and it served also as the first occasion to confront publicly the EU. The Fidesz propaganda machinery coined the slogan of ‘the freedom fight against the EU colonisation’ and mobilised a series of mass demonstrations against the EU, allegedly because of the EU’s intention to force its migration policy upon Hungary. This mass mobilisation for the anti-EU demonstrations was organised by Fidesz through the Civic Unity Forum (CÖF) financed by the Orbán government, as the fist of Fidesz to rule the streets by mass demonstrations and in order to show ‘the popular will’. The refugee crisis was the main media legitimacy device of the

Orbán regime with an enemy picture to turn attention away from the increasing autocratisation, which already indicated the shift of emphasis in the political system from hard to soft power.

The media capture was the main road for the de-democratisation and autocratisation by soft power. The colonisation of media began immediately after the entry of the Orbán government in 2010 with a new media law, as a move to soft power, parallel with the radical actions in hard power, by passing the new Constitution and transforming the basic institutions. In the first period the incoming Orbán regime used the *formal* political power of government turning public media to party media. They established a new forum of state control about the media in general by creating a powerful Media Council consisting of well-disciplined Fidesz actors. In addition, the effort to create a new dominant narrative goes back to the late 2000s when Fidesz established a system of pseudo-scientific institutions – like the House of Terror – as factories for the politics of historical memory in the turn to the traditionalist-nativist narrative for reinventing-rewriting history. In the early 2010s the capture of public media was combined with launching Fidesz-prone websites producing content for their political messages. The establishment of the cultural and ideology lie factories for the traditionalist-nativist narrative has been based on the specific historical ‘Hungarian identity’.

In the second period to conquer the remaining media or to suppress it, and establishing also new media centres by – seemingly – independent media actors the Orbán regime switched more and more to the use of its increasing *informal* economic power of the market. It has controlled the media not only legally, but also financially by direct subsidies and huge government payments for advertisements as well as from the friendly oligarchs to support these fake media actors. Népszabadság, the independent daily, was killed by ‘market’ methods, since the new owner purchased it and closed it down in October 2016. In this period the reference to the ‘market’ was just the democratic façade in conquering the media. The role of the market was just a constant argument against criticism when the control by the friendly oligarchs was extended to new media outlets. The coronation of this tendency of creating a quasi-monopoly in the Hungarian media was the establishment of Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA) uniting about five hundred media outlets across the country. It came officially only on 11 September 2018, after the next electoral victory of Fidesz, but it had already been prepared step by step in the second period. Paradoxically, the establishment of KESMA was a bad joke about the ‘market’, since this move uncovered that the ‘private’ was in fact ‘public’ when the true Fidesz oligarchs offered their media firms *for free* to create a huge media mogul in this centralised media realm, serving as the quasi-monopolistic media actor.

Actually, KESMA indicated the entry to the third period with the quasi-monopoly of the Orbán regime in the Hungarian media. It has only allowed

for some independent media organs at the national level, but not in the most popular media outlets or at the local level. After the closing of Népszabadság, the Orbán regime in fact banned the most popular oppositional radio station (Klubládió) too. On the government side a complete ministry has been organised as the Prime Ministerial Cabinet, called by the people 'Propaganda Ministry' that may be better called the central fake news factory or even the lie factory. This institution has regularly produced sophisticated and systematised lies by presenting an alternative/fictive world by verbal magic issued from the lie factories for the mobilisation of Fidesz believers, first of all in the countryside. The media story already indicates that in the same way as both the 'public' (state) and 'private' (civil) have lost their (former) meaning and they have been turned into a strange autocratic mixture, the same political process has taken place both in the formal and informal institutions. The formal institutions are supposed to be stable and long-lasting that can be changed only by a serious legal procedure, while the informal institutions are allegedly easily changeable. However, in the Hungarian neoliberal autocracy all things are upside down, since the big formal institutions are almost 'liquid', easily and quickly changeable by the parliamentary supermajority, absolutely legally, while the basic informal institutions, first of all the ruling politico-business networks, are stable and resilient. Actually, the same strange autocratic mixture – which has been overviewed above in the case of public-private economic sectors – also appears in the cultural sector. The big public cultural institutions have been 'privatised' and ruled with an 'easy go round' sequence between the Fidesz party leaders, under the direct personal/private command of Orbán himself.

The conquer of media and the cultural sector has produced a strange mixture of public and private, with constant transition between the two realms. The state institutions have created their private dependencies, since the EU resources in this kleptocracy have also become 'privatised' through the closed system of public procurement. So are the access processes to the state funds at all levels, like to the top positions in many cultural organisations. Almost everything which looks public turns out to be private and vice versa. What remains outside this realm of the neoliberal concoction may be declared public by a swift political decision in order to make it part of this huge private world, but it has been working 'public' in its new context of political dependency from the party headquarters. The magic term of 'the national interest' can transform everything legally into state property – with an exceptional, special procedure – for completing the 'public' control of the autocratic state, and it appears 'on the next day' as the private property of the Fidesz oligarchs at a cheap price. Anyway, the third period completed the shift to the soft power of the cultural sector as the main means of the political rule in the emerging 'perfect' autocratic regime that deserves the name of zombie democracy.

## The 'internal Easternisation' and the emergence of zombie democracy

The zombie democracy has been the endgame of the Orbán regime home and abroad as the internal Easternisation of Hungary. The Hungarian historical memory is haunted by the symbolism of a ferry moving between East and West in the changing stages of Easternisation and Westernisation. It seems so that after the decades of Westernisation a new turn to Easternisation began in the early 2010s, this time not by foreign occupation but by some kind of internal Easternisation generating a zombie democracy. Looking at the consecutive periods of autocratisation more closely, these three periods discussed above can also be seen as the state capture at macro-, meso- and micro-levels, namely first in the central government, second in the intermediary institutions and third in civil society, with its widening implications in the social, cultural and human dimensions. To track down the development, these three consecutive periods give the key for the systematisation of the democracy decline and the emerging zombie democracy in the ECE scholarship through these periods of De-Democratisation, Autocratisation and De-Europeanisation.

The divergence of Hungary from the democratic mainstream has been crucial during the Orbán regime because this long-term supermajority has offered the opportunity for the voluntaristic legislation in the *formal* institutions, and cumulating enough political power for the institution-building in the *informal* institutions and in the networks across all other social fields. This double process has culminated in the third period and it can be described in general as conquering the monopolistic positions in the formal state institutions – representing the zombie democracy par excellence – on one side, and building the informal power centres as the general foundation and/or the background of the zombie democracy on the other side. In the recent period it has meant extending the direct formal control of the government to all layers of public administration and reaching a complete *state capture* as the 'deep state' vertically by 'governing' even in small settlements as well as conquering/creating the big economic, social and scientific/cultural institutions informally, called the 'parallel state'. This total invasion of government as social capture has also produced direct government control in those institutions, which are supposedly independent and representing the interests of the given field in the public life of a democratic country. This extension of the political power from the central state to all sectors has mostly been disturbing the everyday life of the Hungarian citizens.

The third consecutive electoral victory of the Orbán regime in 2018 was indeed a deep turning point in all respects as an all-out war of the government with everybody about everything for full control. Therefore, the Orbán regime in the *third* period of autocratisation has focused on the cultural war. The media drogue has been the main weapon of Fidesz control over the popular mind, but

in this period all other cultural and scientific fields have experienced the fierce attack for conquering them in order to widen and diversify this control. It has been characterised by an open traditionalist-nativist, anti-EU ideology giving the cultural frame to the official narrative of the freedom fight against 'Brussels'. The third period has been the peak of the Orbán regime, and at the same time it has also presented the decay of this regime by its 'hybris', by the overextension in all fields. In the strange mixture of the new Orwellian ideological factory – as e.g. combining the pagan and Christian traditions in the Fidesz ideological campaigns – this complete social capture in Hungary after the 2018 elections has been managed by a tough state control in its largest meaning through the aggressive 'privatisation' of the cultural sector (see the comparative ECE analysis in Hesová, 2021).

After dismembering the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA) and depriving it from its research institutes, the next step has been the colonisation of universities by 'privatisation' and pushing them into a direct politically dependent situation. Most state-run universities – except the biggest ones, as yet – have been 'privatised' in the legal form of 'private foundations with public functions' with all of their properties. Fidesz political leaders are exclusively in the decision-making positions of the curatorium in these 'private' universities. By this move, those employed in the research institutes and at the universities have lost their status of public employees, so they can lose their job any time 'if the market demands', actually, if they are not disciplined enough for loyal behaviour in the Orbán regime. They have also organised the National University of Public Service (NKE) – in the common parlance the 'janissary' university – with many privileges for the elite socialisation of the praetorian guard or the professional serving intelligentsia, and have established a huge training factory in order to produce ideological foot soldiers under the – otherwise very prestigious – name of Mathias Corvinus College. The MCC has recently been given big properties across the country and a huge budget, unimaginable for the poorly financed universities. Moreover, and among others, the Orbán regime has concocted its own 'Academy of the Arts' (MMA) to please their supporters in the various fields of the arts.<sup>6</sup>

Altogether, when in this cultural war 'formal' institutions have turned into 'informal', public into private and vice versa, it has taken place parallel with the drastically decreasing transparency in all fields, not only in the government sector, but also in the workings of these new government controlled informal institutions, including the 'private' cultural/scientific enterprises. The trans-

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6 It is well-known that the Orbán government has pushed out the Central European University and it has prepared the establishment of the Chinese Fudan University in Hungary. Both cases have been very controversial, but there is no space here to discuss them in detail. This is the same case with the fake scientific research institutions serving the government and fabricating some kind of seemingly scientific background to the official ideology, like many other Quangos at different levels.

parency for the public control has disappeared in both the ‘privatised’ formal institutions as the universities and in the ‘statified’ informal institutions as the Quangos. There have been more and more obstacles to get information about political decisions, since access to the politicians and to the public institutions has been bordering on the absurd in this ‘perfectly’ closed world of governmental politics and policy. Moreover, the Orbán regime has used all legal and many illegal means to intimidate the still surviving independent media actors, and has tried to disturb them by direct/indirect state actions in order to force them to accept limitations, the compromises for ‘decent’ behaviour. This effort for full control has reached its peak in the recent Pegasus ‘spy’ scandal. It has concerned both opposition politicians and independent journalists, to put some of the ‘dangerous’ people under surveillance of the security services through the close observance of their mobiles.

For this overextended state with a huge control mechanism a big waterhead has been needed in the central government, numbering three times more top leaders than in the former governments. This formal/informal government has also contained high numbers around the government as (prime-)ministerial commissioners, who have been charged with the control of this combination of formal and informal, public and private institutions, and provided the surveillance over the ‘money pump’ of the redistribution to feed the political pyramid. This all-embracing control mechanism, including also the informal institutions, has become manifest by the new and new voluntaristic legal regulations and by the appointments of the Fidesz actors to rule these colonised social fields. They have been instructed and coordinated by Rogán’s large Prime Ministerial Cabinet, as the ‘Propaganda Ministry’ with hundreds of various leading officials. Altogether, due to the cumulative effect, this new ‘party state’ has been completed in the final period of autocratisation by the ‘cultural capture’, the extension to the remaining social fields, with the systemic change in culture and ideology. The main ideological products of the cultural war have been conceived in the politics of historical memory, producing controversial messages bordering on the sheer absurd. Not only by declaring Christianity as fundamental to Hungarian national identity, but mixing it with the idealisation of the mythical Hungarian pagan prehistory to a chaotic concept of the singularity of the ‘Hungarianness’ in Europe. In the politics of historical memory, everything has been rewritten about the contemporary history, and in the official presentation of the last thirty years Orbán has been elevated to a national hero personally performing the systemic change.

The Orbán regime completed the Reverse Wave after the 2018 elections by the institutionalisation of autocratisation in the ‘cultural capture’ that has raised a big opposition inside, and open conflict with the EU as De-Europeanisation outside. These two parallel, domestic and international processes have unleashed the endgame of the perfect autocracy in the Orbán regime. Since the



late 2010s big cracks have appeared in the Orbán regime, and the economic, social and political ruptures have deepened more and more in this 'perfect' autocracy. The autocratisation provoked an increasingly popular resistance and the success of the opposition parties' union on one side and the weakening of the 'perfect' autocracy on the other, became evident by the two – EP and municipal – elections. In the late 2010s for the first time all opposition parties were able to form an electoral alliance, and in both elections the EU was in the centre of the electoral campaign. Although Fidesz won the EP elections on 26 May 2019 by a large majority against the parties of democratic opposition with 13 versus 8 seats, still it meant some kind of turning point in the history of Hungarian parties. It was a good socialisation for the democratic opposition how to campaign together for the EU integration and in the spirit of the EU rules and values. Just to the contrary, the open confrontation of Fidesz with the EU was visible both internationally and domestically in the EP elections. As a result, in the municipal elections the democratic opposition parties on 13 October 2019 already won 'urban Hungary' – the majority of cities, including Budapest – but not yet the countryside, 'rural' Hungary, which was still under the direct and strict political and ideological control of the Orbán regime. Above all, since the municipal elections the democratic parties at local level have governed a large part of Hungary, the most developed cities and regions, and these city governments have collected a lot of experience in the democratic coalition politics.

As to the conflict with the EU, the drastic violations of rule of law at the political, social and cultural levels has produced 'the Easternisation of politics', called sometimes Putinisation (see e.g. Gotev, 2021). In some rampant anti-democratic legislations of the Orbán regime they have just copied the Putin model, sometimes word by word. It has finally led to a full confrontation with the EU, to the open De-Europeanisation. This Easternisation has to be investigated in the open conflict and confrontation with the EU, termed by the Orbán regime as the 'freedom fight against Brussels'. Since the aggressive anti-EU campaign in the 2019 EP elections the Orbán regime has moved from its 'mimicry' to an open anti-EU position, from a defensive attitude to offensive behaviour against the EU. Beyond the 'state-owned' lie factories in Rogán's Propaganda Ministry the newly organised parallel state has also been more and more mobilised in the offensive against the EU. This mobilisation among others includes also the Christian Churches – since the Orbán regime has claimed to be defending 'Christian Europe' – and the business organisations as the playing field of the friendly oligarchs.<sup>7</sup>

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7 The Eucharistic World Congress in September 2021 in Budapest was a big attempt to use the Catholic Church for legitimising the Orbán regime. In the parallel state, actually, the Hungarian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MKI) has also been completely controlled by the Orbán regime. The Consultation Forum of the Competitive Sector and the Government (VKKF) has been convened very rarely and it has not played any significant role in the conflict management between the government and the business life.

In the external dimension there has been an increasing conflict with the EU on two issues: in the rule of law violations (see the whole story in Scheppele, Kelemen and Morijn, 2021) and in the diversion from the EU in the foreign policy line (see Varga and Buzogány, 2020). *First*, the Orbán regime has been the ‘poster boy’ or the most ill-famed actor, although the profiles of the other ECE states in these conflicts about the rule of law violations have been rather similar, just in the internal dimension the national idiosyncrasies have played a more important role. In the deepening conflict between the EU and Hungary the crucial event was the Sargentini Report (2018), since critical efforts of the EP majority produced a long list of the democracy deficit in Hungary that can be applied, by the way, almost directly to all other ECE countries. This Report was passed on 12 September 2018 in the EP with a large majority (448 votes versus 197) in the Article 7 mechanism. The Sargentini Report is emblematic of the worsening relationships between the EU and the Orbán regime, indicating the real turning point as the entry to the third period of the open confrontation, and since then there have been many other EU documents condemning the rule of law violations of the Orbán regime. However, in this deepening conflict with the EU the biggest event was the Polish and Hungarian veto threat during the preparation of the basic EU document for the management of the triple crisis. It was concluded in the December compromise, masterminded by Merkel just before the end of the German Council Presidency in late 2020. For sure, there will be a hard debate about this December Compromise for a long time, emphasising either its positive side that it has saved the crisis management in that given historical moment, or its negative side that it has given a free pass or lee way – at least for some time – to the access of the new recovery fund for those ECE regimes as the horrible actors in the violations of the EU rules and values.

The EU resources have been extremely important for the Orbán regime, since the brutal expropriation of the EU funds by the Hungarian government through the systemic corruption has been a vital necessity to feed the ‘money pump’ in the power pyramid for the support of the regime. Therefore, even in this process of turning against the EU, the Orbán regime has produced a double game: it has developed a special pro-EU empty rhetoric on one side, but on the other side Orbán’s propaganda factory has performed a fierce populist-nativist propaganda war against the EU with personal attacks on its main opponents in the EU. This move has led to the effort of the marginalisation of the Orbán regime in the EU, first by the exclusion of Fidesz party from the European Peoples Party faction in the EP, followed by its deepening confrontation with the majority of MEPs on the issue of the rule of law violations.<sup>8</sup>

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8 I have described this process in my book in details (Ágh, 2021a: 113–147, 183–187). Just for the illustration of the Fidesz style: Orbán has insinuated that Brussels has been similar to Hitler’s headquarters (the Wolf’s Lair). Szilárd Demeter, the Ministerial Commissioner of culture has written an article in a domestic newspaper that has created internationally resonance, since in the article he referred to George Soros

This behaviour of the Orbán regime – parallel with that of the Polish government – has produced a split in the EU's decision-making mechanism in the delicate historical moment of the implementation of the recovery funds in the next EU budget (MFF). Obviously, the Council and the Commission have had more a conciliatory approach with a conflict-avoidance in this rule of law issue that has raised increasing concern in the EP, but also in many Western governments and, first of all, among the large majority of the EU citizens. In the early 2020s this EU-wide conflict can also be widely described even in the strict legal terms of the official documents issued from the institutional triangle of the Council, Commission and Parliament. However, this situation can be briefly summarised in the turn of the EP against the Commission, threatening it with taking this negligence to the European Court of Justice for the marginalising the rule of law violations in Hungary and Poland. This is still an open history in the fall of 2021 (see Bayer, 2021, Hungarian Spectrum, 2021 and Reuters, 2020a, b).<sup>9</sup>

As to the second issue, the foreign policy line, it has to be emphasised above all that the Orbán regime in close cooperation with the Polish government has tried to organise – in their parlance – the ‘sovereignists’ versus the ‘unionists’, the new member states versus the old ones, as well as the neopopulist parties versus the ‘federalists’ within the EP. This effort was clear already in 2019 when the Orbán regime provoked an anti-EU electoral campaign with the other neopopulist/extremist parties in the EP elections, both domestically and internationally, in an effort to reset the proportions of party factions in EP, but this effort failed (Buzogány and Varga, 2019). Beyond the EU scenery, however, the Orbán regime has been rather successful in organising intensive contacts with other autocratic regimes around the world, mainly with Russia and Turkey, and recently more and more with China. This ‘Eastern Opening’ was announced by Orbán after the entry of his new government on 5 September 2010. The Orbán regime took the first steps in this new foreign policy toward Russia, but afterwards China came to the fore. The Eastern Opening has attracted a large followship in ECE, better to say, in other ECE countries the same perverse tendencies have also emerged, and they have reinforced each other.

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as the ‘liberal Führer’, who is turning Europe into a gas chamber’ where Hungarians are the ‘new Jews’. Additionally, the Fidesz-founder, Tamás Deutsch, the leader of the Fidesz faction in the EP, has compared the critical stance of Manfred Weber, the EPP faction leader towards Fidesz to that of the Gestapo.

- 9 There is no space to follow the itinerary of this political and legal debate (see Scheppele et al, 2021), it is enough to indicate here the increasing tension in the EU because of the aggressive behaviour of the Hungarian and Polish governments and the conciliatory approach of the Merkel government (Financial Times, 2021a, b). The Orbán government turned to the European Court of Justice, but in the summer of 2021 the ECJ confirmed the EP decisions. This legal decision has become the indication of the total confrontation of the Orbán regime with the EU. One of the most characteristic moves of the aggressive autocracy was Orbán's strange political message to the EU in the Magyar Közlöny (Hungarian Official Journal) on 2 August 2021 (Issue 146, p. 6811) as the Decision of the Hungarian Government refusing the Commission's Report on the Rule of Law situation in Hungary (EC, 2021).

The Eastern Opening claims to be pragmatic, and advertised as trade-oriented, but in fact it has been a politically-engaged ideological weapon. In the last decade this trade policy has also been used for inviting investments from the countries outside the EU, and it has been declared successful according to the government reports. In fact, its economic role has been minimal for Hungary and it has basically served as a façade for the political opening to the other autocratic regimes outside the EU. Although Hungary has relied strongly on the Russian supply of gas and oil, the Orbán regime – unlike the other energy importing EU countries – counterproductively extended this contact to other fields, first of all to the ill-famed case of the Paks-2 nuclear station, which would be both unnecessary and too costly for Hungary, and serves only to strengthen the political relationship with Russia. Thus, since the 2010 elections the Orbán government has not only established and maintained a strong relationship with Russia and the Putin regime, but it has often followed, even copied, its autocratic measures against the opposition and civil society.

Nowadays in the trade opening the often-mentioned case is China, but its economic importance has been exaggerated. While the Hungarian export has been increasing to the EU and presently stands at 77.3 percent, in the case of China it is only at 1.7 percent. Yet, following the line of its opposition to the EU sanctions, the Orbán regime has turned toward China. In the early 2020s the issues of the planned Belgrade-Budapest railway for the sake of Chinese ‘connectivity’ and that of the establishment of the Hungarian branch of the Chinese Fudan University have been among the biggest political confrontations within Hungary, and these moves have also sent a strong political message to the EU. The international press often claims that Hungary has been the Trojan horse of Russia and China, since the Orbán government has regularly vetoed the EU decisions condemning these countries (Ji, 2020, Kalkhof, 2021, Kapitonenko, 2021 and Karásková, 2021). Otherwise, the Eastern opening has not only been an active foreign policy line for the Orbán regime, but also an ideological construct, bordering on the absurdity, because Orbán himself has declared that Hungarians are among the Turkish nations, and he has regularly attended their summit meetings, developing intensive relations not only with Turkey, but also e.g. with Azerbaijan (see the whole story recently in Mészáros, 2021).

Thus, the ‘Hungarian disease’ is particularly important because this is the model case of autocratisation and this disease has also infected the neighbouring countries, and it has turned to a common ECE disease. This pandemic of autocratisation has been spreading, the Orbán regime has been active in supporting this ‘Putinisation’ tendency not only among the new member states, and seeking partnership with them, but it has infected the Western Balkans too, above all in Serbia (Gotev, 2021). In this geopolitical turn of the Orbán regime to the West Balkan region it has also been characteristic that Olivér Várhelyi, the Hungarian Commissioner, has been so much in the favour of Serbia’s president Aleksandar

Vučić that he has undermined the EU credibility in the region (Gricourt, 2021: 1). Actually, as the Brdo Declaration of the EU (Council, 2021 on 6 October 2021) indicates, the EU has recently arrived at a historical impasse in the WB region, since neither the EU, nor this region are able and ready for the enlargement, therefore the EU has shifted toward the partnership and securitisation. Whereas Orbán in this precarious situation looks for allies in the West Balkans to make troubles for the EU, some experts have elaborated an alternative strategy for the ‘staged accession’, meaning the accession process in several steps planned for a longer period (Emerson et al., 2021).

All in all, in the last years Hungary has turned out to be a ‘perfect autocracy’, confronting the EU with a political leadership that has lost any long-term rationality or self-control, and behaving as a loose cannon in the EU also in the extremely critical period of the covid crisis. The emergence of this ‘perfect autocracy’, advertised as illiberal democracy, has been based on the repeated two-thirds majority in the consecutive fake elections in 2014 and 2018. It has produced deep violations of the rules and values of the EU and regular confrontations with the EU foreign policy by regularly threatening with a Hungarian veto. Finally, in the recent period of *zombie democracy* by completing the new autocratic polity, the Orbán regime has resulted in an open conflict with the EU, declaring war on ‘Brussels’. In this situation of the general De-Europeanisation in ECE, no wonder that some eminent Western politicians and experts have demanded to expel Hungary – and Poland – from the EU (see e. g. Acemoglu, 2021 and Müller, 2021), since Hungary has developed in fact a *zombie membership* in the EU, while the overwhelming majority of Hungarian citizens (89 %) are pro-EU and supporting the EU membership (Medián, 2021).

## **Conclusion: The project of ‘Re-unite EUrope’ and the redemocratisation in ECE**

In the early 2020s the development of the EU has arrived at a crossroads, and the cumulated problems may be overviewed through the three basic issues that have to be arranged in the recent global crisis management. First, since the early 2010s in the controversial EU developments some disintegration tendencies have also appeared and strengthened. This trend has been indicated in the EU scholarship as *Fragmented Europe*, and the strategic programme of the ‘Re-unite EUrope’ has been designed against it. After the failed global crisis management in the early 2010s, the EU has to now face the main task to overcome this disintegration process in Fragmented Europe in order to ‘re-unite’ the EU. All problems in ECE have to be taken into consideration in this context of the recent EU global crisis management for the EU integration at a higher level. Second, this deepening Core-Periphery Divide in the Fragmented Europe is not a marginal, but a vital issue for the entire EU, since without solving this Divide,

the EU cannot accomplish its ‘Re-uniting’ strategy. These favourable external conditions, the prosperous Next Generation EU recovery programme, offer a big historical opportunity for the ECE countries, and at the same time they have to face the hard necessity to perform a new systemic change. Third, the key words for the ECE internal development are the re-entry, social citizenship, redemocratisation. This great challenge as a new systemic change means that the ECE countries have to re-enter the EU in a new form of social citizenship that presupposes completing the process of redemocratisation. This second historical test for them is nowadays much more difficult than the first one, with the systemic change in the euphoric years on the nineties. The ECE states have to overcome the autocratisation to reach a much higher level of Europeanisation by creating the internal conditions for the sustainable democracy and the effective EU membership. This special crisis management of ECE countries has been high on the agenda in the early 2020s, but it will be a long, painful and complex process.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This conclusion about the megatrend of the EU developments in the 2020s has only been indicated here, it has been explained and documented in my book, Ágh 2021. The strategy of the Re-unite Europe has been elaborated in the European Policy Centre, see first of all Emmanouilidis (2018).



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